Volume 7 | (2005) Issue 4   Article 8

An Analysis of Websites of Bi-national Heterosexual Couples

Sadashivam Rao

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, and the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

CLCWeb **Volume 7 Issue 4 (December 2005) Article 8**
Sadashivam Rao,
"An Analysis of Websites of Bi-national Heterosexual Couples"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol7/iss4/8>

Abstract: In his paper "An Analysis of Websites of Bi-national Heterosexual Couples," Sadashivam Rao discusses the design of world wide web homepages of bi-national couples. Rao shows how such websites become locations of the re-invention of notions of culture, generating a particular practice of representation, namely that of "hyphenating." Rao contends that the subjects of per-sonal homepages enter the domain of the internet as entities already embedded in many other domains of discourse such as those of nationalism, culture, and media. Further, Rao proposes that this specific genre of websites reflects traces of these discourses. Of course, in the process of the website design itself, the artefacts used undergo changes in that they might be transformed or combined together to derive new forms or generate new meanings. In this manner, the world wide web becomes an arena for the expression, reification, and recreation of already existing discours-es.

Sadashivam RAO

An Analysis of Websites of Bi-national Heterosexual Couples

Most personal homepages can be considered as forms of representations intended by the author (or the one owning the site in case he/she is not the direct author of the page itself) to present herself/himself on the net. For this purpose there are a number of artefacts such as pictures, icons, animation, sound, and text available to the author in order to design the pages. Most of these artefacts have their basis in a general bank of artefacts available through various discursive domains be it about nationalism, culture, or the media. Some may have their origin attached to one or another social domain. Others may be the product of a combination of more than one domain. Thus, many of these artefacts have some symbolic meanings already attached to them even before they are used specifically in the design of a personal hompage. In the process of designing, the artefacts used might undergo changes in that they might be transformed or combined together to derive new forms or generate new meanings according to the personal inclinations of the author and the possibilities offered by the media used (in this case the software webeditor, etc). Artefacts can be seen as traces that refer to a number of uses apparent in the cultural and social repertoire of the designer. There are endless possibilities of design and it would be appropriate to assume coherency in the practices of design. The subjects of the personal homepages do not enter the domain of the internet as empty entities devoid of any predispositions. They are a part of several other domains just as much as the artefacts they use in order to create their homepages. Thus, the choice and contextual settings of the artefacts used in the design can reveal certain proclivities -- both conscious and subconscious -- of the author. In this way, new media technology and the internet become an arena for the expression, reification, and recreation of already existing discourses which comprise the structures and politics of significations in other spheres of society.

Before proceeding to my analysis, I would like to refer to another mode of analysing websites based purely on the formalised and technical aspects of the websites and their designs. A case in point is the study conducted by Johannes Bittner's <http://www.digitalitaet.de> (see also Bittner, *Digitalität*; on Bittner's book, see Grimm <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol7/iss4/11>).
Based on purely formal analyses of websites, Bittner concludes that in comparison to analogue texts, so-called digital texts such as private homepages contain a very high density of elements drawn from various semiotic fields -- text, pictures, moving pictures, sounds etc. These varied elements are then synthesised through the use of the technical language (HTML, etc.) required to create the sites. In this context Bittner employs the notion *synästhetisierung* with which to capture the paradoxical effect arising from the demands for synthesis (based on aesthetic needs) of various elements and data formats on the web pages on the one hand and that, in turn, is differentiated from synthesis through a separation of these various data formats on the level of the programming namely in the source code on the other. Bittner sees the development of new semiotic systems through these processes of interaction. Additionally, digital texts such as private/personal homepages contain navigational structures which allow users to interact with the sites and their pages. Taking these aspects into consideration, Bittner characterises private/personal homepages as being *medienkontigent* suggesting that they must be read and conceived only within the very medium (meaning the context of the digital medium in which they are contained: the server, the domain, the internet, etc.) in which they are embedded. All other (non-digital) forms of reproductions of the web sites such as printouts (which are analogue reproductions), etc., are for Bittner no longer "true" reflections of these digital texts. Although the kind of framework based purely on the level of the digital text as Bittner describes can lead to helpful insights, I believe that it has certain limitations since it ignores the protagonists of the digital texts, the authors and the users, as active subjects already embedded in other semiotic systems which in turn do effect the way they perceive, create, and use the digital texts themselves. In fact, in my analysis I show how readings of certain kinds of digital texts on the basis of these semiotic/discursive systems can in fact help to reveal structural patterns with specifically associated meanings. More precisely, in my study I focus on ideas of culture and cultural identity which occur in other semiotic systems (e.g., language)

