Mind the Gaps: Space Invaders!
Migrant Youth Online and the 'Internetworked' Experiences of Transition.

In this presentation we would like to address issues of space, divides and invasions across the online and offline worlds. We draw from theoretical discourses based on cultural theory, postcolonial studies and intersectionality as well as empirical studies based on the Wired Up project based at Utrecht University, the Netherlands which is an international and interdisciplinary research project which focuses on identity, learning and networks of migrant youth online in the Netherlands and the US. The scope is to develop an engagement with the transition of digital media taking into account the role that migration and ethnic diversity plays in it.

Our main focus is to explore how 'space' constructed as a normative space for white, Western and male subjects and in general for mainstream and élite subjects has been subverted, invaded or transformed through new waves of migration which have created diversity into spaces which were previously defined as neutral and universal. This is interesting in order to make connection between theories of space in general and their development in critical discourses from a postcolonial perspective and theories on digital space, as often marked by potentialities or digital impediments, the famous digital gaps, and the socio-cultural transformation that this notion has undergone in the last decade. What is the relation between normative spaces offline and the transformation of digital spaces?

Space Invaders:

Critical sociologist Nirwal Puwar explains such dynamics by describing minoritarian subjects, including migrants, as "*space invaders*". She looks at everyday and institutionalized spaces were certain bodies are considered to be "*out of place*" (2004). Following the revolutions across North-Africa and especially the war in Libya people seeking refuge in Fortress Europe are sometimes literally seen as space invaders. The spring 2011 European right-wing politician' and media depiction of Lampedusa, the Italian island off the coast of Tunisia as in need to be "*rescued*" from "*invading migrants*" fleeing Libyan turmoil is exemplary (Reyes, 2011}

Nonetheless, Puwar argues there has been a "*metonymic shift in the increased presence of women and racialised minorities into spaces in the public realm which have been predominantly been occupied by white men*" (2004, p. 7). For instance,

women and racialised minorities can legally enter British Parliament, but she argues, they are "*space invaders*" that do not fit the "*template*," of "*natural occupants*" that is, "*white male bodies of a specific habitus continue to be the somatic norm*" (2004, p. 141). As they increasingly presence themselves in spaces they were previously excluded from, women and minorities may subvert the status quo but have to actively reposition themselves from within the spaces they invade. The digital realm is one area of "*space invasion*" which is often overlooked.

But what is digital space? Purwal argues that space is formed through "*the historically embedded relationship*" between "*reserved positions and certain social types*." Available "*positions have a gendered and racialized symbolism to them*" (2004, p. 33). Over to the formation of (digital) space. French philosophers Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre are key references in thinking about space, everyday life and identity. Space is formed through performative events, following De Certeau who argues that "*space is a practiced place*" (1988, p. 117) while Lefebvre defined social space as "*not a thing but rather a set of relations*" between people and things (1991, p. 83). These relations are of material-embodied, semiotic-discursive and socio-technological assemblages. Practiced digital spaces are bound by but not fully determined by templates, interface decisions and norms, as there is room for space-invasion.

Following Puwar, the question rises what happens when subordinated subjects go online?

> "*What happens when women and racialised minorities take up 'privileged' positions which have not been 'reserved' for them, for which they are not, in short, the somatic norm. What are the terms of coexistence? This is an encounter that causes disruption, necessitates negotiation and invites complicity*" (2004, p. 1)

Digital Divides:

Early scholarship on inequality and the internet initially focused on material divides, on uneven ownership of hardware and unequal access to the internet across various scales: geographic scales: connected overdeveloped versus disconnected underdeveloped worlds, connected urban versus disconnected rural areas and *scales of* personal markers of differenc*e* such as gender: connected males versus disconnected females, age: connected youngsters versus disconnected elders, race/ethnicity:

connected white versus disconnected black, ability: connected able people versus disconnected disabled people. The term was ideologically loaded, when the gap would be closed, a "*computer-revolution*" would take place, spreading democracy and potentially ending poverty (Graham, 2011, np).

Gradually the focus among scholars and policy-makers has shifted from access towards usage, skills and literacies, and social/cultural capital recognizing another dimension of the digital divide: the gap between "*the information haves*," and the "*information have-nots,*" (Selwyn, 2004) which again was seen to operate at geographical and personal markers of difference. More resources are mobilized to provide the "*information have-nots*" with the skills for a more "*egalitarian*" distribution of knowledge (Fallis, 2007; 38).

