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> What strikes me about the habits of the people who spend so much time on the Net—well, it's so new that we don't know what will come next—is in fact precisely how niche in character it is. You ask people what nets they are on, and they're all so specialised! The Argentines on the Argentine Net and so forth. And it's particularly the Argentines who are not in Argentina. (Anderson, in Gower, par. 5)

The preceding quotation, taken from his 1996 interview with Eric Gower, sees Benedict Anderson reflecting on the formation of imagined, transnational communities on the Internet. Anderson is, of course, famous for his work on how nationalism, as an "imagined community," gets constructed through the shared consumption of print media (6-7, 26-27); although its readers will never all see each other face to face, people consuming a newspaper or novel in a shared language perceive themselves as members of a collective. In this more recent interview, Anderson recognised the specific groupings of people in online communities: Argentines who find themselves outside of Argentina link up online in an imagined diaspora community.

Over the course of the last decade and a half since Anderson spoke about Argentinian migrants and diaspora communities, we have witnessed an exponential growth of new forms of digital communication, including social networking sites (e.g. *Facebook*), Weblogs, micro-blogging (e.g. *Twitter*), and video-sharing sites (e.g. *YouTube*). Alongside these new means of communication, our current epoch of globalisation is also characterised by migration flows across, and between, all continents. In his book *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai recognised that "the twin forces of mass migration and electronic mediation" have altered the ways the imagination operates. Furthermore, these two pillars, human motion and digital mediation, are in constant "flux" (44). The circulation of people and digitally mediatised content proceeds across and beyond boundaries of the nation-state and provides ground for alternative community and identity formations. Appadurai's intervention has resulted in increasing awareness of local, transnational, and global networking flows of people, ideas, and culturally hybrid artefacts.

In this article, we analyse the various innovative tactics taken up by migrant youth to imagine digital diasporas. Inspired by scholars such as Appadurai, Avtar Brah and Paul Gilroy, we tease out—from a postcolonial perspective—how digital diasporas have evolved over time from a more traditional understanding as constituted either by a *vertical* relationship to a distant homeland or a *horizontal* connection to the scattered transnational community (see Safran, Cohen) to move towards a notion of "hypertextual diaspora." With hypertextual diaspora, these central axes which constitute the understanding of diaspora are reshuffled in favour of more rhizomatic formations where affiliations, locations, and spaces are constantly destabilised and renegotiated. Needless to say, diasporas are not homogeneous and resist generalisation, but in this article we highlight common ways in which young migrant Internet users renew the practices around diaspora connections. Drawing from research on various migrant populations around the globe, we distinguish three common strategies: (1) the forging of transnational public spheres, based on maintaining virtual social relations by people scattered across the globe; (2) new forms of digital diasporic youth branding; and (3) the cultural production of innovative hypertexts in the context of more rhizomatic digital diaspora formations. Before turning to discuss these three strategies, the potential of a postcolonial framework to recognise multiple intersections of diaspora and digital mediation is elaborated.

Hypertext as a Postcolonial Figuration

Postcolonial scholars, Appadurai, Gilroy, and Brah among others, have been attentive to diasporic experiences, but they have paid little attention to the specificity of digitally mediated diaspora experiences. As Maria Fernández observes, postcolonial studies have been "notoriously absent from electronic media practice, theory, and criticism" (59). Our exploration of what happens when diasporic youth go online is a first step towards addressing this gap. Conceptually, this is clearly an urgent need since diasporas and the digital inform each other in the most profound and dynamic of ways: "the Internet virtually recreates all those sites which have metaphorically been eroded by living in the diaspora" (Ponzanesi, "Diasporic Narratives" 396).

Writings on the Internet tend to favour either the "gold-rush" mentality, seeing the Web as a great equaliser and bringer of neoliberal progress for all, or the more pessimistic/technophobic approach, claiming that technologically determined spaces are exclusionary, white by default, masculine-oriented, and heteronormative (Everett 30, Van Doorn and Van Zoonen 261). For example, the recent study by Ito et al. shows that young people are not interested in merely performing a fiction in a parallel online world; rather, the Internet gets embedded in their everyday reality (Ito et al. 19-24). Real-life commercial incentives, power hierarchies, and hegemonies also get extended to the digital realm (Schäfer 167-74). Online interaction remains pre-structured, based on programmers' decisions and value-laden algorithms: "people do not need a passport to travel in cyberspace but they certainly do need to play by the rules in order to function electronically" (Ponzanesi, "Diasporic Narratives" 405).