and systems resembling semiotic ones (e.g., films and icons) and use these as contexts to under-stand the designs of the websites. For the study at hand, I conducted an analysis of the way web-sites of bi-national heterosexual couples are designed. My intention here is not to engage in a dis-cussion on aesthetic and design. Nor do I want to understand the pages as purely individual ex-pressions of identity. My aim is, rather, a contextual analysis that spells out the connotations these websites create and how they can be reconnected to particular ways of understanding (cyber) cul-ture. For the present study, I select salient aspects of the design, the artefacts used, and try to show how their presence on the webpage can be traced to certain dominant discourses from other fields, primarily to those concerning nationalism, culture, and media. Just as other spheres of life can be considered to be constituted by structures and practices, similarly the internet which also functions on the basis of consent and conflict -- and perhaps more so since the ability to communi-cate with each other on the net is in certain respects more given -- is also prone to the phenome-non of the building of "social" entities. As Steven G. Jones puts it "The internet does have its own everyday, its customs, rituals and manners, and those need to be understood" (18). The design and presentations of personal homepages is a practice which can be considered as a part of this "everyday." My contention is that there are common forms of web design evident among websites of a particular and specific situation of hybridity, namely that of bi-national heterosexual couples and thus a logical extension of this proposition would be to consider these sites to be a part of a "web community" characterised among others through an exercise of such practices (on hybridity, see, e.g., Bhabha; Höhne-Porsch and Hoppe; Tschernokoshewa; see also the 2005 play, Anne Ma-rie Cummings's *India Awaiting*). In order to do this I would like to consider an example. The web-site I examined is called the *International Couples' Resources* <http://members.fortunecity.com/canzian/Countries.html> and it offers a variety of resources for bi-national couples. For example, tips regarding bureaucratic procedures for international marriag-es, a chat room, links to other resources of interest for such couples, etc. It also contains a link to a page listing bi-national couples by country. The site is interesting because in a sense it is an in-dication of the existence of a community on the internet; albeit, an imaginary one. As Mark Allen Peterson puts it: "Members of such communities of communication may share certain symbols and communicative practices but they do not share locations. The basis of their sense of community, if they have one, cannot involve face-to-face interaction; it is rather based on imagining of others like themselves engaged in practices like those they are engaged in" (256). As Peterson points out the discussions on media generated communities have their basis in Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities." Anderson argues that the nation states came into being on the basis of imagined bonds. They are imagined in so far that most persons in a nation state will never meet; although such bonds might be imagined, the communities incorporating the nation states are very much real in their existence. In Anderson's thought, the media such as the newspaper play a major role in the creation of these bonds and the discourses which uphold such communi-ties. I think one can see such formations on the internet, too. Through its various possibilities and infrastructures -- websites, ICTs, online newspapers, emails, etc. -- the internet offers a platform for the development of imagined communities.

Let us take a look at my example in more detail. On the first page of the *International Couples' List* by countries at <http://members.fortunecity.com/canzian/Countries.html>, we find the fol-lowing entry: "Here is a list of countries. On each page you'll find people from one country who are engaged in an international marriage. If you want to appear in this list, go to the main page and fill the form, or just send us a mail. Lost your way? No problem: search the International Couples' Website!" We see the following caption "The World of International Couples" and beneath this we are presented with a map of the world. The countries have been coloured in various shades. The caption beneath it says "On this list you'll find at least one person from each colored country!" The listing begins a little below this in tabular form with five columns and several rows. Each cell in the table contains a flag representing the country and its name below. The listing is alphabetically or-dered and the first cell is occupied by the country Afghanistan, the last country in the list is Zim-babwe. These listings are active links. Clicking on anyone of these flags leads to a page containing a list of the couples. One of the partners of each of these couples belongs to the country corre-

