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# On digital crossings in Europe

## ABSTRACT

*'On digital crossings in Europe' explores the entanglements of digital media and migration beyond the national and mono-ethnic focus. We argue how borders, identity and affectivity have been destabilized and reconfigured through medium-specific technological affordances, opting for a comparative and postcolonial framework that focuses on diversity in conjunction with cosmopolitan aspirations. Internet applications make it possible to sustain new forms of diaspora and networks, which operate within and beyond Europe, making issues of ethnicity, nationality, race and class not obsolete but transformed. It is therefore important and timely to analyse how these reconfigurations take place and affect everyday life. Using a critical approach to digital tools that avoids utopian notions of connectivity and borderlessness, this article highlights the dyssymmetries and tensions produced by the ubiquitousness of digital connectivity. It further introduces the different contributions to the special issue, making connections and tracing relations among themes and methods and sketching main patterns for further research. It also offers a panorama of other related studies and projects in the field, which partake in a critical reassessment of the enabling power of digital media and their divisive implications for new forms of surveillance, online racism and 'economic' inequality, which we gather under the heading of postcolonial digital humanities.*

## KEYWORDS

Europe  
diaspora  
border  
digital  
racism  
postcolonial  
digital humanities

When I ask people where they are from, I expect nowadays an extremely long story.

(Stuart Hall in Akomfrah 2013)

In an old advertising campaign (1995–1997) the tobacco company Peter Stuyvesant launched the slogan ‘There Are No Borders!’. Countering the Marlboro rough images of the American West, Stuyvesant played the cosmopolitan card by showing photographs of different world cities in black and white: Barcelona, Paris and London, along with New York, San Francisco, San Pedro and Rio de Janeiro. They depicted everyday culture in these urban settings with people displaying cool, sexiness and stylishness. The people represented were white or of mixed ethnicity, male and female, with a problem-free life (Blom 1997). The central message of the campaign was that mobility and lifestyle are part of a transnational dimension that is specific: different city images, yet identical: patterns of everyday cultural consumption. The local and the global are portrayed in visual and compelling ways, making us forget that borders are of any relevance in a transnational context. The stress among migrant people who are unable to cross borders or borders that are not physical but invisible is silenced. The main cities represented in this campaign are mostly western, and all the people are represented as part of a globalized image of youthfulness and cosmopolitanism.

But of course the question that emerges is: whose cosmopolitanism is this? And how is the Europe represented in this campaign back in the 1990s any different from today’s Europe, some two decades later? What has the introduction of digital technologies changed in the way we experience, visualize and theorize borders, diversity and cosmopolitanism? How does the digital frontier impact on the life of migrants and their relationship with Europe? These are some of the central questions addressed in this special issue on ‘Digital Crossings in Europe’.

## 1. ‘WHY EUROPE?’

In order to answer this question, ‘Why Europe?’, we might have to start by framing what we mean by Europe and how Europe relates to new forms of connectedness and multiculturalism. Europe, whether we want to define it as a historical, political, geographical or emotional place, needs to be further scrutinized. This is particularly urgent at a time when the notion of Europe is under fire, both as a result of resurgent nationalism and euro-scepticism that challenge the ideal of supra-nationality and cooperation and as a result of its contested border politics. The latter is predicated, for example, on the refusal of entry policy, and turning migrants back at sea (consider the recent tragedy of Lampedusa, when a reported 360 migrants drowned after a boat sailing from Libya sank on 3 October 2013). This creates unequal categories and regimes of human rights, citizenship and hospitality all in the name of Europe (Ponzanesi and Blaagaard 2011).

In his influential essay ‘At the border of Europe’ Etienne Balibar (1998) advocates a rethink of our idea of borders and democratic sovereignty. With the globalization of capital and the increased speed and agility of information flows, the role of the nation state has weakened and borders have shifted from being geographical markers (boundaries, confines, checkpoints, wired frontiers, security frontlines) to becoming a symbolic figuration.

Types of exclusion are not only implemented at the legislative level but also as a way in which Europe is constructed as a concept. According to Balibar, the borders that contain Europe have become 'uncertain' and despite the constant referencing of Fortress Europe, they are in a state of flux. However, these borders are not disappearing but are being replaced by multiple, invisible and internal borders that mark new lines of inclusion and exclusion based on linguistic, racial, ethnic and religious divisions. Balibar therefore concludes that borders have not been eliminated thanks to the Schengen agreement or to the EU enlargement process. On the contrary, they have multiplied in the form of 'internal borders', a myriad of new invisible borders that are ideological, racialized and politicized (Balibar 2003). Yet, as Balibar specifies, the 'polysemy', 'heterogeneity' and 'multiplicity', 'hypothetical and fictive' nature of borders does 'not make them any less real' (2002: 76).

These invisible, but embodied, borders are unwittingly connected to what Wendy Brown defines as the epidemic of building walls, which corresponds to the paranoia of nation states fencing themselves in from enemy lines, outsiders, strangers (2008). This relates to the recent proliferation of the rebuilding of physical walls (marking, for example, the US–Mexican border, or the Israeli-built wall through the West bank, the Saudi Arabian wall along its border with Yemen or the triple-layer walls around Spanish enclaves in Morocco, to mention but a few) that, as Brown states, are not the resurgent expressions of nation state sovereignty in late modernity but rather icons of its failure. The proliferation of new walls and new borders is in fact testimony to the corrosion of the sovereign state, a kind of swan song for a traditional understanding of the unity of territory, nation and citizenship in an age geared towards the borderless distribution of capital, information and communication.

