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The Social in Media: Race, History, and the VC Controversy at MIT

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A phone ringing non-stop—that is a vivid recollection of mine from the *Visualizing Cultures* controversy at MIT. My office is not far down the hall from Shigeru Miyagawa’s office, and the brassy, insistent old-school telephone clamoring behind his locked door was incessant in the days after the controversy erupted. It would ring a dozen times, stop briefly, then start right up again. It rang all day, for days, a symbol of old communication technologies intersecting with emotional upset spurred in part by online communication. In the weeks that followed, many people experienced a range of emotions: anger, anxiety, frustration, confusion. At MIT and beyond, some my Japan colleagues expressed bafflement, if not outrage, that John Dower and Shigeru should be targeted for protest. Some China colleagues, including those sympathetic to John and Shigeru, expressed concern that the complaints of Chinese protestors were being dismissed out of hand, as if it was unreasonable for people to share their opinions about upsetting images. I’ve been thinking about this controversy in relation to online “social media” and the ways that we are developing a new sensitivity to how the social *in* media is not just about “networking” and “collaboration,” but also about the ways social contexts are difficult to reproduce in online worlds. Perhaps this controversy has something to teach us about the meaning of this context as well.

Context is one of those words, perhaps like creativity and innovation, that everyone supports, but which can have a wide range of meanings, so wide, in fact,

that contradictions can easily emerge. Consider for example an intriguing online effort to reframe racism against Asian peoples, namely, a website called “AllLookSame.com”. Whenever I lecture about race in Japan, which I do often given my interest in Japanese hip-hop, a black musical style developed in the US, interpreted and remade by Japanese (self-proclaimed “yellow”) B-boys, and discussed by me, a white male researcher, in my book *Hip-Hop Japan*. The complexities of race are impossible to ignore in this context, and even when I do my best to be sensitive to the various sides of the issues, it is impossible for me to fully deflect the periodic criticism that my words, no matter what the content, contribute to making hip-hop studies “more white,” for the simple reason that I’m Caucasian. I can accept that criticism. More often where I want to take the discussion in class is towards the question of racism in Japan, which is most volatile in terms of racism against other Asians, notably Koreans and Chinese.

Among Americans, with our common view of race in terms of black, Latino, Asian, and white, it can come as a surprise to some students that the diversity of “Asian races” is an issue at all. Yet I do have Japanese friends who insist that they can tell the difference between Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese. This is worrisome because it signals an enduring belief in the visibility of racial difference, something that can seem to make sense if we think of prototypical images of race, but which falls into conceptual disarray when we try to define boundaries.

Partly as an effort to prompt more discussion around race and Asians, the website All Look Same does a nice job of questioning the visibility of racial differences. The site’s creator, Dyske Suematsu, is a graphic designer of Japanese

descent in New York City. He wanted to take up the question of whether “all Asians look the same” and so he made a website with photos of a variety of Asian people living in New York. Each of the pictures shows only the head and shoulders of an Asian individual against a white background. Some are old, some young, most smiling though one guy with punk hair is sneering, a mix of men and women, some dressed elegantly, most quite casual. The focus of the site is the Exam Room, which presents you with 18 photos in succession: for each picture, you select whether you think the person is Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. When I took the test recently, I guessed correctly 4 out of 18 times, and I received the score “Hopeless, you might as well toss a coin.” The site says the average correct answers are 7 out of 18, basically the same as random guessing.

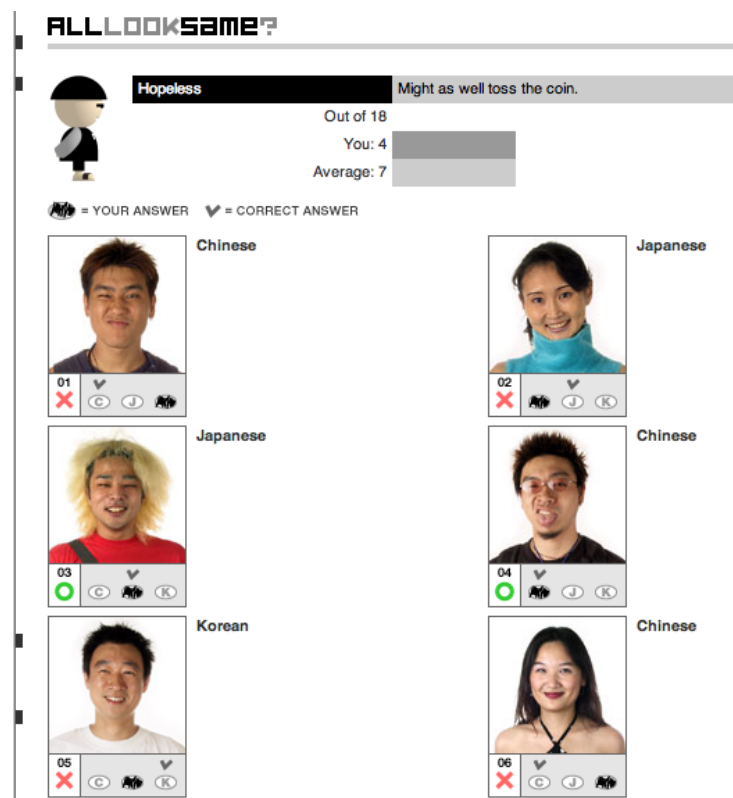


Figure 1: Excerpt of my test results AllLookSame.com (accessed 1/10/11)

