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# a legible face on facebook? de/colonializing gender and race in cyberspace

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**EN** - As the Internet theoretically enables users to transcend geographical and bodily boundaries, it has been praised as a highly liberating, emancipating, and even 'revolutionary' space. Communication technologies and social media such as mobile phones and Internet platforms promise new forms of access to public spaces, new forms of representation and of collective organization. These developments are of particular interest to questions related to gender and decoloniality, because in cyberspace differences that are tied to the body – such as gender or race – are assumed to play a lesser or completely different role. Cyberspace promises to provide a space for remappings of bodies and identities through the blurring of the artefactual and the natural, and through the global remapping of societal, market, and cultural structures. Nevertheless, heterosexist and racist representations and performances persist and are endlessly reproduced and consolidated on pornographic sites, dating platforms, and elsewhere. Cyberspace is no *tabula rasa*, but rather a space closely tied to the offline world with its related asymmetries and inequalities. Critical feminist cyberculture studies thus need to widen their analytical focus to a variety of factors and actors.

**FR** - Internet permet théoriquement aux utilisateurs et utilisatrices de transcender les frontières géographiques et même corporelles ; il a donc été acclamé comme un espace hautement libérateur, émancipateur et même « révolutionnaire ». Les technologies de la communication et les médias sociaux tels que les téléphones portables et les plateformes interactives promettent de nouveaux modes d'accès à l'espace public, de représentation et d'organisation collective. Ces développements ont une pertinence particulière pour les questions de genre et de décolonialité, car l'on présuppose fréquemment que, dans le cyber-espace, les différences liées au corps telles que le genre et la race entrent en ligne de compte de manière moindre ou différente. La promesse du cyber-espace est de fournir un espace permettant une nouvelle cartographie des corps et des identités en troublant les distinctions entre l'artéfactuel et le naturel au travers d'un remodelage à l'échelle mondiale des structures sociétales, culturelles et du marché. Cependant, les représentations et performances racistes et hétérosexistes persistent et sont reproduites et consolidées sans fin sur les sites pornographiques, les sites de rencontres et ailleurs. Le cyber-espace n'est donc pas une table rase : c'est plutôt un espace intimement lié au monde « hors ligne » avec les asymétries et inégalités qui y affèrent. Les études féministes critiques sur la cyberculture devraient donc élargir leur analyse à une variété de facteurs et d'acteurs.

**NL** - Het internet wordt sterk geprezen om zijn bevrijdende, emanciperende en zelfs 'revolutionaire' premisses gezien gebruikers ervan in theorie geografische en lichamelijke grenzen overstijgen. Communicatietechnologieën en sociale media zoals gsm's en internetplatforms beloven nieuwe vormen van toegang tot publieke ruimten en nieuwe vormen van representatie en/of collectieve organisatie. Deze ontwikkelingen zijn in het bijzonder van belang voor issues rond gender en dekolonialisme. Lichamelijk verschillen — zoals gender of ras — worden namelijk verondersteld een minder belangrijke of geheel andere rol te spelen in cyberspace. Diezelfde cyberspace belooft immers ruimte voor het herdenken van lichamen en identiteiten door het vervagen van de grenzen tussen het artificiële en het natuurlijke, en door het herschikken van sociale, commerciële en culturele structuren. Nochtans blijven heteroseksistische en racistische representaties en performances hardnekkig bestaan, eendeloos gereproduceerd en geconsolideerd op pornografische websites, datingsites en elders. Cyberspace is allesbehalve tabula rasa, maar eerder een ruimte die sterk verbonden is met de offline wereld en inherente assymetrieën en ongelijkheden. Kritische feministische studies over cybercultuur dienen aldus hun analytische focus te verruimen naar diverse factoren en actoren.

## Introduction

As the internet theoretically enables users to transcend geographical and bodily boundaries, it has been praised as a highly liberating, emancipating and even 'revolutionary' space. Communication technologies and social media such as mobile phones and internet platforms promise new forms of access to public spaces, new forms of representation and of collective organization. These developments are of particular interest to questions related to gender and decoloniality, because in cyberspace differences that are tied to the body — such as gender or race — are assumed to play a lesser or completely different role. Cyberspace promises to provide a space for remappings of bodies and identities through the blurring of the artefactual and the natural, and through the global remapping of societal, market and cultural structures.