As social media applications continue to grow in popularity over the last decade, the focus has recently again began to shift towards digital divides in the peer-production of online content (Graham, 2011). Nick Couldry in the second *Media in Transition conference* already pushed the agenda to look at people's thoughts and action "inside" and "outside" dominant systems of representation on the Internet (2002, p. 12). The early 1990's utopian view on cyberspace has been nuanced; scholars have recognized the normative ways of being – masculine, white, neoliberal, heteronormative and Western – that are standardized in the digital realm. Illustratively Susan Herring (2003) argues that power relations in computer-mediated communication (CMC) are gendered. Linguistic features of agonism such as assertiveness, use of profanity and rudeness correlate more with males, and features of social harmony such as verbosity, politeness, use of smileys more with female CMC users. Herring sums up: "*women's concern with politeness tends to be perceived as a 'waste of bandwidth' by men*" (2003, p. 209). In popular renderings of our globalized techno-cultural world, colored bodies as active agents are still mostly absent, strengthening the myth of the technological lag of minorities (Everett, 2002, p. 133). Gómez-Peña exposes how Chicanos living in the Mexican-U.S. borderlands are often perceived as somehow being "*culturally handicapped*", and culturally unfit to handle technologies and contribute to cyberculture (2000, p. 249). Nakamura asserts that the content and interface decisions on the Internet reflect and produce racial hierarchical categorizations. Digital profiles and avatars can often be constructed only on the basis of a restricted "*range of faces, bodies, and features. This creates a normative virtual body, one that is generally white, conventionally physically attractive, as well as*

traditionally gendered" (Nakamura, 2010, p. 338). We have to accept that value laden algorithms and interface decisions reflect offline value and belief systems.

Can we draw any parallel between the notion of digital gap and the moves of the space invaders, both as a policy from top down to include minorities and more diversities in the 'white' élite spaces and as a bottom up strategy, or as a tactic for the subjects on the wrong side of the digital divide which invade normative and prescriptive spaces transforming them from within but also creating alternative platforms for communication and belonging?

Rethinking these intersections is necessary and urgent as migration and digital media have changed for good the notion of space, distance and connection. Furthermore the understandings of digital divides have shifted attention from concerns over ownership and access to literacy and skills towards a current focus on digital divides in peer production of digital culture. Our focus is on the latter dimension of the digital divide, by looking at how migrant youth have been able to become what Nirwal Purwal has described as space invaders, as migrant youth do not fit some of the templates and reserved positions of digital culture.

A few words on why we think it is urgent to look at the interrelationships between the migration and digital media. Postcolonial scholar Arjun Appadurai recognized in 1996 that "*Electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination*" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 4). In the second decade of the new millennium, mass migration and mass mediation are two interrelated catalysts of societal transition that characterize the current post-colonial condition in over developed parts of the world. Mass migration and information and communication technologies (ICT's) have a joint effect on the ways in which they enable and restrict subject positions.

Background:
Drawing on empirical survey, interview findings and an analysis of online materials from young Dutch-Moroccans between 12 and 18 years old participating in our Utrecht University research project Wired Up (http://www.uu.nl/wiredup/), we make a plea to approach conjunctures of transition of digital media and immigration from a

postcolonial and intersectional perspective, in which digital space gets transformed from within but also where alternative spaces are created.

Dutch-Moroccans make up some two percent of the total Dutch population of 16.6 million. They are the second-largest minority group in the Netherlands, following those of Turkish-Dutch background. Of this group, 48 % migrated to the Netherlands from the 1960s onwards, when there was a growing demand for guest workers in Northern-Europe. The other 52 % were born in the Netherlands, after their parents had migrated (CBS, 2010). Various axes of differentiation - such as diaspora, generation, adolescence, gender and religion - intersect in their lives. For instance, daughters of immigrant diasporic families can find themselves in a position of being "*used as a site of interaction between hegemonic and minority cultures*" (Ponzanesi, 2002: 210). In the wider Dutch discourse on migration and integration, Dutch-Moroccans are often seen as Muslim fundamentalists or rascals and thieves and females with a migrant and Islamic background especially run the risk of being isolated as either oppressed or "*unemancipated others*" (Ghorashi, 2010: 75-81; Brouwer, 2006).

The scope of our study is to investigate the ways in which Dutch Moroccan in the Netherlands counteract these stereotypical representations and negative political ideologies by engaging as active participant in new media, thereby participating and interacting with the public sphere and the public discourses while also creating platforms of their own which have similarities with many other youths in the global context but also show very specific characteristics that we would like to share with you.

