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# 'Race' on the Japanese internet: discussing Korea and Koreans on '2-Channeru'

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'Race' on the Japanese Internet: Discussing Korea and Koreans on '2-channeru'

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Abstract

This paper investigates discourse about race on the Japanese Internet, particularly regarding resident Koreans and their relationship to the Japanese. One board relating to arguments about Korea on the notorious 'Channel 2' BBS, Japan's most visited Internet site, is investigated, since it is one of the main public forums in which racial vilification takes place, perpetrated by both Japanese and Korean posters. Nakamura's (*Cybertypes*) contention that the Internet is 'a place where race is created as an effect of the net's distinctive uses of language' is taken as a starting point to investigate the differences between Japanese and Anglophone notions of racial inclusion and exclusion and to draw attention to the particularities of racial discourse that take place in this virtual Japanese space.

Key words: Japanese, Internet, racism, Koreans, 2-channel

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*Introduction*

From the mid-1990s onwards, the Internet has shifted fundamentally from its co-ordinates in English-speaking countries, especially North America, to become an essential medium in a wide range of countries, cultures, and languages. According to March 2006 statistics,<sup>1</sup> Chinese language now represents 14.1% of all Internet communication and media use, Japanese 9.6 % and Spanish 9%. At 35.8% and falling, English use is now a minority in terms of overall online language use. However, communications and media scholarship, especially in the Anglophone world, has not registered the deep ramifications of this shift and the challenges it poses to the concepts, methods, assumptions, and frameworks used to study the Internet. Despite the fact that there is also a large body of work being produced by scholars in non-English-speaking cultures and locales, hardly any of this work is being translated and it has had little impact on theorization of the developing fields of Internet and web studies.

So far there is no single monograph or edited collection that introduces and reflects on the fact that the Internet is an international phenomenon. The most often used survey books — such as Gauntlett's and Horsley's edited collection *Web.Studies* (2004) or Wellman's and Haythornwaite's *The Internet in Everyday Life* (2002) — contain some reference to the diffusion of the Internet globally, but do not focus upon or systematically chart what is now most salient and significant about the Internet — its great cultural and linguistic variety and the breadth and difference of its manifestations.

While there have been some earlier studies focusing on language use, such as Gibbs and Krause (2000) and Herring (1996), these investigations were undertaken when the Internet was still concentrated in wealthier, Western

countries, and when technologies such as blogs, wikis, podcasting, and so on, were unknown (and certainly not on the horizon of scholars). Research into languages that do not utilize Roman-based characters is particularly lacking in the literature (Nishimura 2003). More recently there has been a special journal issue on the multilingual nature of the Internet (Cunliffe and Herring, 2003). However its focus is primarily sociolinguistic and it does not seek to bring together understanding of language, culture, politics, community and use in relation to the Internet.

Despite a growing interest in Internet development in specific countries and regions (Ramanathan and Becker, 2001; Kluver and Yan, 2003; Miller and Slater, 2000; Gottlieb and McLelland, 2003; Coates and Holroyd, 2003; Hughes and Wacker, 2003; Goggin, 2004), there still remain a preponderance of studies about, or framed upon, Anglophone Internet experience, histories, and cultures, particularly that of North America. In the literature generally, the United States is all too often taken as 'the supposed vanguard of the information society' (Ito, 2005: 3) and there has been little attempt to generate a discussion between scholars working on different language cultures or to develop modes of analysis that do not take Anglophone models as their starting point (Matsuda 2003; Nishimura 2003). Indeed, commenting on the collection *Japanese Cybercultures* (Gottlieb and McLelland, 2003), Gauntlett complains of the complacency of western scholars, pointing out that 'we assume that people in other countries, using other languages, are probably doing things with Internet technology that are *pretty similar* to those applications that we are familiar with. This book shows how wrong that assumption is' (2003: xii; emphasis in the original). Ito, too complains of the western-centric approach of most Anglophone researchers, noting that although Japanese researchers are well acquainted with Anglophone social science theory, 'the reverse flow is relatively rare' (2005: 4) and as a consequence studies of 'the Internet' that rely solely upon Anglophone theory run the risk of being parochial at best (*see also* Matsuda, 2002).

One book illustrative of this trend is Nakamura's *Cybertypes* (2002), a discussion of 'race' as it plays out on the Internet, which is written exclusively

from a North-American perspective, and assumes that all Internet communication takes place in English and that North-American patterns of racism are universal. Although Nakamura is well aware that 'the Internet' cannot be spoken of as 'a single technology', arguing that 'it makes no more sense to discuss the Net as one "thing" than it does to discuss literature without reference to period, genre, style or audience' (2003: xiv), she limits this observation to distinctive Internet applications (such as chat, gaming, BBS, home pages, etc.). That Internet culture (and consequently racial stereotyping) might vary according to *language use* or cultural background is never considered in *Cybertypes*. Although Nakamura refers to the influence of genre on 'the different rhetorical spaces of and around the Internet' (2002: xiv) she never considers that the rhetoric of Internet communication, particularly that surrounding race, might differ according to the *language* in which the debate is conducted.

