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Performing gender and ethnicity in socio-technological networks: entangling feminist technoscience and post-colonial theory.

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the self and subjectivity in contemporary digital technology-rich contexts. A mutual shaping perspective is elaborated to understand both processes of gender and ethnicity inscription of technologies on the human subject and his/her gendered and ethnic subscription to technologically mediated cultural, economic, social and symbolic power relations. An interpretative frame is sketched that builds on the performance of gender/ethnicity, actor-network-theory and feminist technoscience. Finally a reading of post-structuralist and post-colonial theories on hypertext is offered. Hypertext, as a figuration, is helpful in mapping out performativity in digital contexts as it may uncover power dissymetries as well as male/masculine, 'racial'/ethnic and female/feminine specificities that may be left unheard elsewhere.

Keywords:

gender and ethnicity performativity, feminist technoscience, post-colonial theory, hypertext as figuration

Introduction: the mutual shaping of human subjects and technologies

Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti made a plea to

try to rethink the world as interaction between material-embodied and semiotic (that is sign-producing and communicating) actors and subjects, who cannot be divided along the traditional lines of human versus non-human, conscious mind versus stupid matter (1996; 27). [1]

In our contemporary world where the self and subjectivity can be understood as “no longer one, whole, unified and in control, but rather fluid, in process and hybrid” (Braidotti, 2006; 9) the question arises how they can best be approached in their technology-rich contexts. On the one hand, often-utopian perspectives emphasizing the liberating potential of ICT's are taken up. On the other hand, dystopian

perspectives are expressed, stressing technologies as standardizing neo-liberal, capitalistic, centralizing, white, masculine and heteronormative norms. Judy Wajcman argued that “technology is both a source and a consequence of gender relations” (2004; 7), while Terry and Calvert stated: “just as gender produces and is produced by culture, so technologies reflect, structure and produce gender relations” (cited in Kennedy, 2005: 472). Lisa Nakamura found that the content and interface decisions on the Internet produce and reflect racial and ethnic categorizations; as for instance technology users are asked to express their identity through limited options available: “menu-driven”-identities (2002, 2008). [2]

These assertions start of from the premise that culture and technology are reciprocally constitutive. I want to follow this premise and consequently accept that information and communication technologies (ICT’s) and personal identity dimensions such as gender and ethnicity must be seen as mutually shaped. From this assumption, the question arises however how to account for this mutual shaping processes. How can we begin to understand how these different opportunities and constraints are performed at the level of the individual? I want to carve out my theoretical position in the literature to conceptualize how Dutch-Moroccan youth using digital media on the one hand find empowerment and on the other hand are simultaneously subject to constraining forces in complex, multiple ways. This paper therefore seeks to go beyond the binary positions described above by reviewing conceptual tools to allow for a critical reading of technobodies in their contexts of power-relations. By doing so I want to be able to assess what ways of life are enabled and disabled. [3]

In this paper I will develop a perspective to understand both processes of gender and ethnicity inscription of the human subject *and* his/her gendered and ethnic subscription to technologically mediated cultural, economic, social and symbolic power relations. I want to unravel the mutual shaped, performative character of the interactions of individuals with intricate material-embodied, semiotic-discursive and socio-technological networks. To do so I will sketch an interpretative frame that builds on the performance of gender/ethnicity (Judith Butler and Elsa Dorlin). Subsequently I will turn to Actor-network-theory (Bruno Latour) and feminist technoscience (Karen Barad and Donna Haraway). Finally I will offer a reading of post-structuralist and post-colonial theories on hypertext. [4]

I. Ethnic and gender performativity

Taking the temporal performative nature of identities as a theoretical premise means that more than ever, one needs to question how identities continue to be produced, embodied and performed, effectively, passionately and with social and political consequence (Bell, 1999; 2). [5]

Judith Butler deconstructed the category of gender by foregrounding that gender is to be understood as something *we do* rather than something *we are*. Butler’s oft-cited work on the symbolic articulation of the gendered self illustrates how gendered bodies are “performed”:

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds (Butler, 1990; 282). [6]