sponding to the flag. There are several artefacts on this site which point towards the intention to present an "imagined" community comprising of bi-national heterosexual couples. The resources available on the site – chat room, mailing list page, tips to overcome bureaucratic hurdles regarding bi-national marriages, shared experiences and a whole gamut of links to many other bi-national couples are some of the strong indicators which suggest a community like feeling. There is an endeavour on a symbolic level too. The use of the caption "The World of International Couples" and the picture of the world divided into various domains of "bi-nationality" maps the world into a community of bi-national couples. Although the mapping, undertaken through the use of various colours -- blue, red, cyan, magenta, yellow, etc. -- has been used primarily to indicate domains/regions associated with bi-national couples, they coincide not unintentionally with that corresponding to national boundaries. Of course the very use of the caption "World of International Couples" suggests a community whose identity is in some way derived from popular discourses of nation states. The question now arises as to what it implies to belong to such a community, at least on the world wide web. How does the idea of bi-national marriage as supporting a particular identity get expressed and take shape in homepages of the couples? As we shall see, there are in fact a variety of designs of such homepages. However, what connects these pages together is a shared embeddedness in dominant (one could say popular) discourses of nationalism, culture, and media which can be traced back through the design characteristics and the use of artefacts on the pages.

For this study I undertook a survey of a number of websites of bi-national heterosexual couples. Owing to reasons of economy, I present an analysis of only two such websites. Both these are examples which illustrate the variety of ways how couples imagine themselves as bi-national on the net. For my analysis, I adopt the following procedure. First, I describe the first two pages of each website, followed by their analysis referring thereby also to the various other pages present on the respective sites without necessarily describing them in detail nor by mentioning their hierarchy within. My first case study is a website of a couple name Farid and Mireya <http://geocities.com/mireya_farid/>. First page: Mexican (on the left) and Indian (on the right) flags waving. In the centre there is a caption, "Welcome to our world! Mexico and India presenting." Beneath are three cut out photos (almost like passport-sized photos) of Farid placed to form a triangle. Beneath the topmost photo of Farid is another large photo which occupies the space between the two other photos of Farid and below it the following caption, "Please click here to enter." Second page: On entering we land up on a page with two approximately one inch wide banners with black backgrounds and patterns in gold, running top down along the left and right margins of the page. In the centre of page (white background) are four pictures with captions beneath each of them. The first picture is that of Farid wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and a leather jacket. He is standing next to a bed in a room which looks like a bedroom. The caption beneath says "We were introduced over the net by a mutual friend. This is the first pic that I saw of Farid." Next, a picture of Mireya with her head bent and her hair hanging loose side wards. She is looking towards the camera. The caption beneath says "One of the 1st pics that I got to scare him with." The net picture is of Farid and Mireya together. Farid is standing behind Mireya and has his hands around Mireya's waist. The caption beneath says, "First picture that we ever took together on my 1st visit to LA." This suggests that Farid is resident or was resident in Los Angeles at that time. In the fourth picture, Farid and Mireya are holding hands. Farid is wearing a black suit and Mireya is in jeans. She is wearing a white blouse and a jeans vest. Immediately behind them is a maroon coloured car. A little away in the background one can see other cars too. The caption beneath says "Saying good bye on my 2nd trip to LA." On the page at hand it is at first not clear whom the photos belongs to. It is only later, on entering the second page that the identity of the person becomes evident. His name is Farid and the female counterpart of the couple is called Mireya. The design of the website is similar to that of a photo album and is basically made up of pictoral material -- icons, photos, etc., and text which is limited to one or two sentence captions under the photos or as banners on top of each page. It also uses animated artefacts. For example banners such as "Mireya y Farid" in gold, following the movement of the mouse. The protagonists of the narrative are the couple themselves. The author of the website is the woman of the couple. This is ap-