The re-walling of the world is outdated in light of the context of a late modern world that is increasingly networked, virtual and even liquid, and where people are increasingly linked if not hybridized (Brown 2008: 7). This networking is, however, accompanied by a new regime of opening and barricading, fusion and partition, erasure and reinscription because, as Brown states, we have on the one hand the increasingly liberalized borders that are, on the other, accompanied by a new kind of fortification. The increasing transnational flows of capital, people, ideas, goods, violence and political and religious loyalties have severely undermined the monopoly of the nation states and the traditional function of borders. However, as Brown further states, we encounter newly redefined walls in our everyday life, while navigating the Internet in the form of firewalls, spyware and spam filters on our computers, or through security systems such as automatic locking and alarm systems in cars, homes, office buildings, and briefcases, passwords, digital codes and so forth: 'these flows both tear at the borders they cross and crystallize as powers within, thus compromising sovereignty from its edges and interior' (Brown 2008: 4).

Alternatively, borders are not just marked by detention zones, holding areas, checkpoints, high fences, surveillance cameras and high-tech barriers but also by what Judith Butler defines as 'unlivable and uninhabitable' zones of social life that are nevertheless 'densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject' (1993: 3). Therefore, to think of a connected Europe, where both material and digital relations come into being is crucial for understanding Europe in transition between past cartographies of movements and conquest and present forms of uprooting and migration. The postcolonial paradigm is very suitable to express the continuity between the interrupted

legacy of the past and the remoulding of multiple converging presents. As Jaishree Odin has so aptly written, both the hypertext and the postcolonial are discourses are characterized by multivocality, multilinearity, open-endedness, active encounter and traversal. Both disrupt chronological sequences and spatial ordering (1997), allowing for a contestation of master narratives and the creation of subaltern positioning.

To address the notion of digital connectedness and migration within Europe is therefore important for several reasons. First, as highlighted above, the mere definition of Europe is a tantalizing experience. The term Europe does not refer to a concrete notion, a geographical space, a linguistic unity, or a sovereign state. It is to be intended more as an idea and a project than a coherent entity. Therefore, unpacking the many possible meanings of Europe and resignifying Europe from different perspectives, such as the migrant one, is crucial for understanding Europe as a contemporary notion in flux. Second, issues of migration have often been kept separate from the discourses on new media technologies and the advent of digital connectedness and trans-medial practices (Appadurai 1996). Although the two fields are clearly related as they refer to a shift in the notion of space and time, and concur in reshaping patterns of globalization through the movement of people and of information exchange, they have hardly been interconnected in a systematic and coherent way, if not for isolated case studies and often with a national, or mono-ethnic focus. It is, therefore, important to investigate how migrants are also 'digital natives', early adopters and heavy users of digital technologies, not unlike their peers if not more as a result of their transnational connections. Yet the appropriation and use of digital technologies can serve different purposes, have a different value in connecting home and abroad and various affinity networks. The European framework makes it possible to dislodge traditional centre-periphery trajectories of analysis, inherited from colonial dynamics, and focus on the comparative and interdisciplinary dimension of digital connections within and across Europe. Third, it is important to trace and convey new forms of participation and citizenship that defy traditional notions of state sovereignty and create new articulations of the public sphere, in which questions of agency and subalternity are reconfigured in different ways.

'Digital Crossings in Europe' hints both at the notion of belonging and trespassing that entails being both within and outside Europe. However, for the reasons mentioned above, it is also about creating networks and connections that contribute towards a new definition of Europe that is both historical, imaginary and diasporic. 'Digital Crossings in Europe' refers to the mobilization of ossified categories that hold on to the notion of Europe as the cradle of western civilization, and towards new ways of conceiving of movements and passages. Digital crossings imply both the material and the immaterial movement of people, thoughts and ideas across Europe through a digital presence on social networking sites, websites, blogs, Twitter, video-chat and smartphones, making reference not only to the connected migrant (Diminescu 2008) but also to new power relations, divides and forms of surveillance generated by the ubiquitousness of digital technologies.

## **2. WHY DIGITAL EUROPE?**

To speak of Europe in relation to transnational flows and networks may not only sound old-fashioned and outdated but also conservative. Insisting on the notion of Europe in an era of global connectivity – which trespasses state

boundaries and teleological notions of modernity and progress – might sound like holding on to the centrality of Europe and its place in the world. It might sound like a diverting manoeuvre at a time when the crisis of Europe is all-pervasive (not only financially but also politically and culturally), and the prospect of its demise does not seem to be too far-fetched. Yet there is a purpose in holding on to the notion of Europe, not out of nostalgia or idealism, but with a view to engaging with its legacy. Europe comes to function as a hinge between the history of the past and its many colonial entanglements and the predicament of its postcolonial present. This makes it possible to give a new élan to reshaping, revisiting and renaming Europe from new perspectives and positionalities. It enables to drag Europe out of its innocence and proclaimed extinction and re-ignite the project of Europe as a new cosmopolitan venture from below (Bhabha 2000; Gilroy 2004). Thus to hold on to Europe does not mean doing away with its tainted legacy of colonialism, slavery and the holocaust (Balibar 2003; Gilroy 1993; Passerini 2011), but rather to acknowledge it in a critical way in order to move forward towards new forms of history writing and conviviality (Gilroy 2004).