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Manuel Castells (2001) has famously postulated the rise of the 'information society'. And ever since Donna Haraway published her groundbreaking *Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985), feminist and queer thinkers and activists have celebrated the surmounting of gendered and racialized inequalities and oppressions through new communication technologies (VNS Matrix/Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century 1991; Plant 1997; Wakeford 2000). Other feminist voices (e.g. Sundén 2001; Fernández and Wilding 2002; Flanagan and Booth 2002) have charged that the internet reproduces patriarchal hierarchies through technologies designed by and for heterosexual men. Heterosexist and racist representations and performances persist and are endlessly reproduced and consolidated on pornographic sites, dating platforms, and elsewhere. Cyberspace is no tabula rasa, but rather a space closely tied to the offline world with its related asymmetries and inequalities. Critical feminist cyberculture studies thus need to widen the analytical focus to a variety of factors and actors.

In how far do new media such as mobile phones, Facebook, blogs or Twitter provide new forms of intervention that can potentially blur received gendered, racialized, and social hierarchies and ascriptions?

How do bodies perform differently in cyberspace than outside of it, and how do different forms of knowledge performance on gender and race enter public spheres?

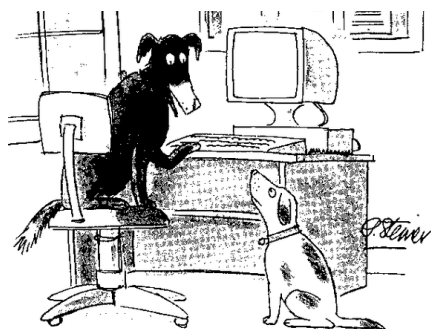
In which ways does the commercial medium of the internet avoid or render invisible voices from the margins, and how does it contribute to the maintenance of hegemonic forms of dominance?

What role does the so-called 'digital divide' play? Or, to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak (1989): Can the subaltern speak in cyberspace(s)? I ask what frames and limits new technologies provide for that aim. To put it in Judith Butler's terms: "After all, under what conditions do some individuals acquire a face, a legible and visible face, and others do not?" (2001: 23)

## Colonial asymmetries, digital divides and representational agency

In the following, I will elaborate on the question of how new communication technologies affect possibilities of political organization, representation, mobilization and agency. I explore the role of media technologies with regard to gender knowledge in terms of global interrelations and feminist aims. I will especially take into account a transnational perspective, pondering the possibilities of transnational/transcultural feminist alliances of solidarity and decolonial perspectives beyond received identity ascriptions, such as the ascription as 'black' or 'female'. A decolonial perspective provides me with a useful tool for elaborating on the structural dimension of inequalities in cyberspace. Decolonial approaches are not completely different from postcolonial theories, but they provide a sort of complementary perspective: decolonial thinking is based on the paradigm of modernity/coloniality, and it considers coloniality to be the condition of possibility for Eurocentric narrations of modernity. In other words, European modernity relied heavily on a colonized Other in order to make the self-narration of progress, civilization, and Enlightenment work, and there thus is no modernity without coloniality.

Moreover, decolonial thinkers take as a starting point the conquest of Latin America in 1492. Unlike 'classical' postcolonial critics who have stemmed predominantly from the former British colonies and focused on the formal era of imperialist colonialism, a decolonial perspective allows for including the colonization of the entire American continent. Another difference is that according to the modernity/coloniality paradigm the year 1492 constitutes the starting point for a process of the colonization of power, bodies and knowledges, resulting in a structurally asymmetrical coloniality. This colonial asymmetry has by no means been overcome with the formal end of colonial rule, but it continues to mark our everyday relations and practices in manifold ways. Furthermore, neoliberal notions of globalization deepen and



