

Queer Internets and Digital Creolization



ROUTLEDGE

Virtual English

Virtual English examines English language communication on the World Wide Web, focusing on internet practices crafted by underserved communities in the US and overlooked participants in several Asian diasporic communities. Jillana Enteen locates instances where subjects use electronic media to resist popular understandings of cyberspace, computer-mediated communication, gender, sexuality, nation, and community, presenting unexpected responses to the forces of globalization and predominant US value systems. The populations studied here contribute websites, conversations, and artifacts that employ English strategically, broadening and splintering the language to express their concerns in the manner they perceive as effective. Users are thus afforded new opportunities to transmit information, conduct conversations, teach, and make decisions, shaping, in the process, both language and technology. The subjects of *Virtual English* challenge prevailing deployments and conceptions of emerging technologies. Their on-line practices illustrate that the internet need not replicate current geopolitical beliefs and practices and that reconfigurations exist in tandem with dominant models.

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Jillana B. Enteen

Virtual English

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Digital Creolization

Jillana B. Enteen

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I dedicate this book to my Grandmother, Henrietta Mitzner – an amazing woman of character, and conviction – one who infuses her strength with those around her, creating the Mitzner clan – an impassioned family of excellence in every imaginable hue.

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1

Introduction: Life Skills

“Did you learn some computers today?”

(Grandma to Shawna, “Dirty Laundry”)¹

The idea for this project came to me at a part-time job I started in 1997 during my final years of graduate school. I was hired to develop a “Life Skills” curriculum to accompany a technology training course for twelve-to-sixteen-year-olds at Urban Technology Incorporated’s² “Youth Leadership Academy.” This engaged my interests in technology, urban youth, and popular culture, and afforded me a break from the long, isolating dissertation process. This project would lead to *something* and quickly – the program would be taught within days of its completion. Co-writer Jennifer Bransford White and I were to update and expand the “Life Skills” modules, incorporating information mandated by the State of New York for child foster care education programs while simultaneously imparting cutting-edge technology skills and captivating the attention of this challenging age group.

When the first group of students gathered in a basement room of the Concord Family Services foster care organization in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, most had never been in a room with a computer. Upon entering the lab, several of the eager novices raced to the computers, picked up the mice, and placed them directly on the screen. My co-writer recounted this event months later as proof that the participants had made great leaps in their technological literacy as a result of the Youth Leadership Academy. By the end of the six-week program, this group was able to produce more sophisticated spreadsheets than I can to date. But rather than the beginning of a trajectory of technological literacy,

the students' initial impulses struck me as the reverse: why shouldn't a mouse elicit a direct response from the place it touches on the screen? What is logical or self-evident about the movement of a mouse on a rubber pad unattached to the rest of the hardware? Furthermore, what is obvious about clicking? Double-clicking? Suddenly, mouse technology seemed very counterintuitive, and it became clear to me that these teens had better ideas for the application of technology from the onset. A decade later, the iPhone is celebrated for allowing the user to interface directly with the screen, and Steve Jobs and his team at Apple are credited with the innovation. At Concord Family Services, not only were students taught to use technology in predictable ways, but their potential for technological innovation based on their own "life skills" was ignored. Their success in the Youth Leadership Academy depended on lowering their expectations about computer technology, curbing their imaginations, and accepting a cultural interface that did not reflect their lives or interests. Technology was demystified, yes, but in the process, creative inspiration that could have led to innovation took a back-seat to memorizing Microsoft iconography.

The following summer, I witnessed first-hand how these young people responded to their opportunities to acquire technology skills. Several students wanted to program sound into their personal webpages. Urban Technology, Inc. responded to their demands by drafting a musician to teach music software. The results were strictly local – they placed themselves "on the Web" sonically in a way that mirrored their self-perception. The pages they produced, therefore, ended up mimicking one another's. Like many of the other early personal webpages that littered the Web, they were full of smiley-face animations, lists of likes and dislikes, shout-outs to family members, and links to hip-hop sites.

When faced with an exercise to be completed without the help of a template, these "youth leaders" forged creative solutions. The online resources they found to accompany each "Life Skills" module, for example, showed inspiration rather than information regurgitation. Google had not yet begun to crawl, and the major search engines of the time had a reputation for delivering partial, suspect results, so participants were encouraged to use a combination of these algorithms and the ubiquitous "Links" pages to present fresh takes on oft-repeated topics (i.e. their annual nutrition class). One student provided a journalist's account of local-rapper-gone-global Lil' Kim and her diet. An examination of her idol's eating habits was fodder for a lively discussion with peers rather than a monotone report that mimicked school activities. The exercise not only required students to demonstrate a working knowledge of the World Wide Web and search methods, but it inspired them to conduct further research in an effort to substantiate their claims. The students discovered, through a review of Lil' Kim's regimen, what *not* to eat. The habits she claimed – perhaps in jest – had the students in stitches. Not only could they recognize the lack of balance in her candy-centered diet, but they were able to provide alternative meal choices that met Lil' Kim's lifestyle: frequent touring and few chances for home-cooked meals.