There is no preceding or following I that exists apart from gender performativity, rather it comes into existence through the matrix of gender relations. With her notion of the performative, Judith Butler goes beyond distinctions between material-embodied and symbolic-discursive domains. Gender performativity is the constitutive stylized repetitious process through which one acquires a gendered subjectivity: “language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible” (Butler, 1997; 6). The body becomes fundamentally constituted through performative repetitions of gendered norms. Gender performativity is not constituted in terms of random play, but it meets the established societal “heterosexual matrix”, social configurations of ‘othering’ the feminine versus the masculine and vice versa: “a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990; 151). [7]

Gender performativity can however be subverted by unsettling and denaturalizing it: “[g]ender is an act [...] which is open to splitting, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their vary exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status” (Butler, 1990; 282). By contesting enacted gender identities in their embedded contexts of hegemonic power relations people have the chance to re-signify themselves. The agency of the subject becomes visible through ironic self-reflexivity in the stylized repetitious acts that may subvert the repetition of norms. As Karen Barad recognizes: “Butler’s theory of gender performativity has been enormously influential, opening a range of different investigations in to the practices that produce subjects and identities” (2007; 59-60). [8]

Butler has rarely addressed the performance of other dimensions of self such as race and ethnicity,¹ Elsa Dorlin (2007) has argued that Butler’s notion of performance of gender can be expanded to understand the performativity of the gendered and racialized self² in the era of postcoloniality. She states that although these concepts of course differ widely but they are intrinsically connected and they share a common logic. The gendered and racialized body is the result of social hierarchies and dissension. It is her argument that political subjects cannot be seen as either only gendered or ethnic. She gives a number of examples, I will list three here. She states for instance that being a black woman in the French colonies in the eyes of the colonists demanded the practicing of a regulatory set of coherent performative gender and ethnic acts. Built on an ideological pattern, a distinct gendered ethnicity or ethnic gender was to be performed. In order to count as a true female, African American women were asked to sustain patriarchal gendered practices. The discussions in France on the veiling of Muslim girls displayed that gender, like ethnicity was not natural but politically motivated constructs. [9]

Ethnic (and gendered) performativity perhaps be understood more specifically on the basis of the dynamic process of “ethno-cultural positioning”. There are two

¹ For an exception see for instance Butler, 1993 in which she does deal with race.

² Jon Stratton made a similar argument for the performance of Jewishness: “Jewishness, like other ethnicities, can in this way be thought of as a set of attributes which a repeated and become naturalized and identifiably Jewish” (cited in Georgiou; 2006; 43).

theoretical dimensions to be discerned in this process: “position acquisition” and “position allocation”. Position acquisition refers to whether people regard themselves as members of a specific group, while position allocation refers to whether people are treated by the majority of a society as representative of a specific group (D’Haenens, 2003; 3). In a continuous process of negotiation people stake out (thus perform) their ethno-cultural position by for instance complying with, subscribing to and subverting its particularities. [10]

In sum, for me these 3 assumptions are key: a) gendered and ethnic identities are not neutrally, naturally occurring entities but are actively constructed and *made*, in a process of both external ascription and internal claiming, b) gendered and ethnic identities are *performed* resulting from encounters between individual bodies and discursive frameworks and c) gendered and ethnic identities are performed through *matter*, through material artifacts. It must be noted that Butler and others working on gender performativity have only rarely (Van Doorn, forthcoming) addressed the performance of self of the socio-technical networked individual. In answering my research question on how to conceptually grasp the inscription of the human subject *and* his/her subscription to technologically mediated cultural, economic, social and symbolic power relations the question arises how to approach the gender and ethnic performative identities in the contemporary context of digital media and technologies. In the following I want to see how to understand performativity in digital cultures. First I will see whether Actor-Network Theory is useful. Karen Barad has hinted at how issues such as how subjects come into being in high-tech environments are interesting to look at from an ANT perspective. She argues that these issues

are precisely the kinds of points that one would think that actor network theorists and other scholars attuned to looking for ways in which ‘objects’ emerge through scientific practices would be especially attentive to (2007; 57). [11]