Given that nearly two thirds of Internet communication now takes place in languages other than English and that major Internet languages such as Chinese, Japanese and Spanish are associated with cultures that have very different and contrasting histories of racism, it is to be expected that North-American models developed to study the manner in which race plays out online will not be universally applicable. Accordingly, this paper seeks to outline the manner in which the racial discourse and stereotyping that takes place on the Internet in Japanese differs in many ways from the Anglophone paradigms analyzed by Nakamura in her book, and to call for more sustained research to be undertaken into the Internet's linguistic and cultural diversity.

### *The Internet as a 'Contact Zone'*

Of the Internet's four most prevalent languages, English, Chinese, Japanese and Spanish, three (excluding Japanese) are global languages, in that they are official languages of multiple nation states and are also the preferred language of communication among large diasporic communities. No single ethnic or national identity *necessarily* adheres to the use of these languages. More Spanish speakers access the Internet within the geographical bounds of

the United States than do so in Spain, for instance.<sup>2</sup> Even in the case of Chinese, in which language and ethnicity are perhaps more closely tied, China is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nation (including Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongolians and many other minorities)<sup>3</sup> and the written language (Chinese has many mutually unintelligible dialects) functions as a unifying factor among an extremely diverse and geographically dispersed population. Indeed, Yang (n.d., 2003) uses the notion of a 'transnational public sphere' to describe Chinese online communication, arguing that 'the virtual Chinese cultural sphere is a heterogeneous space characterized by diversity, segmentation and connection' (n.d.). The Internet has enhanced the ability of these global languages to facilitate the flow of ideas and information around the world and to create distinctively English, Chinese and Spanish cultural spheres that are deterritorialized and transnational and that serve both to accentuate difference as well as enable community.

In understanding how these global languages might promote both 'segmentation and connection' (Yang n.d.), Pratt's (1992) notion of 'contact zone', originally formulated in relation to colonial expansionism, is helpful. Pratt notes how colonialism (and today globalization more generally) results in the clash of languages, ideas and customs on the colonial frontier, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power. Pratt uses the concept 'to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect' (1992: 7) and although applied by her to colonial literatures, her analysis is also applicable to the Internet, another 'frontier' space on which subjects previously separated by geographical and historical accident (such as mainland- and Taiwan-born Chinese, Cuban exiles in Miami or displaced refugees and their homeland communities) can now suddenly be 'copresent' in these 'virtual cultural spheres.' Pratt notes how a 'contact' perspective emphasizes that subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other and that these relations are always implicated in regional and global power relations. Pratt's notion of the contact zone is clearly also applicable to the power plays that take place in relation to online as well as offline identities. Examples might include the use of the Internet by indigenous minorities in

South America to draw international attention to their situation via participation in online Spanish networks<sup>4</sup> or the attempt by pro-independence Taiwanese activists to argue their case for independent statehood via online Chinese discussion spaces.

However, Japanese, despite its prevalence on the Internet, functions very differently from English, Chinese and Spanish to the extent that it is much more closely identified with a specific ethnic group: the Japanese.<sup>5</sup> In Japan, Japanese is taught at schools and universities under the rubric *kokugo* (i.e. 'language of the nation'), the term *Nihongo* ('Japanese') being reserved for foreign learners (Gottlieb, 2005: 15). Hence, the Japanese language is closely aligned with Japanese national identity, marking the Japanese online world as a distinctly Japanese cultural space in which Japanese language, residence in Japan<sup>6</sup> and Japanese nationality are closely entwined.

Since Japanese is neither a language of diaspora nor an international medium of communication, apart from websites about Japan in English (published by the government or by companies wishing to communicate information about Japan), Japanese websites are not intended for international consumption and 'Japanese-language pages are not often accessed by non-Japanese' (Gottlieb, 2005: 136). This situation has led Coates to argue that 'Japan's digital face is largely exclusive to the Japanese' (2003: 124). Indeed, Coates has compared the Japanese Internet to an 'intranet' which has a very local flavor when compared to the kind of transnational cultural spheres that it is suggested are enabled by the Internet in English, Chinese and Spanish. Coates notes '[the Japanese Internet] is primarily designed for internal consumption and rarely seeks to inform, educate or transform broader world opinion' (2003: 126) and he concludes that 'Overwhelmingly, Japan's face on the Internet is in Japanese, by Japanese and for Japanese' (2003: 147). Indeed, as Gottlieb has argued, in the case of Japanese on the Internet, there is 'none of the disjunction between culture and locale we have seen predicted in a globalised world' (2000: 200; see *also* 2005: 136). Given that Japanese cyberspace is characterized by a greater cultural homogeneity than is typical of virtual spaces in English and other major languages, we might question the

utility of Pratt's notion of 'contact zone' as a heuristic for understanding online interaction in Japanese. In the remainder of the paper, I will look specifically at how discussion about race is carried out in Japanese online spaces and consider the extent to which use of the Japanese language constrains the ability of these virtual spaces to act as 'contact zones' that bring together widely disparate and contested understandings of racial difference voiced from a range of advantaged and subaltern speaking positions.

