21A.850J / STS.484J The Anthropology of Cybercultures

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Student A

I feel like this week the readings are again relevant to the bit of Dennett picked out last week on 'substrate neutrality'. Cyberspace was initially characterised as being neutral space, as Eglash and Bleecker quote (pg 354):

Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, econ- omic power, military force, or station of birth (Barlow, 1996).

Eglash and Bleecker want to find better ways to introduce cultural identity to cyberspace, and list examples of black cultural heritage in other systems and artefacts. Having race on the agenda of information technology seems like only part of what should be a bigger picture: information technology is allowing many different niches to unite. You can hardly think up a habit, fetish or religion or there is a club for it somewhere on the internet.

The geography of cyberspace is what enables this. Physical boundaries are irrelevant. Cyberspace is boundless, there is no maximum capacity. Whereas in the real world we are limited by location and physical possessions, in cyberspace there is no space, and possessions can be replicated exactly in seconds.

In this alternate world, it seems reasonable that we should come up with alternate rules of conduct. If a website I host on a server in Canada can be viewed in Ecuador, is what Ecuador thinks is reasonable content at all relevant? Lessig is proposing rethinking of law in cyberspace which Philip echoes in his article, which negates physical separation on cyberspace and takes the free-ness of copying and pasting in digital bits into account.

There are some problems with this utopian future though. In cyberspace, large silos are arising where content *is* regulated-- Facebook, Flickr, gaming communities... If you do not have a name which Facebook acknowledges, you cannot use its services. Germany, France and a smattering of other countries cannot view photos which have been marked as 'unsafe' on Flickr. (One could argue here that Flickr is merely abiding by the law, but simultaneously they are providing a framework for the law to use for this censorship). In Microsoft's gaming community Xbox Live, a girl was recently suspended for pointing out that she was lesbian in her gamer profile (article). Apparently the Xbox Live staff had received complaints about her profile violating the terms of use. An Xbox Live team member wrote on his blog (source):

Our current policy for Gamertags and Profiles does not allow expression of sexual orientation under the Terms of Use. That applies to *any* orientation, straight or gay or otherwise. Gamers can however self identify their orientation in voice chat, where context for their statements can be provided.
A few months ago when this first cropped up as something that displeased people, my team saw that although the policy was objective, it's inelegant.

To think here that their policy is objective smacks entirely of technological determinism. Later it became apparent that Microsoft was selecting on keywords including homo, gay, lesbian and hetero ([article](#)). That also makes the policy hardly objective.

It will be interesting to see how the laws of cyberspace unfold, with or without the help of Lessig. It's pretty exciting he manages to argue that tools should be allowed to exist because of the minute part of their existence that can be used for non-illegal purposes. Simultaneously I hope that he also does well on fighting the illegalness of these activities. But I'm worried about large portions of cyberspace currently being in cybercountries where companies like Yahoo and Microsoft are the boss. It's also odd that the main cartographer of the internet is Google, even if they vehemently maintain that they are not evil. In the end, I have to agree with Eglash and Bleecker-- cyberspace is only neutral in theory.

Student B

Material Potentialities

"Lawrence Liang points out that P2P and hi-tech, real-time electronic remixing depend on high bandwidth and/or state-of-the-art computing power." (p. 212)

In this excerpt Philip inserts a statement into the article that hints at a potential tension in between the material natures of the technologies discussed in the article and the types of "pirating" they permit. And this tension may expose a deterministic undercurrent in the argument that the author does not discuss further. Briefly, the argument goes: Lessig reinstates authorship by identifying the good kind of creative pirating certain tools facilitate. These tools depend on access to software, reliable hardware, and ubiquitous connectivity. Lessig's counterpart in the article, Liang, believes that other kinds of "transformative piracy" (echoing Lessig) like duplicating, copying are all part of a redistribution of creative capital that should be accessible to all. In other words, there is "good piracy" and "bad piracy".

While I appreciate Philip's discussion of pirating I wonder if she has not implicitly stated an argument by which those "Asian pirates" have no recourse because of limited access to certain technologies? In addition, she does not discuss the entirety of the IPR being copied and distributed. Not all the counterfeit software/movies/etc. is transferred TO Asia. Surely, much of the data is also generated in Asia and then recopied there. How should those instances of piracy be interpreted? This last question becomes interesting in light of Eglash and Bleeker's arguments for considering home-grown sources for technological advances. There are also examples of low-tech remixing (illegal – videotaping movies in a movie theater, legal – using open source tools to engage in creative projects because you don't need expensive software to use computers creatively, for example Scratch is free) that might be important.

Imaginairies and Material Realities

In the Eglash and Bleecker article, the authors alternate between material examples of computation and technological achievement in African tradition and more modern and contemporary imaginairies such as the work of the Afrofuturists. I'm interested in thinking more about the relationship between the material artifacts such as musical instruments and weaves and the science-fiction and the futuristic projections. How do they inspire each other? And what is the role of those actors like E. E. Just (p. 366) who bridge history, culture and science, technology?