We began our article with a statement by Benedict Anderson, stressing how people in the Argentinian diaspora find their space on the Internet. Online avenues increasingly allow users to traverse and add hyperlinks to their personal websites in the forms of profile pages, the publishing of preferences, and possibilities of participating in and affiliating with interest-based communities. Online journals, social networking sites, streaming audio/video pages, and online forums are all dynamic hypertexts based on Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) coding. HTML is the protocol of documents that refer to each other, constituting the backbone of the Web; every text that you find on the Internet is connected to a web of other texts through hyperlinks. These links are in essence at equal distance from each other.

As well as being a technological device, hypertext is also a metaphor to think with. Figuratively speaking, hypertext can be understood as a non-hierarchical and a-centred modality. Hypertext incorporates multiplicity; different pathways are possible simultaneously, as it has "multiple entryways and exits" and it "connects any point to any other point" (Landow 58-61). Feminist theorist Donna Haraway recognised the dynamic character of hypertext: "the metaphor of hypertext insists on making connections as practice." However, she adds, "the trope does not suggest which connections make sense for which purposes and which patches we might want to follow or avoid." We can begin to see the value of approaching the Internet from the perspective of hypertext to make an "inquiry into which connections matter, why, and for whom" (128-30).

Postcolonial scholar Jaishree K. Odin theorised how hypertextual webs might benefit subjects "living at the borders." She describes how subaltern subjects, by weaving their own hypertextual path, can express their multivocality and negotiate cultural differences. She connects the figure of hypertext with that of the postcolonial:

> The hypertextual and the postcolonial are thus part of the changing topology that maps the constantly shifting, interpenetrating, and folding relations that bodies and texts experience in information culture. Both discourses are characterised by multivocality, multilinearity, openendedness, active encounter, and traversal. (599)

These conceptions of cyberspace and its hypertextual foundations coalesce with understandings of "in-between", "third", and "diaspora media space" as set out by postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha and Brah. Bhabha elaborates on diaspora as a space where different experiences can be articulated: "These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation (4). (Dis-)located between the local and the global, Brah adds: "diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them,' are contested" (205).

As youths who were born in the diaspora have begun to manifest themselves online, digital diasporas have evolved from transnational public spheres to differential hypertexts. First, we describe how transnational public spheres form one dimension of the mediation of diasporic experiences. Subsequently, we focus on diasporic forms of youth branding and hypertext aesthetics to show how digitally mediated practices can go beyond and transgress traditional formations of diasporas as vertically connected to a homeland and horizontally distributed in the creation of transnational public spheres.

Digital Diasporas as Diasporic Public Spheres

Mass migration and digital mediation have led to a situation where relationships are maintained over large geographical distances, beyond national boundaries. The Internet is used to create transnational imagined audiences formed by dispersed people, which Appadurai describes as "diasporic public spheres". He observes that, as digital media "increasingly link producers and audiences across national boundaries, and as these audiences themselves start new conversations between those who move and those who stay, we find a growing number of diasporic public spheres" (22).

Media and communication researchers have paid a lot of attention to this transnational dimension of the networking of dispersed people (see Brinkerhoff, Alonso and Oiarzabal). We focus here on three examples from three different continents. Most famously, media ethnographers Daniel Miller and Don Slater focused on the Trinidadian diaspora. They describe how "de Rumshop Lime", a collective online chat room, is used by young people at home and abroad to "lime", meaning to chat and hang out. Describing the users of the chat, "the webmaster [a Trini living away] proudly proclaimed them to have come from 40 different countries" (though massively dominated by North America) (88). Writing about people in the Greek diaspora, communication researcher Myria Georgiou traced how its mediation evolved from letters, word of mouth, and bulletins to satellite television, telephone, and the Internet (147). From the introduction of the Web, globally dispersed people went online to get in contact with each other. Meanwhile, feminist film scholar Anna Everett draws on the case of Naijanet, the virtual community of "Nigerians Living Abroad". She shows how Nigerians living in the diaspora from the 1990s onwards connected in global transnational communities, forging "new black public spheres" (35). These studies point at how diasporic people have turned to the Internet to establish and maintain social relations, give and receive support, and share general concerns.

Establishing transnational communicative networks allows users to imagine shared audiences of fellow diasporians. Diasporic imagination, however, goes beyond singular notions of this more traditional idea of the transnational public sphere, as it "has nowadays acquired a great figurative flexibility which mostly refers to practices of transgression and hybridisation" (Ponzanesi, "Diasporic Subjects" 208). Below we recognise another dimension of digital diasporas: the articulation of diasporic attachment for branding oneself.

