Digital Islamophobia: The Swedish Woman as a Figure of Pure and Dangerous Whiteness

Karina Horsti,

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Abstract

This paper addresses the digital culture of Islamophobic bloggers, focusing on the online circulation of a forensic photograph of a Swedish woman who was assaulted. The analysis shows how through appropriating this image, the bloggers created a unifying, imagined whiteness in the transnational Islamophobic network. The empirical analysis clarifies how this one image migrated and transformed in the blogosphere, and legitimated the recurrent discursive trope of 'Muslim rape'. This image became a sub-cultural 'memory freeze frame' crystallizing the contemporary Islamophobic ideologies articulated in connection to race, ethnicity, nation, gender, and sexuality. The viral circulation of this image constructed a cultural, gendered, and racial Swedish whiteness, imagined to have become victimized by both Islam and liberal feminism, and therefore requiring global protection.

Keywords: Whiteness, Islamophobia, social media, digital culture, feminism, globalization, racism

Introduction

> *You people were descended from Vikings and other warriors. What the hell happened over the years?* (Comment posted on 30 December 2005 to Norwegian Fjordman's blog.)

Islamophobia, along with other forms of racism, has gained momentum through new media technologies and global digital networks in the last decade. In these circuits of representation, racialized and racist imagery has become common (Sharma, 2013; Daniels, 2009; Titley, 2014; Nakamura, 2014). This article addresses the broader issue of cyber racism by examining the digital culture of Islamophobic bloggers. These are misinformation experts who generate false facts for politicians, grassroots groups, and the media both online and offline (Ali et al., 2011). During the past 15 years, the trope of 'Muslim gang rapes' as part of the feared 'Islamization' of Europe has become prominent in the 'counter-Jihad' movement and in the radical right wing parties in Europe (e.g. Fekete, 2011; Yilmaz, 2016). The article focuses on the production and circulation of this trope by analyzing the global re-mediation of a forensic photograph of a Swedish woman taken after she was subjected to a violent attack. This image has become an iconic sub-culture 'memory freeze frame' (Sontag, 2003), that is re-mediated and appropriated across different contexts, and through its circulation, it creates a shared identity among those subscribing to Islamophobic ideology. The image visualizes the different fears that cut across the trope of 'Muslim rape' in transnational, exclusionist spaces. In circulating this picture, the bloggers imagine a shared white community in danger, symbolized by the injured, blond, Swedish woman, who is in need of global protection. This is a variation of the 'protection scenario' (Jeffords, 1991) that has been used in waging war for centuries. Imagery of a victimized white woman, for instance in the 17th century depictions of violence against Native Americans, in WWII recruitment posters and in the more recent mediatized narratives of the US-led war in Iraq, has persuaded men to fight 'the enemy' and exercise their masculinity (Kumar, 2004). Paradoxically, however, the figure of the Swedish woman also symbolizes emancipation, feminism, and

female agency at the frontline of the society, which the bloggers consider to be destructive to (white) masculinity.

My analytical approach is explorative. I examine the genealogy, dissemination, aesthetics, and discourses of the image, which do not represent separate analytical levels but are entangled with one another. While some images 'invite' new meanings more than others, these re-contextualizations emerge through the media practices within networks of people. Thus, I pay attention to the agency and to the affordances of technology. In doing so, I trace the origin of the initial publication in the mainstream media and follow the image's migration from the national context to global social media networks.

In addition, I adopt the analytical perspective of W. J. T Mitchell's (1996: 73) visual theory in which he maintains that some images more than others 'seem to have a surprising capacity to generate new directions and surprising twists'. A visual analysis of the image itself allows me to examine how this particular image takes on a 'personhood' (Mitchell, 2005: 30) and to discuss what makes it spreadable. I argue that, in this case, the digital and aesthetic plasticity of the image converges with its cultural plasticity in ways that facilitate the performance of globally shared anxieties and identities.

The story behind this image begins in 2005, when two young, Swedish women, Lisa and Maria[i], decided to speak publicly about having been violently attacked by a young man, who was accompanied by three other young men, in Gothenburg on New Year's Eve in 2004. Both women were violently injured, and Maria was raped. It is rare for a rape victim to appear in public in Sweden and put a face and a name to her story. However, these women claimed that public discussion would empower women

to report gendered violence. Lisa maintained that publishing the forensic image of her injured face 'would show how brutal violence against women could be' (Lisa in *Expressen*, 26 March 2005).

At least three different mainstream media outlets, *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen* and TV3 television channel published the photograph, and from there, bloggers appropriated the image to their anti-immigration, racist, and anti-Muslim publications. In the photograph, Lisa is gazing directly at the viewer, blood running down her face. She is aware that her photograph is being taken, and despite the explicit injury, she maintains a confident pose. Nevertheless, the initial emancipatory framing of this image was erased as soon as the picture began circulating through the blogosphere, first among Nordic bloggers and later globally. The nationalist bloggers in the Nordic countries framed the image as testifying to the 'Muslim rape epidemic' or 'rape jihad'—common myths in Islamophobic circles worldwide (see, e.g., Fekete, 2011). In the early coverage of this incident, the mainstream media did not mention the Somali ethnic background of the perpetrators, in accordance with Swedish journalistic ethics[ii]. Nevertheless, bloggers and the nationalist populist Sweden Democrats capitalized on this case[iii], framing it as 'ethnic violence'.