parent from the first person narrative used in the captions under the photos. Nowhere in the website is the nationality of either member of the couple mentioned explicitly. Nor is it possible to arrive at any conclusion through obvious differences such as skin colour. In this case (at least from the photos presented on the site) either one of the couple could be just as much Mexican as East Indian in origin. It is only through a reading of some of the artefacts presented on the website that it is possible to make some form of deduction such as from the names of the protagonists and then associating this with the reference to the caption "Mexico and India Rule" on the page. There are of course other subtler clues on the site. Take for example the picture of Farid in a jogging suit, standing beside a bed (on the first picture page). Two posters can be seen clearly behind him on the wall, one of Sharukh Khan (an Indian movie star) and the other the picture of a Black athlete, a basketball player with an athletic vest. What is the "myth," the connotated chain of signification, conveyed by the photograph? Firstly, the presence of a poster of a well known East Indian actor in the background indicates a familiarity with Indian Bollywood cinema. Similarly, the poster of a Black basketball player indicates a familiarity or liking for basketball. Furthermore, I think the use of the posters in the photo has a broader significance. Sharukh Khan is a reference to a modern, youthful India and the Black basketball player a reference to the sporty, multicultural, and modern USA.

Furthermore, the poster of the Black basketball player can incorporate the myth of "race and difference" (see Hall) or even refer to a message such as "the victory of the underdog." Other pages on this site contain photographs of Farid and Mireya in Las Vegas. A couple of these are portraits of Farid and Mireya wearing Mexican hats in turn. There are also pictures of their visit to the Hoover Dam in Los Angeles. What is also striking on this site is a page containing a set of photographs of Mireya wearing an elaborate "Oriental" dress and jewellery reminiscent of those worn by a famous Indian heroine Madhuri Dixit for a particular Bollywood film *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*. Even more intriguing is the fact that the page contains the following caption -- "Getting all dressed up to go to our friends Vilama & Sohail's wedding." The film *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* is a story set almost exclusively in the context of a wealthy upper-class wedding in India. It also contains a number of song and dance sequences and in some of them the heroine Madhuri Dixit can be seen wearing a dress (and even the jewellery) very similar to that worn by Mireya in the photos. The film was a huge success among Indians in India and abroad. In this context, I would like to quote a few lines from an article in the online version of *The Guardian Unlimited* which records some voices of the Indian diaspora in the United Kingdom. The article describes the increasing popularity of Bollywood cinema in the UK: "We've watched *Dil To Pagal Hai* eight or nine times, and *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* 12 or 13 times. *Hum Aapke* is our favourite, with Madhuri Dixit and Salman Khan. Madhuri is really beautiful, and Salman Khan … well, he's just fit. We love the romance. It's so unrealistic, you're in another world. We've got friends who won't watch Hindi films because they think they're embarrassing, but it's important because it's our culture" (Chohan <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/story/0,3604,250358,00.html>[inactive]). What is interesting to note here is the idea reflected in the comment that the Hindi films (Bollywood films) are an important part of "East Indian culture." When Hindi films are a part of culture and an important part of it then it is but natural to expect that its influence is not just limited to watching films but also that these films influence the discourse of everyday life and on the world wide web, too. In the same spirit influences of media discourse pertaining to that of the Hispanic community in the USA are taken up. There is a page containing a photograph of Mireya with a sleeveless top and jeans with a bandana tied around her forehead giving what I could identify as "a hotheaded, bandana-wearing Hispanic tough girl" look, stereotyped, for example, in the film *Aliens* by James Cameron. Then again there is a reference to the Hollywood actress Salma Hayek (born in Mexico, daughter of a father of Lebanese origin and a Mexican mother) whose name appears in a caption on the page containing the photos of the couple's visit to the Hoover dam as following "Farid was dying to see where Salma Hayek throws the coin over the dam in the movie *Fools Rush In*." Further reference to the actress is made through a caption below a photograph of Farid (looking tired I guess): "Poor poor Farid he looks so disappointed because he cannot find Salma Hayek anywhere. (Better luck next time baby!!!)."

