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My Second Life as a Cyber Border Crosser

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Abstract

This article explores Chicana (Mexican-American woman) experiences of being a cyber border crosser – someone of both and neither real life and Second Life. The presumption and privilege of whiteness as the foundation of Second Life is seen to limit participation of people of color. Further, I write against the notion that cyber worlds provide transcendence from the limitations of the non-normative body. Second Life and official Linden discourse are devoid of references to race, ethnicity, disability, or any other type of salient identity that might interfere with Linden Lab's vision of a perfect world. Indeed, there is a pervasive blindness to color which has negative rather than positive effects for people of color. As long as SL persists mostly as an entertainment platform, the larger SL population may not consider the lack of interest by people of color anything to be concerned about. However, the SL grid will continue to grow and engage with educational and commercial operations that will desire the participation and economic resources of people of color. The issue that needs to be addressed now is will the borders that limit users of color be build up or knocked down?

Keywords: Second Life; race; ethnicity; gender

My Second Life as a Cyber Border Crosser

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Overhead blimp: A new life awaits you in the off-world colonies, the chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure.   New climate, recreation facilities...

(Blade Runner 1982)

Second Life is an online 3D virtual world imagined and designed by you. From the moment you enter Second Life, you'll discover a universe brimming with people and possibilities. . . Enter a world with infinite possibilities and live a life without boundaries, guided only by your imagination. Do what you love, with the people you love, from anywhere in the world.

(What is Second Life? Second Life Website)

Introduction

As noted by Boellstorff (2008, p. 144), issues of race and ethnicity have been under-researched and under-theorized regarding cyberspace and virtual worlds, and, Second Life *is* a place where race happens (Nakamura, 2002, p. xi). The development of Second Life has allowed participants to engage in fantastical as well as banal social interactions through new technologies once heralded as the antidote to the ills of the post industrial age. Options abound in Second Life for "trying on" new identities as easily as trying on new clothing – seemingly without experiencing the consequences of violating social propriety. Yet virtual worlds are constructed out of the cultural and historical templates already in existence and thus replicate relations of power that mirror those found in the real world. As a creative construct, Second Life emanates out of a political economy and cultural milieu based on a Eurocentric model of the world (Blaut, 1993) that privileges a limited set of subjectivities.

Consequently, there has been a tendency to conceive of virtual worlds as largely under the purview of whites; white is, therefore, the "default" assumption unless otherwise indicated (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 144). Yet, as Cornel West (2001) has demonstrated, race **does** matter, even in virtual worlds. Similarly, Anzaldúa (2007), and Moraga and Anzaldúa (2002) have theorized the borderlands inhabited by Chicanas (i.e., Mexican American women) as a means to call attention to the rich terrain of cultural production that is otherwise neglected by mainstream society and feminism. Life on the racial and ethnic margins presents myriad obstacles, difficulties, and stereotypes that must be overcome for participants to become fully enfranchised cyber-world beings. As a Chicana engaged in Second Life I have found that cyber border crossings are as salient as crossing the very real borders of nations, and of race/ethnicity, gender, and class. The primary border to be crossed is between real life and Second Life. While no passport is required, passage into SL requires cultural, technological, and financial capital that is concentrated in the hands of white, educated, middle class people.

My experience in SL has demonstrated that avatars of color experience harassment, verbal abuse, marginalization, and cyber violence in the form of shoving and ejection. These experiences were disturbingly borne out by Mohammed (2009) when her avatar was "killed"