To conduct the empirical analysis, I first traced the online routes of the image, identifying the networks and agency that were crucial to its circulation. To this end, I conducted a reverse image search and manually examined the results. For a closer examination, from the 493 hits in the image search, I selected 28 blog entries in 14 blogs that had published the image. Second, I analyzed the different versions of the image, asking why this particular image was circulated and what the different alterations might signify for the global Islamophobic and racist blogosphere.

Islamophobia in the Nordic countries and beyond

I understand Islamophobia as a form of culturalized racism that includes persistent Orientalist myths about Islam and Muslims (see, e.g., Werbner, 2013; Taras, 2013)[iv]. In the Western versions of Islamophobia, boundary marking takes place in the intersections of culture, ethnicity, modernity, class, sexuality, and religion. Islamophobia includes the beliefs that Islam creates a culture that is sexist, misogynistic, violent, and anti-democratic, and that Muslims cannot think rationally (Kumar, 2012: 42–60). However, as Farid Hafez (2014: 484) argues, Islamophobia is not a radical, marginal ideology in contemporary Europe; rather, it is a form of 'accepted racism'. It can be seen as an exemplary case of cultural racism (Goldberg, 2009: 175), where the incompatibility of people is defined by presumed differences in culture rather than biology. However, as the analysis of the discourses of rape later in this article show, biological racism entangles with cultural arguments in Islamophobic ideology. Moreover, the notion of whiteness, which is crucial in the analysis of racism in the Nordic context, allows us to examine how Islamophobia combines cultural and biological racism. Whiteness simultaneously refers to both race and culture in ways that position some people in more privileged positions than others. Passing or performing as 'white' naturalizes some bodies, allowing them to belong in certain 'white spaces'. Thus, whiteness and non-whiteness are performative and constructed categories, and they can be marked or un-marked by class, gender, sexuality, religion, phenotype, language, and style. (Bonnett, 2000; Andreassen and Vitus, 2015.)

Islamophobia has long historical roots in Europe, but it gained academic interest only recently. The most recent scholarship points to stereotypes that emerged in the context of the so-called war on terror after 2001 in Europe and the United States, depicting

Muslims within the frameworks of 'terrorist' and 'radicalization' (Kumar, 2012: 155–157; Puar, 2007). In these frameworks, Muslims are not only seen as a threat from the outside but increasingly as a threat originating from within Western societies, as 'non-integrated Others' and 'homegrown' terrorists. This internal threat is increasingly articulated in the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality in ways that mark Westerners through exceptionalism, or what Jasbir Puar (2007) calls 'homonationalism'. In the Nordic countries, this exceptionalism manifests in the discourses of nationalist, right wing parties and 'counter-Jihadist' movements that in recent years have brought the rights of women and homosexuals to the center of their politics. These groups often claim that Muslims are inherently patriarchal and backward; therefore, they threaten liberal values, particularly the rights of women and homosexuals (see, e.g., Akkerman and Hagelund, 2007; Betz and Meret, 2009; Keskinen, 2013; Hervik, 2011). However, this form of 'liberal nationalism' or nationalization of liberal values (Laegaard, 2007: 49) extends beyond the far right and has reached the mainstream in the Nordic media and politics. As Sindre Bangstaad (2015: 55) argues in his analysis of Islamophobia in Norway, 'part of its appeal lays precisely in its transcending left/right divides'.

While the imaginary of 'Nordic exceptionality' strongly rests on gender and LGBT equality, it is supported by the mis-recognition of racism. Nordic colonialism is largely omitted from the national consciousness in the Nordic countries (Andreassen & Vitus 2015; Keskinen et al 2009). In addition, the region's connections to Nazism, particularly to eugenics, are often ignored. However, Sweden has a history of state sponsored racist eugenics tracing back to the 1920s, when the racialized 'Nordic type' was elevated to superiority[v] (Björkman and Widmalm, 2010; Kjellman, 2014). The Swedish state claimed that it had to assume the urgent responsibility of rescuing the

purity of what was believed to be the whitest of the Northern European people (Kjellman, 2014: 581–582).

This is the broader discursive landscape where the Islamophobic blogosphere analyzed in this article operates. My position is that the bloggers who circulate the image of the Swedish woman should not be treated as marginalized actors operating in the fringes of the society but as nodes in a wider network of ideology that also includes the mainstream of the European societies. The material they circulate does not spread only due to the affordances of digital technology but exactly because it fits to the ideological work of Islamophobia that has been in the making for centuries.