In the first year of the Youth Leadership training, instructors distributed paper manuals that guided students, step-by-step, through the technology modules. Impatient pupils often skipped steps in order to finish the lesson with time left to surf the internet. Often, the final product – a table, graph, or spreadsheet – would be missing some part that was included in the directions but overlooked in a student's haste. Rather than returning to the text to retrace the missing steps, participants played with the application and figured out how to produce an identical final project on their own. Each assignment would inevitably contain as many variations in its production as there were students at computers, and, as a result, the class had a collective knowledge about the workings of the software that far exceeded required competencies. This information would be shared as students visited neighboring monitors to assist their friends. The following year, manuals were replaced by PowerPoint presentations; participants sat away from the computers and watched the slides projected on the wall. As a result, the students produced projects that more closely adhered to the steps outlined in the learning module. Thus the viewing-then-reproducing approach better facilitated the goals of the Youth Leadership Academy: students did indeed learn standard operating procedures and became fluent in officially sanctioned vocabulary, but gone were the creative deployments that stretched collective understanding and exposed the software's breadth and depth.

By the late 1990s, computer use was increasing exponentially, but websites and software were not necessarily performing as expected. At the time, usability studies were the central gauge for measuring the success of computer-related material. Energy was devoted to development rather than deployment. Furthermore, it was assumed that technological innovations and digital communication were enacted as their developers had envisioned them. The adoption of Microsoft's collective mind was taken for granted. In the introduction to their edited collection *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, editors Hines, Nelson and Tu note the limited criteria used by technothorists to designate technological advancements.³ They recommend "Casting our nets farther and wider" in order to "more fully realize the different levels of technical knowledge and innovation that individuals and communities" exhibit (Nelson *et al.* 2001, 18). They subsequently suggest that widespread attention paid to the "digital divide" may distract from the recognition of innovation by precisely the populations such discussions seek to address. Consequently, if the "digital divide" is the only lens for viewing the position of people of color vis-à-vis computers, and black urban foster kids are expected to be technologically illiterate, they will be treated as such and may internalize this belief (Nelson *et al.* 2001, 5). Moreover, talk of the "digital divide," important though it is, inhibits alternative formulations and discussions of non-dominant practices.

While Urban Technologies, Inc. was following a strict definition of innovation and literacy through their curriculum, they also encouraged their participants to take on the mantles of innovators, crafting websites for themselves and their

communities. Between 1996 and 2000, I interviewed many young technorati from this program and others in New York. Their comments suggest that urban youth using internet technology shifted their view of the world within the Web. While initially optimistic about the internet as a medium for innovative ideas and community formation beyond physical borders, the youth I interviewed were becoming disillusioned with its liberating potential. Rather than giving up on the internet, they rethought its purpose and went local: representing a particular club or school, connecting with neighborhood friends, file sharing, and designing ground-breaking forms of expression using non-standard features of popular applications. New York based websites from programs such as Urban Technologies' Youth-on-Line, Youth Radio, Teen Voices, and Harlem Live!⁴ were crafted by low-income youth of color intent on forming communities and sharing experiences that originated in their homes, schools, and community centers and reached youth with similar interests. They educated their peers and built networks that united a population often depicted by mainstream media as unreachable, divided, and violent. In order to do so, they employed a specific style of language and used a range of strategies I term "digital creolization." Put simply, digital creolization is the adaptation and amalgamation of English-language terms in online spaces that intentionally modifies prior meanings in order to serve alternative, and often subversive, purposes.

Noting a dearth of similar websites in urban Chicago, I supervised interviews and observations between 2002 and 2004 concerning the online practices of Chicago-based, low-income, African-American youth. These teenagers perceived the Web as a "non-interactive" archive useful only for information retrieval. During the summer of 2002, my research assistant Anayah Barney spent four weeks at urban Chicago locations asking about and observing young people's computer use. The young people she interviewed gave her the information they *thought* she wanted to hear: they provided sometimes (false) email addresses they said they used to keep in touch with distant relatives and friends, and reported doing research for school projects, looking things up in the library catalog, and playing the occasional corporate-sponsored game. What she observed told another story. These youth were not using the Web to journey outward and explore the "wide world." Many of them did not even have email accounts. Instead, they used a familiar interface to send messages to their friends, often at the next computer, and talked about their friends on their profile pages located on portals geared toward Black or Latino populations, such as Black Planet (www.blackplanet.com) or Mi Gente (www.migente.com). Although these portals were marketed as forums for meeting new people and dating, these twelve-to-twenty-one-year-olds were not interacting with people they didn't know, but instead communicating with people they saw or talked to daily, e.g. leaving messages for their cousins or their classmates. They used the templates provided on the sites to represent their blocks, neighborhoods, or schools, and only responded to communication from their friends, family, and neighbors. The internet was another mode of local interaction, not a vehicle for outward voyages and novel encounters. Chicago urban youth in these venues did