Digital Europe therefore becomes not just a new metaphor for symbolizing ‘virtual’ inclusion and virtual ‘communities’ but refers to the reality and materiality of many people. It refers to their histories of uprooting, dislocation and marginality and to their participation, connectedness and remaking of Europe from inside. This remaking has taken many different shapes and forms in the past two decades, its centrality and visualization emerging not only through traditional media (newspaper, radio, cinema, television, see Georgiou 2013; Slade 2010) but also through new digital engagements that remediate the old media into the new ones (big data journalism, vloggers and YouTube channels, trending topics on Twitter; location-based services). The latter create new opportunities for reaching, rethinking and re-linking Europe and for unpacking, disrupting and deconstructing many of its assumptions and self-celebratory mission as in the EU motto ‘unity in diversity’.

Digital connectedness does not come as a utopian alternative to histories of dislocation, rejection and expulsion. Digital technologies have allowed people to stay connected in cheaper and faster ways, but it has also created new divides linked not only to questions of access, literacy and competence in using new media technologies but also to the medium-specific affordances that they allow. Furthermore, the use of digital technologies has created new forms of surveillance, bordering and monitoring access to Europe. Fortress Europe becomes a highly virtualized concept, whose paradox is being poised on embracing a project of expansion and inclusion versus digital and physical re-walling and refencing.

Examples of these are institutions such as *Frontières extérieures* (Frontex), European External Border Surveillance System (Eurosur) and Eurodac (fingerprint database for identifying asylum seekers and illegal immigrants within the EU), Schengen Information System (SIS), and other advanced forms of border control involving state-of-the-art technology that reduces humans to ‘illegal immigrant’ statistics in breach of security codes. These procedures often contrast with the EU policies of expansion and integration as celebrated by various treaties and agreements, including *the Treaty of Maastricht* (1992), *the Schengen Agreement* (1995) and *the Lisbon Treaty* (2009).

This painful contradiction is beautifully and painstakingly conveyed in *The Videographies* of video activist Ursula Biemann, which expose the global village underbelly where mobility and fluidity are deeply entrenched with illegality,

1. For more information see Ursula Biemann's homepage: <http://www.geobodies.org/>.

racism, forced migration, xenophobia and trafficking. Ursula Biemann's *Europlex* (video-essay, 2003, twenty minutes) tracks distinct cross-border activities through the Spanish Moroccan borderlands and seeks to make these obscure paths visible through video blogs showing smuggling women and 'domesticas' moving back and forth between the Moroccan and European time zones; *Remote Sensing* (video-essay, 2001, 53 min.) deals with the global sex trade and exposes what it means to sense the world remotely and charts the ambivalences surrounding the media technologies used to track, monitor and 'sense' women's bodies from a distance; and the *Black Sea Files* (video-essay, 2005, 53 min.) comments on artistic methods in the field and the ways in which information and visual intelligence is detected, circulated or withheld. Also in *Performing the Border* (video-essay, 1999, 45 min.), which focuses on the US-Mexican border, Biemann discusses the sexualization of the border region through the division of labour, prostitution, the expression of female desires in the entertainment industry and sexual violence in the public sphere.<sup>1</sup>

Digital visibility and migration is also an important feature of Jasmijn van Gorp's contribution to this issue. She analyses how performances of memory can be enacted across a range of activities, places, rituals and media, focusing in particular on photographs as cultural artefacts that are not only regarded as repositories of memory but also as aids for remembering a personal or a shared past. She focuses in particular on Former Yugoslav migrant women living in the Netherlands and how they use digital visual tools to articulate their sense of diasporic belonging. Participatory visual methods are believed to enable the participants, the subjects of the research, to express their own views, and as such claim to 'empower' them. Through auto-ethnography, photo-elicitation interviews and participatory visual methods, the article



Figure 1: *Europlex*, 'Invernaderos' the green houses in Almeria, Spain. Video still by Ursula Biemann and Angela Sanders © 2011 Ursula Biemann.

shows therefore how the ten women – of different ethnic backgrounds: Croat, Serbian or Bosnian – have visualized their identities, and their ethnic identities in particular, in photographs, and how these relate to dimensions of time and space in their rearticulation of a sense of home and belonging to European spaces.

Although many migrants are blocked before they even reach its borders, as shown in Biemann's videographies, connections and relations to Europe and its many diasporas cannot be impeded, as Gorp's article shows. Europe is becoming more than a legal and territorial entity by opening up to criss-crossed histories and new forms of entitlement. It is therefore important to acknowledge, account for and draft the ways in which the borders of Europe as porous and shifting are replaced by digital networks and flows (Castells 1996) along with new forms of confines and divisions.

In this special issue, Gavan Titley explores, for examples, how these new divisions are created by theoretically reflecting on the circulation and assemblage of racist ideas and racializing discourses online. He contends in particular that social media are politically generative of racism and racist discourses, and that the web is far from being post-racial, but on the contrary, it reconfigures inequality, hierarchies and ideologies. Analysing media presence through YouTube, blogs and Twitter, the crossings in Europe are explored in their digital implications, showing that the 'internet is a site of political struggle over racial meaning, knowledge and values' (Daniels 2013: 704). As critical race studies and its implication for digital media studies, in the form of 'racial digital divides and 'digital segregations' and 'race as code', have been mostly theorized and discussed in the North American contexts, Titley advocates further study of race studies within the European context, where specific trans-media spaces emerge.