(Source: *The New Yorker*, July 5, 1993 by Peter Steiner)

reinforce colonial inequalities with regard to participation, representation, recognition and agency. Against this backdrop, I ask in how far or in which ways cyberspace is related to and marked by the historically constituted power structures and body politics of the offline world. The geopolitical dimension of ICT use is usually referred to as the digital divide. According to Nayar:

This term is used to describe the uneven nature of access to and quality of Internet access, electronic communication, and cybercultures in general. It gestures primarily in digital cultures – including production, dissemination, and use – between First World and Third World nations, though the ‘divide’ within the former is also increasingly described under the same rubric. (2010: 185)

Besides the asymmetry with regard to internet access and access to other new technologies alongside a North-South division (the so-called ‘first digital divide’, or *primera brecha digital*), there is a ‘second digital divide’ (*segunda brecha digital*), as defined by Cecilia Castaño Collado (2008), considering the use and intensity of internet use. If progress is related to technological development, this progress is symbolically owned by the elites of the global (capitalist) North, hence reproducing an age-old asymmetry of colonizing knowledges and bodies, even though they are often ‘physically’ produced by those exploited through these very structures. Castaño Collado refers to ex-Secretary of the UN Kofi Annan’s statement that “the so-called digital divide is actually several gaps in one.” Annan points at a third decisive dimension of the digital divide, the “gender divide”, which he describes as follows:

There is a technological divide – great gaps in infrastructure. There is a content divide. There is a gender divide, with women and girls enjoying less access to information technology than do men and boys. This can be true of rich and poor countries alike. (Statement at The World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva, December 10, 2003, quoted in Castaño Collado 2008)

According to Castaño Collado, the second divide is closely connected to a specific digital literacy incorporating certain digital or e-skills and the capacity to adapt to new information and communication technologies. It can thus also be called a knowledge divide, one which is marked by a structural coloniality, or colonial divide, as I would argue.

### **‘Faces on Facebook’: Queer subversions & collective interventions**

On internet platforms, users can create (bodyless) (gender) identities. Under pseudonyms like ‘Steven Transgender’ and by using photos of ambiguous comic figures, hegemonic gender roles are symbolically subverted. Moreover, there are a growing number of gender-political sites (“Gay Marriage”, “Wipeout Homophobia on Facebook”, “TGE – Transgender Europe”, “Asociación Mujeres Òrgiva Igualdad”) in cyberspace.

Furthermore, sites of non-hegemonic feminist groups and sites for decolonization (“Decolonial Transnational”, “Decoloniality Europe”) can now be found on Facebook. The internet has played a decisive role for mobilizations on very different

levels: already 1995's 4th UN World Conference on Women in Beijing was organized in part via the internet, even though internet access was still limited at that time. The world wide web has also stimulated the mobilization against the oppression of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime (e.g. the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), see <http://www.rawa.org/index.php>, or the campaign for Afghan Women and Girls by the Feminist Majority Foundation, see [http://feminist.org/afghan/taliban\\_women.asp](http://feminist.org/afghan/taliban_women.asp)). Current examples of women's collectives developing agency through creative internet use and networking within cyberspace are the online activities of the womens' movement "mujeres Zapatistas" in Mexico or the lesbian feminist collective "Mujeres Creando" in Bolivia, the collective "Feministas en Resistencia" in Honduras or the women's group "Las O.T.R.A.S." (an organization of young women in engineering and computing who promote access to free culture and software for women in Central America).

The recent political uprisings in numerous North African countries are hardly thinkable without taking into account mobile phone cameras and internet platforms such as Facebook. The so-called Arab Spring included the rise of a number of feminist sites (see e.g. the Facebook accounts "Women of Egypt", "Feminismo Islamico"). With regard to gender and migration – the topic of the conference this paper sprang from – new information and communication technologies provide tools that facilitate keeping in contact with 'home' for domestic workers and sex workers that have moved to the urban centers in order to make a living. Via internet phones, chats, platforms, blogs and e-mails, contact becomes easier and geographical distances shrink by making communication possible in real time. Mobile phones moreover facilitate childcare, by observing the kids' activities from the work place.

