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# Intersectionality, digital identities, and migrant youths

Moroccan Dutch youths as digital space invaders

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Kop of Munt (in English, Head or Tail) is a nine-minute movie uploaded on You-Tube. The video is accompanied by tagline explaining that Head or Tail offers a sketch of the day Moroccans left the Netherlands en masse. The video was made in October 2009 by MUNT, a collective of Moroccan Dutch young professionals. Its multiple uploads have attracted 450,000 online views so far, spurring a heated debate in mainstream Dutch news media. The video presents an exaggerated inventory of the consequences—at least according to prevailing stereotypes about Moroccans—of what the Netherlands would look like if people of Moroccan descent left the country: Newspaper delivery stagnates because white Dutch youths do not want to take up low-paid paperboy jobs; theater performances by Moroccan Dutch artists are canceled; barbershops close down; newspaper opinion sections are left empty because Islamization, the headscarf, and street crime cease to exist; taxis become scarce; social housing projects are abandoned; prisons are put up for sale because they are untenanted; satellite dishes—often mistakenly seen as emblematic symbols of segregation and the failure of integration—disappear from view; and requests for social services decline. The very exaggerations of the online video counter antiimmigration sentiments and Islamophobia by exposing the absurdities in the Dutch debate. Kop of Munt references Die Stadt ohne Juden, a 1924 film suggesting what would happen if Jews disappeared from Vienna, and A Day Without a Mexican, a 2004 film depicting what would happen if all Mexicans left California. The video teases out pre-set ideas about Moroccan Dutchness, offering a new take on the positive contribution of migration and fostering greater intercultural understanding. Islamophobia in the Netherlands targets the Moroccan Dutch community, especially after the 2004 political murder of controversial Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by the Moroccan Dutch Mohammed Bouyeri. That assassination was itself interpreted in the light of the September 11, 2001 Islamic fundamentalist attacks in New York. Spearheaded by former Dutch Member of Parliament Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party PVV and abetted by sensationalist commercial news media, both national

policy and media discourse deny "Moroccan youth" (who are often born in the Netherlands) the Dutch national identity. They are dismissed as a danger, problem, financial burden, or nuisance. Moroccan Dutch boys are assumed to be "street terrorists" and/or Muslim fundamentalists; girls are constructed as either unemancipated or oppressed by Islam and in need of rescue.<sup>2</sup>

Discrimination is not fueled solely by unidirectional gendered, raced, or age-based exclusionary claims. Rather, singling out any one of these categories obscures others. Feminist theorizing about intersections allows us to move past additive conceptualizations of gender, race, age, class, sexuality, etc. to understand these not as singular or unitary attributes but instead always entangled. Building on an analogy between discrimination and traffic in an intersection, moving in all four directions, Kimberlé Crenshaw notes, "If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them" (1989: 149). Kop of Munt illustrates how injuries to Moroccan Dutch people result from a complex configuration of gender, race, religious, age, and generation discrimination.

The concept of intersectionality problematizes identification as emerging from multiple axes of categorization that coexist and co-construct identity. This chapter charts the advantages of intersectional approaches by focusing on migrant youths' use of digital media for the articulation of their online identities. First, having surveyed the literature, we advocate moving both beyond isolationist approaches to the study of digital identities and beyond mainstream understandings of digital culture as either liberating (utopian perspectives) or disenfranchising (techno-deterministic approaches to digital media). Intersectional feminist studies of migration and technologies allow for exploring the more nuanced and fluid realm of online worlds without losing sight of how power relationships get reorganized and reformed online.

Analyzing the digital practices of Moroccan Dutch youths, we take uneven participation in digital spaces as an entry point. Online forums and hypertextual linkages on online social networking sites show how intersectionality works online. Because this theoretical paradigm does not fully account for the multiple axes of belonging, we propose an innovative way of thinking about intersecting digital spatial hierarchies and their subversion by bringing postcolonial theory to bear on the complex interface between online and offline worlds. Fieldwork was conducted as part of Wired Up, a collaborative, international research project aimed at understanding the multifarious implications of digital media use among migrant youths (www.uu.nl/wiredup). Besides participant observation across different platforms, we circulated questionnaires among 1,408 Dutch youths (including 344 Moroccan Dutch youths), and conducted in-depth interviews with 43 Moroccan Dutch youths 12 to 18 years old.