By using the concept of 'racial debris' offered by Ash Amin (2010) we can understand how racial references, orders and logics held to be of the 'past' come to recur – and are remediated – in the current 'racial present' (Titley, this special issue: 47). In his article 'The remainders of race', Amin examines the temporality of race and how it becomes reactivated in the postcolonial present according to a mix of past and present racial practices that become particularly vengeful towards the racialized other. Amin explains this by working through a three-layered modality that imbricates 'newness' (challenging settled patterns of racial formation and behaviour); 'repetition' (the potential to return sameness if the force of repletion is strong); and 'immanence' (the potentiality of accumulated racial debris, variegated and dormant from different eras, ready to be instantiated in an unknown way) (Amin 2010: 5). Titley's point is that trans-media spaces provide the perfect environment for sifting and assembling debris, and offer an extended archive and repertoire of racial conceptions and associations. It is therefore important not only to study the historical mutability of the history of oppression but also to analyse how these practices migrate and translate into digital networked cultures. However, the digital production and circulation of racism is not just a simple extension of offline racist discourses and practices, but generative, asking for new ways and methodologies (network social media interaction) of examining racism in European trans-media spaces, where racializing mediations and flows of racial meaning accumulate across network sites.

This special issue accordingly builds on a new understanding of digital diasporas as related to networks and flows and not constrained by boundaries, although acknowledging their transformation.



### 3. WHAT IS THE DIGITALLY CONNECTED MIGRANT?

The 2014 World Press Photo, first prize for contemporary issues, was awarded to the American photographer John Stanmeyer for his picture *Signal*, captured for *National Geographic* magazine. It is a picture of African migrants on the shore of Djibouti city at night, raising their phones in an attempt to capture an inexpensive signal from neighbouring Somalia – a tenuous link to relatives abroad. Djibouti is a common stop-off point for migrants in transit from such countries as Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea, seeking a better life in Europe and the Middle East (World Press Photo 2014). This picture of the year not only shows the impact of mobile phones across the world but also their symbolic valence. ‘It opens up discussions about technology, globalization, migration, poverty, desperation, alienation, humanity’, said World Press Photo jury member Jillian Edelstein, ‘it’s a very sophisticated, powerfully nuanced image. It is so subtly done, so poetic, yet instilled with meaning, conveying issues of great gravity and concern in the world today’ (Johanson 2014). As Stanmeyer told the AFP news agency: ‘It connects to all of us, it’s just people trying to call loved ones. It could be you, it could be me, it could be any one of us’ (BBC News Africa 2014). As another panel member, Susan Linfield, said: ‘So many pictures of migrants show them as bedraggled and pathetic ... but this photo is not so much romantic, as dignified’ (BBC News Africa 2014).

The ethereal shot of the silhouetted figures of African migrants seeking a better life in Europe and the Middle East evokes the precarious life of people in many African regions, while, at the same time, underlining their access to modern advanced technologies, such as smartphones, prejudicially believed to be only for wealthier populations. Yet the symbolic value of the radio ‘signal’ testifies to the still fragile and unpredictable forms of connectivity and crossing. This is in keeping with the notion of the digitally connected migrant (Diminescu 2008), whose empowerment through technology is coupled



Figure 2: ‘SIGNAL’ by John Stanmeyer. 26 February 2013. Djibouti City, Djibouti 2014 World Press Photo of the Year, Contemporary Issues. Courtesy of John Stanmeyer/VII.

with an ongoing material reality of everyday life, ordinary and extraordinary, making the connection between the offline and online world not disengaged and separate but intertwined in daily practices and events, creating a continuum between digitalized life experiences and rematerialization and embodiment of technologies (Van den Boomen et al. 2009).

Little is known about the impact of new communication technologies on the lives of migrants in Europe or wanting to reach Europe. There remains a dearth of nuanced research on digital diasporas in Europe, providing in-depth contextual accounts of their social, cultural, political and economic dimensions in everyday practice. In their recent overview of research in the EU on the use of information and communication technology by immigrants, Maren Borkert et al. advocated the 'establishment of a European Research Area on ICT and migrations' (2009: 25). In their special issue on 'Migration and diaspora in the age of information and communication technologies', Pedro Oiarzabal and Ulf-Dietrich Reips similarly argue that the use of digital technologies in immigration and diasporic communities 'is still very much an under-researched area, particularly regarding the study of the use of ICTs by migrants within Europe' (2012: 1334).

Based on research in asylum-seeker centres in Germany, Saskia Witteborn writes in her contribution to this special issue: 'many migrants who cross the borders into Europe are apt at using new technologies'. Routes are navigated via GPS, while mobile phones are used to text family members and Facebook is used to stay in touch with loved ones. 'At the same time', Witteborn continues, 'there are as many migrants, especially refugees who cannot plan their flight, who have to depend on NGO's like Refugee Emancipation to learn the technical skills and remain digitally connected' (Witteborn, this special issue: 75). The reasons for being disconnected may be financial, being housed in a remote location without digital reception or a lack of technological know-how. Therefore digital heterotopias, a notion elaborated on by Witteborn, need to be taken into account that encompass both the utopian dimension and the potentiality of technologies for transforming the life of disenfranchised migrants and make reference to its dystopian character, being real and placeless at the same time, connected but distant, enabled yet marked by institutionalized racism.