II. Performativity & technology: STS and/or feminist technoscience?

Science, technology and society studies (STS) aims to study the heterogeneous complexities of social-political-technological practices. Steven Brown states that STS is a “‘test bench’, if you like for a set of debates that have rumbled across the Humanities” (2004; 9). Within this field, by developing Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Bruno Latour and others³ aimed to provide conceptual tools to “study up”. Actor-Network Theory aims to address from a bottom-up perspective the relationships between society and technology (2005; 98).⁴ Prominent in their argument is that divisions between society and technology are necessarily arbitrary. Rather they stated that these domains are inseparable as constantly shifting assemblies. The social world as such is a networking of human and non-humans. The concepts of “actors” and “networks” are most prominent. “Actors” can be people, semiotic-discursive as well as material things. “Networks” are scales to analyze associations of actors. These concepts were coined to help describe associations of people and things on different scales. Key in this approach is that these concepts are said to “to let the actors have some room to express themselves” (Latour, 2005, 142)

³ Other well-known scholars associated with ANT are Michel Callon and John Law.

⁴ It must be underlined that ANT did not conceptualize the Internet whatsoever; rather it was oriented towards mapping the constantly changing aggregations of humans and machines or tools such as hotel keys.

by describing the active associations between actors on different scales. Actors become visible and recognizable in their agencies. The agency of actors can be traced by looking at how actors influence other networked actors. Actors for instance influence others by inscribing or transforming other actors. By describing associations, the agency of actors becomes discernable. John Law states that ANT may be understood as a “semiotics of relational materiality”, as actor-networks are formed and can be characterized on the basis of their location in a relational web. This location can be seen as a form of “performativity”, as actors are performed “in, by, and through these relations” (1999; 3-4). Without the performing of relations, any actor-network will dissolve. [12]

Arguing from the perspective of Latourian-inspired Actor-network-theory it is assumed that human and non-human actors are of equal importance as they influence each other incessantly. Constellations of human and non-human actors can be traced by unraveling their connections. Connections as such become performed. I am attracted to this perspective, but I also want to engage critically with it to put the specificity of the individual, marginalized human back on the map. This is much needed, as for instance specifically on the topic of studying the performance of gender from an ANT-perspective Barad states “there has been surprisingly little cross-pollination between feminist poststructuralist theory and science studies” (2007; 57). This is highly problematic, because the constitutive nature of gendered practices is neutralized as such. In a similar vein, Law has critically assessed his own and other contributions to the field and underlines that attention for the dispossessed is lacking: “Much of STS is not, or at any rate has not been, driven by a concern for dispossession. This is the charge ... that many writers in STS have had little to say about class, race, or gender” (Law, 1991; 2). Similarly, Donna Haraway argues that

Either critical scholars in antiracist, feminist cultural studies of science and technology have not been clear enough about racial formation, gender-in-the-making, the forging of class, and the discursive production of sexuality through constitutive practices of technoscience production themselves, or the science studies scholars aren't reading or listening – or both (1997; 35). [13]

As is obvious from my engagement with ANT, its abstract vocabulary may appear to obscure processes and realities that it was designed to reveal. However, I am convinced ANT is a strong set of tools to begin with, but, for me an emphasis on humans, their positioning and their agency as a key point of departure should be added. To do so, I will turn to feminist techno-science as an attempt to refocus on human selves in networked settings. This way, I aim to be able to take into account the specificities of gendered and ethnic subjectivities in their engagements with enabling and constraining ICT technologies. [14]

Although Barad has warned that “[e]ven in the feminist science studies literature, one is hard pressed to find other direct engagements with Butler’s work on performativity” (2007; 57). In this section I will explore whether feminist technoscience scholarship is compatible with performative construction of gendered and ethnic selves in technology rich contexts. Donna Haraway, one of the prominent scholars in feminist techno-science, introduces the field as follows:

The globalization of the world, of ‘planet Earth’, is a semiotic-material production of some forms of life rather than others. Technoscience is the story of such globalization; it is the travelogue of distributed, heterogeneous, linked,

sociotechnical circulations that craft the world as a net called the global (1997; 14). [15]