As these examples indicate, one might well assume that the new social media can function as a 'third epistemological space' for knowledge production, subaltern interventions and empowerment, and access to wider public spheres from the margins, as decolonial critic Walter D. Mignolo (2003) had it. Mignolo defines 'border spaces' as the privileged loci of enunciation and of decolonial knowledge production.

However, cyberspace is not free of tensions and ambiguities. Cyberspace cannot be considered as independent from offline realities and is affected on several levels by the restrictions and power structures that also dominate the offline world and determine who is granted recognition and agency.

A first tension is the dissolution of the borders between private and public – as practiced in cyberspace and promoted by politicians. This might not be embraced by people whose security and access to enter the public spheres is tied to this division and who depend on the guarantee of anonymity or the use of pseudonyms.

Especially marginalized subjects need bodily referents and depend on strategically essentialist entities in order to voice their concern and claim empowerment, recognition and agency. In poststructuralist discourses, the significance of the speaker or author and values such as experience and subjectivity are radically questioned. Especially marginalized groups, however, depend on these values in a particular way. Whether a voice is recognized and authorized thus depends on who claims this voice. Lanser Sniader hence rightly remarks:

the 'postmodern' decades have also been a time of new discursive activity by previously suppressed communities who might be less enthusiastic than hegemonic writers about dispensing with narrative authority. [...] such groups understandably seek to create an authoritative voice, not to undermine an already existing one. (1992: 126)

Similar problems arise for non-hegemonic or multiply marginalized speakers in the context of the deconstruction of all representation possibilities in poststructuralist discourses, as they still needed to gain the authority others could take for granted and do away with. Racialized and lesbian women for instance reminded hegemonic white heterosexual middle-class feminists of their privileges and of their blind spots in their attempt to speak for 'all women'. African American and other non-hegemonic feminists have for a long time been underscoring the 'differences within' women, that is, the interdependencies of different regimes of oppressions. They insisted on the necessity to consider gender as an interdependent category, which is always also and already determined by other dimensions such as 'race', sexuality, social status, class, religion or locality (see e.g. Anzaldúa 1986; Bambara 1970; The Combahee River Collective Statement 1977; Crenshaw 1995; Hill Collins 1998; Anzaldúa 1986). Non-hegemonic feminist and postcolonial critics have always underscored the necessity of momentous political alliances, especially against the backdrop of the deconstruction of identities and the possibilities of its (their) representations (see e.g. Mohanty 2003; Lugones 2003 and 2008). Gayatri Spivak (1989) for instance, claims a 'strategic essentialism' and in her famous essay "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism" (1992), Judith Butler speaks of the importance of 'contingent foundations', which are necessary in order to overcome power asymmetries.

Cornelia Sollfrank sees Cyberfeminism as a "a unifying moment. It creates the myth of a political identity without forcing anyone to strive for it." And, significantly, groups such as the "Digital Sisters/Sistas" (African American women in ICT) or "Webgrrls International" organize online (see <http://www.digital-stistas.org/>, <http://www.webgrrls.com/>). Interventions by multiply marginalized speakers such as black and Latina feminists have thus pointed toward the fact that collectivities that are based on presumed identities cause exclusions and power asym-



metries. Critical cyberfeminists continue such interventions by pointing at the blind spots of hegemonic feminist practices, e.g. María Fernández in her essay "Is Cyberfeminism Colorblind?" (2002).

On the other hand, internet platforms provide opportunities for discomfoting appropriations that seemingly re-enact patronizing gestures of 'speaking for' the disenfranchised, often in a patriarchal manner – one prominent example has recently been a heterosexual man who performed as "The Gay Girl from Damascus" (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13744980>) and another one writing the Blog "A Gay Girl's View on the World" (<http://lezgetreal.com/>). Moreover, this appropriative gesture dis-empowers gays, lesbians and transgender people to speak for themselves by taking on a vulnerable identity that is so easily mocked and ridiculed by mainstream positions.