Among my Asian-American students, this site is famous. Many, if not all, have heard of it, and most have taken the test. The test is funny because it both plays on stereotypes and demonstrates how inaccurate our guesses can be. The pictures clearly make the point that there are many “looks” for Asian people and that whatever stereotypical preconceptions we may have about visualizing race, they are not as accurate as we might believe. In this regard, I view the site as a useful tool for undermining racial prejudice because it forces us to question the certainty of our visual interpretations and to recognize diversity within identities.

But, like many of approaches to combating racism, the site also can be seen as a double-edged sword. Why? Granted, it shows that people really cannot tell the difference between “Asian races,” and calls into question the concept, reminding us that it is a socially constructed category that comes clothed in the language of biological difference. On the other hand, the site ignores, some might say erases, the reasons why the belief that one can tell the difference between Koreans, Japanese and Chinese is so important to many people. In a word, war. The enduring anger of both Koreans and Chinese towards Japanese military atrocities during the Pacific War, and earlier as demonstrated by the images cited in the controversy, is something that cannot be denied. Moreover, the complaints that Japan hasn’t done enough to take responsibility for this history also has some justification. When I visited the war museum that sits on the grounds of Tokyo’s Yasukuni Shrine, I was struck by the unapologetic attitude of the war history displayed there. In other words, the issue of different Asian races is not only about a ill-conceived notion of human diversity, but also about persistent anger over

wartime behavior. AllLookSame.com combats a visual aspect of racism, but only at the risk of downplaying the historical contexts in which these visual interpretations are so important. Whether or not people can actually tell the difference between Koreans, Chinese and Japanese by looking at them, the fact remains that they feel it's very important to be able to do so. Which context is more important? Racial stereotyping of Asian people, or the ongoing wounds of a history of military conflict? Obviously, both are important, but emphasizing one risks underemphasizing the other. Hence, teaching about bias is always potentially volatile.

One thing the social media moment brings into sharp relief is the social dynamics of media production, distribution, and interpretation. But as the term "flame wars" suggests, online media is notoriously speedy and spreadable but at the same time, and perhaps for some of the same reasons, difficult to contextualize. There has been a lot of attention in recent years on the ways that seemingly inconsequential media snippets can become overnight phenomenon thanks to the Internet, along with the heightened pleasures of sharing, linking, posting, and commenting. Unlikely stars are born, whether as a webcam guy singing along with "Noma Noma" or two guys in a dorm room in China lip-syncing to the Backstreet Boys, or "Nyan-Cat," an animation with a catchy song made with Japanese voice synthesizer software. Indeed, the idea of an "Internet meme" hinges on an idea of universality that tends to ignore the communicative (often peer-based) contexts in which sharing these images is fun.

The phone ringing incessantly in Shigeru's office is another examples of worlds colliding around online images, but which spoke to larger social dynamics.

Some of the differences in interpretation may be better viewed not in terms of right and wrong, but in terms of what the different attitudes say about contexts. My Japan studies colleagues were uniformly aghast at the thought of calling John Dower a racist, especially as one of those most outspoken in terms of viewing the Pacific War as a race war (see *War Without Mercy*). On the other hand, some China studies colleagues felt that the protestors were being pre-emptively accused of extremism, as if complaints about the contextualization of portrayals of Japanese military atrocities were unimportant. Everyone had a point, but the responses pointed to the very different contexts that people were speaking from.

The Internet's recent turn towards the social in media has amplified and accelerated a range of communication practices that in the past were more closely linked to existing social, geographic, and media networks. With everything accessible anywhere, many of those boundaries and filtering mechanisms have shifted, often with hugely beneficial results. But the VC controversy also demonstrates that opening up new connections can be problematic as well. As we come into contact with images online, we simultaneously expand our awareness, but also move into realms where we have only a limited grasp of the contexts in which things are made, and the goals to which they aspire.

The ringing phone in Shigeru's office was a palpable sign of anger, and that anger has a validity, even if I believe that the targets were poorly chosen. For me, the targets were not symbols of elite universities in the West; they are "John" and "Shigeru," that is, people in my close social network, people I care about. The possibilities for the digital era to bring new forms of collaboration and networking

are remarkable. But as we cross boundaries of geography, history, especially in the exchange of shocking images, then we are likely to witness more of this kind of outrage. As educators, we are in the business of dealing with ignorance, not the least of which means overcoming the limitations of our own, often seductive, senses of our own expertise. But it seems to me that we must also work on both shaping and understanding the contexts in which our efforts take place. Only then can we come to clearer understanding of how to combat indifference and to see how historical contexts continue to shape even the newest of new media.