

# The Interface Effect

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# Postscript: We Are the Gold Farmers

“Do we really need another analysis of how a cultural representation does symbolic violence to a marginal group?” This is how one colleague recently put it, suggesting that the cultural studies and identity politics movements of the 1980s and 1990s had at last exhausted their utility.

But how could an ostensibly liberal, broad-minded person say such a thing? How did we get here? How did the world slip away from the 1960s mold, in which the liberation of desire (and thus affective identities of various kinds) was considered a politically progressive project to undertake? At the turn of the new millennium a different destiny lies ahead. Today, under the new postfordist economies, desire and identity are part of the core economic base and thus woven into the value chain more than ever before.<sup>1</sup> What cruelty of fate. If marginal groups are now “normalized” within the mode of production, what would it mean to offer criticism of the present situation? Is there any outside anymore, when networks encircle the globe? Any subaltern, when all are tethered to the communications apparatus?

This book has tried to address some of these questions by showing how digital aesthetics both prohibit and facilitate political encounters. At the outset I suggested that we think of media not so much as objects but as principles of mediation. In this sense, the computer should be understood as an ethic or a practice, in that it introduces a structure of action, a recipe for moving procedurally toward a certain state of affairs. The primary site for such investigations has been the interface,

since it is the point of transition from one entity to another. Yet, countering the received assumptions that interfaces are doors or windows, connecting things to other things, I tried to argue in Chapters 1 and 2 that the digital interface in fact produces an autonomous zone of interaction, orthogonal to the human sensorium, concerned as much with unworkability and obfuscation as with connectivity and transparency. Faced with the breakdown of the interface, it was necessary, in Chapters 3 and 4, to interrogate representability as such. Can media artifacts depict control society, and if so, how? To end I will consider one final interface, the human interface itself, and then offer some concluding meditations on the virtues of generic personhood in the age of the control society.

A specter haunts the world of digital games, the specter of the “Chinese gold farmer.” But who is this shadowy figure? The Chinese gold farmer is a gamer who plays online video games day and night in order to earn virtual gold and sell it for real money. Journalists and researchers have stalked this elusive pirate around the world, uncovering computer rooms in China stocked with young gamers toiling in meager conditions for inferior pay.<sup>2</sup>

But is it as simple as all that? Such narratives are often accepted at face value, without probing more deeply into the powerful repercussions of the stereotypes they contain. I want to suggest that the specter of the Chinese gold farmer is in fact performing powerful ideological work within contemporary culture. The gold farmer is an allegorical portrait for how identity exists online, a portrait not so much of the orientalized other, but of ourselves.

To triangulate this state of affairs, the chapter will unfold around four queries. The first is an inquiry into the contemporary status of race, in parallel with a few observations about the state of cultural theory. The second and third questions deal directly with representations of race in video games and elsewhere. And the final question offers something of a suggestion, a possible reassessment of the situation itself, not so much a “way out” of the problems presented here, but an alternate beginning that shows, if it is successful, how some

of the problems might not actually be problems in the first place, provided one is willing to leave them be.

### First Question: *Ubinam Gentium Sumus?* Or, Where in the World Are We?

How did we get here? Step back and recall two larger points of socio-historical context informing the present debate. The first concerns the question of how race is represented today in culture, and the second concerns the so-called failure of theory and the turn, in recent years, away from identity politics and cultural criticism.

For the first point of context, recall the inauguration of the American President Barack Obama in January 2009 – not the ceremony itself, but the rehearsal that took place just prior to the event (Fig. 5.1). Three figures appear on the platform, the



Figure 5.1. Stand-ins for President-elect Barack Obama, his wife Michelle Obama, and Chief Justice John Roberts rehearse the swearing-in ceremony for the inauguration on the West Front of the US Capitol, Monday, January 19, 2009 in Washington, DC (AP/World Wide Photos, used with permission.)

same three who would be present during the swearing in. Barack Obama's stand-in is a black man, Michelle Obama's a black woman, and Justice John Roberts' a white man.

Who are these people? Who orchestrated this event? One may assume that the stand-ins for this rehearsal are drawn from the White House aide corps or perhaps from the Secret Service, their roles in the rehearsal being merely to stand in certain places and follow the choreography of simple sequences of events. Yet the specificity of the roles is particularly interesting: this black man for that black man, this black woman for that black woman, this white man for that white man. Why go to such lengths to enforce such racial specificity body by body? The casting of these particular three stand-ins might not mean much at all. Indeed a number of practical concerns most likely influenced the decision, practical concerns such as lighting and camera placement.

Even then, is there not evidence here, in Obama's inauguration rehearsal, of the most idealized form of racial typing? After Obama's election many began to speak of a post-racial society. But focus on the inauguration rehearsal. Even during this rehearsal, even during a moment in which race no longer matters, it appears to matter more than anything else. In the most prosaic dress rehearsal of who steps when and where, of moving television cameras around, of determining the temporal sequences of events – at this very moment of absolute banality, the logic of race nevertheless holds sway, all the more aggressive by virtue of its very innocuousness.

Consider for a moment the logic of superstition. "Of course *I'm* not superstitious," the level-headed person says. "I know that it doesn't *really* matter if I step on a crack, or walk under a ladder, or place a hat on a bed." Occult ritual – doing one thing to ward off another – has *nothing* to do with how the world really works. Common knowledge, claims the level-headed person. Yet it is precisely in such moments of "common knowledge" that the logic of superstition intervenes. Precisely because it doesn't matter where one places a hat, all the more reason to adhere militantly to the rules of correct behavior. The fact that the decision is free makes it all the more necessary to choose correctly. It is absolutely

meaningless, so why risk it. Why walk under a ladder rather than not, when the two paths are equivalent and one may just as easily avoid it?

