

# Chapter 31

## Facebook Aesthetics: White World–Making, Digital Imaginary, and “The War on Terror”

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### **ABSTRACT**

*What is the relationship between digital imaginaries and whiteness? Following recent calls to investigate the juncture between whiteness and the internet, this chapter seeks to provide a critique of imagery posted on Facebook in the aftermath of ‘terror attacks’ in Paris 2015. The author renders these images as structured by deep forms of white world-making, ways of thinking and feeling that reproduce whiteness as ethically superior, innocent, and in need of preserving at the cost of non-white knowledges and peoples. In this chapter, the author argues that the internet provides yet another site for whiteness to engage in white world-making by extending the white gaze to digital platforms in the service of transforming the violence of Paris into a racialised attack on white innocence. As such, the Paris images are understood as responding to and perpetuating a digital imaginary in which the political capacities of images relate to an ethics of violence to the non-white Muslim body.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*The reproduction of whiteness relies on its constitution as an invisible ‘raceless’ identity, thereby equating white subjects and their specific cultural mores and values with the universality of the human. (Thobani, 2007: 172)*

What is the relationship between digital imaginaries and whiteness? Following recent calls to investigate the juncture between whiteness and the internet (Nakayama, 2015), this chapter seeks to provide a critique of imagery posted on Facebook in the aftermath of ‘terror attacks’ in Paris 2015. Rather than comprehending these posts as a user-reaction to a violent event, I render these images as structured by deep forms of white world-making, ways of thinking and feeling that reproduce whiteness as ethically

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superior, innocent and in need of preserving at the cost of non-white knowledges and peoples. In this chapter, I argue that the internet provides yet another site for whiteness to engage in white world-making by extending the white gaze to digital platforms in the service of transforming the violence of Paris into a racialised attack on white innocence. As such, the Paris images are understood as responding to and perpetuating a digital imaginary in which the political capacities of images relate to an ethics of violence to the non-white Muslim body. The possibility for anti-racist activism on the internet is thus deemed severely mitigated in the context of digital corporations structuring social media platforms - the algorithms that curate online imagery and their viewers' gaze are racist (Noble, 2018).

During/in the aftermath of the Paris shootings (13 November 2015), Facebook became a platform for the production and circulation of photographs, cartoons and filters representing or reacting to the events. These images varied in content and form and a selection became viral. The viral images concentrated attention to the Western European location of the attacks (Paris) and simultaneously challenged notions of nationality and citizenship by their appeal to Facebook-users globally. The viral images varied; some depicted the chaotic aftermath of the shootings (see Image 1), other images portrayed shrines to those who lost their lives in the attacks (see Image 2) and, there were also photos of various international landmark buildings lit up in the colours of the French flag (see Image 3). Other representations included a filter that superimposed the colours of the French flag onto users' profile pictures (see Image 4) and, arguably the most iconic image to emerge on social media newsfeeds was a drawing of a peace sign constructed from the outline of the Eiffel Tower (see Image 5).

It is not unusual that Facebook users posted, commented on and shared Paris images after the attacks. Social media has become a platform for sharing affected and affecting imagery immediately after violent events. Indeed, Facebook, alongside other social media platforms (Instagram, Twitter, Flickr, Tumblr), has offered an activist space where users may communicate to build community after experiencing violence (Linder et al., 2016). Others have hailed online community-building as invested with potential policy implications for citizens surviving national trauma (Dufty, 2012). Thus, the spontaneous circulation of Paris 2015 images on Facebook can be rendered a working through of trauma, expressing a need for community-building and as a strategy for recovery. Yet, while these studies have celebrated online community-building as an agentic process that can restore the sanctity and safety of those who have been traumatised, there are other critiques that foreground the political context within which violence is imagined and made sense of.

Thobani (2007: 169) argues that the 'War on Terror' reconfigures "the practices that constitute whiteness through its definition of the West as endangered by the hatred and violence of its Islamist Other". She foregrounds a 'new' imperial imaginary where the deployment of the discourse on 'terror' presents the current 'threat' and 'terrorist' violence as being of global proportions - committed to the destruction of the West at all costs. In this configuration, whiteness is re-centered as innocent of its colonial histories and contemporary complicity in the subjugation of brown and black people. This colonial amnesia is critical to Europe's enduring self-image of a morally virtuous agent that represents a universal humanity invested with the responsibility to restore the rights of, and justice for, oppressed people (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017). In this vein, digital scholars can extend the analysis of explicitly racist posts to those representing European moral goodness where both registers sustain a belief in white innocence and white superiority.

In this chapter, I draw on Fanon's (1961) concept of colonial violence to unpack viral imagery circulated in the aftermath of Paris 2015 and conjoin it to online processes of white world-making. Fanon (1961: 33) articulates how colonial violence targeting black and brown bodies is normalised by a disembodied

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