### Beyond the digital divide

Difference, inequality, and hierarchies in/of the internet have first and foremost been analyzed in terms of digital divides. Scholarship initially focused on the material divides in terms of ownership of hardware and internet access across geographic scales and across markers of difference: The rich, overdeveloped parts of the world are highly connected, while underdeveloped countries are disconnected. Ownership

and access is spread across distinct axes of differentiation: men, youths, whites, and upper classes are better connected in comparison with women, elderly, non-whites, and working/lower classes. The term digital divide is ideologically loaded, particularly its proposal that once the gap is closed a "computer revolution" will take place, spreading democracy and promoting equality (Murelli and Okot-Uma 2002). The second wave of scholarship focused on skills and literacies needed to find information, again finding gaps between the "information haves" and the "information have-nots" operating at geographical and personal markers of difference (Selwyn 2004).

Social media applications promise users a presence online. Acknowledging unevenness in people's contribution to digital culture is urgent, because these so-called Web 2.0 platforms promise that users can control their own representations. The question, however, is whether everyone can equally participate and contribute. Main target audiences for major internet applications again are young, white, middle- and upper-class men, mostly located in the Western world (Graham 2011; Nakamura and Chow-White 2012; Donnelly 2011). Platform templates, drop-down menu options, and user majorities configure symbolic grammars of difference by virtue of the dominant user practices and norms that emerge within these digital spaces. These new, uncharted developments beg for analysis that considers interlocking and interrelating forms of oppression and agency.

# Intersectionality goes online: from isolationist to the intersectional study of digital identities

Few intersectional studies on digital embodiment, subjectivities, and identities are currently available. Singular axes of differentiation are typically studied in isolation. Techno-determinist new media theorists initially proclaimed the internet, as a parallel world of cyberspace, would be liberatory in its core, enabling users to establish progressive and civic communities (Barlow 1996; Rheingold 2002). Feminist technology scholars at first followed this positive stream of thought. For example, Sherry Turkle (1997) noted that users could "bend" their gender. Providing a way out of gender and technological determinism, Donna Haraway (1991 [1985]) developed the metaphor of the "cyborg" to tease out more inclusive woman–technology relations. Katherine Hayles's My Mother Was a Computer (2005) and Judy Wajcman's Technofeminism (2004) similarly read gender and technology as shaping one another.

Critical race scholars scrutinized how technologies shape ideas on race. Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert Rodman (2000) and Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (2012) challenged race-blind understanding of digital cultures. Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) and Myria Georgiou (2006) account for the impact of digital technologies on the lives of migrants. Gary Bunt (2009) and Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas Cowan (2004) address how digital technologies shape religious practices and perceptions.

A focus on intersectional sociocultural configurations of subordination and agency urges scholars interested in internet practices to localize how various previously hidden categories—such as age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, generation, and religion—may interrelate and impact differently. This makes visible how people are

differentially positioned and differentially position themselves, and also reveals broader structural inequalities that travel from the offline to the online realm. Danger remains in using intersectionality as a "catch-all phrase." For example, some social scientists use intersectionality more as a "buzzword," by combining different singular categories, rather than accounting for the heterogeneity and hierarchies within and across categories (Davis 2008). Arguing that its potential paradoxically lies in its ambiguity, Kathy Davis cautions that "the world around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated." Intersectionality does not offer a "normative straitjacket" or fixed set of protocols for feminist inquiry; rather it stimulates innovative, explorative, and accountable feminist research practice (Davis 2008: 79).

Indeed, various postcolonial and feminist media and technology scholars have recognized the urgency of taking up an intersectional approach. Emphasizing that contemporary technologized bodies are "not simply any body," Pramod Nayar asserts: "Bodies are raced, gendered, and classed, and situated in particular social, economic, and cultural contexts" (2010: 66). Adrienne Shaw demonstrates how intersectional thinking fosters a situated understanding of the articulation of identity among video game players who are "not solely male, not heterosexual and not white/Anglo identified" (2012: 39). She shows how identifying as a gamer emerges alongside and in dialogue with the dominant young, heterosexual, white/Anglo, and male gamer market. Lynette Kvasny, Eileen Trauth, and Alison Morgan mobilize the perspective to surface internal differences among and within categories: "While women are typically treated as a homogenous group in gender and IT research, intersectionality presents the theoretical argument for examining within group variation with respect to how women are exposed to, experience and respond to the generalized, group-level exercise of power" (2009: 111). Studying computer adoption among working-class mothers from ethnic minority communities in the UK, Helen Kennedy highlights how her informants displayed "digital diversity" by identifying against imposed labels, technological expectations, and prioritized community notions (2005: 483). The value of intersectionality thus goes beyond the invocation of a list of axes. It situates everyday internet-based practices in local contexts as part of revealing and narrating micro-politics.