In his contribution, Koen Leurs further unravels digital heterotopias by theorizing how digital connectivity among young Somalis stranded in Ethiopia on their way to for example Europe may resonate in their physical bodies, prompting transnational affectivity. Accruing value through networked circulation, transnational affective capital may be one of the only sources of capital these migrants have. Transnational affective capital is highly ambivalent; it both enables anxiety management and fosters a sense of 'ontological security' (Giddens 1990), but affects spurred through transnational communication are short lived, depend on financial remittances and although promising do not ultimately solve their precarious situation. Unlike digital diasporas, digital heterotopias and transnational affective capital convey the liminality of affect and the place of Europe in becoming not the signifier, the definition by default, but a non-place that is both an aspiration and a disillusion. Therefore, more lines of investigation are needed for mapping the many diasporas, both visible and invisible, that not only connect people to Europe and across Europe, but that make Europe the heterotopic 'electronic elsewhere' (Berry et al. 2010) that it has become, where citizens and 'others' are organized in different ways betwixt and between spaces.

Considering the role of digital technologies in diaspora and migration underlines the urgency of contextualizing the wide variety of media used. For example, digital media do not exist in isolation and usage in the diaspora is shaped by the socio-political history of the different homelands, the variety of motivations for displacement or migration (which may be political, economic, social, gendered or religious) and the present living conditions of diasporic people in their country of arrival. Diasporas have always been mediated, and the forms of mediation have diversified. Migrants previously depended on posting written letters and photographs. Letters and photographs, as highly affective personal, tangible artefacts, could be read and re-read, touched, caressed, smelled and carried around. They could, however, take several weeks to arrive. Subsequently, in middle-class migrant families, personal messages were carefully audio-recorded on cassettes and posted via the mail, emotionally moving the recipients upon hearing the voices of their loved ones living far away. However, the time-lapse remained. This was the case until people were able to fax letters. In addition, lengthy telephone conversations could be initiated. Being instantaneous, these calls allowed for a feeling of absent presence. Long-distance telephone calls were costly, and were therefore only used in the case of emergencies for a long time. Beyond interpersonal communication, newspapers, satellite broadcasting, video and cinema were also adopted by established diaspora communities. Over time, the cost of transnational communication decreased (but cost may still pose a burden), communication can now be instantaneous and mobile phone networks promise users connectivity, as the World Press Photo discussed above shows. For additional reflection on migrant connectivity see in this special issue the review essay of four recent books on digital diasporas by Eugenia Siapera.

However, the financial incentives of producers providing hardware and software for users to form digital diasporas have not been sufficiently addressed. In her article on the Migration Industry of Connectivity (MIC) in this special issue, Cecilia Gordano Peile carries out an important analysis of how the migration industry is a market of its own that is created around and geared towards the development of services targeted specifically at migrants and that rotates in particular around the issue of mobility and digital connectivity (i.e. mobile telephony and money transfer services). The MIC is explored as both a theoretical concept that makes it possible to analyse contemporary migratory processes, and as an empirical practice, it offers the opportunity to study different economic actors in action, both as corporations and users, producers and consumers, providers and customers. Whereas the migration industry was previously studied as an object of policy or governmental enquiry, it has now become a powerful field for studying the migrants making choices between services and offers, therefore providing alternative discourses around lines of consumption, citizenship and ethnic identity. Gordano focuses in particular on migrants in Spain, who, for marketing strategies, simply become Spanish citizens. Gordano offers a European angle by theorizing the business of keeping in touch as not only linked to digital connectedness and the affordances allowed but to the financial infrastructure and the flow of money that makes it possible and that flourish on the mobility of people and their need for their staying in touch (connectedness).

Not in a linear, teleological fashion towards a more wholesome experience of diaspora, multiple media forms have converged with the global adoption of divergent forms of digital communication technologies and the Internet. For example, based on ethnographic fieldwork in London, Trinidad and the

Philippines, Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller discuss how Filipino and Caribbean transnational families in their transnational communication negotiate different technologies: landline phones; mobile phones; Skype; Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) audio chat, with or without webcam; texting; and sending e-mails, instant messaging (IM) or social networking sites such as Facebook. Assessing the choice that contemporary diasporic subjects make, they have developed the notion of 'polymedia' (2012). They argue that migrants make use of a set of digital media: 'as a communicative environment of affordances rather than as a catalogue of ever proliferating but discrete technologies'. 'Polymedia' highlight social, emotional and moral dimensions and explain the choices between different media (Madianou and Miller 2013), and distinct medium-specific forms of connectivity increasingly shape relationships mediated across distance. Focusing on migrants' use of polymedia is also of interest when considering differential crossings in Europe to gain a better understanding of how and why these users navigate the different choices available.

The notion of affordances was developed to approach the subject and its surroundings in tandem, instead of considering them as binary oppositions. According to Jeffrey Treem and Paul Leonardi (2012), social media are for example characterized by affordances such as 'visibility', 'editability', 'persistence' and 'association' that migrant users can mobilize for various purposes, as we summarize below. The concept prompts digital diaspora researchers to take into account what the technology allows and restricts and how users negotiate interfaces. In her research on social networking site practices, danah boyd found that it is crucial to consider configurations and templates that offer affordances that 'do not dictate participants' behavior, but they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants' engagement' (2011: 39). Similarly Lisa Nakamura specified that scholars researching the internet need to 'meld close interface analysis with issues of identity': the implications of medium-specific affordances and restrictions need to speak back to critical theories of cultural difference to raise more awareness of the ideologies that underlie technologies (2006: 35). Nakamura criticized 'menu-driven identities' (2002: 104) on profile pages. By providing a limited set of options to choose from in the form of drop-down menu boxes to tick – only a limited number of subject positions are made available to the user. The interface forces users to choose 'what they are' from a limited set of options (2002: 104). When race is one of the menu options to be chosen, Nakamura writes that a fixed number of options render 'mestiza or other culturally ambiguous identities' invisible when they are not 'given a "box" of their own' (2002: 120). However, minoritarian subjects circumvent limited drop-down menu options. In their negotiation with interface limitations, ethnic minorities publish elaborate ethno-racial text, audio and visual narratives of themselves on Facebook (Grasmuck et al. 2009). By doing so they resist being silenced by 'dominant color-blind ideologies' (Grasmuck et al. 2009: 158). Such unforeseen user behaviour results from material infrastructural affordances of digital media platforms being appropriated in various ways.