The field as such focuses on issues of domination and power distribution and goes beyond the standard dichotomies of semiotic/discursive and body/material. Similar to science and technology studies and its subset of actor-network theory, feminist technoscience approaches phenomena as heterogeneous, related assemblages where some subjects enjoy privilege whereas others are underprivileged. The specificity of feminist technoscience is its focus on unequal power distribution. Corporealization for instance is seen as the result from the distributed interactions between humans and nonhumans. Humans engage in alliances with non-humans (technologies) resulting in certain world-building practices whereby specifically located subjectivities and objectivities, certain actions and passions and modes of speaking are materialized and signified. These alliances can “be teased open to show the sticky economic, technical, political, organic, historical, mythic, and textual threads that make up its tissues” (Haraway, 1997; 68). It provides a perspective to map out the continual uneven distribution of power across historically located material and semiotic domains, and especially seeks to unravel the particularities of normalized and taken for granted circumstances. [16]

Haraway elaborates that feminist technoscience aims to unravel how specific located practices that may act globally become constituted locally by stating:

I want to use technoscience to designate dense nodes of human and nonhuman actors that are brought into alliance by the material, social, and semiotic technologies through which what will count as nature and as matters of fact get constituted for-and by-many millions of people (1997; 50)

On the basis of this elaboration of feminist technosciences we know that actors are and become differently situated resulting from different alliances between material, social and discursive domains. The question remains however how to frame the interactive encounters between human and nonhuman actors through different technologies, thereby materializing “worlds in some forms rather than others?” (Haraway, 1997; 129). Technologies can be understood as vehicles that can enact (enable and disable) processes of allying human and nonhuman actors. Let me turn to the specific context of the Internet and see how Haraway’s figuration of ‘hypertext’ can account for the performative character of the self in digital worlds. [17]

III. Hypertext

I discussed that “gender performativity constitutes (but does not fully determine) the gendered subject” (Barad, 2007; 62). I tried to understand this in the context of techno-cultures, through the lens of STS. From that perspective, the specificity of the human condition appeared to slip away; therefore I turned to feminist conceptions of STS. Haraway recognized that the computer is “not a Thing Acting Alone” (1997; 126), but saw that connections between humans and computers remake worlds. She turned to the trope of hypertext to grasp human computer interaction: “[m]aking connections is the essence of hypertext [...] hypertext delineates possible paths of action in a world for which it serves simultaneously as a tool and metaphor” (ibid.). For feminists interested in processes of techno-scientific meaning-making this is a valuable approach, as it captures both the restrictions as well as opportunities side of human-computer interaction. Haraway elaborates on the two-sidedness hereof by

stating that “[a]lthough the metaphor of hypertext insists on making connections as practice, the trope does not suggest which connections make sense for which purposes and which patches we might want to follow or avoid” (1997; 127). [18]

From these statements it follows that the Internet can be approached as a hypertextual medium to locate agency online. Before dealing with the medium-specificity of the Internet however, let us turn to post-structuralist work on intertextuality, the framework Haraway implicitly builds on in her talking about hypertext. Post-structuralists like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have all worked on analytic frameworks to conceptualize fragmentation, decentring, nonlinearity, intertextuality and authorship. In short, their literary criticism concerns the idea that all texts are inherently “intertextual”. As such, texts are only meaningful for their readers in direct and indirect relation to other texts. They assume that texts are thus understood in webs of textuality. The process of creating meaning out of the different ways of reading a text depends thus both on the reader as well as the author. With the advent of networked digital applications and the arrival of technological linkages of text, the idea of intertextuality became technologically materialized, as a hyperlinked network of texts (hypertext). [19]

Lister et al. define hypertext as “a work which is made up from discrete units of material in which each one carries a number of pathways to other units. The work is a web of connection which the user explores using the navigational aids of the interface design. Each discrete ‘node’ in the web has a number of entrances and exits or links” (2003, 24). As in analog intertextual referential webs, hypertext thus consists of a network of digital links to other texts that are of equidistance “outside, above and beyond” itself. A hypertext approach to the Internet aims to take into account the media specific characteristics of the Internet. In contrast with non digital texts which are generally seen as linear, univocal, closed, and authoritative; texts on the Internet exist in relational webs, meaning they can be understood as being nonlinear, multi-vocal, open and non-hierarchical. [20]