while wearing a *hijab*. While Castronova (2003, p. 2) indicates that "avatars can be seen as bundles of attributes," avatars of color are identified by their "phenotype" created through the conscious efforts of the user rather than genetics. Visible markers of race and ethnicity are reflected in skin color, hair styles, wardrobe, and body shape. Performing race and ethnicity complicates avatar identity in that individuals can choose to embody their actual racial/ethnic identity or engage in racial "tourism" by "passing" as a member of a different group (Nakamura, 2002). As such, cyberspace is perceived as a postracial location (Boellstorff, 2008) and performing race/ethnicity is an option open to any player. What is not widely acknowledged, however, is that white privilege allows white players to engage the virtual world without the need to be cognizant of underlying racist tropes that permeate real and virtual life. This privilege is not, however, equally open to women of color unless we construct avatars that can "pass." In this article, I will explore the way that race and ethnicity intersect with gender as a woman of color that engages in various Second Life activities. By relying on the work of critical race theorists, feminist borderlands theorists, and postcolonial theory I will examine Second Life to reflect on the degree to which the color line and ethnic boundaries are replicated in virtual settings.

Envisioning the Virtual

In the cyber-noir film *Blade Runner*, earth is a wasteland occupied by extinct animal species replaced by genetically manufactured copies as well as humans that are unable to qualify as off-world colonists. As a dystopian view of a future in Los Angeles, Ridley Scott projected a decadent and decaying society comprised of non-whites and other socially marginal groups (e.g., Goths, Hare Krishnas) that merely exist while entropy degrades culture and language into a patois of Chinese, Spanish, German, and English. Those members of society that are not the "little people" are signposted in the film primarily by their whiteness. Escape from the nightmare that earth had become was possible through emigration to off-world colonies; new lands that offered opportunities and adventure. Dystopic science fiction of this nature reflects anxieties that whites experience today in reaction to contemporary shifts in US demography, politics, and perceived eclipses in the global arena.

Second Life, however, is more commonly associated with ideas set forth in Neal Stephenson's novel, *Snow Crash* (1992). Also principally set in Los Angeles, *Snow Crash* concerns the lives of people that move in and out of a three dimensional virtual *metaverse* within which their avatars are able to club, conduct commerce, and even "die" in combat. As in Blade Runner, the Los Angeles of *Snow Crash* reflects a dystopian view of a society broken down under the anarchy of unrestrained neo-liberal capitalism. Pizza delivery joints are run by the Mafia; the most dangerous man in the world is an Aleut assassin leading a floating refugee city towards the Pacific Coast of the former USA. The main character, Hiro Protagonist, is a racial/ethnic hybrid: half Korean and half African American. Evocative in its elaboration of a virtual world wherein nearly anything is possible, *Snow Crash* itself crashed out of the constraint of the printed word and became the inspiration for the development of computer based virtual reality.

Similarly, *The Matrix* relies on notions in its portrayal of a ravaged world in which humans live plugged into a virtual reality that keeps them enslaved to extract electricity from

their bodies for use by their robotic masters. Those humans that have awakened and been ejected from the (in-script) matrix include a rag-tag ensemble of racially/ethnically diverse people. Indeed, the film *Matrix III* focuses on the protection of "Zion" an underworld community of hybrid, multi-ethnic people that look to Neo, the "One" for salvation. Again, whiteness and multi-ethnicity are underlying aspects of the characters that populate *Matrix III* and "reality."

With this very brief synopsis of these significant works of cyber fiction I wish to draw attention to the fact that for many, the imagined future and cyber worlds are constituted as places signified by the presence of non-white, hybrid, and defective peoples. In these dystopias, whiteness is used to mark superior beings (e.g., Deckard and the Replicants of Blade Runner, and the Agents of the *Matrix* franchise but, these representations of whiteness are those left behind – simulacra of real whites that have either left earth or no longer control what is left of earth. Imagery of this type serves as a cautionary tale of what unrestrained miscegenation might produce – a world out of control (of whites).