### *'Race' and the Anglophone Internet*

Nakamura points out that prior to her book *Cybertypes* published in 2002 a lot of discussion of race in terms of the Internet had focused on how Internet access was divided along racial lines. She argues that people of color in the US, generally being of lower economic background, have less access to Internet technology, and that non-white majority populations, particularly in Africa and South America, have even less access. However, her main interest in *Cybertypes* is the analysis of how race is *reproduced* online. She notes that:

As scholars become more sensitized to issues of diversity online, there is ...a growing concern with how race is represented in cyberspace, for the Internet is above all a discursive and rhetorical space, a place where 'race' is created as an effect of the Net's distinctive uses of language. Hence, it is crucial to examine not only the wide variety of rhetorical conditions of utterance, reception, audience and user/speaker that create particular communicative situations in cyberspace, but also to trace the ways in which this array of situations creates 'cybertypes', or images of racial identity engendered by this new medium (2002: xiii).

For instance, Nakamura argues that in the context of online gaming where users construct avatars for themselves, race (unlike gender) is commonly absent as an obligatory descriptor. She comments that:



players who elect to describe themselves in racially 'othered' terms, as Asian, African-American or Latino, are often seen as engaging in a form of hostile performance, since they introduce what many consider a real-life 'divisive issue' into the phantasmatic world of cybernetic textual interaction (2002: 37).

Yet, in the absence of racial markers on Internet forums, that is, unless racial affiliation is somehow coded via a person's handle or self-description, she suggests that the 'default position' is that all users are assumed to be white (2002: 38). On gaming sites Nakamura argues that even when race *is* referenced, as in the adoption of handles such as Bruce Lee, Musashi or Akira, it is primarily white men who are doing this, arguing 'my research indicates that players who choose this type of racial play are almost always white, and their appropriation of stereotyped male Asian samurai figures allows them to indulge in a dream of crossing over racial boundaries temporarily and recreationally' (2002: 39). Indeed, the white male enjoyment of recreational racial crossing has a long offline history and can be dated back to the 'black face' reviews popular in the Vaudeville theatre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Lott, 1993). The Stage and Hollywood, too, have had a long history of casting white actors in black and Asian roles; however, the reverse has seldom happened (Murakami, 1999).

This kind of 'recreational' racial passing does nothing, Nakamura argues, to overturn the Internet's basic 'default whiteness.' This 'whitening' effect of the Internet has also been pointed out by African-American theorist Kali Tal who, writing in 1996 at the beginning of the period of cyberspace's rapid expansion, critiqued the utopian, libertarian theories characteristic of Internet studies of online identity at the time that saw cyberspace as a liberation from potentially confining offline characteristics such as gender, sexuality and race. Tal pointed to the multiple exclusions that limited the access of non-white populations to Internet technology, arguing that cyberspace was very much a domain controlled by white men, and concluding that in cyberspace 'it is finally possible to completely and utterly disappear people of color' (Tal, 1996).

While there are still serious inequalities in Internet access that are connected to race both in terms of the primarily non-white developing world and within non-white communities within otherwise well networked developed nations, Tal, like Nakamura, is working within an Anglophone model of Internet communication. The 'whitening' of cyberspace that she justly criticizes was very much a result of the Internet's social history, being developed in North-America by military and later scientific and academic researchers. However, the 'whiteness' of cyberspace is of increasingly less significance today due to the development of vibrant and rapidly expanding cyberspaces constructed in non-European, non-'white' languages such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean that have little interface with the Anglophone Internet and express racial ideologies very different from those characteristic of Europe or North America.

### *Race and the Digital Divide in Japan*

In the case of Japanese, in particular, the impact of race on Internet access does not really signify since Japanese is not widely used outside of Japan and racial minorities in Japan such as indigenous residents of Okinawa (a nominally independent territory absorbed into the Japanese empire in 1879), citizens of Ainu descent (the original non-Japanese indigenous population of Japan's northern island Hokkaido) and third- and fourth-generation resident Koreans (whose forebears were brought over to Japan as forced laborers after Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910) are not deprived economically to the same extent as are non-white minorities in the west, and where access to the Internet via the *i-mode* mobile phone system<sup>7</sup> is easily achieved for a majority of the population (Nakayama, 2002). There is no clear 'majority' vs 'minority' split in Internet use in Japan along racial lines and the advent of a distinctive Japanese cyberspace has consequently not led to the disappearance of racial difference (as is arguably the case in Japanese commercial media) but rather, to increased visibility and activism around issues of race, with discriminated groups eager to claim a web presence (Gottlieb, 2005: 22, 26, 29, 67; Ducke, 2003).