Such is the logic of race in the Obama inauguration rehearsal: *of course race doesn't matter, which is why it must be preserved at all cost*. The open societies of global neoliberalism have reached a state in which race matters absolutely, but only because it does not matter at all any more. The very lack of necessity drills forward like an irresistible force. Thus racial coding has not so much disappeared in recent years, but rather simply migrated into the realm of dress rehearsal, the realm of the ideal, the realm of pure simulation, and as simulation it remains absolutely necessary. The Obama body doubles, as pure simulation, *must be black*.

Perhaps this indicates the next phase in racial representation. After Jim Crow, after civil rights, race today has been liberated, but only so it may persist in a purely simulated form (and in its being simulated it finds a natural home in the digital). With the media of simulation we have entered the phase of purely idealized racial coding, no longer merely the dirty racism of actual struggle. Now after the "formal" subsumption of racial logic comes the "real" subsumption. With Obama racial typing is finally liberated so that it may exist in a purely ideological form. In essence, the most perfect racial typing is that which lives inside a mediated simulation.

The reason for this is that the virtual can *only* exist within the absolute; the virtual *needs* the absolute. Yet conventional wisdom often suggests the reverse, that the virtual is the thing that stands "above" or apart from the real, that all anxieties about the real ultimately find their escape in the virtual. But here the conventional wisdom is wrong, for the exact opposite is true. The virtual can only be possible, not in relation to the real, but in relation to the absolute.

In formalizing this slightly, the following two points emerge: (1) the absolute realm of mediatic simulation is responsible for the "perfection" (i.e. "completion" or "accomplishment") of racial typing, and that (2) the virtual is responsible for projecting race forward into mediatic simulation, or in other words, for pushing race into the enterprise of value creation.

I will advance to the question of how race enters the sphere of value creation in a moment. First let me examine more closely the present social and historical context, particularly the so-called failure of theory, and the turn, in recent years, away from identity politics and cultural criticism.<sup>3</sup>

Consider again the lament cited at the top of the chapter. “Do we really need another analysis of how a cultural representation does symbolic violence to a marginal group?” Instead of passing this off as merely the insensitivity of a white liberal academic turning a blind eye to matters of racial and cultural injustice, it is important to point out a far more fundamental trend that is at work here. For in certain philosophical circles there exists today a newfound desire to divorce politics from ontology. There exists a desire to neuter the force of critique by removing dialectical reason from the structure of being. As this particular individual put it, the terms of the new philosophy will be: “a rejection of textual analysis or linguistic structures, a positive ontology and desire to attain the Absolute, and an attempt to shed all anthropocentrism.” But what does this mean? The first term, a rejection of textual analysis, refers to literary criticism and the perception that textual approaches gained too much ground particularly in the decades following the 1960s, so much so that they must be curtailed in favor of realist or non-interpretive approaches. The second term, a positive ontology, refers (as best one can surmise) to the “affirmative” ontology of someone like Deleuze, who removes the dialectical negative entirely from his theory of being. While the third term, the shedding of all anthropocentrism, refers to a demotion of the human, such that mankind is on an equal footing with all other objects in the world, no more privileged and no less privileged than other kinds of entities.

Is it a surprise that the identity politics and cultural theory movements have experienced such a crisis of faith? Even the most hardline defenders of leftist theory admit the same thing, that no one really believes in postmodernism any more. Even Jameson, in his *A Singular Modernity*, put forward a new take on the postmodern as something of an echo of the modern, something to be folded back, something to be reversed and reincorporated into a singular periodization. It was easy

to sneer at those who slowed the march of civil rights, or cluck at a politically incorrect remark. But perhaps a total reversal has taken place without anyone knowing. Perhaps the bottom has fallen out. Perhaps we are all Alan Sokal now.

But is it any surprise that, just at the moment when identity and affect become incorporated into the digital markets of postfordism, the utility of identity and affect as critical categories comes into question? Shall we not discard our discussions of affective “faciality” in favor of a new defacement? Recall Tiqqun’s diagnosis of the present political landscape of empire, that “Empire does not confront us like a subject, facing us, but like an *environment* that is hostile to us.”<sup>4</sup> Is the sixties-era liberation of affect really a new kind of obscenity, a new pornography in which all must be exposed for speculation and investment?

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri fired one of the first volleys in this new skirmish over the utility of certain critical tactics, specifically the elevation of multiple affects and subjectivities by those working within leftist cultural theory:

We suspect that postmodernist and postcolonialist theories may end up in a dead end because they fail to recognize adequately the contemporary object of critique, that is, they mistake today’s real enemy. What if the modern form of power these critics (and we ourselves) have taken such pains to describe and contest no longer holds sway in our society? What if these theorists are so intent on combating the remnants of a past form of domination that they fail to recognize the new form that is looming over them in the present? What if the dominating powers that are the intended object of critique have mutated in such a way as to depotentialize any such postmodernist challenge? In short, what if a new paradigm of power, a postmodern sovereignty, has come to replace the modern paradigm and *rule through differential hierarchies of the hybrid and fragmentary subjectivities* that these theorists celebrate? In this case, modern forms of sovereignty would no longer be at issue, and the postmodernist and postcolonialist strategies that appear to be liberatory would not challenge but in fact coincide with and even unwittingly reinforce the new strategies of rule! . . . This new enemy not only is resistant to the old weapons but actually thrives on them, and thus joins its would-be



antagonists in applying them to the fullest. Long live difference!  
Down with essentialist binaries!<sup>5</sup>