In contrast, the creators of Second Life organized their virtual world as a utopia; a place where individuals are free to do and be as they wish. ". . . we're building a new world" (Guest, 2007, p. 60). Significantly, Second Life and official Linden discourse are devoid of references to race, ethnicity, disability, or any other type of salient identity that might interfere with Linden Lab's vision of a perfect world. Indeed, there is a pervasive blindness to color which has negative rather than positive effects for people of color. This (color) blind spot is so ingrained that demographic profiles for Second Life and other virtual worlds provide little more than age and gender breakdowns (e.g., Spence, 2008). As a result, it is not possible to know the ethnic or racial background of virtual world residents (although it is possible to break down participation by nation or language). Yet the primary message about avatars in Second Life is that choices abound that allow residents to create, consume, and engage in almost any activity as long as it doesn't violate the terms of agreement (Rymaszewski, et. al, 2008). The ideal of a new world where new relationships and a new social order is reflected in the statement "This time, though, our new lands have no indigenous inhabitants to dispute our claim to the territory. Virtual worlds are empty except for us, and are shaped entirely to our desires" (Guest, 2007, p. 6). No more messy business of colonization – that project has been completed. But we do take our colonial attitudes into virtual worlds with us.

3 D(ementia-nal) Living

"Your avatar choices say a lot about who you are . . ." (Rymaszewski, et. al, 2008, p. 10)

My Second Life began on October 25, 2008. After more than a year of residence in SL, my avatar has settled into a very specific look and routine. She is humanoid, female and bears some physical resemblance to me. However, in real life the markers of my identity as a Chicana are significantly more apparent than in Second Life. For Latinos, who are classified on the basis of ethnicity rather than race, group identity is constructed out of a complex integration of shared history, language, ancestry, culture, geography, and religion. This complex mosaic of culture and history is difficult to encapsulate into a singular visual representative that can be read and

comprehended by other residents. Further, there are aspects of Second Life that hinder Latina identity construction.

First, Second Life surnames are "preordained" – that is, Linden Lab requires new residents to select a surname from an established menu during identity creation. However, non-white "ethnic" surnames are conspicuously absent from the menu. Available surnames have included: Alex, Lamplight, Wardell, Oximoxi, Rembrandt, Sandalwood, Slavicz, Maesar, Leborski, and a variety of nonsense names and random juxtapositions of letters. Names almost entirely reflect American, European, or white identities. I was not able to find a name to convey my Latina background. A limited range of surnames illustrates what I consider is Linden Lab's *illusion* of choice.

Finding an appropriate "skin" also proved to be a challenge. The majority of offerings in terms of skin tone reflect the dominant US binary racial classification system (black or white). One of the first tasks in the transition from newbie to more sophisticated resident involves skin upgrading. In my searches for a skin authentic to my aesthetic, I was frustrated to find that skins might come in different tones, but features are nearly uniformly "Barbie doll" white or stereotypically "black." Latina, *mestiza*, and Indigenous appearing skins are sorely lacking. I was able to locate a "Frida Kahlo" skin (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Frida Kahlo Skin by Brazen Women

Given that she is so very iconic, a Frida skin can really only be worn by a Frida personifier. There is one store, Brazen Women, that offers "older" skins, but skin color and shape fall into the black/white binary. A likely response from a Linden or other SL advocate would be that anyone can create the items one needs in Second Life. Of course this presupposes the ability to design and create. Second Life, based as it is on consumerist capitalism responds to market demands. The lack of items resonant with Latina/Chicana culture and phenotype (of which there are many) may indicate a limited participation by Latinas in SL.

As a result, as I engage in SL, I experience a tangible erasure of being. Who I am seems difficult to replicate in Second Life. Since I cannot adequately signify who I am, I experience