A brief excursion through post-structuralist writing on hypertext will further deepen our understanding of human subjectivity online. Jay Bolter described that the hypertextual character of the web has created a networked ‘environment’, without a “univocal sense; it is a multiplicity without the imposition of a principle of domination” (1991; 25). Michael Joyce understands hypertexts as virtual spaces, as a “city of texts” where users on the one hand explore their own paths (*exploratory hypertext*) and on the other hand construct “versions of what they are becoming” through collection, shaping and acting upon digital information (*constructive hypertext*) (1995, 42). Turning back to Haraway, 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. Who and what are with and for whom?” (1997; 128). [21]

As a technological device and metaphor to think with, the figuration of hypertext points us towards how Internet users now habitually make and create jumps between texts, while simultaneously connecting different texts by taking and uploading multiple pathways. Most interestingly, although companies with commercial interests (currently most notably Google) are increasingly trying to monopolize and channel Internet users in their behavior, digital pathways are not completely predetermined or pre-structured. The hypertextual character of the Internet of course to a certain extent guides its users in certain ways; however, users in their interaction with the web and other users may construct and or publish their own hypertextual experience. By doing so they compose heterogeneous webs of

connections combining and contrasting global and local artifacts. The hypertext figuration as such already reminds us that distinctions between global/local as well as Western/non-Western cannot hold. [22]

IV. Hypertext as a post-colonial figuration

Now that I have gotten more insight into the workings of hypertext, I want to turn to the particular situation of migrant youth online by taking into account post-colonial writing on the topic of hypertext. Inspired by George Landow, who displayed the connections between hypertextuality on the one hand and poststructuralism and post-colonial theory on the other (2006; 351), I explore below how postcolonial theory can contribute to the understanding of migrant youth usage of digital media. The fields of postcolonial theory and new media studies have developed parallel to each other but have only rarely intersected (Fernández, 1999). Here I want to examine how I can connect both fields through the figuration of hypertext to conceptualize Dutch Moroccan youth online. To do so I will shortly make an argument going from the specific situation of languages online to a general interpretation of hypertext as a postcolonial experience. [23]

Gómez-Peña sees the Internet as a ‘virtual barrio’, a ‘frontier’ that indeed excludes people by popular perception, but it also offers people the possibility to air ‘alternative voices’ and express ‘cultural values’. She states that one way this can be done is through the subversion of the Internet by for instance disrupting the online lingua franca; she states the Internet is

propelled to work against it; to question it, expose it, subvert it, and/or imbue it with humor, radical politics and linguas polutas such as Spanglish, Franglé and cyberñol (Gómez-Peña, 1997). [24]

As such, the at first glance hegemonic situation of English as the main communication language on the Internet can be disrupted by appropriating it as a “Creole” language. Post-colonial studies informs us, “creole” does not refer to a situation that somehow leads to the demise of formerly independent cultural practices, rather it reflects on a situation of mutually constitutive development (Braithwaite, 2006). McGahan stated that the Internet allows users to question dominant cyberspatial configurations of sociality by relocating and to a certain extent disrupting disciplinary assignments and regulatory practices of social identificatory mechanisms. Digital media practices thus are to be conceptualized in a middle ground between either “wholly voluntarist self-fashioning” and of internet practices as “reifying the racial order” (2008). [25]

I would like to argue that the hypertextual Internet offers the opportunities for “the Empire” to write back. Similar to how authors living in post-colonial and de-colonized areas wrote literature from the margins (Ashcroft et al., 1989), the web now increasingly allows those excluded to express and manifest themselves online. I would like to underline that this is especially true for those who migrated to the centre, as still many inhabitants of post/de-colonized nations currently remain on the ‘wrong’ side of the digital divide. Jaishree Odin sums up the strength of combining post-colonial theory and hypertext as follows:

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

characterized by multivocality, multilinearity, openendedness, active encounter, and traversal (1997; 599). [26]

Odin states that hypertext reflects the inherent diversity in our contemporary societies: “diverse, sometimes contradictory information, can exist simultaneously in hypertext format, so it is in culturally diverse societies with different, sometime contradictory narratives” (1998). She adds that the web reflects a new mode of embodiment, as the postcolonial hypertext “is composed of cracks, in-between spaces, or gaps that do not fracture reality into this or that, but instead provide multiple points of articulation with a potential for incorporating contradictions and ambiguities” (1997; 598). [27]

As we learn from post-colonial engagement with hypertext as well as the earlier engagement we see that it can be seen to enable fragmentary, decentered subjectivity and identity formation, recurrent for post-colonial subjects. For instance Trin Minh-Ha states that fragmentation denotes a way of living with differences at the discursive/physical boundaries, where “one finds oneself, in the context of cultural hybridity always pushing one’s questioning of oneself to the limit of what one is and what one is not [...] Fragmentation is therefore a way of living at the borders” (1992; 156-157). The Internet can be a space to articulate contradictory and differential feelings. As such both differential ethnicities and genders can be voiced online. The cracks in the fragmentary character of the hyperlinked Internet to a certain extent allows for oppositional cultural positioning. The non-uniform web allows those that are normally marginalized from mainstream discourses to assert their presence. Examining hypertexts consumed, produced and distributed online can uncover male/masculine, ‘racial’/ethnic and female/feminine specificities. This approach enables “to account for the differences – assumed, ascribed, and real – in women’s and men’s cultural productions and productivity” (Griffin, 2006; 77). [28]

However, before getting too carried away with these arguments, dominant perceptions of cyberculture needs to be taking into account as well. I would like to emphasize that Eurocentric, male whiteness is still the present-day norm in contemporary culture, including online cyberculture. Building on Eduard Said’s work on “othering” of the Orient, “the positional upper-hand” of Eurocentricity / the West over the “non-West” still can be said to cause a fixation of those that are unlike the norm. Any deviations from the norm are seen as the “other”, and these are often discursively fixed. The ‘other’ is therefore not expected to develop. On the basis of these assumptions, racial subjects are often perceived as incapable to participate in online cyberculture even though these popular imaginations fail to capture the ‘the realities on the ground’ (McGahan, 2008). In popular imaginations of the present globalized techno-cultural world, colored bodies are still mostly absent, strengthening the myth of the technological lag of black intellectuals (2002) Gómez-Peña addressed the same issue with regard to Chicanos and Mexicans and states they are often perceived as somehow being “culturally handicapped”, displaying a “cultural unfitness” to handle technologies and participate in cyberculture (1997). Focusing on ethnic depictions in cyberspace, Nakamura presented the analytical tool of “cybertyping” as a way to show how ethnicity, class and gender do matter online. Her work critiques earlier interpretations of the Internet as being race free. She renders visible how stereotypical cultural narratives perpetuate gender, race and class as conditions of social interaction online:

The study of racial cybertypes brings together the cultural layer and the computer layer; that is to say, cybertyping is the process by which

computer/human interfaces, the dynamics and economics of access, and the means by which users are able to express themselves online interacts with the “cultural layer” or ideologies regarding race that they bring with them in cyberspace (2002; 3). [29]

However, in contrast with these dominant perceptions, “forging a black public sphere” is a project taken up by for instance members of transnational African Diasporic social networks displaying (Everett, 2002). I would like to argue that the figuration of hypertext presents us with an informing angle to study the performativity of humans and computers and their connections. It allows for a mapping of the reading and active construction of hyperlinks and online behavior through with ethnicities and genders are performed. The perspective is not blind to constraints that limit one’s agency but simultaneously brings our attention to the contradictory and ambiguity of connections forged. The computer cannot be seen as determining or causing certain types of behavior; rather the active entanglement of human subjects with digital applications can be shown to construct certain worlds and worldviews. The figuration of hypertext is one way to tease open, or to disentangle these entanglements. [30]