Concerning mainstream media policy in Japan, Hanada argues that 'diversity has not meant diversity in the quality or content of the programming, but has instead come to function as a catchword for creating a plurality of *similar* programming and a multitude of transmission channels' (2003: 292). Ito has shown how Japanese television, in particular, is implicated in portraying only 'a positive interpretation of postwar history' and, as a consequence, the many victim's of Japan's imperialist past are considered 'unsuitable for remembrance' (2002: 31) and are excluded from programming. Minority issues are barely acknowledged in mainstream media, including television, and research by Hanada has shown that resident Koreans experience both 'apathy' and 'anomie' in relationship to broadcast media (2003: 397) which fail to acknowledge either their current existence or their troubled past. It is in this context then, of a mainstream media discourse comprised of 'violent exclusions' (Ito, 2002: 31) that the Internet has proven invaluable for minorities to voice both individually and communally their own distinct and uneasy positionalities as residents of Japan who are variously excluded from full membership in the category 'Japanese.'

### *Racial Theory in Japan*

It is now standard to describe race as a cultural concept, that is, an ideological device deployed to construct categories and draw boundaries around groups of people, and not a set of 'natural' or biological differences rooted in genetics. Racial discourse and racial vilification in particular are often about shoring up self-identity and maintaining boundaries as opposed to delineating real differences between peoples. As Luke and Tuathail point out, arguments about who does or who does not belong serve to 'solidify porous borders, bolster breached containments, arrest the erosion of identities, and revitalize faded essences' (1998: 73). This is particularly the case in Japanese discourse about race which hinges on notions of Japanese racial, linguistic and cultural uniqueness that in a globalized world are increasingly being contested.

Yoshino (1998) points out how western debates about racism do not adequately map onto the type of thinking that characterizes the discourse of Japanese identity since 'Racial, ethnic, and national categories rather vaguely overlap in the Japanese perception of themselves' hence 'the concept of "minzoku" [race/ethnicity] can be interpreted to mean race, ethnic community, nation, or the combination of all these' (1998: 24). He argues that Japanese race theory is characterized by a 'uni-racial' consciousness that assumes the unchanging racial, linguistic and cultural homogeneity of the Japanese (1998: 22), a finding largely borne out by Lie, who, in a series of interviews with Japanese people, noted 'the pervasive conflation of the state, nation, ethnicity, and race in contemporary Japan' (2001: 144).

The most important requirement for Japanese cultural assimilation is therefore not being born in the country (even for phenotypically indistinguishable people of Chinese or Korean descent) but the possession of 'Japanese blood' (Yoshino, 1998: 22). Consequently, Iwabuchi (1994) has referred to Japanese discourse on race as an ideology of 'ethno-nationalism' in which 'Japaneseness' can be conferred only by blood, not place of birth, acculturation, language proficiency or naturalization. Indeed, as Lie points out, for many Japanese, nationality is seen as 'an almost natural—indeed, racial—category' and is consequently 'immutable from cradle to grave' (2001: 145).

In Japan, debate about race often takes place in the context of a wider cultural discourse known as *nihonjinron* or 'debate about Japanese uniqueness' (Befu, 2001). The genre began in the 1930s as Japan accelerated its colonial advance into Asia and the Pacific when there was much talk about Japanese destiny and the superiority of the Japanese race as opposed to the 'decadence' of the west and the 'degeneracy' of neighboring 'races.' Japan's rapid reconstruction after the war and its regional and then global economic dominance in the 60s, 70s and 80s only fuelled speculation about Japanese superiority and the search for unique indigenous characteristics and the genre is still very much alive today. As Befu points out '*Nihonjinron* asserts the coterminousness of geography, race, language, and culture' (2001: 71), necessitating that 'Japaneseness' be seen as a homogenous category—never

hybridized. Thus, in Japanese, one speaks of *zainichi kankokujin* (Korean residents in Japan) and not of Korean-Japanese, despite the fact that some Korean residents are now third and fourth generation. That Japan refuses to allow dual nationality for its citizens is another example of the reluctance to open up the category of Japanese to hyphenization and hence hybridity.

Within Japan, the myth of homogeneity causes all sorts of casualties. Cases of 'very Japanese' foreigners and 'not very Japanese' Japanese generate a lack of fit between cultural and racial boundaries of difference, thereby causing inconsistency in and inefficacy of the symbolic boundary system that defines Japanese identity. The assumption that those who speak and behave like the Japanese should possess Japanese blood, and vice versa, is an imbedded ideology and so when individuals who disrupt this congruence are encountered, it can produce 'boundary dissonance' (Yoshino, 1998: 29) which can have unpleasant effects for both sides.