the psychosis of being an interloper, an impostor. These feelings are similar to Chicana/Latina real life experiences – particularly that of not belonging. As a cyber border crosser, I experience the ambivalence of not being of here nor there as Anzlaldúa (1999, p. 99-113) and Moraga (2002, p. 24-33) wrote about living in the real world. Entering into SL creates a distortion, a type of cognitive dissonance since one's identity as a woman of color is largely invisible, suppressed, neglected, or erased. As a cyber border crosser I may be able to move fluidly across the socially constructed and binding boundaries of race, ethnicity, and gender. But the more important question is, do I want to? As in my first life, my Second Life leaves much to be desired. The perpetual immersion in a white oriented world wears upon the psyche. My Chicana self often looks not for escape in exotic vacations, but rather trips "back home" to the comfort of family, food, traditions, and *raza-ness*. Second Life, then, fails to meet my needs for "escape." I believe that this is an important distinction, and one that bell hooks reflects on in *belonging: a culture of place* (2009). hooks reminisces about Kentucky, the home place in the hills outside of the everyday indignities of racism, segregation, and humiliation. Likewise, I associate escape with returning home where I can relax away from the scrutiny of white dominated society. Second Life strikes my curiosity, meets my need for debate and discussion in Socrates Café or Philosophy Island. I have enjoyed explorations and dancing the night away in techno clubs. But these are proxies for opportunities lost when I moved from the fast paced living of Los Angeles to the Midwest. Additionally, as a Latina with a significant amount of international travelling under her belt, I find tourist sims to be sterile and made to appeal to the timid American traveler too afraid to actually engage with the dirt, poverty, and reality of non-western settings.

Finding communities of color in SL

Second Life is known amongst virtual world cognoscenti as a place where members of non-mainstream groups can find similarly like minded people. The most notable communities are the Furry (avatars that dress/play as animals) and Gorean (Dom/Sub play) groups. Second Life has literally given new life to these rather underground real life micro-cultures. While in world sexual minorities are able to enjoy sex play and community secure in the anonymity of the platform.

My search for groups based on racial or ethnic identities has not been successful. A search did reveal more than 360 individuals that used Chicana, Chicano, Latina, or Latino as a first name. In this way, some residents explicitly signify their ethnicity through naming. For Latinos, who can be of any racial group, phenotype is a poor marker of ethnic identity. In the real world, Latino identities are conveyed by language, behavior, social networks, kinship, and—to a lesser degree—physical appearance. Interestingly, the one Latino community I was able to find was the Furry Latino group which had 242 members in January 2010. What had originally brought this group together was identification primarily as furry, and secondarily as Latino.

Linden Lab does not record demographic information regarding resident/user race or ethnicity. Interestingly, gender and age categories are considered relevant data points to gather. Indeed, *Second Life: The Official Guide* (Rymaszewski, et. al, 2008, p. 86) light-heartedly revealed that many men have female avatars in SL. It has reported that a good percentage of female avatars are animated by men. This is seen as a good thing – a means for men to explore their femininity. Shopping in Second Life is certainly a more female oriented activity. There is a wider range of skins, clothes, and accessories for females than for males.

But as has been pointed out already, references to race or ethnicity are seemingly taboo. The official guide to SL offers "not to be missed" hotspot recommendations (Rymaszewski, et. al, 2008, p. 38-63) and a sample list of communities (p. 44-45). However, none of these communities is organized around shared ethnic, cultural, or racial identities. Second Life does boast sims and even regions dedicated to non-English speakers, but these are base on national or linguistic terms such as Mainland Brazil or areas where German, Korean, Japanese, and Spanish speakers can congregate. This is an aspect of a globalizing market that must be attractive for Linden Lab to explore. However, national identities or regions for specific language speakers do not address issues of race and ethnicity in the overall US conceptualization of this virtual world.

In terms of studying race, ethnicity, gender, and other "invisible" identities within Second Life, proxy measures are required. One must rely on avatar "phenotype" (physical features) and other markers such as clothing, hair, and accessories (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Black Male Avatars

The difficulty here though, is discerning whether the person behind the avatar is acting out a desire to inhabit the body of a different race or is in fact performing his/her actual identity. Since SL is populated by every variety of avatars, it can be difficult to determine what motivates users' choices. I have found that many Black female avatar bodies are highly sexualized and eroticized aspects (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Eroticized Blackness

Anecdotally, it appears that the more sexualized the body, the less likely the user is black or female. Avatars of this type recall blackface performance; whites are able to enact their projected fears and desires to control the exotic female other in a socially sanctioned performance space called Second Life.

