



Taylor & Francis  
Taylor & Francis Group

---

Invisibility, Race, and the Interface

Author(s): Michelle Kendrick

Source: *Rhetoric Review*, 2005, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2005), pp. 395-399

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20176681>

#### REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/20176681?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20176681?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Rhetoric Review*

JSTOR

Young, Morris. *Minor Re/visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004.

Villanueva, Victor. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993.

---

**Michelle Kendrick**  
**Washington State University–Vancouver**

*Invisibility, Race, and the Interface*

*The founding absurdity of “race” as a principle of power, differentiation, and classification must now remain persistently, obstinately, in view.*

—Paul Gilroy, *Against Race*

As someone who teaches at the intersection of digital media studies and race/whiteness studies, I often feel as if I’m trying to fit a round peg in a square hole, or perhaps I should say trying to view millions of colors on a monochrome monitor. Computers, so often, are about distance, invisibility, and textuality while race/whiteness studies is often about bodies, skins, and lived experience. Scholars in both digital media and critical race studies have critiqued those assumptions—both are social constructs, and are created, enforced, and continue to privilege the few over the many—but the idea of computers being ethereal and bodies being “raced” still governs much of what we write about, much of what we take theoretical time to debunk. I want to consider what we can learn at the intersection of digital studies and critical race studies and what we can teach from that vantage point.

One of the core courses I teach in the program in Digital Technology and Culture at Washington State University, Vancouver, is “Digital Diversity.” I developed this course to look at how race/whiteness function online and how electronic “text” and bodies are related. Over the years I’ve found that I have to start this course with a “Race 101” segment, as my mainly white, mainly lower- middle-class students who grew up in the farming towns of southwestern Washington have little idea of how to define or deconstruct ideas of race, or racism, or whiteness. The course, I’ll admit, has proved to be frustrating for me. Ostensibly a course about “race/whiteness” online, it becomes a semester-long struggle to get my students to see issues of race anywhere as complex, historical, constructed and, well, frankly worth their while to talk about. Without a doubt the

most difficult element of the course is dealing with the concept of “whiteness.” Most of my Anglo students, many who grew up poor, are angered by the idea that they need to see themselves as having a race, as having any privilege that is unearned. The difficulty in teaching about whiteness is precisely whiteness qua whiteness. Whiteness, as many of my students think of it (or not think of it) is invisible. It is the canvas upon which everything else is painted.

Teaching courses like “Digital Design” and “Digital Diversity” in the same semester has led me to believe that there are ways to usefully combine the two lines of research. Principally, elements of digital design can be used heuristically to gain a greater understanding of whiteness as an historical, cultural, and naturalized force. Uniting these two seemingly dissimilar branches of study can yield ways to make visible forces—within computers and within the culture at large—which were designed to remain invisible to their users.

When teaching a course in web design and usability, it is now common to come across passages in textbooks like the one written by Steve Krug:

“What’s the most important thing I should do if I want to make sure my web site is easy to use?” The answer is simple. It’s not “Nothing important should ever be more than two clicks away,” or “speak the user’s language,” or even “be consistent.”

It’s “Don’t make me think!”

“I should be able to ‘get it’—what it is and how to use it—without expending any effort thinking about it.” (11)

Krug advocates, in his very popular Internet design/usability book called *Don’t Make Me Think*, for design simplicity and transparency—worthwhile goals as anyone surfing the web will attest. There are, however, multiple layers of meaning suggested by this simple and perhaps simplistic title. Specifically, what Krug calls for is an invisible computer interface, something so “natural” and familiar that it does not register on your consciousness. It “fits” the user, and like water in the fish tank, simply becomes the unnoticed environment in which you function. Good web interfaces, Krug tells us, are ones in which ease of use and agency are married. One enables the other. Things work without conscious effort (at least for the “user”). Bad interfaces, on the other hand, are ones where the structure that is to enable use and grant agency instead makes itself too visible and “gets in the way” of successful navigation toward the user’s goal. Heuristically, it is valuable to recognize that the invisibility of the computer interface is akin to the invisibility of white privilege and can be usefully taught that way. Thus my class on design and my class on race in cyberspace overlapped, and the overlap of this Venn diagram is the concept of the interface.

Teaching web design requires one to apply Lanham's notion of dual consciousness to the curriculum (5). You must teach students to look both "at and through." Where Lanham was discussing digital texts that call self-conscious attention to the manner of their own creation, the vast majority of digital texts use an "invisible" interface: an interface that works precisely because it is designed not to call attention to itself. To work with students in digital design is to require them to really see that which they have never—because of its very design—seen before.

In this short response, I am only able to scratch the surface of the valuable metaphor of the interface. To do so, I describe several related concepts—robustness, ease, power, and diversity (computer concepts all) that are useful to illuminate the structure of white privilege in US society.

