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## Introduction



Fig. 1: "Mocro's be like. Born Here," tweet @Nasrdin\_Dchar (March 17, 2014)

*I want to say one thing! I am Dutch and yes my parents are from another country, Morocco just to make it clear, and I'm proud of that!! Because I have been raised with two totally different cultures and I'm happy to have been able to experience that*

– Meryam, fifteen-year-old (Facebook post, March 23, 2014)

"Do you want more or less Moroccans in this city and in the Netherlands?" This was the question Geert Wilders asked his audience during a party rally in The Hague. "Fewer, fewer, fewer!" chanted his supporters thirteen times before applauding. The audience had gathered on the occasion to celebrate

municipal election results.<sup>1</sup> To this, the leader of the anti-immigration and anti-Islam Party for Freedom (Dutch: Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV) smiled and made the promise: “then that will be arranged” (NOS, 2014). A storm of protest erupted, with several actions going viral online. On Twitter, using the hashtag #bornhere, Moroccan-Dutch celebrities such as the award-winning actor Nasrdin Dchar posted selfies showing their Dutch passports.<sup>2</sup> Many fellow Moroccan-Dutch people copied the tactic, #bornhere became a trending topic on Twitter, alongside other hashtags such as #spreadtheword, #bornthere, #leefhier (in English: living here), #ProudMoroccan, #mocro, #ookikbenederlands (in English: I’m also Dutch). In addition, more than 95,000 Facebook members liked the page “Ik doe aangifte tegen wilders” (I will report Wilders to the police) while 15,000 liked “Meer Marokkanen” (in English: More Moroccans). Eventually, more than 6,400 people reported Wilders’s rally to the police, and a similar number of complaints was filed with Dutch antidiscrimination agencies. The Dutch Public Prosecution Service (OM) announced in December 2014 they will prosecute Geert Wilders “on suspicion of insulting a population group based on race and inciting hatred and discrimination” (OM, 2014).

This book considers how Moroccan-Dutch youth, mostly born in the Netherlands, navigate digital spaces to articulate their politicized identities in a time when claims over the failure of multiculturalism, anti-immigration sentiments and Islamophobia sweep across Europe. *Digital Passages: Migrant Youth 2.0* addresses not only to how these mostly second-generation migrant youth navigate across digital spaces, but also considers the digitization of key identity-formation processes, such as coming of age, rites of passage and the negotiation of offline/online gender, diaspora, religious and youth cultural expectations. For example, Meryam, a fifteen-year-old informant who also participated in the #bornhere protests, is a headscarf-wearing girl who is called a “gangster” in her school because she likes hip-hop. With her

1 Geert Wilders made these comments at the moment exit polls from local elections in The Hague revealed the PVV was running neck-and-neck with the liberal-oriented Democrats 66 (Dutch: Democraten 66, D66). The PVV ended up in second place with 14% of the votes after the D66 with 15%.

2 Born in the Netherlands from parents who migrated to the Netherlands from Morocco as guest workers, Nasrdin Dchar is famous for his acceptance speech for winning the Golden Calf for best actor at the 2011 Dutch Film Festival: “A few months ago I read an article in which Minister Maxime Verhagen said that having fear of foreigners is very understandable. Well, Minister Verhagen and Geert Wilders and all those people that stand behind you: I’m a Dutchman. I’m very proud of my Moroccan blood. I am a Muslim and I have a fucking Golden Calf in my hands.”



Fig. 2: Geweigerd.nl website top banner (March 6, 2005)

Moroccan-Dutch friends, she posted selfies on Twitter, “Insta” (Instagram) and Facebook. Meryam mostly received positive comments and likes from coethnics, youth of other migrant backgrounds as well as ethnic-majority Dutch kids. However, in her Facebook post, she also addressed a few of her white Dutch classmates who had expressed sympathy with Wilders, writing she hoped they would change their minds: *“stop following someone who is so blind, you have to open your own eyes and think about what you say.”* To sign off she stated, *“the Netherlands is a free country so I wanna say, do whatever you wanna do.”* Inzaf, a fellow fifteen-year-old girl, shared *“I have filed a report myself. I have written that I’m of the opinion that he discriminates.”* She added, *“I have also had everyone I know file a report. You can do it online in no time.”* Geert Wilders’s speech and the responses triggered illustrate that in the Netherlands a particular configuration of cultural difference, whiteness and (secularized forms of) Christianity has gained prominence. Through such discourses, binaries and borders are constructed. As a result, Muslim and migrant bodies may be feared and considered out of place. Many migrant and minority groups do not fit the norms and are therefore not seen to fully belong to nations like the Netherlands, yet they live inside them.

Fifteen years ago, Moroccan-Dutch digital media enthusiast Abdelilah Amraoui initiated a movement in the Netherlands called Geweigerd.nl (*geweigerd* in English: denied) in direct response to the discrimination among owners of club venues and discotheques that required bouncers to refuse people entrance based on their ethnicity, race or religion. Amraoui started the website because he believes that with access to the Internet *“you can now create media yourself in case you cannot find it elsewhere.”* The site invited young people who felt they were wrongfully refused entry to a venue to submit their stories of being refused access. Figure 2 displays the top banner of the Geweigerd.nl website, an animated GIF image which combines (in) famous Dutch club logos with stop-signs and the “top five of bouncer excuses” such as “this is not a multicultural event” and “there

are already plenty of your sort inside.” Personal experiences sent in by young people were published on the site. Collecting personal stories of mainly frustrated Dutch ethnic-minority youth, Amraoui hoped to engage in dialogue with those places of entertainment in order to renegotiate their admission policies. The issue received wider attention after Amraoui collaborated with the nationally famous Moroccan-Dutch rapper Ali B. in the release of the song similarly titled “Geweigerd.nl” that also scrutinized unfair and discriminating admission policies.