### Moroccan Dutch youths' differential identity performativity

Studies of acculturation show that the generation which has migrated is primarily oriented towards acquiring a solid social-economic position, while identity issues play a large role for their descendants (Berry *et al.* 2006). For example, Meenakshi Durham describes the complex journeys of second generation young people: "the psychological transition of adolescence, already charged in terms of gender and sexuality is then imbricated with the conundrums of the other transition—the diaspora identity that demands delicate negotiations of race/ethnicity, nation, class, language, culture and history" (2004: 141).

Feminist and migration scholars have found generational and gendered double standards: different expectations, roles and norms surround migrant boys and girls. Moroccan Dutch youths' gender and sexual identification can similarly be seen as an arena for power struggles. Moroccan Dutch boys are often permitted "a wider

radius of action" outside the home, while "girls still face the most restrictions," as gatekeepers to maintaining the family honor; girls spend more leisure time indoors with female friends (Pels and de Haan 2003: 61). Parents may seek to protect their children from "outside' spaces of socialization," such as Dutch regimes of upbringing (de Haan 2012: 333). Although the majority of Moroccan Dutch people present themselves as Muslim, the way religiosity is practiced differs from their parents. Islamic religious practice is becoming a more private individual experience among Moroccan Dutch youths (Phalet and Wal 2004: 39). Nonetheless, two broad and prejudiced discourses maintain influence over the lives of Moroccan Dutch Muslim women (Piela 2012: 2–3). In the (neo-)Orientalist discourse, Muslim women, especially those wearing the hijab, are represented as backward, irrational, silent, and subjugated by Muslim male oppressors (Said 1979; Afshar 2008). In the conservative patriarchal Islamist discourse, women are also essentialized, albeit differently. This discourse foregrounds Western women as sex objects, in contrast to Muslim women granted rights within their families by Islam (Piela 2012).

Issues of discrimination, Islamophobia, age, generation, diaspora, and religion and youth culture complicate their process of coming of age. As *Kop of Munt* illustrates, internet practices can reveal how various axes of difference are negotiated and subverted. For example, having found that "Moroccan-Dutch girls have to struggle against western stereotypes and against the restrictions they encounter within their families and communities," Lenie Brouwer (2006) argues that online girls can "demonstrate counterviews towards the dominant western image of Muslim women as well as to their own communities."

### Digital space invaders

In Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place, Nirmal Puwar explains that space is never neutral; every space has its own template. She examined institutionalized physical spaces in Britain, such as Parliament, the civil service, and academia. Spaces are guided by their own norms, expectations, and protocols that are usually oriented towards "white male bodies." Spaces thus hold "privileged and reserved positions" for certain people, thus considering other bodies as "out of place." Puwar sees an "increased presence of women and racial minorities in public spaces" previously dominated by white men. But, she argues, they sometimes remain "space invaders" when confronted with the dominant norms (2004: 33). Extending the notion of invading to the digital space helps unearth the complex dynamics of how the body is reinscribed online. Following Puwar, we ask, what happens when Moroccan Dutch youths take up "privileged positions" not reserved for them across digital space?

Digital interface decisions and user majorities reserve certain dominant consumer, national, gender, ethnic, and racial positions. Consider, for example, the keywords that the Google Netherlands search engine associates with "Marokkanen" (the Dutch word for Moroccans). Upon typing a word in the search box, Google automatically provides ("auto-completes") search query suggestions. The auto-complete algorithm offers query suggestions in a drop-down list, predicting behavior based on previous queries of Google users, site traffic, page visits, and recently crawled websites. The

search query suggestions are illustrative of some of the ways Moroccan Dutch youths are allocated particular stereotypical positions.<sup>3</sup>

The suggestions that appeared can be translated from Dutch as follows: "Moroccans must die," "Moroccans Veenendaal," and "Moroccans must exit the country." The first and third suggestions point the Google user towards rightwing neo-Nazi websites—mostly discussion forums—where extremists share disturbing views on migration, Islam, and the multicultural society. The auto-complete suggestion linking Moroccans to Veenendaal reinforces the emphasis on negative incidents (including robberies, violence, and disturbances) related to the Moroccan Dutch population in the majority Orthodox Christian town of Veenendaal. Simultaneously, Google Image Search results appear below the suggestions. The four images emphasize aggressive masculine street culture by depicting groups of Moroccan Dutch boys in the streets as dangerous loiterers. The inclusion of a policeman in one of the images accentuates Moroccan Dutch boys as troublemakers. The auto-complete and image search algorithms emphasize gendered, ethnic, religion-based exclusionary associations of Moroccan Dutch people.