An important variant of Islamophobia, dubbed as the 'Eurabia' conspiracy theory, alarms of 'Islamization of Europe' and it has become particularly powerful in the Nordic countries (Bangstaad 2015). This theory brings together some seemingly different movements such as 'counter-Jihad' street and online movements (e.g. Stop Islamization, Pegida), nationalist populist parties (e.g. Progress Party of Norway and Sweden Democrats), and some movements covered in liberal ideologies such as feminism and freedom of speech (e.g. Human Rights Service in Norway). The Islamophobic blogosphere is crucial for connecting the different debates and movements internationally. However, as I will show in this article, this transnational network needs people who are able to translate between different languages and contexts. The Norwegian blogger Fjordman (alias Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen), who plays a central role in the digital circulation of the image, mediates between the Nordic and the English speaking networks. He first made the forensic image available for the international blogosphere. However, the image was also instrumental to his own success in the global Islamophobic circles.

Emancipatory framing in the mainstream media

An exploratory reverse image search using Tineye and Google revealed that the picture of Lisa had been re-published in blogs worldwide continuously after its initial publication in 2005, and that there were different alterations and image macros ('memes') of the picture circulating online. The image search allowed me to trace the picture's first publication in the Swedish tabloid newspaper *Aftonbladet* (24 March 2005)[vi]. It was also printed in the tabloid paper *Expressen* (26 March 2005) and shown on the crime television program *Efterlyst* (24 March 2005) in Sweden. These media outlets justified showing the forensic photograph by generalizing its testimonial power beyond the specific case. According to *Expressen* (26 March 2005), it published the image 'to give other vulnerable women the courage to report [rape] to police'.

The discourses around the picture in the mainstream media and the subsequent online circulation have centered around rape, although the woman in the picture was not the one who was raped—her friend Maria was the rape victim, and images of her appeared in the Swedish mainstream media only after her (physical) recovery. The stories in the mainstream media describe how the two women were on their way to a New Year's Eve party when a group of four young men started a conversation with them. 'They seemed normal, so we socialized with them on our way', Maria reported to *Expressen*. However, this normal behavior unexpectedly became evil when they passed a small wooded area, where the men robbed them, and one of the men turned violent[vii]. The story recounted in the mainstream media has the typical elements of an 'ideal victim' (Lindgren and Lundström, 2010: 310). That is, an unknown rapist attacks an innocent victim outdoors—a storyline that is familiar in fiction and appeals to audiences globally (Cucklanz, 2000: 34). The mainstream media avoided

mentioning the Somali ethnicity of the perpetrators even in the coverage of the court proceedings[viii]. Thus, the media did not externalize the perpetrators' identities outside the 'national', as has been typical in other news coverage of sexual crimes in Sweden (Lindgren and Lundström, 2010). This was a decision that the two women supported, as Maria later expressed. When she became aware of her popularity among nationalist populists and Islamophobic networks, Maria declared that she was disappointed that her story was used in the right wing propaganda and that 'it was never important where the guys who hurt me and my friend came from' (*Expressen*, 26 August 2010)[ix]. However, the attempt to regain the ownership of the story and the framing of the image through mainstream media presence in Sweden had no effect on the global blogosphere.

Alongside the forensic image of Lisa, *Aftonbladet* (24 March 2005) published a picture of the recovered women embracing, showing empathy, caring, and friendship. In this picture, the media outlet balances the women's victimization with power and agency, thereby generating more sympathy for them. Further, this allows them to speak more generally for victims of sexual violence, justifying the publication of the forensic image: the media and the women framed it as a joint emancipatory act, which nevertheless fit the mainstream, hegemonic public sphere.

Tracing the image in the blogosphere

The story was first discussed among the Nordic bloggers in their native Scandinavian languages, and from there, a Norwegian blogger, Fjordman (12 December 2015[x]), who writes in English for 'counter-Jihadist' blogs in the United States and Europe, picked up the image and re-framed the story about the New Year's Eve assault as an example of the 'immigrant rape wave'. Thus, Fjordman became a nodal point

between the Scandinavian and the global Islamophobic networks, and in the transformation of the framing of female emancipation into Islamophobic 'rape frame'. He published the image of the violated woman with the title 'Immigrant rape wave in Sweden', and this text was quickly linked, copied, and referred to in various blogs in Europe and the United States. Another important moment in the circulation of the image was its linking, through Fjordman, to New York based Pamela Geller's blog, *Atlas Shrugs* (15 December 2005). The attention from *Atlas Shrugs* in particular increased Fjordman's visibility and popularity in the global blogosphere, and eventually rape became one of his favorite topics. For instance, in 2011, mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik copied to his compendium nine of Fjordman's blog entries in which he wrote about 'Muslim rape'[xi]. Thus, the picture of the Swedish woman and the alterations of it have been instrumental in the production of the globally shared trope of 'Muslim rape wave'.