The reference becomes clear when one investigates the popularity of Salama Hayek in the Hispanic community. I would like to quote here a passage from the online magazine *HispanicOnline.com* at <http://www.hispaniconline.com>, an online forum for Hispanics focusing mainly on business, career, politics, and cultures pertaining to the Hispanic community. *HispanicOnline.com* offers various resources such as chat rooms, news, discussion boards, etc. "People en Español's 2nd Annual Hispanic Opinion Tracker 2001 TM (The HOT Study) asked Latinos all across the country to weigh in on their favorite stars. The results of the HOT Celebrity Monitor are in and some interesting trends emerge. … Salma Hayek emerges as the 'Sexiest Female' celebrity, literally trading places with Jennifer López who, although number one last year, moves down to number four this year. In addition to her status as a sex symbol, Hayek also landed in the top rankings for 'Favorite Actress', 'Most Well-Liked,' and 'Most Trustworthy'." I mention this reference to show how identity on the web is constructed by cross-references to other (media) domains. What becomes clear from an analysis of the various pictures here is that media discourses which take place in other spheres and in contexts of other "imagined" communities spill over into the internet and can take concrete shapes in forms as in the case of Mireya and Farid's homepage. To sum up, I would like to mention certain features of my argument above: 1) One can see the use of artefacts for design of the webpage which can be traced to dominant discourses such as on nation, culture, and media, 2) Some of these artefacts have been combined together, concatenated, and set in new contexts, in order to express sentiments which in turn may have their basis in the dominant discourses, and 3) Practices on the web, such as design of this website, are influenced by practices of "imagined" communities from other spheres in life. Given these observations, is it possible to draw any conclusions about the protagonists on this page? Since the themes of nationality and ethnic identities have been followed on this site, it is but pertinent to pursue a line of enquiry in this direction. Is Farid an Indian now living in the USA? Just as possible is the assumption that Farid could be a US-American (i.e, born in the USA) with Indian origins. Equally possible could be the assumption that Farid is an East Indian living in India. Similarly, the identity (ethnic) of Mireya has not been specified anywhere in site. Although at first it appears that the author makes use of these codes to situate the protagonists in a fixed manner, in the end the fluidity of their identities takes over. Farid is sometimes Indian, sometimes Indian-American and sometimes Indian-American-Mexican. So is the case with Mireya who takes on the identity of Mexican-East Indian or Mexican-American.

My second case study is the website of Jennie and Benjamin <http://www.geocities.com/ben_jennie/>. I believe that it is in significant ways opposite to that of the "Mexican-East Indian" couple. Here culture is not a complex net of codes that can be taken and re-connected in old and new ways. Culture, rather, appears as a stable entity that is connected to particular nationalities. There is no fluidity and hybrid cross-over but difference and interconnection between separate entities. The following quote from the website captures the mood: "However, nothing prepares you for what it's like to be married to someone from another country, another continent. Nothing can change the fact that we grew up on opposite sides of the Atlantic. I can't imagine what it's like to be an American child. This means that we have to work hard at understanding where the other person is coming from." Early 2004 when I visited this website for the first time the first page had a background with a repeating pattern of a house beside a tree. A darkish-pink semi-transparent layer had been laid on top it. A large centered box with a thin border occupies most of the page and contains within it two boxes placed below. The upper part of the large box has a length of text which shall be the primary focus of analysis here. A drawing of a woman seated at a desk with a framed picture of a man on it was placed on the top right of the box. On a subsequent visit to this website in 2005 I found that the repeating background pattern of the house beside a tree had been replaced by a picture of a fourleafed bouquet. Some additions have been made to the text and the earlier drawing on the right has been replaced by a drawing of a male doll and a female doll with rosy cheeks and dressed rather "childishly." Although several additions have been made, much of the older text has been retained as even the basic structure of the website. For this reason I consider only that part of the text and the design which is common

to both the versions. The large box contains the following caption on the top -- BEN & JENNIE -- followed by the text: "Ben, 27, is from the midwest [with a link to [<http://www.travelwisconsin.com/>] of the USA & Jennie, 23, is from North West England [with a link to <http://www.visitliverpool.com/>]. Neither of us were looking to meet someone online; yet this is the story of how we met in a yahoo chat room, fell in love and got married on August 20th 2001." Below this text are two boxes, one embedded in the other. Below this are two boxes, one embedded in the other. The outer box contains a black and white chequered background. The inner box is divided into 15 rectangular compartments. Each of these compartments has a caption which reflects a certain theme and is thus an active link to another page. A few of these captions are, for example, "Our Story," "Online Love & LDRs," "US-UK Culture," "Web ring," etc. Before I present my analysis, however, I would like to describe two more pages from this website which can be followed through the link UK-US Culture.