Conclusions

In this paper I aimed to theoretically position myself in ongoing debates about the dynamic construction of gender and ethnicities, by addressing its context of human-computer interaction and computer mediated communication. I wanted to come up with a nuanced conception that would not fall into the traps of either everything goes techno-utopianism or deterministic techno-pessimism, as I found these perspectives outdated and inadequate to account for how (Dutch-Moroccan) youth using digital media may experience empowerment while being simultaneously subject to constraining forces. Rather I accepted that these spheres mutually shape and co-construct present realities. Therefore I wanted to come up with ways to disentangle material-embodied and semiotic-discursive socio-technological networks computer users find themselves in today. From these assumptions, following research question arose: how can we begin to understand how different opportunities and constraints in this process of mutual shaping are performed at the level of the individual? [31]

By engaging with notions of gender and ethnicity performativity in the first section, I wanted to account for processes of inscription of the human subject *and* her/his subscription to cultural, economic, social and symbolic power relations. I argued that gender and ethnicity are unstable dynamically constructed entities made in a process of external ascription and internal claiming. This construction was understood as repetitious performative acts resulting from encounters between bodies and discursive frameworks. These acts can be approached as being performed through matter, through material artifacts. During my readings of theoretical work on performing gender and ethno-cultural positioning, I found that an understanding of its technologically mediated context was lacking. Following some leads in the literature, I cut to the field of science, technology and society studies (STS) and more specifically actor-network-theory to conceptualize the performativity of human subjectivity in its networked environment. These fields provided strong analytical vocabulary to address human non-human interactions but the focus appeared to be on the agency of the side of the object. By turning to feminist critiques of science studies, I tried to regain my focus on the human specificities, again in their relationship with digital technologies. Feminist technoscience was shown to be strongly oriented

towards mapping out the uneven distribution of power of human beings and their alliances with material and semiotic domains. Specific alliances result in rapidly taken-for-granted specific worlds, where some enjoy privileges and others do not. [32]

Feminist technoscience provide tools to tease out these alliances. Within this domain, the figuration of hypertext appeared fruitful to approach the performance of self in technological material/discursive settings. Hypertexts consist of links, connections that are tools for people to weave their own path online and shape textual relations. Hypertext consists of material artifacts that enable and disable the performing of gender and ethnic-cultural positioning. Also it is a metaphor to reflectively think about these processes. I took a de-tour through post-structuralist theory and its claims on fragmentation, decentering, nonlinearity, intertextuality and authorship to frame the interpretative web of textuality that becomes materialized in hypertext. Interestingly, to a certain extent, hypertext does not set guidelines as to which connections should be made for which purposes. I would not go as far as to say that hypertext is not affected by any principles of domination, as a matter of fact large transnational corporations are increasingly seeking to commodify the Internet and its hypertextual character by channeling usage and guiding users to generate traffic for commercial gain. However the trope of hypertext seems promising to address the gendered and ethnic performance of self by mapping out which connections are made, why, for whom and what they mean for those involved. [33]

Finally I turned to post-colonial theory to understand specifically the opportunities and constraints offered by hypertext to migrant youth. In my reading of the literature I showed that certain groups of people are often excluded in the popular perception of the Internet and its users. However, as hypertext is an open-ended tool, people are offered ways to air alternative voices and express culturally specific interests. By doing so, it has been argued, regulatory practices of social identificatory mechanisms can become disrupted. Hypertext offers room for the expression of contrasting narratives through multiple points of articulation, multilinearity and ambiguity. The cracks in the fragmented hyperlinked Internet to a certain extent allow for oppositional gendering and ethno-cultural positioning. I would like to argue that this figuration is helpful in mapping out the performativity in online hypertexts as it may uncover male/masculine, 'racial'/ethnic and female/feminine specificities that may be left unheard elsewhere. Nevertheless, we critical scholars of culture must remain aware of power dissymmetries that may be actuated or perpetuated through certain material-embodied, semiotic-discursive or socio-technological entanglements. The figuration of hypertext can direct us in our critical disentangling of such phenomena. [34]

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