As might be expected Hardt and Negri were met by a considerable amount of resistance for taking this position, particularly from those scandalized by the notion that postmodernist theories about cultural identity might not be as effective as once thought, and may even add fuel to systems of power and domination. But Hardt and Negri were not speaking alone; other voices soon added themselves to the chorus. Both Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, for example, have made it clear that they oppose so-called postmodern theory and the fragmentary subjectivities and liberated affects that supposedly go along with it. With his book *In Defense of Lost Causes* Žižek advocates a return to universal truth, leftist theory's erstwhile enemy, and thus an end to postmodernism's skepticism toward "grand narratives," a skepticism which he rightly associates with the corrosive properties of capitalism.<sup>6</sup> Badiou goes even further, staking much of his work on a theory of the subject bound not by "fragmentary subjectivities" but grounded in the universality of truth. This newfound interest in a singular, universal truth is also shared by Susan Buck-Morss in her recent *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*:

Can we rest satisfied with the call for acknowledging "multiple modernities," with a politics of "diversality," or "multiversality," when in fact the inhumanities of these multiplicities are often strikingly the same? Critical theoretical practice today is caught within the prisonhouse of its own academic debates. . . We exist behind cultural borders, the defense of which is a boon to politicians. The fight to free the facts from the collective histories in which they are embedded is one with exposing and expanding the porosity of a global social field, where individual experience is not so much hybrid as human. . . It is not that truth is multiple or that the truth is a whole ensemble of collective identities with partial perspectives. Truth is singular, but it is a continuous process of inquiry because it builds on a present that is moving ground. History keeps running away from us, going places we, mere humans, cannot predict. The politics of scholarship that I am suggesting is neutrality, but not of the nonpartisan, "truth lies

in the middle” sort; rather, it is a *radical* neutrality that insists on the porosity of the space between enemy sides, a space contested and precarious, to be sure, but free enough for the idea of humanity to remain in view.<sup>7</sup>

Truth is thus singular, Buck-Morss suggests, and achieved through a “radical neutrality” of the human. (A point I will return to at the end.)

But perhaps the most forceful push away from subject-oriented, relativistic, and correlationist thinking has come from Quentin Meillassoux, in his *After Finitude*. Through a highly technical intervention, Meillassoux rejects the hegemony of finitude and urges us to awake from our slumber and reconcile ourselves with the absolute.<sup>8</sup>

Citing these different authors exposes a trend, and accentuates the contrast between a dawning set of concerns and those of the immediate past. Consider for example Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s much cited essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,”<sup>9</sup> an article that helped set the stakes for a whole field of critical race theory, particularly in the area of postcolonialism. Spivak’s “subaltern” refers not simply to the historically disenfranchised. Subaltern is not simply the subordinate position within any given structural relationship, such as that of Woman, Proletarian, or Gay. There is another level of remove. The subaltern is that quasi-subject structured as Other through a relationship of difference vis-à-vis imperial power. The subaltern is precisely the one who does not have a seat at the table. It is the one who can not petition the powers-that-be, the one who is not – or is not yet – a wage slave for capital.

If Spivak’s “can the subaltern speak?” is emblematic of the 1980s and 1990s period of cultural politics, today the very terms of the question have changed dramatically. The question today is not so much *can* the subaltern speak, for the new global networks of technicity have solved this problem with ruthless precision, but *where* and *how* the subaltern speaks, or indeed *is forced* to speak. It is not so much a question of *can* but *does*, not so much a politics of exclusion as a politics of subsumption. (And to be clear: “speech” means something entirely different under this new regime.) The crucial political

question is now therefore not so much that of the liberation of affect, as it was for our forebears in the civil rights movement, the gay liberation movement, or the women's movement, in which the elevation of new subject positions, from out of the shadows of oppression, was paramount. The crucial question now is – somehow – the reverse. Not exactly the repression of affect, but perhaps something close. Perhaps something like a politics of subtraction or a politics of disappearance. Perhaps the true digital politics of race, then, would require us not to “let it be,” but *leave it be*. Something else is necessary, a *something* of the political. In short, Obama's body double should not necessarily have to be black. It should be whatever it is.

So where in the world are we?<sup>10</sup> To summarize the socio-historical context: (1) there comes an increased cultivation of racial typing and a triumph of the decades-long quest to liberate affect, concurrent with (2) the recession of “theory,” particularly identity politics and cultural theory. At first glance these two phenomena might appear unconnected. They might appear as merely contradictory effects, pushing each other apart, tied together only by historical coincidence. It is thus necessary to pose the question explicitly: Are these two forces connected? And the answer is most certainly yes.

## Second Question: Why Do Games Have Races and Classes?

The Obama inauguration rehearsal is not informatic per se, beyond the admittedly vague references given already to simulation and the virtual. To pull back the curtain a bit, consider now cultural production and the digital infrastructure, particularly video games and the kinds of worlds they create. A curious logic holds sway in these digital realms. A curious logic of race and class, constructed via complex software algorithms, still grips the psyche of game makers and game players. But why?

In a game, a race designates a set of representational proclivities – across both diegetic and nondiegetic representation – that are closely followed in matters of narrative, character

modeling and animation, gamic elements such as weapons and resources, *mise en scène*, algorithmic personalities, styles of gameplay, AI behaviors, and so on. These types of software artifacts are then “metaphorically patched” into games as coherent, contained “races.”