As mentioned, one community whose place in the Japanese racial scheme is extremely fraught are *zainichi kankokujin* – that is 'Koreans resident in Japan' – these are children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of forced laborers brought over to Japan during Japan's colonization of the peninsula during the first decades of the last century. The majority of *zainichi* were born in Japan, frequently speak only Japanese and in most respects are indistinguishable from those who possess 'Japanese blood' but they are not automatically granted citizenship and are treated as permanent residents with fewer rights than Japanese citizens (until the late 1990s they were required to be finger printed and carry foreign registration cards and they are still excluded from public housing and the civil service and can be discriminated against when applying to 'elite' universities and companies).

Since most *zainichi* are indistinguishable from 'real' Japanese, many pass as Japanese and it can be extremely disturbing to themselves and others when their Korean ancestry is discovered or revealed. One does not have to look far on the Internet for these kinds of accounts. Of particular interest is the daily online diary posted by a 'resident Korean' man throughout 2000 (very similar

to a daily blog but before the advent of blogging programs). The diary is entitled 'Korean Japanese *Sengen*', Korean Japanese is written in English (since there is no such term in Japanese, the relevant moniker being 'Korean resident in Japan') and *sengen* is a Japanese term meaning 'declaration.'

The son of a second-generation Korean father and a Japanese mother, the author explains he was not automatically granted citizenship, since until 1984 nationality could only be passed via the male line. However, this information was not passed on to him by his father until he was 18. His diary entry for 29 April 2000 reads:

Why did my father wait until I was 18 years old before telling me that I was a resident Korean? Was it a matter of waiting for the right timing? If I had been a white or a black 'half'<sup>8</sup> then timing wouldn't have mattered since I would have recognized that my skin color was different from others. I wouldn't have needed my father to tell me as others would have made my difference clear to me. But in my case I didn't know I was different since Japanese and Koreans are both Asians and there's no difference in skin color. Since there's no difference in skin color, it's really difficult to tell the difference between *zainichis* and Japanese people...<sup>9</sup>

The diary continues in this vein with almost daily entries over the course of a year with heartfelt and complex discussions going on about identity and the search for roots and belonging. Being of 'mixed race', the author cannot help but reflect on the different status conferred by the hierarchy of racial mixing in Japan where Caucasian-Japanese children are accorded the top position. He continues:

When I look at those white halves who are made much of I sometimes feel envious. If I were a white half I would have gone to an English-speaking international school and if I'd been brought up in an English-speaking environment I wouldn't feel the same sense of pain and lack of satisfaction I feel now. But more than this I feel angry that there are

so few of us *zainichis* brought up speaking Korean. Why do we have no connection with our language roots? Why are we being extinguished?

There are clearly many individuals within Japan who, from an outside perspective may seem (or seek to pass as) 'Japanese' and yet who experience extremely conflicted identities due to the indigenous ideology of 'ethno-nationalism' that insists on a fusion of 'blood', language and culture in its project of national belonging. Indeed, it is with regard to Koreans, particularly Japan's community of resident Koreans, that much debate about race takes place on the Japanese Internet. Given the fluency that resident Koreans have in the Japanese language and their bicultural awareness of both Korean and Japanese customs, resident Koreans occupy a particularly fraught relationship with the category 'Japanese' and their presence online can prove troubling to otherwise hegemonic Japanese discourses on race.

Hence sites such as 'Korean Japanese *Sengen*' certainly can function in Japanese as a 'contact zone' in which subaltern narratives concerning 'Japaneseness' become more visible and are 'copresent' alongside more hegemonic discourses. However, in this instance, the Internet is likely to be functioning more as a narrowcast medium, since it is unlikely that persons apart from other *zainichi* would be interested in engaging with the site.

#### *Discussing Race on 2-Channeru*

Probably the most visible cyberspace in which arguments about race take place is Japan's notorious *2-channeru* (channel 2), 'the most popular online community site in Japan', which is accessed over eight million times every day (Matsumura et al. 2004). '*Ni-channeru*' as it is pronounced in Japanese was set up in 1999 by Hiroyuki Nishimura,<sup>10</sup> a private individual, and is run by a large number of volunteers. It contains over 400 boards (known as *ita*) divided into very broad themes such as 'social news', 'cooking', 'travel', 'celebrities', etc. and each board contains up to one-hundred threads. The maximum number of postings to a thread is 1000 after which the original thread is

archived and a new thread started. Unlike many bulletin board sites where members must first register before being able to submit posts, *2-channeru* has no registration system and no requirement to self-identify (although users may identify by handle if they so choose), thus anyone is able to post to the boards with anonymity.