The notion of the body and of trespassing in digital space is interesting as here the postcolonial and intersectional approach come to the fore. How is the body reinscribed in cyberspace and in what way does gender/race/ethnicity/age/ nationality/language/sexual preference influence in different ways the 'invasion' of normative online spaces? Where are the differences with the 'offline' spaces?

Reshaping divides into new hybrid, transcoded, multilayered spaces, we report how young Dutch-Moroccans become invaders of digital space in their use digital media applications. We will do so by looking at two spaces: online social networking sites,

where they align themselves through hypertext with the majority Dutch population in the mainstream of digital culture; and online discussion boards, where they shape and become the majority in their own hushed corner of the internet away from the mainstream.

Case 1: Online social networking sites and hypertextual selves

From our survey we learned that 86.4 % of Dutch youth and 77 % of young Dutch Moroccans report to log on to social networking sites at least once per week. Over half of Dutch youth and over one third of Dutch-Moroccan youth report to do so daily. We would like to focus on the presentation of self of youth as hypertextual selves here in our attempt to setup new and better mapping of the ways in which migrant youth mobilize various social, cultural, linguistic and other symbolic resources to establish new grounds for defining themselves and for relating to the cultural, social and political contexts around them.

Looking at hypertext, we aim to acknowledge the medium specificity and networked context of contemporary digitally mediated cultural identification. The figuration of hypertext (the establishing of links between multimedial, often user-generated, material) presents an informing angle to study the performativity of people in networked settings.

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. Social networking sites provide a template for users, which "*is a structure within which agents act*" (Davis, 2010). danah boyd and Nicole Ellison recognize that "*While their key technological features are fairly consistent, the cultures that emerge around Social Networking Sites are varied*" (2007). Already in the early days of the internet, feminist theorist Donna Haraway recognized "*although 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, p. 126).

A brief excursion through a number of profile pages on the Dutch social networking site Hyves set up by Dutch-Moroccan youth show that these youth individually hyperlink to and participate in many different online groups. We zoom in on the profile of a 13-year-old girl. Her page shows how cultural identification is a distributed practice. For instance she links to groups that deal with her food

preferences, such as global junk food like McDonalds. She contrasts it with being a Moroccan tea junky' and the Moroccan and Turkish kitchen. A demand for "*respect for wearing a headscarf*" is connected with a community such as "*Moroccan Male Hotties*" and "*Moroccans with brains*". She likes H&M and "*skinny jeans*" but she also shows her attachments to traditional "*Moroccan dresses*". Her religious affiliations are shown by linking to groups such as "*Hijab style*" and "*Islam = peace*" and she combines this by join "*I love Holland*". And she lists the group with an image of the Tiananmen square protests "*choosing for freedom*" with a group that goes by the statement "*women are in charge*".

This exemplary profile page showed unexpected coalitions of migrant youth as space invaders: minoritarian subjects align with majority groups through affiliating with global youth food preferences, activism and clothing styles. In their cultural-self profiling on line, the younger generations not only tap into immigrant heritage elements. Rather than a straightforward continuation of cultural legacies of their parents, such individuals are actively transforming those in ways that resonate with the dominant local and global youth cultures in which they grow up. Hypertextual presentations of self challenge the binaries between modes of cultural continuation versus assimilation of minoritarian cultures. They render the multiplicity of their cultural trajectories visible. Postcolonial scholar Jaishree Odin sums up how hypertext can be understood as a figuration to understand people living at the borders: *"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 characterizing 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, 2006, p. 356-357).

Case 2: Online discussion boards as gendered hush harbors

The second case study concerns online discussion boards. There, we recognize another dynamic, away from the mainstream of the Internet, the Dutch-Moroccan minority group becomes the majority group on the online discussion boards they setup and frequent. Earlier studies have suggested that in the Netherlands, online forums are especially popular among Dutch-Moroccan youth (Brouwer, 2006). The sites

Marokko.nl, Maroc.nl and Chaima.nl are mostly frequented by this group. For instance Marokko.nl has been estimated to reach a remarkable 70 to 75 percent of young Dutch-Moroccans

From our survey findings we learn that Dutch-Moroccan youth participate significantly more in online forum discussions than majority Dutch youth. 39.8% of young Dutch-Moroccans participate in forums at least weekly versus 25.2% of majority Dutch youth. They are also more attached to online forum discussions in comparison to majority Dutch youth. When examining other axes of differentiation, we found that among the Dutch-Moroccan youth in our sample, Dutch-Moroccan girls report to be more active users than boys. 50 percent of Dutch-Moroccan girls are active on discussion boards, much higher than the 30 percent of Dutch-Moroccan boys that are active.