Peer-produced norms also operate as exclusionary mechanisms. Oussema, a 15-year-old interviewee, recalled witnessing people keeping a firm grip on their purses when anxiously encountering him in the supermarket. Nor are these processes restricted to the offline world. Oussema says he often encounters racism and stigmatization while playing video games. The first-person shooter game Counter Strike lets players talk to each other through their microphones and headsets. Having introduced himself in the game by saying, "I am a Moroccan, I am a Muslim," Oussema painfully described being cursed by white Dutch opponents who called him a "terrorist." During an interview, Safae, 18, explained that a friend who covers her hair with a veil uploaded a picture on the Dutch social networking site Hyves; afterwards somebody sent her a message: "We live in 2010, a headscarf is out-dated, and it's something of the past." Targeting the headscarf as a hyper-visible marker of difference, white (secularized) Christian user-generated norms operate as digital "othering" mechanisms.

Thus, digital spaces are not merely mute or external backdrops of identity formation. Rather, they are distinct expressive cultures filled with intersectional ideologies, hierarchies, and politics. How do subjects on the wrong side of the templated and peer-produced digital divide invade prescriptive spaces transforming them from within and also creating alternative platforms for communication and belonging? By exploring two strategies—securing communicative spaces of their own and publishing hypertextual selves—we highlight how identity categories are not fixed straitjackets that can be imposed top down or simply subverted from below. An intersectional approach helps to unearth the interdependences between categories such as nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, and age as normative impositions but also as fluid categories that can be constantly reconfigured and reinvented online through the appropriation of technological affordances.

### A corner of their own

Our survey findings indicate a distinct preference among ethnic minorities in the Netherlands for engaging with online message boards: Moroccan Dutch youths visit

discussion boards more than white Dutch youths (Leurs 2012). Forums such as Marokko.nl are felt as safe spaces to connect with fellow Moroccan Dutch youths (Leurs et al. 2012). Naoul, a 16-year-old girl, says Marokko.nl "is your own circle, with all those Moroccan things"; she adds, "the people there are like you, that's nice." As a corner of their own, these sites create a space where an ethnic minority becomes the majority. Symbolic grammars of difference can be unpacked here among a receptive and even dedicated audience. Boundary markers include Moroccan images and symbols such as photos taken in Morocco, Arabic typing, as well as visual references to Islam like a minaret and the Quran, as well as photos of veiled women. Furthermore, in the discussions users can reframe dominant stereotypical racial and Islamophobic views circulating in news media. Sixteen-year-old Nevra finds that "different stories" are shared on internet forums, where "there is often negative talk about Moroccan youths, I find that youths there can say what they want, showing it is not all bad." Besides ethnic repositioning, notions of gender, religion, and sexuality are also negotiated. Bibi, 16, reports visiting Marokko.nl to discuss issues of sexuality in the context of marriage; she would rather turn to the online community to talk about the first night after marriage instead of bringing the topic up with her parents. She said, "With the Muslim faith when you have the first day you are not to oppose your husband and just do 'it.' And [about] these things I'm definitely not going to my parents, 'Mom, dad, listen, is that the case.'" Fifteenyear-old Meryam turns to Marokko.nl to read about personal stories that people have shared, including about Islam. She says that some Islamic rules and principle are not available in the Quran or other printed books, "but they might be available on the Internet." Participating in online forums, girls report a greater sense of freedom for discussing the sometimes stringent social-cultural codes of socialization of their parents, and wider Moroccan Dutch and/or Islamic community. The interviewees, however, not only connect with fellow members of the Moroccan Dutch community, but also forge connections with majority groups and interests.

### Hypertextual selves

Social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook and the Dutch Hyves allow users to publish hyperlinks on their personal profile pages; they can list preferences, join groups, and express affiliations with interest-based communities. Donna Haraway recognized that hypertext emphasizes establishing connections; it neither foregrounds nor forecloses certain areas of the internet. Approaching profile pages from the perspective of hypertext enables "inquiry into which connections matter, why, and for whom" (Haraway 1997: 128–30). This way, hypertext can be grasped as a concept, empirical material, and a means of intervention, which we employ to innovatively map Moroccan Dutch traversals and connections across and between categories of difference.