In the early phase of its circulation, the image appeared in its original form, allowing one to identify the hospital background behind the injured woman. However, soon, it was transformed into an Islamophobic meme—an image macro that removed the woman's bloody head from the photograph and pasted it on a black background. This aesthetic alteration brought the picture into a wider genre within digital culture, namely, the photography-based meme culture, where photographs are used as raw material for new creations that by definition invite new transformations (Shifman, 2014). The term 'meme' refers to 'digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual and auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from' (Nooney and Portwood-Stacer, 2014: 249). The following texts that accompany these modifications anchor meanings to the image: 'To Rape an Unveiled Woman', 'Muslim Rape, Feminist Silence'[xii], and

'Western Muslims' Racist Rape Spree'. Further, the sub-texts 'Victim of Muslim gang rape in Sweden' and 'Recent Swedish victim' appear with these titles. These words on the graphic image create an unexpected juxtaposition that is typical of meme culture—a 'show-space' where attention is sought through visual spectacle (Nakamura, 2014: 269).

[insert Image 1.]

This modified version of the photograph accelerated the circulation of the image, and it became a 'memory freeze frame'—a picture that immediately evokes a memory or a narrative among those who share the Islamophobic cultural repertoire. In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag (2003: 22) writes, 'in an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it'. She argues that a photograph is like a quotation that is subject to instant recall. For a photograph to become a collective memory freeze frame, it needs repetition. However, in the digital age, images are not only copied and shared but are also transformed. The digital format of pictures today enables a particular plasticity that increases the degree to which individuals can produce new meanings with these images.

This shift from a digitized photograph in the mainstream media to a meme is typical of the participatory network culture, where the remixing of various elements, such as photographs and text, brings the consumer-public's desires to the center of the communication. Thus, an image does not simply go 'viral' irrationally and replicate itself; it moves through producing minds, through active consumers who re-contextualize, change, and add meanings to the image (Jenkins et al., 2013). This kind of production within digital circulation is characteristic of what Yochai Benkler

(2006) terms 'a folk-cultural production model'; this is a more reflexive and participatory cultural production as compared to the mass cultural production. Moreover, it is crucial to note that besides humans, this kind of vernacular creativity includes operating machines and algorithms, which strongly shape the digital culture and the networks created within it. Therefore, a memory freeze frame of the digital age has some recognizable features of the original photograph, but the picture transforms in its circulation.

The bloggers who have changed and spread the image, and the technologies that have shaped this process, have created social and cultural value through this process of circulation. Scholars who have developed theories of digital circulation (e.g., Valaskivi and Sumiala, 2014; Nakamura, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2013) maintain that mediated circulation through networks has become the dominant cultural logic that shapes social relations today. Therefore, by transforming, re-contextualizing, and sharing the image, the bloggers constitute both their individual identities and relationships to others. These relationships construct Islamophobic and white supremacist micro-publics that overlap, and through transnational circulation, they produce shared identities. Thus, the most crucial outcome of digital circulation is not the expression of individuality but the re-mixing of the voices found within the networks and the social relationships that are constituted and maintained through such a media practice. The unpredictable alliances make the impact and influence of these blogs difficult to estimate. Nevertheless, instead of downplaying their discursive power, I take these blogs as points in the networks that re(produce) broader nationalist, racist, and Eurocentric ideologies that have done the ideological work for centuries.

Next, I analyze the image itself and the kinds of meanings that bloggers anchor to it through their visual and textual labor.

Spreadability of the image: Why it circulates

The initial social function assigned to the forensic photograph is witnessing the violence the woman experienced. However, my focus in this paper is on the public life of this image. For me, the main question that the image raises is 'How and why has it become a sub-culture memory freeze frame'?

The monitoring equipment in the background serves as an information pointer (Barthes, 1999) implying that the woman is in an intensive care unit at a hospital and that she has been seriously hurt. However, the image does not tell us why she is hurt; she could also have been in an accident. The woman is positioned slightly lower than the photographer, and her head is tilted to the left. Her blue eyes are looking directly into the camera, and as such, her intense gaze reaches the viewer in a powerful way. Her confident and self-aware pose transforms the photograph into something more like a portrait. Although her gaze is intense, the woman does not express any emotion, such as sadness, horror, or pain. There is a contrast between the confidence she projects and the visible signs that she is hurt, particularly the blood running down her face and hair. To me, this contrast is the quality within the photograph itself that is most intriguing and demands attention. The violence committed to the face, portrayed by the blood, elicits the most biological response in the viewer (Kuntz, 2013). The face expresses identity, and it is through facial expressions that humans communicate. Therefore, violence inflicted on the face is particularly destructive. In her analysis of vicious acts on the face in popular culture, Katrina Kuntz (2013) follows Jean Luc Nancy's reasoning that violence needs the face; it needs that kind of representation,

specifically because violence wants to be both demonstrative and 'monstrative'. In addition, Adriana Cavarero (2009: 15) stresses that the face and the violence used on the face are crucial for creating horror and terror. In European culture, the face is understood to be the most intense and expressive part of the body, as shown in the idea of the eyes reflecting the soul. Thus, the image of the bright red blood on the face forces the viewer to look at the photograph and ask further questions about what happened and why.

