

## **Book Review**

**Virtual Ethnicity: Race, Resistance and the World Wide Web**, Linda Leung, 2005, Ashgate Publishing, Burlington, VT, 196 pages, \$137.26 (Hardcover) ISBN 0 7546 43034

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*Virtual Ethnicity*, by Linda Leung of the Institute for Interactive Media and Learning at University of Technology, Sydney, is a groundbreaking new book on race and ethnicity online. Issues of race and ethnicity have been largely neglected in studies of new media, and this book is a comprehensive attempt to critically analyze how ethnicity is represented online and, crucially, how ethnic minority users of the Internet interact with these representations.

The research method used in this book is unusual. The author used students who were in a pre-university course as subjects (her term) for the project. The students were all ethnic minority women from disadvantaged parts of London. The course provided them with free computers, and students were expected to do research tasks using the computers as part of the course. The tasks involved having them discuss their ethnicity and their ethnicity and technology. They were also asked to do online searches for web sites that might reflect their ethnicity, and discuss whether or not the sites did in fact do this, among other things. Leung was candid about the research method, discussing its pros and cons and the challenges of conducting this type of research. In particular, she foregrounded the power issues between her and her research subjects/students. As the research strategy was so unusual, Leung's open discussion of the challenges in particular of doing this kind of research was welcome.

To locate her research on virtual ethnicity in a broader media context, Leung begins by engaging with research on the representation of race and ethnicity, particularly blackness, in mainstream media, considering whether the research in this area is relevant to race-based representation in new media. She finds that in some ways it is, (for example in revealing a range of key race and ethnicity-based stereotypes that also exist on-line), but that computer use is much more interactive than our engagement with mainstream media. In particular, she argues that we can find a wider variety of content online than we might be exposed to in our day-to-day interaction with mainstream media. For example, she notes that her subjects recognized that they, as non-white women, are not the target audience for much of the media content they are exposed to in television or other mainstream media. By contrast, they were the target audience for some of the content they found online.

That said, Leung finds that media representations online, as with other types of media, tend to essentialize ethnicity, representing it as fixed and immutable. This is in contrast with her and her subjects' experiences of ethnicity, which is much more changeable.

The research that the study is based on was conducted in the late 1990s, but at the end of the book Leung notes that the issues she is discussing are still very relevant today. I agree: although there are now more women online than there were then, the types of people who have access to computers and in particular the ability to produce online content are still the elites of society. In addition, issues of representation of ethnic minorities online have still been neglected, and so her research provides an important and much needed contribution to this critical area of social experience.

*Virtual Ethnicity* is very well researched, and I enjoyed her engagement with the large body of literature in the studies of race, ethnicity, media, gender, and the Internet. I also

appreciated her attention to the contradictions and nuances involved in our experiences of our ethnicities and races. The book would be very useful for those who are interested in media studies or studies of race and ethnicity. It is essential reading for those interested in race or ethnicity in an online environment.