In my travels through SL, I have met avatars designed to reflect the real life identities of their users. For example, at Virtual Native Lands the Director is Nany Kayo, an enrolled Cherokee (her profile states "Cherokee by blood, by custom, by law, and by choice").

Latino-ness is represented by a few sims such as Visit Mexico Second Life Ruta Maya and the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum. Both, however, seem to be largely oriented towards attracting non-Latino residents. Visit Mexico Second Life Ruta Maya recreates popular tourist attractions such as Chichén Itzá, Palenque, and colonial Campeche. Created by the Mexican Tourism Board, this sim provides residents the opportunity to engage in virtual tourism "without the cost of staying in a hotel" (Second Life Update.com). More importantly, cyber tourism offers travel without the inconveniences of interactions with *real* Mexicans. There are no children hawking cheap souvenirs, linguistic barriers, or concerns about "Montezuma's revenge". Instead, all is provided for the virtual tourist including cyber stereotyping that allows visitors the comfort of their xenophobic knowledge base (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Virtual Sombrero in Virtual Mexico

Virtual Mexico also provides entirely inauthentic "authentic" Maya costumes that avatars can wear as they explore. However, these costumes rely on the trope of Indian as savage – accessories include a spear and feathered headdress (Figure 5). Equally jarring is the audio tour with the voice of a woman with a British accent!

Figure 5: "Savage Indian" Costumes for Avatar Tourists

The Fantasy of Transcendence

Some have argued that virtual worlds such as Second Life allow individuals to transcend the physical limitations of the body (Jones, 2006, p. 3, Guest, 2007, p. 114). One can style an avatar into any shape, size, or creature (anything from aliens to velociraptors). Transcendence, however, is an unrecognized privilege of whiteness, heteronormativity, ableness, and even perhaps gender. For residents that enjoy white privilege, this transcendence allows them to play out fantasies of performing the other. I have met "Orientalized" avatars manipulated by white users. In this way, whites can dress and act out according to their romanticized notions of ethnicity. They transcend their whiteness by appropriating the phenotype, dress, and stereotyped behaviors of non-whites.

For people of color, however, the notion of transcendence is awkward and problematic. Jones (2009, p. 4) suggests that Second Life is attractive to individuals that wish to be free from social and physical limitations of the body limited by ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other markings. Boler argues that computer-mediated communication, while offering the hope of disembodiment, actually "re-invoke(s) stereotypical notions of racialized, sexualized and gendered bodies" (2007, p. 140). Similarly, I question whether those of us with non-normative bodies desire to be set free from these so-called limitations. Do we really want to transcend our racial/ethnic identities? Do we desire the ability to "pass"? Is the fantasy of transcendence real? Do people of color really feel that we want to transcend the body or do we merely desire to transcend the privilege attached to whiteness? As the experience of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates indicates, people of color are subject to greater surveillance, racial profiling, and racist commentary in everyday real life (Antonovics and Knight, 2009; Kivel, 2002; Murcchetti, 2005). Due to institutionalized racism, skin color itself has been criminallized (Harris, 2002, p. 224) and the costs take a heavy psychological and physical toll (Kivel, 2002). For Gates—arrested for disorderly conduct on his own property—neither fame, status, class, nor his gender mitigated the humiliation perpetrated on him by the police, community, and media. Entry into the upper echelons of US society still remains contingent upon factors outside the control of the individual. Be this as it may, individuals that must endure the threat and fear of racist, sexist, or homophobic assault, do not necessarily wish they could change their state of being.

I contend that for users of color there are opportunities to play with identity by performing whiteness, fantasy creatures, other genders, etc. However, assuming that virtual worlds allow us to transcend the limitations of the body assumes that our bodies are the problem. For people of color, our bodies are not the problem, rather a history of racism, prejudice, discrimination, colonialism, and oppression is what we wish to overcome. The subtext of transcendence is that white is the norm and that given the opportunity, anyone can engage in SL without the problem of being recognized as colored by look, dialect or dress. The fantasy of transcendence is little more than the colonialist desire to remake the colonized in the image of their white masters.