*2-channeru's* size and longevity have created a distinct online culture with its own slang resulting in the publication of a special *2-channeru* dictionary (2-Ten Purojekuto, 2005; Nishimura 2004). The subcultural slang and elliptical mode of address in many of the threads makes this a complex space to negotiate for non-native Japanese speakers or for Japanese not familiar with the site's distinct jargon and etiquette. Also distinctive is the site's extensive use of online art made up of the special ASCII set of characters specific to the Japanese scripts. Indeed many postings consist simply of artwork. Yet, despite the fact that *2-channeru* is clearly an innovative and important communications medium in Japan, (with a readership that exceeds any single print media), little has been said about the site in English other than a few journalistic accounts stressing its 'dark side' (for example, *Time*, 2001). Such reports usually note that since people can post anonymously to the site and its boards are uncensored, frank expression all too frequently degenerates into hate speech and vilification of other posters and social groups, particularly along racial lines.

The use of distinct jargon and the vast and anarchic nature *2-channeru* are perhaps two reasons why there has been little sustained research into this important Japanese cyberspace by Japan Studies scholars. Despite the fact that the boards are divided into general topic areas and each thread within a topic is given a clear title, the unmoderated nature of this space means that the browser is constantly distracted by irrelevant and often offensive postings, the most common of which are links to pornography and websites selling Cialis and Viagra. Unlike discussion groups in English such as those on USENET, the vast majority of posters remain anonymous and so there is little 'community' feeling about the various discussions since it is impossible to identify postings with particular individuals. Hence, there is little clear line of



argument in many of the threads and attempts at rational debate are often derailed by the swapping of invective and insults. A further distraction on *2-channeru* is the extensive use of hyperlinks to refer back to other discussions on the same or other boards, as well as to off-site webpages. It is thus very difficult to study the interaction on *2-channeru* in terms of the paradigms for online community established in the Anglophone literature.

However, despite these difficulties, in an attempt to assess the extent to which a specifically 'Japanese' Internet space such as *2-channeru* might contain a variety of positions and responses concerning resident Koreans, I visited a board dedicated to discussion about 'South and North Korea'<sup>11</sup> which contained, as do all boards, 100 distinct threads, on a variety of themes – from Korean food, through to pornographic reflections on the supposed depravity of Korean women, as well as many that are clearly off topic.<sup>12</sup>

I chose to focus my analysis on one thread (started on 24 March 2003 and still running at the time this paper was written) with the simple title 'Who do you hate more, Chinese or Koreans?'<sup>13</sup> I selected this thread, since this question posed in Japanese would seem to suppose a Japanese readership (the 'you' implied here is a Japanese 'you') and consequently, given my earlier discussion of the closed space of the Japanese Internet, might anticipate a purely Japanese readership. At the time of writing, the thread contained 365 postings, some consisting of only a few words and others over a page of text. In the discussion below, it is not my purpose to give a close reading of the interaction that takes place in this space, but to pick up on a few salient postings that complicate the notion that the use of the Japanese language in a website based in Japan somehow excludes non-native-Japanese posters or viewpoints.

As expected, most of the replies in the thread are voiced from a Japanese perspective. To choose just a few of the shorter and more direct reasons given for disliking Japan's most proximate neighbors – poster no.1 says that s/he hates Chinese the most since their use of Furan gas endangers the environment. No. 106 also hates Chinese people more since his/her elder

brother was murdered by a Chinese gang during a house invasion. Whenever s/he sees Chinese people – even women and children – s/he wants to kill them. However, no. 108 hates Koreans more since they, apparently, eat cats and consequently, s/he would like to kill them in as cruel a manner as possible.

However, despite the overwhelming number of posts criticizing the supposed faults of Korean and Chinese people, of particular interest to this paper is the manner in which Japanese is also used in this thread as a vehicle to attack the Japanese. When this happens, the posters are assumed to be Korean (given resident Koreans' facility in Japanese) as in the exchange below where the original post contains no marker of racial identity:

128 FUCKKING JAPANESE, YOU SHIT (*written in English*)

You Japanese—

I'm asking you, disappear from the face of the Earth. (*In Japanese; my translation*).

129 (*clearly written in response*)

You've got it all wrong.

It's not the Japanese but the Koreans that I ask should disappear. (*In Japanese; my translation*)

When the Japanese used is not native-level, the posters are also understood to be Korean (never Chinese or from a western country) and the Japanese respondents often resort to English to insult the original poster, as these responses to a poorly expressed Japanese message illustrates:

87 Stupid korean,

I tell you truth.

Your words don't translated well.

You study Japanese hard!! (*Original in English*)

90 How stupid, Korean.

Your Japanese words means nothing.

Machine translation does nothing.