Gamic races are often essentialist in nature, paralleling certain offline retrograde notions of naturally or physiologically determined and unchangeable human races. For example in a game like *World of Warcraft* race is conditioned largely by the demands of aesthetic representation of certain “ethnic” intangibles like voice, visage, and so on, and only secondarily intersects with informatic modeling of behavior in so-called racial traits. For example the troll race in *World of Warcraft* (Fig. 5.2) speaks with a Jamaican accent. Yet in a game like *StarCraft* race is much more algorithmically foundational. In

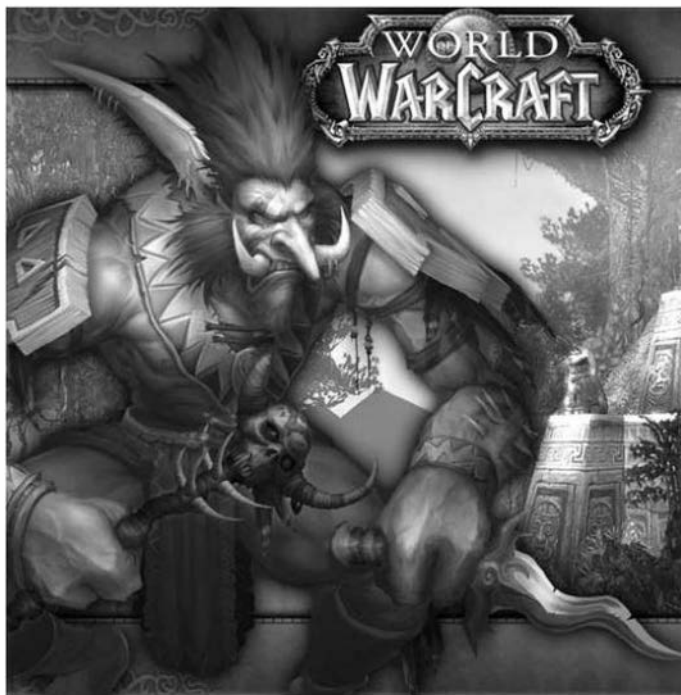


Figure 5.2. Troll race. Blizzard Entertainment. *World of Warcraft*, 2004. Game still.

*StarCraft*, a race has unique combat strategies, a certain “way of doing things.” To be sure, “race” here pertains to an entirely gamic context, a context which is altogether different from but in some senses determined by offline race. Yet in this sense *StarCraft* is more sinister in that it provides a direct mapping of race onto machinic variables, whereas *World of Warcraft* offloads almost all of this functionality to the sister concept, class, retaining race largely for the window dressing of diegetic representation.

After these software clusters are metaphorically patched into the game as distinct races, the game designers seek balance in gameplay by fine tuning different variables within each software cluster, reducing a value in one faction and augmenting it in an oppositional faction. In this way, all the races are brought into balance. For example, if one *StarCraft* race is inordinately powerful certain racial variables may be quantitatively increased or decreased. The goal is to create a better sense of equilibrium in play. Since each software cluster is apt to be quite complex, the techniques of racial balancing generally operate in a rather roundabout way, eschewing any neat and tidy trade-off between this or that trait mirrored across two or more races. Instead, balance is achieved through the delicate art of exchanging qualitatively different values, for example by shaving *time* off one racial ability and transmuting it into a *damage* boost in another race’s ability. If the simulated system involves three races as in *StarCraft*, or an even larger number of classes as in *World of Warcraft*, the art of balance can be exceedingly difficult, ultimately measurable in certain global statistics such as win-loss percentages for each race, or that intangible statistic known elusively as fun.

Certainly much more could be said here about races and classes in games, and the distinction between them, but one particular observation is necessary before moving on, that these games subscribe to a specific notion of race and class (and one not dissimilar to the offline): *race is static and universal, while class is variable and learned*. So in *World of Warcraft* racial traits indeed exist and have a bearing on gameplay, but they are unmodifiable (alas, the troll-Jamaican alliance is incorruptible), while class traits are configurable in a number

of significant ways including the talent tree and the boosting of class abilities via consumables or wearables. What this means is that race is “unplayable” in any conventional sense, for all the tangible details of gamic race (voice, visage, character animation, racial abilities, etc.) are quarantined into certain hardcoded machinic behaviors, what I have elsewhere called the “diegetic machine act.”<sup>12</sup> One cannot “play” race in *World of Warcraft*. One must accept it as such. Certainly the enterprising gamer can “play with” race via the chat channel, fan comics, and so on. But to *play* with race and to play *with* race are two entirely different things.

The worrisome conclusion is that this view on digital race is typically what one would call, in the offline context, racism, in that the apparatus assigns from without certain identifiable traits to distinct classes of entities and then builds complex machineries for explaining and maintaining the natural imperviousness of it all. That the game pleads innocence by placing the narrative in a fantasy world of fantasy races (trolls, gnomes, elves) does not absolve it from foregrounding a systemic, “cybertype”<sup>13</sup> logic of naturalized group definition and division, as in a dream when the most important or traumatic details are paraded before the mind’s eye in such flagrant obviousness that one is blind to them in their very immediacy. The “innocence” of the sublimation is in fact apropos because it illustrates the neoliberal, digirati notion that race must be liberated via an uncoupling from material detail, but also that the logic of race can never be more alive, can never be more *purely* actualized, than in a computer simulation. Apparently one must leave this world in order to actualize more fully its mechanisms of management and discipline.

Let it be underscored though that the most interesting thing to observe here is *not* that *World of Warcraft* is racist. The interesting thing to observe is precisely the way in which racial coding must always pass into fantasy before it can ever return to the real. The true is only created by way of an extended detour through falsity.