Why do young Dutch-Moroccans flock to online discussion boards? Interviewees shared they gain a sense of belonging to a community there. "*it is your own circle [of people], sort o*f" (girl, 16 years). "*you can pleasantly talk with fellow Moroccans about all kinds of stuff*". It is a site, "*where you can just be with other Moroccans*" (girl, 15). It is a space where they can "just be" themselves. It has "*really that Moroccan atmosphere*" (girl, 16 years), generated by the use of Moroccan-Arabic and Berber words. Such symbolic resources help to articulate a bounded collective identity, excluding outsiders, who cannot voice themselves through these symbolisms.

Another recurrent theme is that as "often counter voices" circulate on the forums (girl, 15 years). There is "*often negative talk about Moroccan youth*" in the media. Those who post on these boards, interviewees mention, "*also look from good perspectives, about good things, instead of only bad things*" that have to do with Dutch-Moroccan youth. Scholar of African-American studies Nunley has recognized that "[*w]hat is unsayable in the public sphere gets said*" somewhere else, in what he describes as "hush harbors" (Nunley, cited in Campbell, 2009, p. 2). "*Historically, the term hush harbor refers to the places where slaves gathered to participate in various aspects of public life, hidden, unnoticed, and especially inaudible to their white masters*".

Communication scholar Dara Byrne likens online discussion forums that are frequented by ethnic minorities to such hush harbors. She understands digital hush harbors as important spaces that "*fly well below the mainstream radar*", where "*community-centered knowledges*" survive and circulate: "*Historically, the term hush*

harbor refers to the places where slaves gathered to participate in various aspects of public life, hidden, unnoticed, and especially inaudible to their white masters". Updating it to analyze contemporary digitally mediated counter public spheres, she argues that sites such as AsianAvenue.com, BlackPlanet.com, and MiGente.com are popular for the maintenance of "a sense of group cohesion and rhetorical practices that members perceive as being very valuable to their online lives because they are relatively free of *mass* participation by ethnic outsiders" (2008, p. 16-17). The hushedness of the discussion boards gets accentuated as informants report that the site, in their view, operates under the radar "*I don't know, I think that half of the [Dutch] people do not even know that it exists*" (girl, 15 years).

John Edward Campbell talked about hush harbors in last year's conference, as he argued that "*all people need a space where they feel safe untying their tongues and singing their songs*" (2009, p. 33). Interviewees emphasized especially the heated debates over the controversial Dutch anti-Islamic Member of Parliament Geert Wilders (on Marokko.nl). He sees veiled girls as unemancipated or backward and dismisses boys as Islamic radicals or street "terrorists". These youth feel more secure and confident to speak out on Marokko.nl. A 16-year-old girl shared with us: "*We speak about various Moroccan things, but we agree about one thing. For instance about Geert Wilders, all of Marokko.nl agrees that he is no good, or that he lost his mind*". A sense of freedom is enjoyed, away from the Islamophobic tensions in Dutch society. Users feel at home to disrupt stereotypes "*because yeah, you can defend yourself and say whatever you want, it is your opinion, and you can just give your view there*" (girl, 13). Being among fellow young Dutch-Moroccans also gives confidence, young people learn they do not stand alone, "*You can express your opinion [.]and you hear that [there are] others are similar to you*" (girl, 13 years)"

Michel De Certeau wrote about political dimensions to everyday practices, including subordinated people' encounters with dominant forms, calling their strategic maneuvers "*tactics.*" "*A tactic is determined by the absence of power*" and he therefore sees it as "*an art of the weak.*" He recognizes "*the space of the tactic is the space of the Other*" (1988, p. 37). He argues the weak can "make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. These ideas resonate with the ways in which our informants constitute Marokko.nl and other online discussion boards as hush harbors. Discussing societal conditions, Dutch-Moroccan in their practices of dwelling practices on discussion boards take up tactics

to negotiate their personal and collective encounters with dominant formations. Creating "*a space of the Other*" on the publicly accessible web, they have established and actively maintain their own corner of the internet. However, "*tactics*" remain heavily contested, as De Certeau recognized:

> *"It must play on the terrain imposed on it and organised by the law of a foreign power. It is a manoeuvre within the enemy's field of vision and within enemy territory. It operates in isolated actions, it takes advantage of the 'opportunities' and depends on them. What it wins it cannot keep"* (1988, p. 37)

Nancy Fraser argues that counter publics, when "*elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech*" the mainstream, "*in turn, excoriated these alternatives*" (1990, p. 61). Mainstream news and politics seem to replicate this process in their stance towards forums frequented by Dutch-Moroccan youth. "*The space of the Other*" becomes ghettoized. Public news media link discussion sites frequented by Dutch-Moroccan individuals to radicalism, with news paper items such as: *"How young Muslims in the Netherlands compose their radical worldview*" (Oostveen, 2004). These sites are dismissed as the underbelly of the unknown, segregated ghettos, grimy spaces disconnected from the mainstream: "*Getto's on the web; On the internet, every group creates its own truth*" (Hulsman, 2005).