In 2006, when the picture was picked up from Fjordman's blog and circulated globally, bloggers began to alter it, using the digital photograph from the online newspaper as raw material for their own creations. In these new versions, the woman's head and torso were moved from the emergency care background to a black surface. This aesthetic decision is significant for the image becoming a memory freeze frame in the Islamophobic blogosphere. The black background offers a powerful contrast to the other colors: the red of the blood, the blonde of the hair, and the blue of the eyes. This creates a kind of graphicness that removes the image from its context and the documentary reality of the forensic photograph, thereby deconstructing the photograph's truthfulness. By definition, a forensic photograph is assigned a 'social use' that is held to be 'realistic' and 'objective' (Bourdieu, 1990: 73). Thus, removing something from a picture and retaining other things deliberately changes the meaning of the image. Due to this alteration, the picture's quality as a wild sign—whose meaning can expand in any direction—accelerates. Consequently, the image begins to function more in the mode of an advertisement: the woman's face and gaze, which do not express pain, are open to reflect the viewer's desires and interpretations. The openness to the viewer's reflection becomes clearer if we think of alternative uses of the image. It could equally be used for a public awareness

campaign about traffic accidents. The un-realness of the altered image becomes apparent when imagining it in connection with a horror movie or Halloween party.

These qualities of the image itself reflect what W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) terms as the 'personhood' of the image. He argues that humans have a kind of pre-modern attitude towards some objects and pictures that takes them as 'living' things. This aspect of visual analysis is particularly crucial in the digital network culture, where certain images are found and circulated. Found objects invite one to pick them up and save them, and transform them into something meaningful. Mitchell (2005: 118) claims that found objects have a tendency 'once found, to hang around, gathering value and meaning like a sort of semantic flypaper or photosensitive surface'. This is exactly what the image of the violated woman does. It is distinctly 'sticky' to attract meanings, and in doing so, it gains significant sub-cultural value in the global circuits of digital sharing.

While all images are polysemous, the altered version of the woman's face has specific openness to multiple interpretations. Moreover, the visual mode of the meme invites re-coding and orients the user towards the future. This orientation strengthens the reading of the image as a representation of dystopia: the destruction that is coming. This horrific scenario emerges in the ritualistic practice of sharing and gazing at the image of an injured woman with others in the network. As Johanna Sumiala and Minttu Tikka (2011: 147) argue, following the writings of Georges Bataille on ritual communication, gazing at visual representations of violence constructs 'the heterogeneous social', and this practice can constitute certain relations among the participants in the visual event. The kind of voyeuristic pleasure that draws viewers towards images of violence and the gazing at the same image together construct transnational imagery and visual practice of Islamophobia.

The figure of a threatening Muslim male

In their practice of remediation, the bloggers added text to the image, thus anchoring certain meanings to the image and fixing to it a floating chain of possible interpretations (Barthes, 1999: 37). The text directs the interpretation by offering an explanation of the image. At the same time, the image offers testimonial power to the claims in the text. For instance, the image serves as proof of the many other rapes that occur across the world and many other fears about multiculturalism that these bloggers express, particularly in relation to Sweden.

The text added to the altered image on the black background includes 'To Rape an Unveiled Woman' or 'Muslim Rape, Feminist Silence[xiii]' with the sub-text, 'Victim of Muslim gang rape in Sweden'. These are keywords that crystallize the paradoxical myth circulating through such blogs. The bloggers believe that Muslim men, as an ethnic group, violently rape non-Muslim, unveiled women, and that this is a problem that has not been addressed in the West due to feminism. Moreover, it is significant that the notion of 'Sweden' has stuck with the image throughout its years in circulation. The symbolism of Sweden is important in the Islamophobic imagination, as it signifies both feminism and whiteness, which I explore later in the analysis.

There are basically two main orientations in the blogs that circulate the image: White supremacist racism such as in *Stormfront* and 'counter-Jihadism' such as in *Gates of Vienna* and *Atlas Shrugs*. Deviance constructed around the image is specified in different ways depending on the blog's orientation. The blog texts depict Muslim men as a threat to the West, and in this constructed culture or race 'war', women represent the body of the nation, the nation's 'daughters', the West, and the 'white race', as the following examples illustrate:

> *Swedish politicians and media need to put the well-being of <u>their daughters</u>*
>
> *above that of political correctness and their own Multicultural vanity, and it is*
>
> *shocking that they actually need to be reminded of this.* (Fjordman,
>
> 'Immigrant rape wave in Sweden', 12 December 2005)

> *The ruling elites are facilitating such matters by continuing to promote*
>
> *massive non-white immigration and using the criminal justice system to favor*
>
> *<u>non-white perpetrators over white victims and defenders.</u> On balance, whites*
>
> *would be safer if the police just went away and allowed whites to defend*
>
> *themselves.* (Comment in *Free Republic* by mas cerveza por favor 11 January
>
> 2012.)