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On a more symbolic level, a further divide on the representational level can be observed in hegemonic representations with regard to discourses on bio-diversity and climate change. With respect to Latin America – and certainly other spaces as well – one can observe a troubling revival of received colonial images of specifically raced and gendered women (mostly half naked and represented as mothers and 'life givers') in tourist advertisements and Western development programs. The spaces and their presumably 'natural' inhabitants are thus represented as part of a 'virgin' nature to be protected and supported by Western expertise and developmental technologies (see e.g. Ulloa Cubillos 2005). Most recently, the blockbuster movie "Avatar" reproduces such a gendered, sexualized colonial fantasy, imagining a paradisiacal planet full of 'good natives' and bare-breasted (heterosexual-male-fantasy-type) amazons who live in harmony with their natural surroundings. Not surprisingly, the encounter of the main actor with his avatar friend is told as a romantic (heterosexual) love story, calling to mind received narrations of the colonial encounter as an encounter between two genders like La Malinche and Cortés, or Pocahontas and John Smith. Such images obviously reinforce what I will call a 'colonial divide' with regard to the access to the power to represent.

It seems to be no coincidence that this innovative blockbuster 3D movie – which heralded a new 'age' in the history of film – was produced at the hegemonic center of Hollywood. This is because of another divide with regard to the digital. The access to rule this new realm is the narrative of 'digital natives' as referring to the young elites of the urban centers. The colonial divide is re-enacted by the fact that mostly cheap labor forces from the 'global South' (and often women) produce the very technologies they themselves structurally have no access to, as they could never afford to purchase them.

Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) further points at the level of the coding or writing of software programs as another significant issue to be taken into consideration by a

decolonial critical feminist cyberculture approach. She underscores that diversity politics and the inclusion of formerly marginalized speakers is urgently necessary in the realm of programmers, which is alarmingly dominated by white, mostly heterosexual, males who reproduce hegemonic Western-centric cultural codes while writing their programs. Hence, everyone who seeks visibility or acknowledgement in cyberspace already has to conform to certain rules and paradigms by the simple use of these media. The internet platform Facebook is one vivid example of such a framing by certain norms (as it requires users to insert an e-mail address, a gender (male or female), a photograph and date of birth). Online performances require conforming to certain prerequisites in order to be acknowledged and authorized by a wider audience and gain 'a legible face', that is, to be decoded according to specific cultural codes.

### **Against neo-colonial horizons: Decolonizing cyberspace**

Who is granted a 'legible face' on Facebook is obviously affected by numerous factors of social, gendered and racialized regimes of inequality. As my short excursion has shown, these inequalities in cyberspace are deeply rooted in the offline reality of norms and hierarchies and the referent of the body, which influences whether someone is granted recognition and a 'face' or not. As Judith Butler has it:

There is already not only an epistemological frame within which the face appears, but an operation of power as well, since only by virtue of certain kinds of anthropocentric dispositions and cultural frames will a given face seem to be a human face to any one of us. [...]. There is a bodily referent here, a condition of me, that I can point to, but I cannot narrate precisely, even though there are no doubt stories about where my body went and what it did and did not do. But there is also a history to my body for which I can have no recollection, and there is as well a part of bodily experience – what is indexed by the word *Exposure* – that only with difficulty, if at all, can assume narrative form. [...] my narrative begins in *media res*, when many things have already taken place to make me and my story in language possible. (2001: 23/27)

Asymmetries and inequalities with regard to the access to representation and participation, to recognition and the public sphere, are re-enacted in current neo-colonial settings. One example is the massive exploitation of former colonized countries by multinational companies, another is the debates on the 'backwardness' of Islam, multiculturalism and the necessity of a 'leading culture' (as was recently debated in Germany). Based on the assumption that inequalities will never be abolished by those who are privileged by them, critics dedicated to the decolonization of knowledge and power have thus claimed to include hitherto excluded or marginalized voices and knowledges, and create transregional alliances. With regard to the internet as a new space, persisting frames might provide spaces for

alternative identities for some, but on a global scale these frames leave numerous voices out of the picture, thus avoiding their agencies. It seems as if also in cyberspace hegemonic actors (agents) rule over bodies and territories, even though the above-mentioned examples of queer interventions and resistance politics, such as personal Facebook accounts or political activating sites, indicate that the internet might provide a (cyber)space for anti-hegemonic, emancipatory and empowering interventions.