Lastly we want to say a few words on why especially Dutch-Moroccan girls seem to be heavily engaged with online discussion forums. Our survey findings resonate with the demographic composition of the discussion board. Mahdauoi, co-founder of Marokko.nl states that a majority of 60% of visitors to Marokko.nl is female (Van der Zee, 2006; p. 53). We want to acknowledge that this gendered specificity must be situated in a wider web of intersecting power relations, adolescence, as experienced by migrant girls gets complicated by issues of race, generation, culture and nation. Sociologists Trees Pels and Mariëtte de Haan have noted that Dutch Moroccan boys are often "*allowed a wider radius of action outside the house*" (2003, p. 61), while Dutch-Moroccan girls are more confined to the domestic context.

Perhaps, because they spend more of their times indoors, they have sought for alternative ways to connect to others. Since a large number of Dutch-Moroccan girls can connect to the internet from their bedrooms (D'Haenens, Koeman and Saeys, 2007), they might enjoy a significant level of privacy while engaging with discussion forums. Sociologist Lenie Brouwer stresses that Dutch-Moroccan girls have turned to online discussion boards to express their voice: "*Dutch-Moroccan girls are more restricted in their freedom of movement than boys, and thus, the Internet widens their horizons.*"

Some girls report they sometimes find it easier to discuss '*hchouma*' or topics that transgress dominant offline cultural orders online. From the relative safety of their own homes, they report to experience a greater sense of freedom to discuss topics such as relationships, sexuality and to meet new friends.

> *you perhaps dare to say more on the internet. You know, you do more… at home me you can usually not talk about these things, otherwise you would have done that long ago. Than you can tell it online. And than you see what people on the internet have to say about it. And that might help you* (girl, 13 years).

A 16-year-old girl shared with us: *"these things I'm definitely not going to my parents 'Mom, dad, listen. Yes it is hchouma you know, I am shy to talk to my parents about these things* (girl, 16 years). Often from the relative safety of their bedrooms, our female informants experience a greater sense of freedom to discuss topics such as relationships, sexuality and meeting new friends on the forums. In sum, forums are important spaces where young Dutch-Moroccans belong to a community; counter dominant views and Dutch-Moroccan girls circulate knowledge from below.

Conclusions:

As we have discussed above according to Puwar space invaders are considered to be bodies out of place which cross, trespass, invade institutional setting where the norm is to be populated by mainstream, white, male, élite bodies. Women and minorities have, however, permeated those 'official' neutral spaces through top down practices (like the integration of minorities through multicultural policies) and bottom up approaches by creating countercultures and entering the no-go spaces through social climbing, education and other tactics to decolonize the dominant spaces. This is of

great relevance as comparison to the studies on digital divide which originally marked the exclusion of the have-nots, linked to education, access and competence but basically meaning the inferiority of gendered, ethnic and elderly bodies in online spaces, and the more recent understanding of it according to which literacy and skills can be interpreted in new hybrid, transcoded and multilayered ways. The understanding of space both as geographical and sociocultural norm offline and as a fluid and contested realm online has significantly changed over the last decades making bodies out of space the new agents, interactors and players for the reshaping of spaces, divides and platforms in transitions. In our example of Dutch Moroccan youth online we have explored two possibilities, for the sake of clarity presented here in stark and a bit schematic ways, in order to illustrate how bodies out of space offline enter the digital realm to renegotiate their place along majoritarian and minoritarian lines. We have tried to show how Dutch Moroccan migrant youth take up positions that have not been 'reserved' for them in the digital realm. They become space invaders in different ways. They showed to blend in with the majority on SNS, while simultaneously highlighting difference in terms of showcasing their hypertextual cultural trajectories. They stake out their own corner on the Internet in their use of online discussion boards, becoming the majority in their own digital space. As such the digital divide has been transformed into new forms of literacy and skills which are specific to migrant youth on line and which transform digital divides and forbidden space into new peer production of digital spaces.

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