In these narratives, the white female represents the border of territory, family, race, culture, and identity. Furthermore, the 'openness' and softness of the female body is represented as a weakness, a boundary for which violation and infection from the outside are constant threats (on the feminist theory of the 'open body', see Jegerstedt, 2012). Feminist scholars have analyzed such connections of gender and sexuality to citizenship, nationalism, and nation-building in various contexts (e.g., Yuval-Davis, 1997; Keskinen, 2010; Puar, 2007; Norocel, 2013; Hübinette and Lundström, 2011; Horsti and Pellander, 2015). This body of research explains how women are often, in a very banal way, represented as embodying the nation, or the nation is imagined as a family, and therefore women represent the threshold of what belongs to men.

In the construction of racialized Muslim men as evil, the bloggers mix agency and non-agency: hyper-masculinity and diminished masculinity. This dual representation of the Muslim male is characteristic of the 'war on terror' discourses (Puar, 2007: xxv). Muslim masculinity is simultaneously 'pathologically excessive yet repressive,

perverse yet homophobic, virile yet emasculated, monstrous yet flaccid' (Puar, 2007: xxv). On the one hand, the bloggers depict Muslim men as strong agents, who deliberately and strategically rape for the purpose of conquering the West. On the other hand, they depict Muslim men as non-thinking, animal, or virus-like organisms. In the latter instances, the bloggers erase conscious agency by describing rape as an 'infection', 'epidemic', and 'pathology'. Metaphors of such border-crossing organisms have a long tradition in racism. Uli Linke (1999: 138–149), in her examination of the continuation of the Nationalist Socialist aesthetics of race in contemporary Germany, maintains that the figure of the immigrant is feminized by liquid metaphors of 'flood' and 'flow' that threaten the masculine 'stealth'.

The following examples illustrate how bloggers produce the threatening figure of a young Muslim male as a self-moving organism or an animal, a predator, incapable of controlling his instincts:

> *As is the case with young Arab Muslims throughout the West, teenage girls are generally forbidden to go out, leaving separatist gangs of predatory Arab Muslim males with highly misogynist attitudes. (*Atlas Shrugs*, 'Islam gone wild', 19 May 2006)*

> *Muslim violence infects, spreads across continents. Australia – Sweden. (*Atlas Shrugs*, 15 December 2005)*

> *In the psychopathic mental gymnastics that occur in the perpetrators' minds, the unveiled woman must be sexually punished for violating the 'modesty' code. (*Frontpage Magazine*, 'Religion of rape', 29 June 2011)*

Fjordman, the blogger who serves as a nodal point between the Nordic and global networks, perceives the threat of a hyper-masculine warrior—the kind of masculinity that he believes the white Scandinavian man has lost due to feminism:

> *We are now witnessing a wave of rape and violent crime in many European countries which is unprecedented in modern history. It's not 'crime', but in fact resembles <u>warfare</u>. ... If you postulate that many of the Muslims in Europe view themselves <u>as a conquering army and that European women are simply war booty,</u> it all makes perfect sense and is in full accordance with Islamic law.* (*Fjordman*, 'Immigrant rape wave in Scandinavia', 12 December 2005)

The figure of the threatening feminist and liberal woman

The imagined double-binding threat of a hyper-masculine/emasculated Muslim male intertwines with the notion that feminism, liberal sexual values, and multiculturalism would allow, and even invite, the evil to enter the nation through the female body. The bloggers explicitly accuse Muslims of misogyny, repeatedly claiming that Muslims think that unveiled women deserve to be raped. This underlining belief of Muslim misogyny operates as a discursive shield against their own hatred of feminism and liberal women. In the most extreme fantasies, the bloggers wish that feminist and leftist women would be raped, 'because they deserve it'. For instance, a Danish blogger Snaphanen (28 November 2005) writes: 'One almost should wish that these two female journalists would get their own round from this same gang'. Thus, this Islamophobic discourse divides women into two categories: the white, pure, innocent, obedient, and victimized women, who deserve protection, and the dirty feminists, who have been polluted by multiculturalism and their un-feminine independence (Keskinen, 2013; Walton, 2012), and who deserve to be raped.