As a highly commercial medium dominated by Western mainstream shareholders, the internet is marked by the tension between user agency and commercial interest. Hegemonic representations of sexes, sexualities, bodies and identities are endlessly reproduced on heterosexual porno sites and on dating platforms. Further, people, classes and territories that are not significant for the informational society are structurally excluded from the merits of new technologies. Moreover, the working hands — mostly female and mostly from the 'global South' — that produce these technologies hardly ever have the material power to enjoy them and participate. Consequently, the so-called colonial digital divide limits the access to such information and communication technologies to a relatively limited privileged community who themselves have no or very restricted access to what counts as relevant representation and knowledge production. As cyberculture scholar Lisa Nakamura writes (and Nakamura's words are reminiscent of approaches by decolonial thinkers such as Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Dignolo, Fernando Coronil, María Lugones, Ramón Grosfoguel):

While discussions about technology seemingly push us into thinking about the future, so much of the discussion is rooted in the past, particularly [...] the manners in which technology and notions of progress served the aims and was the impetus for colonialism, and [...] our notions of modernity and technological progress owe themselves to these histories of inequality and exploitation. And surely contemporary discussions over issues such as globalism and labor politics in the developing world are inseparable to this. (2010: 6)

As the examples I have discussed in this paper demonstrate, cyberspace provides one (but not the only) vivid example for the intersectional or interdependent character of different regimes of inequality. Cyberspace is by no means free from the hierarchies of the offline world: "the Internet is a social process, cultural factors such as race are surely integral to the function, shape, and use of the technology" (Nayar 2010: 15). To overcome binarily gendered and racialized hierarchies, the decolonizing of cyber cultures on various levels and in various spheres is a strong necessity. In order to turn cyberspace into a tool for transnational feminist alliances I hence suggest a combination of a decolonial and 'multichronotopic' perspective (taking into account the multiplicity of times, spaces and positions; Shohat 2006) with a transnational intersectional feminist one. According to Nayar (2010: 166-7), a

postcolonial approach – which here, I would argue, is equally true for the project of ‘decolonizing cyberspace’ – to cyberculture would include:

- an attention to the cybertypes (e.g. cultural representation) circulating in cyberspaces
- the raced material conditions (labor, knowledge workers) that produce cyberspaces
- the complicity of (postcolonial) nation-states with global, Euro-American-driven informationalism and knowledge formation
- the alternative modes of expression possible for the vernacular and the local
- an examination of the unequal power relations between races in cyberculture engendered by technologies of software and hardware (in terms of computer education of minorities, for example, or access in their own languages)
- the opening up of the screen to cultural differences, where the screen is literally the space of the Other that demands a moral response

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To successfully overcome persisting and re-enacted hierarchies in cyberspace, the hegemonic side cannot be blinded out. It thus furthermore seems to be necessary to add a ‘hegemony-critical’ approach (Dietze, as introduced by Critical Whiteness Studies) in order to make a decolonial project work. Such an approach requires solidary momentous alliances across geo-political and ethnic borders, beyond pure identity politics and bodily boundaries, taking into account the entanglements, interrelations and tensions of differing axis of domination. Moreover, the level of production is strongly marked by the North-South exploitation of (often feminized) labor and must be taken into consideration just like the hegemonic codes of programming. Facebook could be a showcase example here: by including non-hegemonic designers from different cultural backgrounds into the production process, the platform could also become a space or frame for ‘faces’ who have heretofore been structurally excluded or marginalized. Such a re-visioning of unquestioned codes could question the requirement of photographs, the necessity of the choice between two genders and the fashion to name one’s relational status, date of birth, school or occupation. It hence requires a successful decolonization of cyberspace and of knowledge in cyberspace in order to overcome a situation in which it seems as if, currently, on Facebook “in cyberspace: Millions talk, but only a few are listened to” (Nayar 2010, 32).

## QUOTED LINKS

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