Page US-UK Culture: This page has a different background than the one mentioned previously as it has a repeating pattern consisting of tiny heart-shaped forms which are made up of two parts. The left half of the heart comprises part of the US-American flag and the right half consists of the British flag. A light blue semi-transparent layer covers this entire pattern. On top at the centre of this page we see a doll like picture of a woman with an apron and a man wearing a coat with epaulets on the shoulders. Above this there is a caption saying "United We Stand." Below it is another caption which says "Jennie & Benjamin." On both sides of these figures are two flags. On the left we see the British flag with a caption "I love the United Kingdom" and on the right is the US flag with the caption "I love the United States of America." What is interesting here is the explicit use of the word "culture" in order to represent identity on a website. This is realized in the most obvious way by the links placed on the left margin of the page, including UK-US Dictionary, UK culture, US culture 1, and US culture 2. The UK-US Dictionary page has a table-like form with two columns, one containing the US word and the other its British equivalent. For example the word "buttermilk biscuits" is translated as "scones." Similarly, the word "cookie" finds its equivalent in the British column as "biscuits." What is interesting on this page are the various categories of such tables pertaining to food, childhood, clothes, cars, and miscellaneous. For example, under the category childhood we find words such as "mom" (the British equivalent given as "mum"), "diaper" ("nappy"), etc. The page UK culture has a banner on top containing an symbolic picture of a curtain with frills, a dainty tea pot and cup, and two teddy bears. The page contains descriptions of "objects" which in the opinion of the author are typical aspects of British culture. These objects are again divided into the following categories: British Food, Celebrations, and The Pound. Under the category British Food we see, for example, "Chocolate Digestive Biscuits -- ok, they sound like they're for you digestive system but they're just tasty and yummy. I once had an American online friend tell me that they sounded that they were like dog biscuits. Take a look at the McVities <http://www.mcvities.co.uk/80256C1A0047922E/vWeb/pcTSTT5EPGEC>, a biscuit company) site for more detail on their origin." The category Celebrations contains explanations to the following themes: Bonfire Night or Guy Fawkes Night, Christmas, Halloween, May Day, and Bank Holidays. Since some of these celebrations are common to both the US and UK cultural landscapes, the author endeavours to explain the differences manifest in the celebrations, too. For example, under Halloween we find the following text: "The main way that the British Halloween differs from the American Halloween, is that children dress up as something scary to trick-or-treat: a ghost, witch, monster or a black cat. In the USA, children dress up as anything and anyone, scary or not. … When I was young, we would make a scary faced lantern out of a turnip, rather than a pumpkin. The turnip lantern is an old Irish custom. When the Irish emigrated to the USA in the 1800s, the turnip wasn't readily available, so they started carving pumpkins instead. Pumpkins are much easier to carve than turnips." The part on the British Pound consists of a brief description of the pound, its denominations, and its history. It also has an active link to a website which offers British bank notes (historical and contemporary) for collectors (<http://www.thebanknotestore.com/british.htm>). And US culture 1 and culture 2 are pages containing brief descriptions of what the author mentions as "distinctive aspects of American culture that I've noticed and the traditional symbols of the USA. It should give you an impression of