But is gaming’s race problem merely a nominal one? Is “race” simply an unfortunate word choice for what is ultimately a pragmatic design requirement, that many games

require clusters of algorithmic representational proclivities to designate distinct players and player types. If game designers had used a different word like “archetype,” “species,” or “family” would the problem go away? The answer lies certainly in the deployment of what Lisa Nakamura calls “menu-driven identities” – with or without reference to race – but also in the disheartening discovery that ethnic and racial coding seem always to be synonymous with mediation itself.<sup>14</sup> The one implies the other. By way of an allusion to the *Star Wars* movies, this is what might be called the “Jar Jar Binks” problem of fantasy representation (Fig. 5.3): the more one seems to extricate oneself from the mire of terrestrial stereotyping, the more free and flexible the bigotry machine becomes, able to repopulate the racialized imagination with “aliens,” but aliens that conveniently still stick to the gangly comic relief of the blackface minstrel complete with exaggerated facial features and a Jamaican accent. (Jar Jar Binks borrows the voice, but not the body, of black actor Ahmed Best.) Similar scenarios occur in any number of other digital animations, as in the 2001 animated feature *Shrek* where black actor Eddie Murphy quite literally plays the ass. Apparently computers are much better at this than we could ever have imagined! Because of this, the contemporary format of digital animation, both cinematic and gamic, is one of the most important sites today where racial coding is worked out in mass culture. Until this issue is addressed, the “race” problematic in gaming will be alive and well, no matter what name it goes by.<sup>15</sup>

### Third Question: Who Is the Chinese Gold Farmer?

But what of the market system in general, where does it appear? Markets are places where the standardized exchange of qualitatively different entities takes place in a naturalized, unfettered fashion following certain ground rules. Most all games are markets of some form or another. RTS games in particular – races and all – simulate markets quite vividly with their economics of resource collection and exchange. To be sure this is entirely different from the claim, issuing from



Figure 5.3. Jar Jar Binks publicity image for *Star Wars, Episodes I-III* (d. George Lucas, 1999–2005).

certain economists, that games like *Everquest* or *World of Warcraft* are markets due to the circulation of virtual gold within them.<sup>16</sup> Rather, this is the claim that RTS games (a genre shared not by *World of Warcraft* but by its predecessor *Warcraft III* as well as *StarCraft*) are markets because the algorithms of gameplay themselves are structured around an economy of resources and productive capabilities. Resources circulate, objects and agents are produced, destroyed and replenished,



all without the exchange of “gold” or the existence of virtual “marketplaces” in any proper sense. The market analogy is significant because it highlights the problem of how to “control” that which is uncontrollable, or how to shift from top-down control to organic, bottom-up control.

The specter of the Chinese gold farmer returns again now as a way of addressing the question of markets in games. Recall the narrative again, that somewhere off in another land beyond the sea there are legions of Chinese gamers, working in near sweatshop conditions, playing games to earn real cash for virtual objects. I have no interest in disputing this on purely empirical grounds. Of course such rooms exist, here, there, and elsewhere. But of much greater importance, it seems, is the ideological work being performed by the tableau itself: “the problem of the Chinese gold farmer.” A certain amount of ideological demystification is in order, if not to shrug off the xenophobia latent in such a formulation, then to invert the terms entirely.

What if something else is happening? What if the “problem of the Chinese gold farmer” is really a decoy for what is actually going on? In order to tackle the problem directly, consider the first of two affirmations: (1) *We are the gold farmers*. (And by “we” I mean the gamers and users of the developed and developing worlds alike, the unified mass of whites and non-whites alike.)

What does this mean, that *we are the gold farmers*? It means that in the age of postfordist capitalism it is impossible to differentiate cleanly between play and work. It is impossible to differentiate cleanly between nonproductive leisure activity existing within the sphere of play and productive activity existing within the sphere of the workplace. Such a claim should be understood both in a general and specific sense. In general, postfordist workspaces are those that have ballooned outward into daily life to such a high degree that labor is performed via phone in the car, on email walking down the street, or at home after putting the children to bed. Crosscutting this outward expansion is an internal collapse of the workspace itself, as the “bored at work” classes invent new ways to slack off on the job, surfing the web, and otherwise circumventing

the necessities of workplace always-on performance. But also in a more specific sense, postfordism is a mode of production that makes life itself the site of valorization, that is to say, it turns seemingly normal human behavior into monetizable labor. The new consumer titans Google or Amazon are the masters in this domain. No longer simply a blogger, someone performs the necessary labor of knitting networks together. No longer simply a consumer, browsing through links on an e-commerce site, someone is offloading his or her tastes and proclivities into a data-mining database with each click and scroll. No longer simply keeping up with email correspondence, someone is presiding over the creation and maintenance of codified social relationships. Each and every day, anyone plugged into a network is performing hour after hour of unpaid micro labor. In this sense are we not gold farmers too? Why are our dreary hours spent in front of the screen any different? We troll and scroll, tagging and clicking, uploading and contributing, posting and commenting. They spider us and mine us, extracting value from pure information. Our drudgery is rewarded from time to time of course, with bribes of free this and free that, a free email account or a free ringtone. I do not dispute the existence of a business plan. Rather I dispute the ideological mystification that says that we are the free while the Chinese children are in chains, that our computers are a lifeline and their computers are a curse. This kind of obscenity must be thrown out. We are all gold farmers, and all the more paradoxical since most of us do it willingly and for no money at all.

Now a second affirmation: (2) *It's not the gold, it's the Chinese.* In order to understand further the kind of ideological force behind the so-called problem of the Chinese gold farmer, one must acknowledge that it is not the gold that is being farmed, it is the "Chinese" that is being farmed. The purely economic claim from the first affirmation must now be supplemented. As has been hinted thus far, there is a new kind of speech online, the speech of the body, the codified value it produces when it is captured, massified, and scanned by systems of monetization. The purely economic claim, then, that all users perform scads of unpaid micro labor, merely through the act

of living inside the digital cocoon, must be supplemented via an examination of the very quality of that act. So the hunter becomes the hunted, migrating from a situation in which users farm for gold, to a situation in which users are being farmed. For, under postfordism, the act of life is always already an act of affective identity. A body is always “cybertyped,” that is to say, it is always tagged with a certain set of affective identity markers. Whenever a body speaks, it always already speaks as a body codified with an affective identity (gendered, ethnically typed, and so on), determined as such by various infrastructures both of and for identity formation. The difficulty is not simply that bodies must always speak. The difficulty is that they must always speak *as*.