Transcendence is also problematic in the sense that it offers the opportunity for whites to transcend their perceived lack of ethnic identity and adopt for a day the experiences of people of color. However, should a white user performing blackness with a black avatar experience racism or harassment, he or she can easily shed this other skin and return to the safety of whiteness. For users of color, however, authentic renditions of themselves via avatars means potential exposure to racism and harassment. If I have no desire for whiteness then I must face the consequences of choosing not to transcend.

The subtext conveyed is that people living "defective lives" can be freed through technology and virtual living within Second Life. Similarly, poverty, issues of computer access, and the need for technical competency are not addressed. Second Life is in many ways a virtual gated-community that protects a cyber-suburbia from direct interface with marked and marginalized *real* bodies. Yet, for the "ethnic curious" (akin to being "bi-curious") whites can presume to experience, for example, blackness with virtual bling or play out fantasies of being an exotic erotic Asian automaton. Should the experience prove too real or too uncomfortable, escape is a quick avatar appearance edit away. But for users that must continually be hyper vigilant within white patriarchal capitalist sexist society (bell hooks), no easy edit exists. But the question is can a woman of color present her authentic self through performance of an avatar in Second Life? Second Life does present opportunities for some marginalized or poorly understood micro-cultures to play and interact with relative freedom (e.g., furries, Goreans, etc.). However, these identities are not tied to racialized stereotypes that are part of one's physical being. Second Life is a controlled and contained environment where racial and ethnic identities may well be construed as dangerous to the "public" good.

As there are currently no off-world colonies to escape to, people that have become weary of the ennui of the daily grind can enter into a perpetually clean world. For many residents, places such as Second Life provide order and safety from a chaotic world (Guest, 2007, p. 76). What would such residents be willing to do or do without to guarantee the illusion of order? Social order is maintained to a degree by adherence to informal rules of "SLettiquette." One SLettiquette rule states "Just like in first life, no one with self-respect likes a badgering beggar." Code for no panhandlers, please! Through the deployment of polite language and an ethos of "just get alonged-ness" Second Life has literally and virtually eliminated the inconvenience of stepping over the undeserving poor. This is but one example of the types of social discomforts that are not allowed in Second Life. Behaviors that infringe upon other people's enjoyment of the SL are designated as griefing and carry the potential punishment of perpetual banishment.

If we build it, will they come?

Audre Lorde in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (2002) argued against mere tolerance of difference. At the time she was speaking out against mainstream feminists regarding Black women and Lesbians of Color as afterthoughts . . . literally the last point on the agenda. Similarly, any social project that seeks to be liberatory cannot relegate minorities, and especially women of color, to the margins. If we seek to create new worlds in virtual environments, we must fashion such places with new tools and new perspectives. Certainly in the realm of technology, Linden Lab and other developers of virtual reality have made the speculative fiction of the past into today's (virtual realty). However, given that the developers employed the old tools of the Master – capitalist based, gender neutralized, and from a predominantly (although not necessarily conscious) white perspective the final product is a world that negates difference because it is too difficult for whites to deal with.

Mohammed (2009, p. 9) advocates the creation of educational materials within SL as a means to apply a "negotiation rather than negation" approach to teach cultural/religious understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim residents. Certainly, increased participation by diverse peoples through the creation of sims, educational endeavors, gatherings, and discussion groups holds significant potential for making non-western, minority, and differently constituted

people visible within SL. However, this raises the question; if such venues for learning about difference are created, will residents avail themselves of such opportunities?

