

## **Race, Ethnicity and the Internet: Cybercultures, FYP 100, Fall 2008**

The First-Year Preceptorial course “Cybercultures” examines the impact of the Internet, cyberspace and virtual reality on the way the world is inhabited, perceived and represented. Looking at a variety of texts throughout this course, online and offline, fiction, non-fiction and film we pay attention to issues such as subjectivity and embodiment, the transformative effect cyberspace has on conventional readings of the self, as well as traditional understandings of space and time. Ethical questions are also asked, and we look at operations of power and the ways in which cyberspaces and their cultural representations can operate to both subvert as well as uphold normative structures, looking specifically at issues relating to gender, sexuality, class, race and ethnicity.

The segment “Race, Ethnicity and the Internet”, for which I received Ethics Across the Curriculum funding, was very successful. We addressed a number of issues relating to race and ethnicity in the specific context of cyberculture, and the students responded both enthusiastically and inquisitively to course material. We examined the issue of cyberspace in the context of the discourse of colonization, considering how it is being popularly configured in terms of a new frontier, which can be (variously) explored, conquered and tamed. Students were asked to consider the problematics of such a discourse and the power dynamics, particularly as they are configured between the human and the machine in this context, that are in operation. We also considered specific representations of race and ethnicity in/of cyberspace, by examining the novel Snowcrash, which treats issues relating to racial and ethnic differences. Through an analysis of this novel, in addition to readings from the book Race in Cyberspace, we had class discussions regarding both the liberatory, as well as limitative, aspects of the Internet for racial and ethnic issues. In addition, the students gave presentations on online activist websites of minority ethnic and racial groups. Linking with this, we looked at the issue of Internet access and equality, considering the international ‘digital divide’ and placing this within the historical context of colonialism. We watched a short film about the bridging of the digital divide in Uganda. The students responded very well to this, and I am going to focus on getting some more short films on this topic for next year and give

them group project work on evaluating the different schemes. In relation to the digital divide, we also read selections from Social Consequences of Internet Use: Access, Involvement, and Interaction and The Deepening Divide: Inequality in the Information Society, which specifically addressed issues at the intersection of race, ethnicity and class.

For next year's class, I am going to work on getting some more visual material for this segment as the students respond well to this. I am also going to bring in some 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial documents to compare with some of the contemporary readings, so as to give a stronger historical context to the colonialism which the course is critiquing.