In his content analysis of individual profile pages authored by Norwegian migrant youth on the SNS Biip.no, Henri Mainsah argues that these pages reflect the ways in which these youth position themselves in the everyday context of the multicultural society. Noting that 'white is the default' in Norwegian society and on Biip (2011: 186), he assesses the potential of using screen names, self-introductory texts, photo galleries and videos by ethnic

minority youth for a resistant cultural production to nuance dominant essentialist portrayals. However, to a certain degree, offline and online political and societal norms structure SNS profiling practices, meaning that identities are not always freely picked and chosen. Elsewhere, we have analysed how Moroccan-Dutch youth negotiate the affordances of hyperlinks on the Dutch SNS Hyves.nl (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2014). By joining groups, these migrant youth publish hyperlinked icons that make visible the intersectional multiplicity of their gender, sexual, diaspora, religious, ethnic and youth cultural identifications. On their personal profile pages, they align with majority groups by publishing affiliations with global music, junk food, activism and clothing styles while simultaneously actively transforming the gender, religious and migrant cultural legacies of their parents (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2014: 638–39). The affordance of being able to articulate a friendship network is one of interest to the formation of digital diasporas. Studying the ways in which Basque diaspora institutions use Facebook groups, Oiarzabal found that Basque social capital might be increased through the ease of sharing information and interaction among members. Facebook groups augment offline activities, as his informants note that Facebook has made it easier for them to interact and more actively engage with members of their Basque club offline (2013: 205–2011).

In this special issue, two medium-specific case studies analyse the practice of migrants and their digital involvement in social networking sites. First, as already introduced above, Mainsah explores the ways in which African Norwegian women explore their relationship with the African diaspora through digital, multimodal practices on Facebook and Tumblr. Discussing their transnational and hyperlocal positionalities in the context of everyday Norwegian societal life, Mainsah argues that understandings of ‘diaspora’ and the ‘digital’ are best located within relation-specific situated contexts, grounded in online and offline spaces. Furthermore, the merits of taking location seriously in research on migrants and mediation are charted in Eunike Piwoni’s review essay of Myria Georgiou’s ‘Media and the city. Cosmopolitanism and difference’. Second, Lorena Nessi and Olga Guedes Bailey build on Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu to consider the Facebook use of relatively privileged Mexican migrants in Europe. Focusing on how issues of migration intersect with class, they address how the power relations of class are articulated through global, cosmopolitan online self-representations. They raise awareness for the ways in which online social networking sites are sites of contestation, how they may be used by some as encapsulating technologies while pursuing exclusionary forms of cosmopolitanism while others mobilize potentialities for cultural dialogue.

Message boards originated in the late 1980s and predate online social networking sites. They remain popular among diasporic subjects and many others. Such boards, also known as Internet forums, are online discussion sites where people can engage in conversation in the form of typing and posting text-based messages. These sites consist of different sections in which conversations take place, while new threads, or discussion topics, can be added. Most forums only allow users to post after registering; however, reading postings (lurking) is usually possible without logging on. In the European context, David Parker and Miri Song studied [Britishbornchinese.org.uk](http://Britishbornchinese.org.uk) and [Barficulture.com](http://Barficulture.com), forums set up by British-born Chinese and South-Asians. They read these sites through the notion of ‘reflexive racialization’, highlighting the ability taken up by migrant users ‘to host a self-authored commentary on the issues faced by racialized minorities in a multicultural context’

(2006: 583). Jannis Androutsopoulos concerned himself with German-based diasporic websites, arguing that they are instances of ‘media activism’, as people who claim membership of specific ethnic groups assume responsibility for ‘maintaining a public space for fellow diasporians’. He, however, also comments on the commercialization of diasporic websites as banners and advertisements are included to promote ‘products and services related to the respective ethnic group’ (2007: 343–44).

In her contribution to this special issue, Çiğdem Bozdağ discusses the communicative construction of ethnic communities by focusing on discussion sites popular among members of the Moroccan and Turkish diaspora in Germany. She mobilizes the notion of cultural thickening to account for the medium-specific affordances such as perceived anonymity. This characteristic may lower thresholds to share experiences – both banal and pertaining to painful experiences of racism – which in turn strengthen participants’ solidarity and belonging to an imagined audience of fellow diasporic subjects. As the distinct articulations of digital diaspora on discussion forums and social networking sites in Europe illustrate, digital diasporas can be further substantiated by incorporating a stronger focus on digital materiality and medium-specific affordances.