Examples of educational sims for the dissemination of cultural information include Virtual Native Lands and the Smithsonian Virtual Latino Museum (SVLM). Opened in March 2009, the SVLM required major financial and labor commitments to integrate online museum collection materials with the sim build. The resulting product is of high quality and caters to a wide range of interests. One may spend quite a bit of time examining the various exhibits; clicking on artifacts or panels will link directly to digital archives, sound files, and images. This is an excellent museum with great educational potential. From it's official opening through January 2010, there have been more than 12,000 visitors. Over the course of 2009, the SVLM had the greatest number of visits in April (3106, average of 103 per day) and the fewest in December (339, average of 7.3 per day), while visits were high in November (likely corresponding to Day of the Dead activities that were advertised both in- and out-world). By comparison, about 30 million people visited SI museums and the national zoo in 2009 (Smithsonian Institute, 2009, p. 9), averaging more than 80,000 people per day. Daily visits to Second Life average around 50,000. This does not indicate that the SVLM is an unsuccessful project.

Visits to Virtual Native Lands, a sim that offers accurate visual and textual information on American Indians also seem light. The website for VNL states that it "promotes the use of emerging Internet technologies to create and sustain Native American culture." Similar to VNL is an educational project developed with the USC Annenberg School for Communication Network Culture Project. The project developed in response to "harmful misrepresentations of Native Americans in Second Life" (Mayo, 2009, p. 22). The current director of the project—Nany Kayo—has set up VNL as a non-profit educational project designed to serve several needs. I communicated with Nany in VNL in October 2009. Nany took time out of her busy schedule to talk about plans for the upcoming Day of the Dead festivities in coordination with the SVLM. It was clear from our discussion that Nany is a hands on SL creator with a passion for the work she is engaged in. According to Nany VNL is the only sim in Second Life created by an authentic American Indian. This is an important aspect of the sim. Nany notes that some residents claim to be Native, profit from such claims, but perpetuate stereotypes about Indians in negative ways (Mayo, 2009, p. 23-24). Future plans include collaboration with a Native American college. From VNL, one can teleport to a mall to buy items from Native American creators such as realistic skins, authentic clothing, and household items. At this mall commerce provides opportunity for education. Visitors can view posters critical of "Caucasian Fantasy," the appropriation of Indian culture in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes of Native peoples (Figure 6).
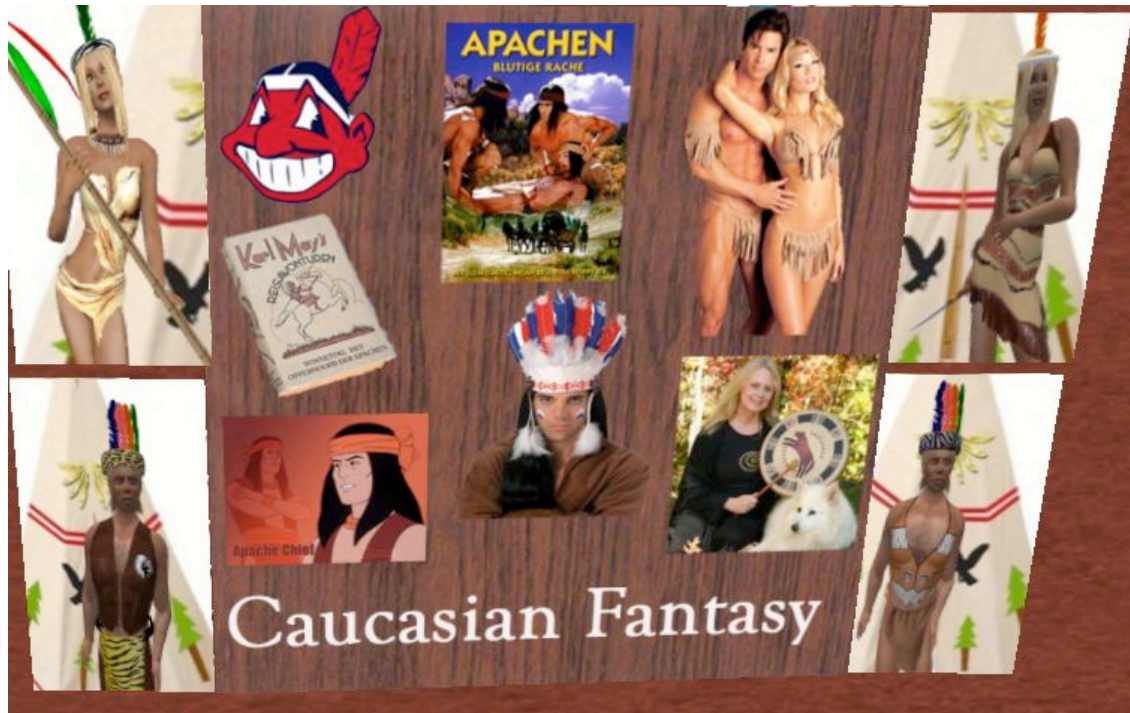
Figure 6: Caucasian Fantasy