You need help of Japanese language expert. (*Original in English*)

English is also occasionally used by (presumed) Korean posters to the discussion in order to insult the Japanese. Korean is not used on the board since the site does not support Hangeul script (and a response in Korean would only be intelligible to other Koreans), so recourse is made to the international language. Yet this use of English is often greeted in a hostile manner by Japanese.

### 101 **bakachon3**

Thank you, slave.

For slaves (Korean), speaking fluently language of master (English) is honor.

That is called colonialism.

Don't you know the word colonialism.

Study hard, stupid korean.

Do you understand? poor Korean, people of colony.

People of colonies act like korean.

Speak Japanese, language of your master!! (*Original in English*)

The racial insult in posting 101 is further underlined by the choice of user name: '*bakachon*', a compound comprising *baka* (stupid) and *chon* (an abbreviation of *Chōsen*, a term for Korea), a once widespread term for simple things, so easy, even 'stupid Koreans' could do them (Gottlieb, 2005: 114).

English is also occasionally deployed (presumably by Japanese) to insult Korean readers on the board as in no. 84:

84 Get out! Fuckoreans!! (*English original*)

As post no. 84 suggests, it is Koreans who are assumed to be the 'interlopers' in this Japanese space. However, despite the fact that the invective exchanged in this and similar threads is between Japanese and Koreans,

other racist voices are discernable, such as poster no. 46 who contributes in (rather poor) Japanese. Although it is impossible to know a poster's background, this submission contains clues that it may be an American. Firstly, the poster identifies with the name 'Bi-koku' (using the characters for 'Beautiful country' which is perhaps a mistake for 'Bei-koku', a kanji term designating America (the characters 'bi' and 'bei' both look and sound similar). That the poster is not well versed in writing kanji is further evidenced by the post itself:

46 I can't tell the difference between Koreans, Chinese (*Chugoku-hito*) or Japanese. (*In Japanese; my translation*)

Here the poster has entered the kanji phonetically by typing *Chugoku-hito* (Chinese people) in which *hito* (people) has been left in hiragana, and not converted to kanji. No native (or competent) speaker would have written the compound this way, since the correct pronunciation of the term is *Chugogku-jin*. These slip-ups suggest a poster whose Japanese is fairly elementary. Also, the oft-rehearsed opinion that Chinese, Japanese and Koreans are indistinguishable would seem to be voiced from a racist 'white' perspective. Hence instances such as these disrupt the particularity of this 'Japanese' racist space by opening the debate to wider, Anglo/European paradigms of racism.

This is also the case in submission 125 written in English, which purports to come from a person named 'USA':

125 USA

Your all just the same fucking thing. Slanty Eyes. Stop fighting, both your countries are fucked up. Japan, you have a problem with porn and racism. Seriously, you japs think you are the lords of asia, but across North America, people think you are just stuck up. Korea, the North is so fucked.... (*Original in English*)

This distressing post is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly it further troubles the notion of the Japanese Internet as a totally separate ‘Japanese’ space that I outlined earlier (a distinct fusion of language and ethnicity). Although it is impossible to know the background of the poster we might assume a white or perhaps a black American voice speaking here. This individual has managed to read and understand enough of the Japanese content on the board in order to make a relevant submission (albeit in English). However what is most interesting is the manner in which it imposes western racial politics on local Japanese discourse about race. From a privileged (presumably white) western perspective, the differentiations being made on this board between Japanese, Chinese and Korean are irrelevant since ‘you are all just the same ... thing.’ At this point predominantly Japanese forms of racism and exclusion are suddenly ‘copresent’ with larger, more global forms of racism – associated with white hegemony – thus becoming a ‘contact zone’ in which different speaking positions do encounter each other, but only in terms of highly asymmetrical relations of power.

This ‘contact’ does not, however, always lead to debate or the opening of the discussion. Despite the fact that Japanese racist discourse is at times qualified by western racism, there is no attempt by posters to assert a pan-Asian solidarity in the face of these white racial slurs. Indeed, these irruptions of western racism are ignored. Poster number 66 for instance, asks that:

66 Other than the Japanese, (I’d like) all yellow races to die. (*In Japanese; my translation*)

To which poster number 67 responds:

67 It would be a problem (for the Japanese economy) if South-East Asians were to die. (*In Japanese; my translation*)

In this exchange, there is no pan-Asian solidarity between the Japanese and other ‘yellow races’ but a reassertion of racial hierarchy in which Japan is seen as the leading nation in a region of economically subordinate states.

Hence, despite contestations from a limited range of other voices, this thread remains a largely hegemonic Japanese space.