The following quotations demonstrate the bloggers' hatred towards feminism and the feminine:

> _The West's leftist feminists_ _are responding with an apathetic heartlessness and deafening silence._ (_Frontpage Magazine_ 1 November 2006)

> _The Swedish_ _goverment are pussys_ _we should deport all the muslims asap …_ (W. Olofsson in the discussion thread below Fjordman's 'Muslim rape wave' blog entry, 9 April 2013)

> _At the same time_ _feminists have emasculated their own men_ _so…_ (Martha in the discussion thread below Fjordman's 'Muslim rape wave' blog entry, 9 May 2013)

> _Have you in Trondheim lost Your Courage…_ _Your Balls?_ (Steve Edward in _Tundra Tabloids_ commentary, 11 June 2011)

While the bloggers depict Nordic men as the most civilized and egalitarian, they nevertheless mourn the past glory of imagined patriarchal power and white masculinity. The contemporary Nordic countries, Sweden in particular, therefore represent a kind of dystopia for the global Islamophobic network. Scandinavia evokes a fantasy of the past world of the conquering Vikings. At the same time, however, Scandinavia signifies feminism and multiculturalism, which, according to the Islamophobic worldview, have destroyed white masculinity, as the following quotations exemplify:

> _Sorry chaps. But its the Scandinavians … who have dug the grave for themselves and it is for them to dig themselves out of it. If you read Fjordman's blog, you will_ _get a flavour of kind of loonie, love the world, socialist humanitarian politics that_

has long been such a defining characteristic of Scandinavia. (*Majority Rights*,
commentary posted by Phil, 17 December 2005)

*Sweden <u>used to be a safe country</u> not so many decades ago. Yet Swedish streets
are now plagued by muggings, shootings, robberies, gang rivalries and mafias on
a scale previously unknown in modern Scandinavian history.* (*Tundra Tabloids*,
Fjordman's blog entry 'Sweden: A New Hell for Women', 15 October 2013.)

It is, therefore, crucial to analyze why the notions of 'Sweden' and the 'Swedish girl'
have stuck with the image for years since it began circulating. Interestingly, several
historical trajectories of racism and anti-feminism converge in the meanings produced
around the image within these Islamophobic networks. Moreover, different national
(self)fantasies of Swedish whiteness mingle with the global Islamophobic worldview.
Whiteness as a privileged and performed category (Bonnett, 2000; Lundström and
Twine, 2011) is important for understanding the framing of the image as the 'raped
Swedish girl'. These beliefs about exceptional Swedish superiority and beauty persist
as sub-currents in the global and Swedish imaginations (see, e.g., Lundström and
Twine, 2011; Khosravi, 2009). Moreover, several Nordic writers and scholars from
ethnic minority backgrounds have reported that whiteness is used as a normalizing
category that protects from suspicion and exclusion in many social settings in the
Nordic countries (see, e.g., Mainsah and Pröitz, 2015; Khosravi, 2009). Thus, if, in
Franz Fanon's words, blackness is a 'corporeal malediction' that emerges in a visual
encounter (Mitchell, 1996: 74), Swedish whiteness, specifically blondeness, is a
'corporeal blessing' that allows social prestige.

Against this background, a blonde, Swedish woman figures as the stereotypical, ideal
beauty in the global imagination. For the Islamophobic bloggers, a young, blonde,

Swedish girl represents the most celebrated pure whiteness that needs global protection. However, paradoxically, the same figure also symbolizes sexual liberation and feminism—both stereotypes that are widely associated with Sweden and Swedishness (Khosravi, 2009; Lundström and Twine, 2011). In the bloggers' worldview, sexual liberation, openness to multiculturalism, and feminism invite and allow Muslim men to conquer and destroy the 'white culture'. Hence, the global network of 'brothers' and 'soldiers' must come together to simultaneously protect and destroy what is considered globally to be 'whiteness'. Paradoxically, Sweden and the figure of the Swedish woman represent both whiteness under siege and threatening white feminism. This complexity in the imagined figure of the Swedish woman, I argue, is crucial for understanding the global circulation of Lisa's photograph. The image of the injured woman powerfully joins the trajectories of biological and cultural racism with the hate of feminism. The violated woman embodies the fears of globalization and shifting gender relations, and consequently, it unites different Islamophobic and white supremacist ideologies transnationally. However, this hate of feminism and the feminine is not only currency of the Islamophobic bloggers but is a feature in online cultures more widely (see e.g. Higgin 2015).

Conclusion

The digital circulation of the image of the injured woman exemplifies how local moments, such as the Swedish women's initial attempt to publish the forensic image as a means of bearing witness to gendered violence, can suddenly be re-contextualized in a totally different ideology, that of Islamophobia. Through digital circulation, the image in question became a memory freeze frame of a broader transnationally resonating discursive trope of 'Muslim/immigrant rape'. However, the image spreads not only because of the digital technology but also because it resonated

with the long trajectory of Islamophobic ideology. This article demonstrated how Islamophobia can powerfully (re)constitute itself in the intersecting cultural processes of globalization and digital media circulation.

Moreover, the analysis identified the qualities of the image itself that open it for re-interpretations that are valuable for the global circuits of Islamophobia. The paradox of explicit injury and a confident pose attract attention. Moreover, the meme produced from the photograph, where the bloody face is pasted on a black background, orients the image towards the future and underlines it's meaning as awaiting dystopia.