Will there be white flight from Second Life?

If, as I have suggested, Second Life is similar to a gated community keeping the riff-raff out, what will happen when the gates break down? Currently, gate keeping in Second Life is accomplished by external cultural, economic, and social factors that limit accessibility by women, people of color, the poor, and people with disabilities. While there are certainly increasing numbers of people crossing over the digital divide, what will be the results of greater influxes of the multitudes? Will more and more SL residents opt for creating barriers between themselves and perceived *others*? Currently, privacy is maintained by fences and ejection bots. Will segregation be the result of a multiculturalized Second Life?

In world, conduct is regulated by the terms of agreement and SLettiquite. The overriding desire for SL by Linden Lab and the majority of residents is a calm, tranquil virtual life where one is free to engage in the 3Cs: commerce, combat or consensual sex. But, if SL is like RL, can social movements, protest, political action, and even affirmative action take root? If I am offended by a grotesquely stereotypical racist/sexist avatar – do I have recourse? The answer, at this point is yes and no. Since SL is a privately owned, corporate venture that individuals opt into, then anyone who encounters difficulties is free to leave. Abuse reports can be filed, but there is no guarantee that Linden Labs can or will take action. Abuse that occurs in private sims are regulated by covenants and may not be punishable.

Au (2006) recounts the experiences of Erica, a woman that spent a month modeling her friend's black skin, who was completely surprised and outraged by the treatment she received as a black woman. Yet, she did not report the abuse, since there are "Better things for Lindens to worry about." This is white privilege in operation – the ability to walk away from racism (Kivel 2002). The subtext is really that she (as a phenotypical blonde in RL and SL) had more

important issues to deal with than challenging racist discourse within SL. For residents and avatars of color, however, the choices are more problematic. One can choose to perform whiteness in Second Life, as two of Erica's Black friends do (Au, 2006). Or, one can perform as a woman of color and be prepared for racist/sexist treatment, or leave Second Life behind. Methal Mohammed's (2009) experience of being singled out and killed without warning in SL was so disconcerting that she did not return to SL for two months. Further, she became concerned the same could occur in real life.

The anonymous nature of Second Life offers people myriad opportunities to explore new skins, new behaviors, and new relationships. This is a positive aspect of virtual world living. However, a negative aspect of anonymity is that racist, sexist, and other hurtful actions can take place with the victim having little recourse. Abuse reports can be made, but in the immediate moment, avatars of color may be so shocked by the attack that they fail to take down information. Regardless of what actions Linden Lab might take against abusers, once a resident has experienced abuse he or she may simply decide to not engage in SL again. As long as SL persists mostly as an entertainment platform, the larger SL population may not consider the lack of interest by people of color anything to be concerned about. However, the SL grid will continue to grow and engage with educational and commercial operations that will desire the participation and economic resources of people of color. The issue that needs to be addressed now is will the borders that limit users of color be build up or knocked down?

"Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged."

Audre Lorde (2002)

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