### *Conclusions*

While it is not possible to generalize too much from the discussion above, it is possible to outline some preliminary findings on how Japanese web spaces differ from those on the Anglophone Internet. Firstly, unlike the Anglophone nations of the west (and similar arguments could be made for ethnically diverse Spanish and Chinese speaking countries), there is no 'digital divide' along ethnic lines in Japan since Japan's minority communities of Ainu, resident Koreans and Okinawans are not economically disadvantaged to the extent that Internet accessibility becomes a problem via the near-ubiquitous *i-mode* mobile system.

In terms of access and equity debates about ethnic background, a further difference that can be discerned between Japan and western nations is the particular form of Japanese racism. In Japanese racial thinking there is a much stronger connection between 'blood' and cultural competence (including language use) than in societies such as the US or Australia which profess to be 'multicultural.' So strong is this association that even *zainichi* Koreans who (for all intents and purposes) speak Japanese and perform 'Japaneseness' successfully (and may even be brought up thinking that they are Japanese) are excluded from the category 'Japanese' – since they do not possess 'Japanese blood.' Hence, much discourse about 'race' in Japanese takes place in the context of *nihonjinron* arguments aimed at defining Japanese uniqueness. In the terms of this discourse, separating 'the Japanese' from their most proximate others, 'Asians' and 'the Koreans', in particular, is a central preoccupation. However, from a racist homogenizing western 'white' perspective, these differentiations are seen as fatuous since both Japanese and Korean are collapsed into the category 'Asian' and both are equally abject.

While homogenizing Anglophone racial categories such as 'Asian American' suggest a common sense of group membership based on country of origin

and phenotype, in the context of *nihonjinron* debate, there is no demonstration of a pan-Asian solidarity. Rather the preoccupation is to distinguish the Japanese from, rather than express solidarity with, neighboring 'races'.

Finally, although the Japanese Internet does not function as a 'transnational cultural sphere' in the same sense as English, Spanish or Japanese, contrary to the expectation that websites in Japanese would be a closed system impermeable to non-Japanese perspectives, the above discussion shows that there is limited interaction between Japanese and non-Japanese viewpoints, both via code shifting from Japanese to English, the use of translation software into Japanese and the not inconsiderable number of non-Japanese posters using Japanese language (with varying levels of fluency). Hence, there *are* multiple viewpoints expressed and *2-channeru* does function as a contact zone in which Japanese racism is, for instance, contested, intersects with and is confronted by white, western racism. However, the irruption of western racism in this context does little to derail the main focus of the site, which is to denigrate Japan's immediate neighbors.

Much more could be said about 'the different rhetorical spaces of and around the Internet' (Nakamura, 2002: xiv) as they play out in distinctively Japanese contexts. For instance, *2-channeru* offers an interesting case study for linguists looking at issues of computer translation and code switching in online interaction. Also, that such an iconic 'Japanese' language space as *2-channeru* is permeable to interventions from other language speakers is clearly an important observation, given that the existing literature has tended to stress the closed nature of the Japanese linguistic world – a position now in need of some modification.

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#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://global-reach.biz/globstats/index.php3> (Accessed 27 March 2006).

<sup>2</sup> 25.9 million people access the Internet in Spanish in the US compared with only 14.3 million in Spain and 12.3 million in Mexico. Source: Global Reach <http://global-reach.biz/globstats/details.html>, (accessed 21 March 2006).

<sup>3</sup> There are apparently 56 official ethnic groups in mainland China; see <http://www.c-c-c.org/chineseculture/minority/minority.html> (accessed 22 March 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Examples include the bilingual English/Spanish *Freedom Road* <http://freedomroad.org/>, (accessed 30 March 2006).

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<sup>5</sup> Weber, in his discussion of the world's ten most influential languages, notes that Japanese is widely spoken only in Japan whereas English is widely spoken in 115 countries and Spanish in 20 (cited in Gottlieb, 2005: 141). After reviewing a range of statistics, Gottlieb concludes 'Japanese does not yet fulfill the criteria for an influential international language' (2005: 142).

<sup>6</sup> According to <http://global-reach.biz/globstats/details.html> (accessed 30 March 2006), there are 66.7 million Internet users resident in Japan and only 0.3 million users of Japanese resident in the US. This contrasts sharply with Chinese, for example, which has millions of users spread across several countries and regions including 1.5 million resident in the US.

<sup>7</sup> Japan was a pioneer of the mobile internet accessed primarily through cell phones, see Ito et al. (2005).

<sup>8</sup> 'Half' (*hāfu*) is a Japanized English term referring to children of mixed race, usually Caucasian and Japanese.

<sup>9</sup> Website now defunct. Was at <http://www.suin.net/tyabudai/april/apr29.html> (accessed 15 May 2000).

<sup>10</sup> For information about Nishimura, see *Japan Media Review* (2003).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.2chan.net/korea/index2.html> (accessed 29 January 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Off topic threads seem to be largely ignored, receiving only a handful of postings.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.2chan.net/test/read.cgi?bbs=korea&key=1048439719> (accessed 10 March 2006).