#### **4. DIGITAL HUMANITIES, DIGITAL DIASPORAS AND ‘CRITICAL DATA’**

The special issue also aims to make a methodological contribution towards the emerging field of digital humanities (Kirschenbaum 2010; Berry 2012; Drucker et al. 2012), which have received considerable attention in the last decade. Considered to be a new paradigm according to which humanities scholars embrace computational approaches to address fundamental questions in traditional disciplines such as history, philosophy, linguistics, arts, media, gender, postcolonial and literary studies, digital humanities make an important intervention into the utopian debate on big data research. It re-claims the right to contextualize, ground and theorize the overlooked power relations in data collection, data cleaning and data analyses. Indeed, there is increasing urgency to emphasize that big data is never neutral or fully accurate, as ‘gender, geography, race, income and a range of other social and economic factors all play a role in how information is produced and reproduced’ (Graham 2012: n.p.). After the enthusiasm for the enormous potential of accessing huge digital databases, archiving information, data mining, data scraping, automated bots, crawlers and many digital tools that make it possible to visualize networks, design cartographies and pluck, systematize and typologize user-generated content produced in social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia and Flickr, the following questions remain unanswered.

How to interpret and make sense of this information? What are the ethical implications of carrying out data-driven research that infringes not only on the privacy of ‘users’ (actual people) but also generates results and analyses that can be manipulated for other purposes? How to go about the exponential growth of data production and the related issue of sustainability, implied in the increasing resources, global waste and energy needed to store, maintain and update these data, adding to carbon emission? (Confino 2014). What do the digital humanities mean for a critical understanding of digital diasporas in postcolonial Europe? Is it just migrants’ use of technology that qualifies digital humanities as an emerging field for the redefinition of Europe? Or is it more the use and applications of digital methods (Rogers

2. See also the Postcolonial Digital Humanities website: <http://dhpoco.org/>.

2013) to visualize, understand, dig into the role of social media, online activities and web techniques for understanding cultural change and political constellations in Europe? Is it about digital tools as enabling or as also generating new forms of knowledge production that require new methods and approaches to understand borders and diasporas as new social ordering? For this purpose digital humanities need to be put in relation to postcolonial theory in order to trace how certain power dyssymmetries simply become transcoded in the computational language and even more into the cultural analytics that emerges from it.

The field of postcolonial digital humanities, as described by Roopika Risam and Adeline Koh,<sup>2</sup> aims to show that technology is not neutral, and that it contains global structures of inequality, that the Internet is not genderless and postracial and that new hierarchies are created online that reproduce colonial and racial dynamics. For example, the collection of big data can be used against certain groups of people, or digital labour exploits certain groups/classes at the expense of others, or information is not equally accessible or available to all groups. Postcolonial digital humanities disrupt the narrative of technological progress, which intrinsically upholds a universal model of humanities, based on colour-blindness and male supremacy. Therefore there is an obvious need to decolonize digital products, behaviour and activities. As shown above, neither interfaces nor algorithms are neutral and therefore computational language should also be analysed in its possibility for resistance, along with acknowledging the problem of language used, the question of access and media literacy.

Several projects have recently attempted to combine these approaches by making digital tools useful to show how migrants in Europe are actually integrated and emancipated through their digital participation. Yet the results often require further analysis and interpretation, going back to the humanities and its drive for hermeneutics and critical contextualization. Also described as the digital turn in the humanities, 'info-aesthetics' or 'cultural analytics', such methods can be used to map out and visualize dominant patterns and trends in mediated practices (Manovich 2014).

The e-Diasporas Atlas project ([www.e-diasporas.fr](http://www.e-diasporas.fr)) brought 80 researchers and engineers using digital methods together to map various processes of migrant connectivity. Diasporic networks were crawled, archived, visualized, mapped and analysed. This resulted in the exploration of 30 diasporas on the web based on the corpus of 8000 migrant websites. They traced in particular the online presence of various groups, including 'Moroccans on Facebook', 'French Expatriates', but also Chinese, Tamil, Tunisian, Palestinian, Russian, Hmong and Lebanese diasporas among others.

Drawing from the e-Diasporas Atlas corpus, Dana Diminescu and Benjamin Loveluck explore in this special issue how the web impacts on affected diasporic representations. Connecting migration studies with media theory, the authors investigate how in the context of migrant flows migrants stay connected and engage with different forms of boundary formations enabled by the web. Carrying out a socio-semiotic and a hyperlink analysis, their contribution examines how online diasporic identity can be traced at different levels. They theorize this as the 'graphic reason' that makes it possible to study and make sense of the multiple traces that migrants leave online through their activities (phone calls, e-mail exchanges, video-communication technologies and recordings, web browsing, posting on forums, and building profiles, updating statuses and actively networking on social media). The other level is that of the

hyperlinked, 'digital reason', which is not only about the science of networks with graph theory and mathematics but that also has a sociological dimension. Analysing hyperlinks in a qualitative way requires mixed methods approaches, in order to demonstrate that links count, but that they are also meaningful and offer insight into relationships among groups and populations and indications of affiliations and communicative strategies among actors and communities. The authors argue that 'graphic reason' and the analysis of traditional semi-otic markers is important as websites still function as an important repository for texts, sound and pictures. Yet it is with 'digital reason' and the application of network analyses that these online diasporas come to life and become activated, enabling the study of culture transmission through media and the forms of participation it takes towards other diasporas.