Let there be no misunderstanding, my goal is not the elimination of difference, racial or otherwise. Rather what must be interrogated is, on the one hand, when difference becomes fodder for injustice, and on the other hand, when difference is mobilized as fuel for value creation in the marketplace. The goal, then, would be to uncouple difference from both injustice and valorization.

With the postfordist colonization of affect and the concomitant valorization of affective difference, a body has no choice but to speak. A body speaks whether it wants to or not. This is the genius of the “page rank” algorithm used by search engines: use graph theory to valorize pure heterogeneity, show how quality is an emergent property of quantity, as Barbara Cassin has written in her book on Google.<sup>17</sup> Data mining is often considered in terms of location and extraction of nuggets of information from a sea of background noise. But this metaphor is entirely wrong. Data mining is essentially a plastic art, for it responds to the sculpture of the medium itself, to the background noise itself. It valorizes the pure shape of relationships. Not “can” but “does” the body speak? Yes, it has no choice.

Making a phone call from the slums of Cairo or Mumbai or Paris, the subaltern “speaks” into a database – just as much as I do when I pick up the phone. The difference for difference is no longer actual, it is technical. The subaltern speaks, and somewhere an algorithm listens.

### Final Question: Does the Whatever Speak?

At the very moment of the digital, at the very moment of the prohibition of the negative, from out of the trenches of forced speech, of enforced behavior, of networks reinforced with apparatuses of capture and protocols for ebb and flow, here rises a new politics of disappearance. It is no longer the Hegel of history, where everything is “post-” this and “post-” that, but the Hegel of the negative, where everything is “un-” or “non-” What was once a logic of supercession is now a logic of cancellation. Seek not the posthuman, but the nonhuman. Be not post identity, but rather subtractive of it. The operative political question today, thus, in the shadow of digital markets, is not that of confrontation on equal footing, not “what are they going to do to us?” or even “what are we going to do to them?,” but rather the exodus question: first posed as “what are we going to do *without* them?” and later posed in a more sophisticated sense as “what are we going to do without *ourselves*?” Cease trying to buttress presence with new predicates, it is time now to abandon it, to leave it be. It is time now for leaving-being.

The virtual (or the new, the *next*) is no longer the site of emancipation. Rather, it is the primary mechanism of oppression. And so, even in the face of those who seek alternatives to this world of debasement and exploitation, we must stress that it is not the job of politics to invent a new world. On the contrary it is the job of politics to make all these new worlds irrelevant. No politics can be derived today from a theory of the new.<sup>18</sup> The reason is simple: we have never known any form of modernity except that form of modernity subservient to the new. We have never known any form of modernity except that of market accumulation, increased profit margins, development of the productive forces, rises in productivity, new jingles, the latest fads, and on and on. These are the currency of the realm. It is time now to subtract from this world, not add to it. The challenge today is not one of political or moral imagination, for this problem was solved ages ago – kill the despots, surpass capitalism, inclusion of the excluded, equality for all of humanity, end exploitation. The world does

not need new ideas. The challenge is simply to realize what we already know to be true.

That silly slogan of the left, “another world is possible,” should be scrapped. Another world is not possible. The political is that thing that can not happen. It can not be produced and it can not take place. But why? Because “production” and “taking place” are the domain of anti-political forces. The political does not arise from the domain of production, nor does it exist in any place or situation. Another vocabulary is required. So like Badiou we might speak of the political in terms of the event. Or like Laruelle we might speak in terms of generic immanence.

The “me” today is the *whatever*. Recall Buck-Morss’ concept of a “singular” truth reached via “radical neutrality.” Or recall what Rey Chow once described as the “indifference” of the native.<sup>19</sup> These are hints into the meaning of this elusive concept. But what exactly is the *whatever*? Now the question may be answered more fully.

The concept of the *whatever* comes from the writing of a number of different authors, all working roughly in the terrain of continental philosophy and political theory. While the concept has roots in the scholastics and can be found in thinkers as divergent as Pierce, Levinas, and Lyotard, the *whatever* gained traction in the current discourse largely because of Deleuze and then later via more sustained considerations by Agamben. Deleuze uses the concept of the “*whatever*” and the “*any-space-whatever*” in his *Cinema* books, and deploys related terminology in other texts, such as the “*something*” (*aliquid*) and the “*neutral*” in *Logic of Sense*, and “*haecceity*” (the Latin term borrowed from Duns Scotus meaning “*thisness*”) in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In *The Coming Community* Agamben explains his use of the term in greater detail: “The *Whatever* in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being *such as it is*.”<sup>20</sup> And later: “*Whatever* is the figure of pure singularity. *Whatever* singularity has no identity, it is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate; rather it is determined only through its relation

to an *idea*, that is, to the totality of its possibilities.”<sup>21</sup> The whatever follows a logic of belonging ( $x$  such that it belongs to  $y$ ), not a logic of predication ( $x$  is defined through  $y$ , or more simply,  $x$  is  $y$ ).<sup>22</sup>

The trick of the whatever is thus to abstain from the assignation of traits, to abstain from the system of biopolitical predication, to abstain from the bagging and tagging of bodies.<sup>23</sup> This does not mean that all bodies are now blank. Quite the opposite. All bodies are full. But their fullness is a generic fullness, a fullness of whatsoever they are.<sup>24</sup> Likewise it does not mean that difference has “gone away.” The opposite is the case, as difference may now finally come into its own as generic difference.

The whatever is often confused with two other kinds of subjects that, while similar, are ultimately incompatible. The first is the postfordist economic subject. It would be a mistake to think that the whatever is merely the fully unique, customized, qualitatively special postfordist consumer – what Tiqqun calls “Bloom,” the subject for whom everything is tailored and targeted.<sup>25</sup> For each affective predilection of the postfordist economic subject there is a corresponding marketplace that will satisfy it. Here lies the Pyrrhic victories of identity politics: each woman a woman consumer, each black a black consumer, each gay a gay consumer, each chicano a chicano consumer. For in our delivery from oppression, were we not also delivered to a new site of consumption? This was precisely the point made previously about the Chinese gold farmer: every economic transaction today is also an affective transaction (which is to say a transaction that will likely deal with aspects such as, but not limited to, racial identity).