Mocro and Nikkei: Diasporic Attachments as a Way to Brand Oneself

In this section, we consider how hybrid cultural practices are carried out over geographical

distances. Across spaces on the Web, young migrants express new forms of belonging in their dealing with the oppositional motivations of continuity and change. The generational specificity of this experience can be drawn out on the basis of the distinction between "roots" and "routes" made by Paul Gilroy. In his seminal book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy writes about black populations on both sides of the Atlantic. The double consciousness of migrant subjects is reflected by affiliating roots and routes as part of a complex cultural identification (19 and 190).

As two sides of the same coin, roots refer to the stable and continuing elements of identities, while routes refer to disruption and change. Gilroy criticises those who are "more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation which is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes" (19). He stresses the importance of not just focusing on one of either roots or routes but argues for an examination of their interplay. Forming a response to discrimination and exclusion, young migrants in online networks turn to more positive experiences such as identification with one's heritage inspired by generational specific cultural affiliations. Here, we focus on two examples that cross two continents, showing routed online attachments to "be(com)ing Mocro", and "be(coming) Nikkei".

Figure 1. "Leipe Mocro Flavour" music video (Ali B)

The first example, being and becoming "Mocro", refers to a local, bi-national consciousness. The term Mocro originated on the streets of the Netherlands during the late 1990s and is now commonly understood as a Dutch honorary nickname for youths with Moroccan roots living in the Netherlands and Belgium. A 2003 song, *Leipe mocro flavour* ("Crazy Mocro Flavour") by Moroccan-Dutch rapper Ali B, familiarised a larger group of people with the label (see Figure 1). Ali B's song is exemplary for a wider community of youngsters who have come to identify themselves as Mocros.

One example is the *Marokkanen met Brainz – Hyves* (Mo), a community page within the Dutch social networking site Hyves. On this page, 2,200 youths who identify as Mocro get together to push against common stereotypes of Moroccan-Dutch boys as troublemakers and thieves and Islamic Moroccan-Dutch girls as veiled carriers of backward traditions (Leurs, forthcoming). Its description reads, "I assume that this Hyves will be the largest [Mocro community]. Because logically Moroccans have brains" (our translation):

> What can you find here? Discussions about politics, religion, current affairs, history, love and relationships. News about Moroccan/Arabic

Parties. And whatever you want to tell others. Use your brains.

Second, "Nikkei" directs our attention to Japanese migrants and their descendants. The *Discover Nikkei* website, set up by the Japanese American National Museum, provides a revealing description of being and becoming Nikkei:

As Nikkei communities form in Japan and throughout the world, the process of community formation reveals the ongoing fluidity of Nikkei populations, the evasive nature of Nikkei identity, and the transnational dimensions of their community formations and what it means to be Nikkei. (Japanese American National Museum)

This site was set up by the Japanese American National Museum for Nikkei in the global diaspora to connect and share stories. Nikkei youths of course also connect elsewhere. In her ethnographic online study, Shana Aoyama found that the social networking site *Hi5* is taken up in Peru by young people of Japanese heritage as an avenue for identity exploration. She found group confirmation based on the performance of Nikkei-ness, as well as expressions of individuality. She writes, "instead of heading in one specific direction, the Internet use of Nikkei creates a starburst shape of identity construction and negotiation" (119).

Mocro-ness and Nikkei-ness are common collective identification markers that are not just straightforward nationalisms. They refer back to different homelands, while simultaneously they also clearly mark one's situation of being routed outside of this homeland. Mocro stems from postcolonial migratory flows from the Global South to the West. Nikkei-ness relates to the interesting case of the Japanese diaspora, which is little accounted for, although there are many Japanese communities present in North and South America from before the Second World War. The context of Peru is revealing, as it was the first South American country to accept Japanese migrants. It now hosts the second largest South American Japanese diaspora after Brazil (Lama), and Peru's former president, Alberto Fujimoro, is also of Japanese origin.

We can see how the importance of the nation-state gets blurred as diasporic youth, through cultural hybridisation of youth culture and ethnic ties, initiates subcultures and offers resistance to mainstream western cultural forms. Digital spaces are used to exert youthful diaspora branding. Networked branding includes expressing cultural identities that are communal and individual but also both local and global, illustrative of how "by virtue of being global the Internet can gift people back their sense of themselves as special and particular" (Miller and Slater 115). In the next section, we set out how youthful diaspora branding is part of a larger, more rhizomatic formation of multivocal hypertext aesthetics.