MIG@NET ([www.mignetproject.eu](http://www.mignetproject.eu)), a 7th European Framework project that brought several European partners in close contact, and in which the guest editors of this issue participated, explored how migrant individuals and communities participate in the production and transformation of transnational digital networks and the effect of transnational digital networks on migrant mobility and integration. Transnational digital networks were approached and analysed as instances of socio-economic, gender, racial and class hierarchies (not just as technologies), where the participation of migrant communities entails the possibility of challenging these hierarchies. The participation of migrant communities, as mapping onto real, rather than virtual geographies, was taken as a central point in order to explore how it could at times be inclusive – joining in larger transnational digital projects, but at times also exclusive – creating separate and relatively closed transnational spaces. Seven thematic areas were investigated: Border Crossings, Communication and Information Flows, Education and Knowledge, Religious Practices, Sexualities, Social Movements and Intercultural Conflict and Dialogue. The project focused mainly on the links and networks that cross, and transcend, national and gender borders connecting migrant individuals and groups across the globe. From this perspective, migrant movements were not conceptualized simply as linear processes leading migrant individuals and groups from one place to another, but as multi-directional processes, determined by transnational patterns of travel and communication, and exchanges of information, ideas, histories, memories and goods across national territorial and cultural borders.

Through the triangulation of partnership, which comprised three countries involved in each thematic area, and a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative analyses with more data driven research, Mig@Net contributed towards the larger need addressed above to elaborate, more systematically and in more depth, on the multiple intersections between migrant and digital networks – both networks that connect different locations of origin and destination and places of transit. A final collaborative videogame *Banoptikon* was produced that aspires to simulate social and political situations referring to migration flows, which take place inside cities, networks, rural areas and above all in human bodies. Because bodies are the subjects on which old and new technologies are applied and therefore bodies remain the basic topos of the battlefield.

Wired up: digital media as innovative socialization practices for migrant youth (<http://www.uu.nl/wiredup>) is a high-potential interdisciplinary and international research project financed by Utrecht University's executive board, in which the two guest editors of this special issue participated. The project combined quantitative and qualitative approaches in



order to monitor, evaluate and assess the sociocultural specificities of the interaction between youth and digital media in a comparative perspective (migrants versus native Dutch, Moroccan migrants and Turkish-Migrants in the Netherlands versus Mexican migrants in the United States, female versus male). The comparative research focused on three main axes of analysis: (1) identity construction and global representations; (2) development of new learning strategies and socialization patterns; and (3) new forms of digital literacy and youth networks. The aim of the project was to locate the impacts of digital media in relation to sociocultural configurations mediated by nationality, gender and ethnicity. The methodology, based on large-scale online surveys, social-network analysis, discursive analysis of IM transcripts, qualitative hypertextual analysis, in-depth interviews, Internet maps, participant observation and ethnographic research, led to an understanding of the dynamics between these global digital spaces and traditional contexts of socialization.

There is a wide array of new emerging projects in Europe on the relationship between migration and digital configurations and intersectional studies that explore, through qualitative methods in connection with digital tools, the interaction between multiple categories of identity formation and social categorization such as gender, religion, race and class. Twitter, for example has been blamed for fuelling the so-called 'race riots' that happened in Tottenham, North London, in 2011 after the police shooting of Mark Duggan, a young black man. Both the role of Twitter and the character of these riots were nuanced by critically combining data-driven research with qualitative fieldwork (Lewis and Newburn 2011). As also discussed by Gavan Titley in his contribution to this special issue, one digital video in particular, *Fitna* – and the video responses it provoked – has dominated recent Dutch public and scholarly debate on digital video, Muslims and YouTube. *Fitna* was followed up by an intensive video battle. Thousands of YouTube users across the globe uploaded their own videos to critique or show their support for the film. The responses consisted, for instance, of activism and culture jamming by tagging unrelated videos with keywords pertaining to *Fitna* to make *Fitna* more difficult to find online; videos in which people offer their personal apologies for Wilders' making of *Fitna*; and satirical and parodying cut-n-mix videos. Liesbet van Zoonen et al. recognize these acts as particular performances of dispersed citizenship (2010: 260).

Building on network analysis, Andreas Hepp also conducted a large-scale project in Germany on the 'Integration and segregation potential of digital media', studying how Internet, mobile phones and social websites enable Turkish, Russian and Moroccan migrants to inhabit different diasporas and connect transnationally with different scales of intensity (Hepp et al. 2011). See also Cigdem Bozdog, who participated in this project, on the 'mediatization of ethnicity' and 'cultural thickening' among diasporic communities in their everyday life, whose article in this issue is already discussed above.

This is of course just a small sample of a growing and expanding field of research that has taken the study of digital worlds and migration as integral to a new construction of identity, citizenship and the public sphere in Europe and beyond. The increasing sophistication in research questions and digital tools used and the more comparative and interdisciplinary scale of approach signal an important trend that problematizes the notion of borders and those of ethnic markers and national affiliations showcasing new forms of digital affordances and connectivity.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

It is true that the digital frontier has radically changed the way borders are reconfigured and diasporic networks are created and sustained. Yet, new forms of inequality have emerged that need to be critically analysed both in their specific manifestation and within a larger comparative and multidisciplinary approach. 'Digital Crossings in Europe' aims to consider not only the specificity of the media use by migrants in the European context but also to trace the many legacies, remains of the past that become reconfigured in online everyday practices. What Laura Ann Stoler calls 'debris or ruin' (2013) and Amin 'racial remainders' (2010) signal the relevance of including the colonial history into rethinking Europe postcolonial dynamics, a plea to address the toxic but less perceptible corrosions and violent accruals of colonial aftermaths, and their durable traces on the material environment and people's everyday lives. 'Digital Crossings in Europe' engages with resignifying the value of travel, movement and connectivity in Europe through new digital affordances while accounting for the residues of historical inequalities and dyssymmetries and their resurfacing through user-generated content.

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