Student C

Time Frame Fallacy

Philip and Eglash-Bleecker essays can be both equally and non-equally corresponded. They corresponded in a way each writers traced the quest of western-eastern invention in conveying intellectual property issue. However, in spite of this dichotomy of east-west geopolitics, it's also hard to compare each study in a way that Philip discussed the piracy issue in a short term period, (mostly in dealing with China-India Syndrome), whereas Eglash-Bleecker illustrated their Historiography of Africa in more expanded time-frame. If only Philip expanded her timeframe as Eglash-Bleecker did, we might get more comprehensive discourse in questioning the role of authorship and piracy in the dichotomy of western/eastern society.

Synchronizing time-frame in intersecting the case of technological author within orientalism issue is critical in regards to Adrian John suggestion in appreciating and to understanding the culture of the pirates. (p.206). In the case of Microsoft v. China for instance, perhaps it's not enough to compare the two parties back from the time the software was created till the moment it was pirated in China. But instead, one need to start from the time Microsoft also started using China invention, such as: Paper and Printing system. Its sound silly and impractical, yet, isn't it a matter of rewarding one's achievement?

Lawrence = Lawrence

Philip's dichotomy of Lawrence Lessig and Lawrence Liang understanding in intellectual right is not really convincing. The notion of transformative creativity and the death of author are almost blurred in a way that Lessig's hopes on good piracy --the multiple new artistic and cultural forms created by ripping and mixing-- could only happen if one starts asking Liang's question: with this piracy, can I create something? (p.212). the only difference is that Lessig's transformative theory expects new invention by modifying the existing intellectual property, whereas Liang's new creation comes by literally utilizing the property. For example, in Betamax case between Sony and Disney (p.203), Lessig goal might be having a different kind of animation movie such as Manga in Japan, while Liang's might be having any kind of new idea from watching the movie, child education perhaps. Nevertheless, both Lawrences argued to pursue differences instead of sameness. (p.208)

Lastly, as I tweaked from Philip in (p.204), Wheels of Invention must not be blocked just because some may use the product to infringe copyright. Patent Law is just one way to reward the author while there is many other kind of reward: money, security, recognition, control etc. So, the question here, following Philip intention in the critics of technology's social network (p.201), is not merely about securing intellectual property but rather to endorse a new Creative Reward Systems to drive more affordable and pervasive innovation.

"The United States government has issued 150 yoga-related copyrights, 134 patents on yoga accessories and 2,315 yoga trademarks." ([source](#))

Student D

In Philips piece the definition of piracy is put forward as a political instrument. Philips outlines the political nature of our society's judgement of piracy, one that deems Asian piracy unacceptable while elevating other piracies to the category of authorship. Her piece, however, doesn't attempt to dismantle these distinctions, but to use them as devices to construe a contemporary notion of authorship.

Her argument of piratical appropriation as a pre-requisite of a global science –and economy- goes back to to pointing the foundations of European Renaissance in Islamic scholarship, undermining (or attempting to) the highly racialized notion of the pirate as a non-white. In this broad historical conception the archetypal pirate *would* be white.

Philips utilizes a portrait of a pirate as an "agent of inversion of repressive power relations" (p.202), but again refrains from focusing on this dialectic. Instead, her piece attempts to outline a definition of technological authorship, one that examines the current discourse on piracy as a means to understand the assumptions –on creativity, ownership, citizenship- it is based on. "In a continuation of Foucault's question 'what is an author?', I suggest that we might ask: 'what is a pirate?'" (p.205)

Another attempt to shift conceptions of race in the context of technological progress via a broad historical perspective is Eglash and Bleecker's piece. Its aim is re-instating the African roots of computation via a fascinating genealogy of the binary system:

African base-2 calculations <- 12th C. Spain <- Alchemist's geomancy (divination) <- 'Logic Machine' by Raymond <- Leibniz

Beyond the genealogy of computational reasoning and craft, a number of mentions to ryhtmic patterns as codes are made, and more generally, the notion of rhythm as an abstract idea that spanned several domains of perception and reasoning in African cultures is explored. The case seems at times hard to buy altogether, but is made effectively. It is a fascinating attempt to reconcile contemporary black American culture with a technological past; the goal is to dismantle the narrative of racial exclusion and dominance that often underlies technology. In this path they visit black American pop-cultural icons (like Collier, a black electronics wizard in Mission Impossible) to trace the

evolution of (the perception of) blacks in American culture.

A slight criticism to Afrofuturism's lack of concern with really scientific issues, instead its absolute concern with fiction.

What underlies the piece is an acute criticism of de-racialization as an avenue of the politically-correct.