Hypertext Aesthetics

In this section, we set out how an in-between, or "liminal", position, in postcolonial theory terms, can be a source of differential and multivocal cultural production. Appadurai, Bhabha, and Gilroy recognise that liminal positions increasingly leave their mark on the global and local flows of cultural objects, such as food, cinema, music, and fashion. Here, our focus is on how migrant youths turn to hypertextual forms of cultural production for a differential expression of digital diasporas. Hypertexts are textual fields made up of hyperlinks.

Odin states that travelling through cyberspace by clicking and forging hypertext links is a form of multivocal digital diaspora aesthetics:

The perpetual negotiation of difference that the border subject

engages in creates a new space that demands its own aesthetic. This new aesthetic, which I term "hypertext" or "postcolonial," represents the need to switch from the linear, univocal, closed, authoritative aesthetic involving passive encounters characterising the performance of the same to that of non-linear, multivocal, open, non-hierarchical aesthetic involving active encounters that are marked by repetition of the same with and in difference. (Cited in Landow 356-7)

On their profile pages, migrant youth digitally author themselves in distinct ways by linking up to various sites. They craft their personal hypertext. These hypertexts display multivocal diaspora aesthetics which are personal and specific; they display personal intersections of affiliations that are not easily generalisable. In several Dutch-language online spaces, subjects from Dutch-Moroccan backgrounds have taken up the label Mocro as an identity marker. Across social networking sites such as *Hyves* and *Facebook*, the term gets included in nicknames and community pages. Think of nicknames such as "My own Mocro styly", "Mocro-licious", "Mocro-chick". The term Mocro itself is often already multilayered, as it is often combined with age, gender, sexual preference, religion, sport, music, and generationally specific cultural affiliations. Furthermore, youths connect to a variety of groups ranging from feminist interests ("Women in Charge"), Dutch nationalism ("I Love Holland"), ethnic affiliations ("The Moroccan Kitchen") to clothing (the brand H&M), and global junk food (McDonald*s*). These diverse affiliations—that are advertised online simultaneously— add nuance to the typical, one-dimensional stereotype about migrant youth, integration, and Islam in the context of Europe and Netherlands (Leurs, forthcoming).

On the online social networking site *Hi5*, Nikkei youths in Peru, just like any other teenagers, express their individuality by decorating their personal profile page with texts, audio, photos, and videos. Besides personal information such as age, gender, and school information, Aoyama found that "a starburst" of diverse affiliations is published, including those that signal Japanese-ness such as the *Hello Kitty* brand, *anime* videos, *Kanji* writing, *kimonos*, and celebrities. Also Nikkei hyperlink to elements that can be identified as "Latino" and "Chino" (Chinese) (104-10). Furthermore, users can show their multiple affiliations by joining different "groups" (after which a hyperlink to the group community appears on the profile page). Aoyama writes "these groups stretch across a large and varied scope of topics, including that of national, racial/ethnic, and cultural identities" (2).

These examples illustrate how digital diasporas encompass personalised multivocal hypertexts. With the widely accepted adagio "you are what you link" (Adamic and Adar), hypertextual webs can be understood as productions that reveal how diasporic youths choose to express themselves as individuals through complex sets of non-homogeneous identifications. Migrant youth connects to ethnic origin and global networks in eclectic and creative ways. The concept of "digital diaspora" therefore encapsulates both material and virtual (dis)connections that are identifiable through common traits, strategies, and aesthetics. Yet these hypertextual connections are also highly personalised and unique, offering a testimony to the fluid negotiations and intersections between the local and the global, the rooted and the diasporic.

Conclusions

In this article, we have argued that migrant youths render digital diasporas more complex by including branding and hypertextual aesthetics in transnational public spheres. Digital diasporas may no longer be understood simply in terms of their vertical relations to a homeland or place of origin or as horizontally connected to a clearly marked transnational community; rather, they must also be seen as engaging in *rhizomatic* digital practices, which reshuffle traditional understandings of origin and belonging. Contemporary youthful digital diasporas are therefore far more complex in their engagement with digital media than most existing theory allows: connections are hybridised, and affiliations are turned into practices

of diasporic branding and becoming. There is a generational specificity to multivocal diaspora aesthetics; this specificity lies in the ways migrant youths show communal recognition and express their individuality through hypertext which *combines* affiliation to their national/ethnic "roots" with an embrace of other youth subcultures, many of them transnational. These two axes are constantly reshuffled and renegotiated online where, thanks to the technological possibilities of HTML hypertext, a whole range of identities and identifications may be brought together at any given time.

We trust that these insights will be of interest in future discussion of online networks, transnational communities, identity formation, and hypertext aesthetics where much urgent and topical work remains to be done.

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