not want to use computers to forge non-local connections or reach a broad, virtual audience. Instead, they used public computers and the internet to deepen their connections with people they knew in their local, real-world environment. Years later, the wide adoption of social networking applications such as Friendster.com and Facebook.com confirmed that many users had identical desires for communication via digital technologies that enhanced their connections to friends and relatives in close proximity.

During the summer of 2003, Sonia Nelson, a second research assistant, observed eight-to-eighteen-year-olds at StreetWorks, a not-for-profit organization on Chicago's West Side. The organization sought to provide young people, mostly Black and Latino, with access to networked computers, as well as to introduce them to a range of digital media technologies. Located near public transport, the organization had established itself in the community as a meeting place; students on summer recess often dropped in to play Web games. Over time, Nelson noticed that, despite the set-up of the facility – approximately 15 desktop computers arranged around the perimeter of the room – visitors at StreetWorks chose to gather at only a few of the available terminals. Often, when playing single-user online games, one player would sit in front of the computer with a group of three or four peers standing behind, coaching and advising the seated student so that s/he might advance. The youths' approach defied expectations of how a desktop computer was to be used: one chair in front of a monitor positioned at eye-level, with a mouse and keyboard within arm's reach of a single user.

This collaborative approach was also employed when visitors sought information online. Although the computers at StreetWorks were public, the traffic was modest enough that youth found it worthwhile to wait for specific computers. Why wait when all browsers lead to the World Wide Web? Nelson discovered that the StreetWorks computer users had different senses of the local and the global than those touted by browser creators and internet service providers. For them, each computer held specific data: they relied on browser histories and caches to access websites they had visited in previous sessions or to learn where other visitors had been. They had created local banks of proven Uniform Research Locators (URLs), indirectly and inadvertently referred by peers. While they also used search engines to locate websites of interest, these were not the primary means for online exploration. Instead, they navigated the internet through traces stored in individual plastic PC boxes and shared by peers in a non-traditional, yet technologically sophisticated, manner. Rather than collecting favorites, bookmarking pages, or refining their ability to query the various search engines available, StreetWorks users displayed a grasp of specific browser application features that most casual internet users do not possess. Nelson's observations illustrate yet again that computer users may possess literacies that are not immediately legible as such. There are manifold ways to understand the internet; its location is not self-evident, and there is no necessary consensus among the digitally connected as to what constitutes the local and the global.

The uses of the internet by members of the “analog” side of the “digital divide” show, in these instances, that focusing only on a divide precludes recognition of unique or unexpected engagements with computer technologies. Those studying the digital divide must not be satisfied with the conclusion that some people do not have access or literacy. Instead, we must unearth the biases embedded in western culture, exposing the racist and gendered suppositions that continually proliferate, yet receive scant attention. What is considered technology and which cultural artifacts provide the inspiration for research and development are not neutral matters. The internet’s current configuration is neither global nor universal. The “digital divide” is more accurately expressed as the gap between normative and non-normative practices than an inability or disinterest on the part of low-income users. Non-normative practices need not be considered less skilled, less literate, less strategic, or less effective.

Digital Communication and English

It was useful for earlier studies that fell under the rubric of Communication to place television in a category that considered issues ranging from broadcasting to spectatorship, and telephony in another that examined the implications of sound transmission or disembodied speech. At the current historical juncture of media convergence, however, interpretation of digital technologies must take into account the rapid shifts and flexibility of digital and analog transmissions. One might as easily be watching a downloaded television show on a portable personal viewing device as watching a cathode-ray tube emit light in the form of a live news event on network television. When we answer the ringing telephone attached to the wall, where analog sound waves travel through wires suspended between home and telephone poles, the voice that responds to our greeting may just have likely made its journey in multiple forms and following non-identical routes, whether as bytes from a cell-phone or via VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol). The end results of these transmissions are now integrally related.⁵ The study of digital networked communication must acknowledge the complexity of these new vehicles for digital transmission and the increasing variety of interfaces possible for their consumption.⁶ Yet these shifts of shape, sound, and configuration render the delineation of digital technology or computer-mediated communication (CMC) increasingly difficult. Computer-to-computer information exchange seems self-explanatory at first, and sending photographs and texts through email or Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is unqualifyingly accepted as CMC or Internet Communications Technology (ICT), two common denotations for categories of study. Yet, does the transmission of a digital image from a mobile phone to a computer count as digital communication? If so, shouldn’t sending an SMS (short message service, also known as a text message) between mobile phones also be considered computer communication? Finally, why would text and image exchanges count as computer-mediated communication when the exchange of sound bytes that con-

stitute cell-phone conversations does not? It must also follow that, if all cell-phone communication is necessarily ICT, then landline use must also fall into this category, particularly since, at present, computer interactions, at least when considering the majority of connections worldwide, still often take place via land-based dial-up connections.