Second is the liberal political subject. It would also be a mistake to think that the whatever is akin to something like the “original position” and “veil of ignorance” described by John Rawls in his theory of justice, but evident as well in other forms across a number of different liberal social theories. The veil-of-ignorance subject must hold in suspension its gender, its ethnicity, its religious affiliation, its class position, etc. In the digital context it is often summed up by the slogan “on the Internet nobody knows your identity.” (A position that was

once famously parodied as “on the Internet nobody knows you’re a dog.”) The Rawlsian liberal fantasy is thus that of the transcendental subject par excellence, the subject who is able to step out of his skin, suspending social relations in order to observe them from a position of supposed neutrality. (The dilemma with Rawls is that some models of social relations are *not* suspended, specifically those borrowed from liberal political economy and game theory: respect for individual liberty, the maximization of advantage, rational choice, and so on. Again the demon of simulation rears its head, as things appear neutral precisely at the point of *least* neutrality.) Given this characterization of the liberal political subject it would be a mistake to think that it has much at all in common with the whatever.

Remember that, after the old enemy of transcendental essentialism, racial justice has a new enemy, transient anti-essentialism. Recall the conceit of white privilege: to cast off the fetters of race and retreat to the original position behind a veil of ignorance (as in Rawls). Such a theory reveals not only the ignorance of the veil, but also the ignorance of the position, for it is only certain select bodies, certain select subjects, who are free to cast off their earthly fetters and go blank, like a white sheet of paper.

What of those bodies of color for whom this is not an option? Or what about those who simply have no desire to abandon themselves, to abandon their culture, to abandon their history? For whom would this be called justice? What even of those bona fide whatever bodies who nevertheless are constructed and viewed as such from the perspective of the dominant? Did they bring it upon themselves? Do they wish it to be so? Clearly such subaltern positions exist entirely within normative discursive structures.

The rebuttal from the whatever is: yes, the old system of transcendental essentialism is still our enemy, we do not want to return to a politics of essential purity in which only certain subjects are dominant and all others are consigned to alterity; but at the same time, the new system of transient anti-essentialism is our enemy too, for we also reject the new customized micropolitics of identity management, in which

each human soul is captured and reproduced as an autonomous individual bearing affects and identities.<sup>26</sup> The whatever rejects the symbolic violence of Facebook just as much as it rejects the real violence of Jim Crow. The whatever rejects the farming of “Chinese” just as much as the farming of gold.

In short, there exists today *universality without collectivity*. The whatever is an attempt to work through this dilemma, not by eliminating universality, but by showing how collectivity is the natural outcome of the generic, how the common is only achieved by those who have nothing in common.

Finally now the unsolved enigma of Chapter 1 receives some attention. That “dirty regime” called *truth*, consisting of the intersection of both aesthetic and political incoherence, returns with full force. The whatever is aesthetically incoherent because it does not coalesce around any given formal essence or definitional predicate. The whatever finds its power in incontinence and transformation, not unification or repetition. Likewise the whatever is politically incoherent because it tends to erode existing territories and institutional routines. The whatever is not a coalition or a political party. No center exists toward which it might gravitate. The whatever does not make political demands, and has no political platform. A harbinger of the truth regime, the whatever dissolves into the common, effacing representational aesthetics and representational politics alike, in favor of direct immanence in matter.

So the whatever should not be read as simply a new spin on the same old white liberal hobbyhorse. It is not a call for all the world’s people to appear in our image, for us all to join in a chorus of “we are the world.” No, as George Yúdice wrote, we are *not* the world. The world does not appear in our image. By contrast, the whatever is an attempt to avoid the trap of affect, that is to say, the trap of the “image” of the identity-bound individual. It is an attempt to avoid the trap of racialized universalism. The sooner we realize these things, the sooner we can return to what we are, *whatever* that may be.<sup>27</sup>

Again, to be absolutely clear: the whatever does not eliminate difference. The whatever is neither a synonym for the universal, nor for the transcendental, the white, the blank, the



empty, or the whole. The whatever begins when the system of predication ends.

To be sure, the whatever is not a panacea. It is not a heroic subject position. The whatever is not a gateway to a utopia. This is not a new kind of Maoism, a call to go forth and disentangle oneself from ideology and privilege, to live among the peasant classes, those who have no qualities except their own authentic history. The whatever is merely a practical suggestion, an ethos. Demilitarize being. Stand down. Cease participating in the system of subjective predication. Stop trying to liberate your desire. Forget 1968. Don't "let it be," *leave* be.<sup>28</sup>

Again the question, was the subaltern able to speak? No, not exactly.

What of today's digital class? It has no choice but to speak, continuously and involuntarily.

And the whatever? The whatever fields no questions and leaves very little to say. Let's try to keep it that way.

world. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002).

- 19 Fredric Jameson, "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* As a Political Film," *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54.
- 20 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 51.