Figure 58.1 shows the icons of the groups to which 13-year-old Midia hyperlinks on her Hyves profile page. She connects to a variety of groups ranging from feminist interests ("Women in Charge"), gender and ethnic solidarity ("Moroccan girls hyves"), Dutch nationalism ("I love Holland"), to food cultures relating to both

# Respect is wat ik vraag voor de hoofddoek die ik draag!! (218) Marokkaanse meiden hyves (1893) ISLAM = PEACE (4039) ISLAM = PEACE (4039) ISLAM = PEACE (4039) IVrouwen zijn de Bads (585) Vrouwen zijn de Choumicha-de-Marokkaanse thee junks

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Figure 58.1 Hyves groups that Midia links to on her Hyves profile page (April 15, 2009)

marokkaanse-en

(556)

Baas. (79)

migration backgrounds ("Choumicha, the Moroccan and Turkish kitchen," "Moroccan tea junky") as well as global junk food ("McDonald's"). She expresses her religious attachments ("Hijaab Style," "Islam = Peace," "Respect is what I ask for the head-scarf that I'm wearing"), and publishes her preference for different clothing styles ranging from Moroccan dresses ("Moroccan dresses 2009") to global fashion trends ("Skinny Jeans love" and the brand "H&M"). Additionally she joined the groups "Moroccan Male Hotties" and "Show you choose for Freedom—sign up for the Freedom-Hyves." These groups vary in member-size, from 53 members of the group "I love Holland" to 244,853 members of "H&M."

Hyperlinked icons published on Midia's profile and these different visual statements cover a wide spectrum of affiliations. Hypertext becomes a discursive space of encounter. The intersectional multiplicity of her personal gender, sexual, diaspora, religious, ethnic, and youth cultural trajectory becomes visible. Midia actively revalues her social and symbolic embeddings. She connects the categories of Islam and Dutch nationalism, which are dominantly framed as irreconcilable by Dutch rightwing politicians, while countering negative perceptions of Islam as a violent religion and also making a plea for greater tolerance of veiling practices among Muslim girls. Simultaneously she reframes the veil as a stylish fashion element. The representative profile page shows unexpected hypertextual coalitions of migrant youth as space invaders: they align with majority groups through affiliating with global youth food preferences, activism, and clothing styles. Rather than continuing migrant cultural legacies migrant youth are actively transforming those in ways that resonate with the dominant local and global youth cultures in which they grow up.

### Conclusions

Digital identities emerge not as a set of unitary categories. Rather, when organized cartographically, they reveal entanglements with different axes of differentiation. Intersectional online micro-politics can be usefully mapped onto broader structural offline inequalities, allowing scholars both to move past utopian online/offline binary thinking, as well as to move beyond additive conceptualizations of gender, ethnicity, age, class, sexuality, and so on, to understand these not as singular or unitary attributes but instead as always interdependent. However, to avoid re-essentializing categories of difference online, we recall Nirmal Puwar's concept of space invaders. Space invaders are considered as bodies out of place. They cross, trespass, and invade institutional settings typically populated by mainstream, white, male, elite bodies. Women and minorities have, however, permeated those through top-down governmental practices (like the integration of minorities through multicultural policies) and bottom-up approaches by creating countercultures and entering the no-go spaces through social climbing and education. Illustratively, the video Kop of Munt satirically proposes the erasure of all Moroccan Dutch bodies out of space in the Netherlands, which—instead of a positive reordering—causes emptiness, chaos, and unruliness, as migrants play crucial roles in Dutch society.

Our detecting of new tactics to decolonize digital spaces moves beyond the studies on digital divide which originally marked the exclusion of the have-nots, but thereby retained the inferiority of gendered, ethnic, and elderly bodies in online spaces. The example of Moroccan Dutch digital identifications here shows how bodies out of space offline enter the digital realm to renegotiate their place along (1) minoritarian lines on discussion boards and (2) majoritarian lines on social networking sites. Digital migrant youths' identities emerge online as multi-layered individual paths navigating through and across the affordances and restrictions of digital media spaces.

### Acknowledgments

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### Notes

- 1 Van Gogh produced the film Submission (2004), which shows a woman wearing a see-through chador, her naked body painted with verses from the Quran.
- 2 Moroccan Dutch people make up some 2.1 percent of the total Dutch population of 16.6 million. After Turkish Dutch people they are the largest ethnic minority. Some 47 percent migrated to the Netherlands after the 1960s, when demand grew for guest workers in Northern Europe; the others were born in the Netherlands, after their parents had migrated (CBS 2011).
- 3 The search, on May 29, 2012, used Mozilla Firefox with "Private Browsing" enabled and without being logged in to a Google account and without having previously searched for the topic.

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