Then again, what constitutes digital space? Like communication, the space of the digital serves to privilege placelessness over location – occupied, culturally imbued understandings of some bounded parameters. Cyberspace, which I discuss in greater detail in Chapters 3 and 4, posits a disinterested spacelessness, enabling greater-than-light-speed travel, an epistemological oxymoron. It imagines itself as nowhere, despite the geographical footprint of huge warehouses housing digital servers – not to mention the natural resources necessary for their continued maintenance. At the moment, much worldwide communication is digital, though the majority does not occur on the internet. Not only is the internet frequently considered solely in terms of information exchanged via email and the World Wide Web, but other forms of digital interaction have not received sufficient consideration – among them digital music sources, cell-phones, and e-pets. When including all forms of digital communication, it seems obvious that digital space is where many people are right now: we hear the ringtone we’ve programmed to denote a call from a friend; we watch PowerPoint presentations; we read our news from an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed. Delimiting the boundaries of the digital may no longer be possible; however, cyberspace is not some parallel dimension where we conjure a non-space linked securely to a place – such as a country – by typing in a URL with a country code Top Level Domain Name (ccTLDN) – “.uk,” for example. No longer can we assume that at a “.com” suffix situates a company in the United States; in fact, such a website may not be a business at all. It may not have a location beyond the server that houses its digital domain.

Despite the many variances, digital communication has one surprising commonality: its connection to English – both as language and as cultural underpinning. English is embedded in almost every form of digital communication, from html and cell-phone programming to domain-naming practices. Worldwide participation by users from communities and nations where English is not the primary language outnumbers participation by English-speakers, regardless of how digital communication is defined. English serves as the de facto lingua franca of the computer-related technologies, particularly the internet and the World Wide Web. Similarly, the centrality of the US in World Wide Web and internet development and communication often facilitates the reproduction of hegemonic western discursive practices. Linguistic and geographical inequalities result from internet involvement, and the medium often extends the practices of earlier US-based English-language media such as television and film. This study recognizes the colonial and imperial histories of English-language spread, but does not assume that current English-language use in digitally networked environments is singly

informed by these histories. Navigating between the critical-applied linguistic theories and the celebratory framework of appropriation linguistics, I move away from the all-or-nothing proposals that obfuscate most discussions of English-language use. Digital creolization is the process of English-language use rehearsed in formulations of nation, gender, and/or sexuality in or regarding computer-mediated technologies.

The English language is not a fixed, static means of communication in which grammar rules are to be respected and conventions duplicated. Non-standard English not only develops, it sputters, fizzles, spurts, oozes, morphs, travels, disassembles, and reconfigures – embodying adjectives that have been used to understand the mal-functioning of other “technologies” of movement, from steam and gas engines to electric currents and data bytes.⁷ Locating English as a master language renders its non-normative users, in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s words, as “becoming minor,” and, as a result, undergoing the process of deterritorialization. In “Minor Literature: Kafka,” Deleuze and Guattari posit deterritorialization of a major language as a characterizing element of minor literature, written in the major language from a minoritarian position. As an a subjective assemblage, the “minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature” (Deleuze and Guattari 1993, 18). A minor literature is a “revolutionary force for all literature” (1993, 19). Expanding the tetralinguistic models of Henri Gobard, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that minor literature combines vernacular, vehicular, referential, and mythic languages. Becoming minor means being multilingual in one’s own language, thus employing different language systems based on context. The process of becoming minor within the writing-machine of a “minor literature” involves voicing the multilinguistic resonances within language. To make a “minor literature,” one must oppose “the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality” (1993, 27). When a writer can become “a sort of stranger within his [or her] own language” (1993, 26), s/he creates minor literature through deterritorialization. Deterritorialization of language

can have ambiguous edges, changing borders, that differ from this or that material. . . . Each function of language divides up in turn and carries with it multiple centers of power. A blur of languages, and not at all a system of languages.

(1993, 24)

Deterritorialization occurs with language deployment by people who “live in a language that is not their own,” occupying the “disjunction between content and expression.”⁸ The notion that literature becomes minor by being made strange through deterritorialization is an apt way to mark the moment where English is engaged strategically for online communication.