#### 4 Disingenuous Informatics

- 1 24, season 3, episode 4 (Fox, 2003), minute 23.
- 2 Several technical terms such as "protocol" and "socket" are used by characters in the show in order to give the dialogue an aura of technological sophistication. In 24 a protocol means a directive for action involving information flows and human agents.
- 3 I thank David Parisi for this word choice, as well as his thoughts throughout. Slavoj Žižek discusses the detached subject position of the 24 torturer in his piece "The depraved heroes of 24 are the Himmlers of Hollywood," *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,1682760,00.html> (accessed January 10, 2006). For Žižek however, this detachment indicates a certain type of coping strategy, not evidence of the pure machinic expedience of torture as a tactic (or rather a *fantasy* tactic).
- 4 See in particular Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 142–143.
- 5 I discuss this further in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 64–65.
- 6 Anne Friedberg attends these questions with much greater detail than I. See in particular the final chapter of her book *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

#### Postscript: We Are the Gold Farmers

- 1 Nancy Fraser charts this historical shift with great facility and insight in her article "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," *New Left Review* 56 (March–April 2009): 97–117.

- 2 Interesting work has been done on the question of race and labor in gaming. See in particular Lisa Nakamura, “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (June 2009): 128–144.
- 3 For two contrasting articulations of this trend see Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 225–248, and D. N. Rodowick, “An Elegy for Theory,” *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 91–109.
- 4 Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander R. Galloway and Jason E. Smith (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 171.
- 5 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 137–138, emphasis added.
- 6 Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008).
- 7 Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 138–139, 149, 150.
- 8 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 128.
- 9 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 271–313.
- 10 With the chapter well underway one may now reference the source of this quotation, Cicero’s famous lament from the *Catiline Orations* where with much pomp and flourish he decries the abominations besetting the city: *O di immortales, ubinam gentium sumus? Quam rem publicam habemus? In qua urbe vivimus?* (“Oh immortal gods, where in the world are we? What kind of commonwealth do we have? In what sort of city do we live?”) Or perhaps for our purposes today a slightly more literal translation of *gentium* is appropriate: “Where are we among all the races?” Are we *barbarians*? Do you think this is *China*?!
- 11 “Metaphorically patched artifacts [are] technological narrative elements that are brought to fit into the diegesis by the deployment of a metaphor.” See Eddo Stern, “A Touch of Medieval: Narrative, Magic and Computer Technology in Massively Multi-player Computer Role-Playing Games,” [http://www.c-level.cc/~eddo/Stern\\_TOME.html](http://www.c-level.cc/~eddo/Stern_TOME.html); reprinted in Frans Mayra (ed.),

- Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings* (Tampre University Press, 2002).
- 12 A diegetic machine act is an action performed by the game within the world of the story. For more on this concept see the chapter “Gamic Action, Four Moments” in my *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- 13 See Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- 14 *Ibid.*, 101–135.
- 15 I thank David Parisi for raising the problem of nominalism in this context.
- 16 See in particular Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). A precursor to *World of Warcraft*, *Everquest* is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game released in 1999 by Sony Online Entertainment.
- 17 See Barbara Cassin, *Google-moi: La deuxième mission de l'Amérique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007), 100, 102.
- 18 Here I take oblique aim at McKenzie Wark's assumptions in *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), one of the essential books on politics and information technology.
- 19 “And she stares indifferently, mocking our imprisonment....,” Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 54.
- 20 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1. Agamben is relying here on the Latin word *quodlibet*; the Italian cognate is *qualunque*, the French *quelconque*. Agamben suggests that the root *libet* indicates that the whatever being has a relationship to desire, yet it carries a slightly softer connotation than that, as *libet* signifies not so much full-fledged desire (a word so loaded with meaning these days) as the fact of being pleased by something or finding something agreeable. Thus one should not see the whatever as a code word for desire in the strongest sense, particularly not in the way that desire was picked up by poststructuralism. *Quodlibet* is literally: “what you please”; or more loosely, “whatever you want.”
- 21 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 67.

- 22 To this François Laruelle adds an important amendment. In contrast to both belonging and predication, Laruelle favors the logic of identity in which something is understood strictly through sameness ( $x$  is  $x$ ).
- 23 See Jason E. Smith, *Optimism of the Will, Pessimism of the Intellect* (forthcoming).
- 24 Agamben says that the whatever is neither particular nor general, neither individual nor “generic.” Yet it is important to point out that Badiou uses the term “generic” too, and when he does he means something very similar to the whatever. So a superficial false-friend incompatibility should not deter us from making a connection between the two terms. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005), and also Nina Power’s essay “What is Generic Humanity? Badiou and Feuerbach,” *Subject Matters* 2, 1 (2005): 35–46, in which she follows an interesting path back to Marx and Feuerbach’s *Gattungswesen*, man’s “generic nature,” or as it is more commonly rendered in English, his “species-being.”
- 25 See in particular Tiqqun, *Theorie du Bloom* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2004). The Tiqqun group also deploys the concept of the whatever in their writing.
- 26 For a discussion of the whatever in connection with contemporary media technology see the work of Jodi Dean and Dominic Pettman, in particular Chapter 3 on “Whatever Blogging” in Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), and Dominic Pettman, *Love and Other Technologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).
- 27 Here I diverge – if perhaps not substantively then in a few points of emphasis – from the critique of Agamben and Mark Hansen in the excellent paper by Jennifer González titled “Surface: Slippery Ethics and the Face” given at the “Visual and Cultural Studies: The Next 20 Years” conference at the University of Rochester on October 2, 2009, and published in alternate form as “The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice,” *Camera Obscura* 70, vol. 24, no. 1 (2009): 37–65. In Agamben the whatever is not a universally same subject, as González’s critique of Agamben and Hansen would imply. The whatever is the subject of unassigned difference, not sameness. The whatever is never the same, it never transcends what it is, it always disidentifies itself into the generic. Again, this is a far cry from both the blank, universal

sameness of the transcendental ego on the one hand (the Cartesian, Kantian, Rawlsian variant), and the infinitely customizable granular individuality of the postfordist “dividual” on the other (the cybernetic, behaviorist, game-theoretical, proto-ecological variant).

- 28 For an inspiring example of what this might look like see Eugene Thacker’s project “Calamity Gym,” forthcoming from Punctum Books.