how I'm adjusting to life here. I also wanted to make a note of all the things that seem unusual to me, before I acclimatise and forget that they do things differently in Britain." These pages are subdivided into the categories of Food, Holidays, Television, Sport, Flag, Birds, and Miscellaneous. Each of these categories contains objects to which brief descriptions have been given keeping in view a British reader of the text. Finally, one of interesting aspects of this site is the extensive use of text to express opinion. The nature of the written text supports the interpretation that constructs the two cultures as separate domains that overlap and interconnect but at the same time remain separate. This has been indicated already by the quote mentioned at the beginning of this section. The act of growing up in a culture is taken to be a major contingent to qualify as belonging to it. It is not enough to spend a substantial amount of time in a cultural domain as an adult to qualify for full membership. There is some part of culture which can only be acquired as a child and this "missing bit" is one of the sources of concern for the author. Gerd Baumann, in his study of Asian immigrants in London, mentions encounters with similar expressions which project culture as a programmatic form which every child must undergo in order to belong to a cultural domain. As Baumann puts it, there is a popular belief "in tune with the dominant discourse" among the immigrants in Southall London that, "the very process of enculturating children entails the necessity of isolating elements, traits, and norms that stick out as distinctive and which are thought, in the widest sense, proper to a cultural 'us'" (13). In other words, without this type of reification of culture, which is supposed to happen in the process of growing up, an individual cannot belong to a particular cultural domain, identified as a stable entity that appears to be independent of actual practices and concrete individuals.

The two personal websites I presented in this paper are concrete but varied examples of the bi-national heterosexal couples community on the world wide web. They represent some of the ways bi-national couples imagine themselves. The formation of such an imagined community is evident from the availability of the various resources for bi-national or international couples. What links these websites together is not necessarily similarities in design, which can be quite varied depending on the predispositions of the designers, but the a priori intention to represent themselves in a "hyphenated" state, that, as we know, reprsents a particular configuration of sociocultural existence world wide following the increasing migration of peoples. Some of the websites tend to emphasise only a few of such forms, whereas others as for example that of the Mexican-East Indian couple might indulge in constructing more of them. What is also common is that these attempts at "hyphenating" are carried out through use of artefacts of web design. As I have attempted to show above, many of the artefacts themselves and the practices employed in transforming these to suit the representations, can be traced back to common dominant discourses. At the very beginning is the idea of the nation state as containing and representing the various cultures. This assumption can be found in all the websites irrespective of the particular way the international link is imagined. Thus, it is not surprising that flags play a major role as symbols for displaying identity. This is apparent at the entry via the site of the International Couples' Resource Homepage, where national flags accompany the list of countries. We also find flags in both case studies discussed here. In my survey of the websites of bi-national heterosexual couples I was able to detect a number of sites combining the respective national flags often as wholes or giving them new forms. National flags are unmistakenly symbols for nations, their presence on places, buildings, and borders of demarcations pertain usually to discourses of territorial appropriation especially in "official" contexts. In a more general sense, flags have emerged as the most significant emblems of "the modern culture of nationalism" (Anderson 9). Flag hoisting ceremonies, waving of flags in celebrations, etc., constitute some of the concrete forms of this "culture" which comprise the basis for the existence of one of the most powerful forms of an imagined community, namely the nation state. Thus, the artefacts of this culture become repositories for the dreams, the wishes, the conflicts, and attachments of the members of this community. In short, they become "saturated with ghostly national imaginings" (Anderson 9). With the emergence of the national, there emerges too the trope of the "inter-national," nations cooperating with other nations, forming treaties, and exchanging commodities. This trope of the "inter-national" has two features incorporated in it: The recognition of the nation-state and the formation/existence of common bindings. In

turn, the symbolic and emblematic representations of this trope make use of the emblems derived from this "modern culture of nationalism" itself. Thus, cooperation between two nations would be depicted symbolically by the presence of their national flags. One sees influences of media depictions of "inter-nationalism" familiar from coverage of events involving international treaties and co operations (where national flags are often presented in the background crossed with each other) on these websites. The protagonists present the national flags of the countries corresponding to the origins of the partners on their homepages and these forms of design reflect (consciously or subconsciously) some of the sentiments drawn from dominant discourses on nationalism and internationalism and constitutes a form of reification itself.