Student E

I agreed that the Eglash-Bleecker article positioned the relationship between technology, identity and history in a productive way.

And their point about what constitutes 'cyberspace proper' is a compelling one. Still, I had mixed feelings about their argument to discourage "the move to separate 'official' cybernetic technologies from those of vernacular street artists or indigenous culture is troubling. Rather than a border guard with bigger walls and less leaky dams, we need better linkages, ones which allow flow against the hegemonic current" (364). My concern here is that although their instinct that creating vernacular technologies is troubling, I equally wonder about context here. Can we reasonably expect that these technologies will be understood within their proper historical/social/cultural context or does this threaten the existence of private spaces and risk the appropriation of local knowledge by larger forces (hegemonic forces) who might tend to focus on the materiality of a technology, wrenching it form its cultural identity and from its dynamic position as history unfolds. What relation might this have to Philip's notion of authorship?

The article introduced the importance of including historical examinations and made interesting points about the way that technology is examined (specifically the dichotomy between high-tech/low-tech and inside/outside cyberspace).

I found their point about black appropriations of information technology through cast-off hardware compelling in light of my own work around appropriate technologies. Like Gershenfeld's Fab Lab, which attempts to return "technological thinking" to the field through the dispersal of tools of fabrication around the world through the replication of workshops and a group like Instructables. Both imagine authorship as central components, although in the case of the Fab Lab it's less clear whether the organizational structure even conceives of local knowledge beyond local practice and individual ingenuity. In the case of Instructables, the focus is on creative re-use, explicitly positioning the author as one who appropriates discarded material and technology to new ends.

On that note, I wonder whether Lessig's notion of "transformative piracy" even translates outside of elite modern global flows very well, or whether it also serves to disrupt local knowledge and social practices in the making of the modern individual (author) among the subaltern. I am currently reading STS graduate Anita Chan's dissertation on governance in Peru and found these excerpts about the making of modern citizens to be

related both to last week's articles about Cold-War inspired cybernetic reading of the world (particularly in light of the conversation about Project Cybersyn and worker participation models) as well as this week's readings about authorship, culture, and race.

An excerpt from Chan's thesis about the role of the modern citizen in neoliberal development projects:

…the regulated choices of individual citizens, now construed as subjects of choice and aspirations of self-actualization and self-fulfillment. Individuals are to be governed through their freedom. Distributing responsibilities once assumed by modern states, neoliberal projects govern by 'implant[ing] in citizens the aspirations to pursue their own civility, wellbeing and advancement… (quoting Barry, Osborne, & Rose)

She continues, now focusing on its application to modern governance, which is particularly interesting in light of Project Cybersyn and David Noble's work on 'enchantment of automation and the emergent logic of capitalism' that we discussed in class:

Applied to the logics of modern governance, networks structure a startlingly rational exclusion, dividing civic populations once defined by a status of "ordinary" citizenship, and allowing political recognition and resources to be channeled selectively. Under a logic of neoliberal networks, that is, state and market benefits acquire a new efficiency, allowing securities to settle upon those who not only actively participate, but who can successfully (and continually) demonstrate themselves as exceptionally productive, participative, or enterprising (quoting Aihwa Ong, 13)

~~Intel~~ Nokia researcher Jan Chipchase has documented similar creative re-use behavior in his work on cell phone repair centers around the world. How might this practice fit in our readings? Although undoubtedly this is not valued in the global marketplace as a creative appropriation or individual authorship (as Lessig argues) or an indigenous practice, neither can it be justly considered (good or bad) piracy.

Student F

Eglash and Bleecker's article made me go back to last week's discussion on the universalizing, even colonizing, claims of cybernetics, reducing both humans and machines into carriers and receivers of disembodied information. The universalizing languages of information, feedback, and system sounded to me a clear legacy of Wiener's work for the total war. At the end of last week's class I was almost convinced that the discourses of cybernetics have always carried with it the historical weight of its wartime origin, that is, the attempts to create an American operator-machine system that would effectively shoot down enemy pilot-aircraft system (presumably Japanese kamikaze). A well-trained American cyborg would defeat the calculating but unpredictable Japanese cyborg. Following the historian of science Peter Galison, we may say the project of cybernetics was based on "the ontology of the enemy." Drawing upon the historian of WWII John Dower, we may even view cybernetic ideas as

emerging from the wartime racial antagonism.

Then, this week, Eglash and Bleecker calls for our recognition of "anti-racist technophilia" and "black cybernetics." They say there were clearly cybernetic ideas and practices in African culture. By traciing the analog and digital modes of representation back to African music, handcraft, and religion and by pointing to black cyborgs in American cultutral media, Eglash and Bleecker seem to try to populate the cyberspace with real people with race and gender. But I wonder how this strategy is reconciled or confronted with the particular histories of cybernetics and disembodied information. Does "anti-racist technophila" have to become a black cyborg?