The growth of new media and digital networks has accelerated the cultural logic of circulation in ways that intensify the transnational imagination. Through this practice of circulation, the bloggers re-produce an Islamophobic imagination, where their fear of Muslims converges with their fears of feminism and multiculturalism. This particular image is thus transformed into such a powerful site of the transnational imagination precisely because it is open to meanings and capable of assembling trajectories of privileged whiteness, cultural and biological forms of racism, as well as anti-feminism. The digital plasticity of the image also converges with its cultural plasticity in ways that create space for performing complex anxieties and identities.

By spreading and transforming the image, the bloggers create and re-affirm not only their complex identities but also their transnational networks. This online space of 'whiteness' is constructed through mourning and fantasizing about (lost) white masculinity and 'old Sweden', which they envision as a homogeneous and ordered society. However, whiteness and 'white melancholia' turn out to be complex discourses, and the figure of the violated Swedish woman crystallizes these paradoxes. For the bloggers, Swedish whiteness represents civilized equality, which they

juxtapose to being Muslim. The bloggers refer to Nordic exceptionalism—equality between the sexes, classes, and sexual orientations—as worthy of defending against the imagined threatening Other. Nevertheless, the bloggers feel anxious about this fantasy of 'good whiteness/Swedishness', as it has become too excessive in their view, as exemplified by the fear of feminism and multiculturalism. These kinds of fantasies of a pure, homogeneous, national past have emerged in the Nordic countries not only in connection with anti-immigration movements but also as a broader deep-structural social discourse (Hübinette and Lundström, 2011). The discourses anchored to the image reflect a double-binding racial melancholia that resonates globally, as the global dissemination of the image exemplifies. Paradoxically, the violated face of a blonde, Swedish woman symbolizes both white purity and white danger.

Acknowledgements

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[i] As the two women do not wish for their names to be used, they have been changed. All translations from Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian are by the author.

[ii] Ethnicity or nationality should not be mentioned unless it is significant for understanding the context of the topic. Spelregel för Press, Radio och TV, Journalist Förbudet, 6 May 2013. https://www.sjf.se/yrkesfragor/etik/spelregler-for-press-radio-och-tv

[iii] National Democrats tried to take over a demonstration in Gothenburg organized by young women in support of victims of sexual violence in 2005, and the Sweden Democrats released a report on 'rape and immigrants' in 2010 when the case of Maria and Lisa was referred to in the public debate again.

[iv] The term Islamophobia is debated, since 'phobia' refers to a psychological state and the emotion of fear. For instance, Erik Bleich (2011: 1582) defines Islamophobia as 'indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims'. However, my understanding of the term follows a broader definition that equates Islamophobia with racism (Kumar, 2012; Webner, 2013).

[v] The Swedish State Institute for Race Biology was active between 1921 and 1958.

[vi] The original images is re-published in Morgenbladet
https://morgenbladet.no/samfunn/2014/lisa_19_ufrivillig_symbol

[vii] In the first news stories, it was not clear if one or more men were violent. The court sentenced one of the men (18 years old) to two years in closed youth institution, 'secure youth care', two men (18 and 17 years old) to three months in similar institution, and the charges were dismissed against another one because he was 16 years old (*Expressen* 25 January 2006).

[viii] *Expressen* (28 November 2005) did not mention citizenship or ethnicity. *Aftonbladet* mentioned that one of the men had a Somali background, but referred to the three other men as 'Swedish' and 'Finnish' citizens.

[ix] The women publicly renounced from the racist re-contextualization of their story and the picture. While being relevant, a broader discussion on the issue of ownership and copyright of the image is outside of the scope of this article.

[x] Fjordman's blog has links to Danish and Swedish bloggers Snaphanen (in Danish DK), Simulev (in English SWE), Viking Observer (in English SWE), and Angantyrns Hjo/rne (in Danish DK).

[xi] Fjordman's writing on rape is reproduced in the compendium on pages 309, 343, 408, 355, 612, 615, 637, 678, and 717.

[xii] The transformed image appears in the analyzed blogs 'To Rape an Unveiled Woman' and 'Victim of Muslim gang rape in Sweden'. *Barenakedislam*, published 5 times during 2010–2012. *Dissident Press*, 2008, 2012. *Islamwatch*, 2006. *Stormfront*, 2009. *Tundra Tabloids*, 2006, 2011 – 'Victim of Muslim gang rape in Sweden': *Frontpage Magazine*, 2011; 'Muslim Rape, Feminist Silence', 'Victim of Muslim gang rape in Sweden' – *Frontpage Magazine*, 2006.

[xiii] The transformed image appears in the analyzed blogs 'To Rape an Unveiled Woman' and 'Victim of Muslim gang rape in Sweden'. *Barenakedislam*, published 5 times during 2010–2012. *Dissident Press*, 2008, 2012. *Islamwatch*, 2006. *Stormfront*, 2009. *Tundra Tabloids*, 2006, 2011 – 'Victim of Muslim gang rape in Sweden': *Frontpage Magazine*, 2011; 'Muslim Rape, Feminist Silence'. 'Victim of Muslim gang rape in Sweden' – *Frontpage Magazine*, 2006.