The term *robust* has a precise and technical meaning in relation to computer systems. When used to describe software or computer systems, *robust* can describe one or more of several qualities:

- a system that does not break down easily or is not wholly affected by a single application failure
- a system that either recovers quickly from or holds up well under exceptional circumstances
- a system that is not wholly affected by a bug in one aspect of it  
<<http://sbc.webopedia.com/TERM>>

Robust systems are built so that they are very difficult to crash; they "are not affected by a single application failure" and "hold up well under exceptional circumstances." *Robust*, in this sense, would allow for systemic function even when there is local failure. If we think of white privilege in these terms, it becomes easier to explain to students why one white student being denied admission to Yale does not prove that the system of white privilege no longer functions. These "local" anecdotes become exceptions in a robust social interface. White privilege, then, can be described and discussed as a "robust" system that works for whites nearly all the time: It is designed to be able to have moments of failure (affirmative action, "celebrate diversity" rhetoric) and yet still work as an unhindered system.

Interfaces both digital and social have at their core a desire for "ease." Ease is the knowledge of where things "are" in a physical but also in an emotional sense. For instance, Krug describes good navigation in a web site; he explains that a good navigation system should "say" to its user: "The navigation is over here. Some parts will change a little depending on where you are, but it will always be here and it will always work the same way" (62). This perhaps is the most succinct statement of the promise of privilege I have ever

considered. If the “[system] is doing its job, it tells you implicitly where to begin and what your options are” (Krug 60).<sup>1</sup> Good interface design, according to computer experts, is design that builds into itself a level of diversity that is defined as a flexibility that enables a wider range of probable audiences. Norman writes, “Considering diversity of audience—the range of users—who might use your interface is crucial” (“Interface Theory”). But recognizing diversity is beneficial primarily in translating the interface into a product. Like car commercials that appeal to gay women, or Benetton’s united colors used to sell sweaters. Diversity online, and dare I say offline, is used primarily to define an audience, consumer, or constituency. Like the web design implementation of “skins”—which are customized templates chosen from a list by users—the surface might reflect a diversity that is not “real” in the structure. These “skins” (and the overlap here is almost too delicious to be true) seem to offer “choice.” The conventions that lie beneath them however are all the same. The diversity they offer is critically constrained. It is a show of skins, of surfaces, that does little to change the conventions beneath.

One reason customized templates are offered to users is to create a feeling of empowerment. This is reflective of the fact that the center of good web design is the hypothetical user. This “average” visitor is granted the kind of power that comes from having a whole system designed specifically for him or her. This “power” is largely unnoticed and meant to be unnoticed. When you sign on to Amazon.com, after using it a few times, you will scarcely notice that the choices have changed to meet your past demands. “Cookies” (small pieces of code downloaded to your computer) notify the Amazon site of your preferences. Again, the overlap seems too simple to explain, but white people are the “average user” of the US system, a system that has been designed to meet their needs in a manner virtually unnoticed. So when you come to a site that is designed for a different average user, like a visually impaired person coming to a site designed with a flash navigation system, then you can glimpse the alienation of the marginalized. To someone other than the “average user,” it is often difficult to participate in a system that was structured with little thought of your “kind.”

Clearly, these four ideas of robust structure, ease, diversity, and “average user” power are only the surface of possible ways of exploring the idea of “interface.” Because computer interfaces are embedded in the larger social interfaces, the idea that these systems and their vocabulary overlap is not all that surprising in and of itself.

Teaching white privilege under the rubric of interface design, however, can be very useful in allowing students to see some truths about the structures. Of primary importance is the idea that interfaces can be consciously designed to create ease for a certain group of people and that “ease” (and power) is predicated precisely on its invisibility for the “average user.”

It's easier when students are equipped with this idea of the interface to consider other important ways to interrogate the interface of white privilege. Here I end with a list of questions from another "web design book," *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*. It is a list questions for designers—but here I think you can hear how these reflect on interfaces both digital and social:

What is it we are designing and why?  
 Who will use it?  
 How will we know if we've been successful?

If, in doing critical race studies, we hope to design a world free from racism, discrimination, and unearned privilege, we must ask ourselves these questions about our own social interfaces. Do we want a multiplicity of "skins" placed over what is essentially white content? Can we teach our students and ourselves to look "at and through" interfaces both online and off?

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>The word *system* is substituted for *navigation* to make it clear how this declaration would fit within an exploration of white privilege.

#### Works Cited

- Krug, Steve. *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*. Indianapolis, IN: New Riders, 2000.
- Lanham, Richard A. *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.
- Norman, Kent L. "Interface Theory in Judgment and Decision Making" 5 February 2004 <<http://www.usask.ca/education/coursework/skaalid/theory/interface.htm>>.
- Rosenfeld, Lewis, and Peter Morville. *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 1998.

---

**Lisa Albrecht**  
**University of Minnesota**

***"Actions speak louder than words" (author unknown)***

A balance between anger and love fuels my work for social justice. My anger often feels like molten lava erupting from a volcano. It is hot, dangerous, and sometimes gets in the way of my caring. I don't mean to be hurtful when I'm angry, but sometimes it just comes out of me that way. The love part comes from