Bruce Kapferer, in his comparative study of political cultural practices amongst Sinhalese Buddhists and Australians remarks rightly that the reification of culture leads to the production of culture itself. According to Kapferer, this occurs in two stages: Patterns and traits from everyday life and from the dominant discourses are "systematically removed from their embeddedness in the flow of daily life, fashioned into symbolic things, and placed in a stable, dominant, and determinate relation to action" (210) and "A critical feature of the formation of popular culture is its process of symbolic disarticulation or de-contextualization that removes ideas embedded in the fabric of social practices and symbolically idealizes them" (97). Although Kapferer's remarks are more in context of his focus on fundamentalism among Sinhalese Buddhists and Australians, I think it is also of relevance in understanding how "culture" can be produced in many other contexts such as on the world wide web. Processes of hybridisation and Creolization also involve this process of symbolic disarticulation at the same time as much as they encompass a transformation of these disarticulated symbols on the other. At this juncture I would like to make clear that I do not take the process of de-contextualization to mean that the disarticulated symbols become void of any context thereafter or that they are given totally new ones either. In my opinion, the symbols thus disarticulated in the process get embedded in new contexts and act as momentary foci for these new contexts. It is thus inevitable that the disarticulated symbols also carry the "burdens" of their earlier contexts and discourses, too. And this is what happens with the artefacts on the websites of bi-national couples: Their presence on the homepages is an indication towards the vast gamut of the dominant discourses which in some form or another constitute their basis. My contention is that these symbols and artefacts are being used to de- and re-contextualize the discourses, their concatenations in the design that express at once the presence of a dominant discourse, its resistance, and even a transformation at the same time. The very process of hyphenating which results in the English-American, East Indian-Mexican, East Indian-living-in-the-USA-Mexican-living-in-the-USA, etc., contains within it ideas of "Americaness," "Indianness," and "Mexicanness" recreating and shifting their meaning through the practice of display.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 1991.
Baumann, Gerd. *Contesting Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
Bhabha, Homi. *Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
Bittner, Johannes. *Digitalität, Sprache, Kommunikation. Eine Untersuchung zur Medialität von digitalen Kommunikationsformen und Textsorten und deren varietätenlinguistischer Modellierung*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2003.
Bittner, Johannes. *digitalitaet.net* (2005): <http://www.digitalitaet.de>.
Chohan, Satinder. "When Holly meets Bolly." *The Guardian Unlimited* (2 December 1999): <http://www.guardian.co.ok/arts/story/0,3604,250358,00.html> [inactive].
Cummings, Anne Marie. *India Awaiting*. New York: Samuel Beckett Theater, 2005.
Grimm, Martin. "New Books in German Media and Communication Studies." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.4 (2005): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol7/iss4/11>.
Hall, Stuart. "The Question of Cultural Identity." *Modernity and Its Futures*. Ed. D. Held and T. Mcgrew. Cambridge: Polity P, 1999. 273-326.
Hispanic Online.com (2004): <http://www.hispaniconline.com>.
Höhne-Porsch, Britta, and Anna Hoppe. "Bikulturelle Paare." *Auf der Suche nach hybriden Lebensgeschichten. Theorie-Feldforschung-Praxis.* Ed. Elka Tschernokoshewa and Marija Juric Pahor. Münster: Waxmann, 2005. 171-99.
International Couples' List by Countries (2004): <http://members.fortunecity.com/canzian/Countries.html>.
Jones, Steven G. "The Internet and Its Social Landscape." *Virtual Culture*. Ed. Steven G. Jones. London: Sage, 1998. 7-35.

Kapferer, Bruce. *Legends of People, Myths of State*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, 1988.
Peterson, Mark Allen. *Anthropology and Mass Communication*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2003.
Tschernokoschewa, Elka. "Geschichten vom hybriden Leben. Begriffe und Erfahrungswege." *Auf der Suche nach hybriden Lebensgeschichten. Theorie-Feldforschung-Praxis.* Ed. Elka Tschernokoshewa and Marija Juric Pahor. Münster: Waxmann, 2005. 9-41.

Author's profile: Sadashivam Rao is an independent filmmaker who has produced a series of documentaries on India. His debut fiction feature film *Sanyogita: The Bride in Red* was awarded the Audience Second Prize for best New Asian Cinema Feature at the Asian Film Festival 2003 in Lyon. Before becoming a filmmaker, Rao studied physics and mathematics at the universities of Delhi and Heidelberg and he received in 2005 an M.A. in multimedia from the University of Halle-Wittenberg. He continues his work in film. E-Mail: <sadashivamrao@gmx.net>.