#bornhere and *Geweigerd.nl* illustrate how Moroccan-Dutch youth become ‘digital space invaders.’ The concept of digital space invaders builds on Nirmal Puwar’s research on offline, institutionalized spaces where minority bodies are considered to be “out of place,” upon successfully entering those they become “space invaders” of locations “which have not been ‘reserved’ for them, for which they are not, in short, the somatic norm” (2004, p. 1). The metaphor of space invaders is developed in this book to empirically, theoretically and politically consider what happens when Moroccan-Dutch youth articulate digital identities across digital spaces where they may not be expected or fit the norms. The argumentation draws mostly from extensive qualitative empirical data; however, descriptive quantitative data of 344 Moroccan-Dutch survey participants is used to contextualize the findings. The qualitative fieldwork consisted of in-depth interviews with forty-three mostly second-generation, Moroccan-Dutch migrant youth across five cities in the Netherlands and a virtual ethnography of Internet forums, instant messaging (IM), social networking sites (SNSs) and video-sharing websites. Theoretically, I connect and intervene in dialogues across new media, gender, antiracial and postcolonial studies, critical geography, migration and transnationalism as well as religious studies. The focus is on how Internet platforms are appropriated by Moroccan-Dutch youth to position themselves between cultures of origin, youth cultures and cultures of immigration and how issues of gender, ethnicity and religion are negotiated.

## 1. Online/offline space and power relations

The lens of space invaders will be developed to excavate dominant positions in/of digital media and their subversion. Similar to offline institutions, across digital space, templates, norms and interface decisions reserve certain dominant consumer, national, gendered, ethnic and racial positions. These socio-technical processes have uneven spatial effects, both online



Fig. 3: Google.nl search for “Marokkanen” (June 28, 2012)

and offline. Space dynamically materializes and structures behavior at the interplay of how hierarchical social relations distribute bodies and how bodies position themselves (Foucault, 1980; Lefebvre, 1991; Grosz, 1995; Puwar, 2004; Gilbert, 2010; Soja, 2010; Ahmed, 2012). As summed up by Raka Shome: “a focus on spatial relations of power enables scholars of communication and culture to understand and theorize the complex ways in which identities are being reproduced in our current moment of globalization” (2003, p. 39).

For example, Figure 3 displays the dominant positions that the Google Netherlands search engine associates with “Marokkanen” (the Dutch word for Moroccans). The auto-complete search query suggestions that Google provides appear automatically upon typing “Marokkanen” in the search field. The auto-complete algorithm offers query suggestions in a drop-down list, predicting behavior based on queries typed previously by Google users as well as generating items on the basis of traffic, page visits and recently crawled websites (Google, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

3 The search was carried out in a Mozilla Firefox browser, using the “Private Browsing” settings, whilebeing signed out from a Google account, with “Web & App Activity” turned off and without having searched for the topic earlier. The results do thus not present my earlier search behavior or that of my contacts.



The search query suggestions reveal some of the ways young Moroccan-Dutch people are allocated particular narrow gendered and racialized positions in digital space. From top to bottom they can be translated from Dutch as follows: “Moroccan jokes,” “Moroccans must die” and “Moroccans and Polish people.” The suggestions on “Moroccan jokes” provide results of websites that host offensive anti-immigration, anti-Islam and racist jokes. The second suggestion points the Google user toward discussion forums where right-wing extremists discriminate against ethnic others. For example, Google’s third search result links toward a forum posting on MeetHolland.com where a user left the following comment about Moroccan-Dutch youth: “Those rotten bastards must die!!!!!!! Dirty, cowardly, disgusting, stinking cancer goats” (Wilders, 2005, my translation from Dutch). The third suggestion equates Moroccan-Dutch people with Polish guest workers arriving after the recent EU expansion. Simultaneously, without having pressed the search button, results are shown, including Google Image Search results. The four results are all stereotypical images of aggressive masculine street culture representing Moroccan-Dutch youth as dangerous loiterers and the inclusion of a policeman emphasizes Moroccan-Dutch boys as troublemakers.

The auto-complete algorithm (which is partly based on the search-term popularity among prior users) exemplifies sedimented ideas that emphasize particular associations and stereotypes of Moroccan-Dutch people – particularly those voiced by right-wingers rather than others. Spearheaded by the anti-Islamic Geert Wilders and the sensationalist press, young people of Moroccan migrant descent are often seen as a problem. Moroccan-Dutch boys are dismissed as strangers to Western democracies, possibly dangerous Islamic fundamentalists, terrorists or thieves while headscarf-wearing girls, in particular, are constructed as either un-emancipated and backward or oppressed by Muslim culture. In the context of the United States, danah boyd similarly argued that when, for instance, searching for the name “Mohammed” Google auto-complete suggestions provide suggestions related to Islamic extremism and terrorism. She defines this process as a form of “guilt through algorithmic association,” as the search suggestions for Mohammed exemplify how people can be “algorithmically associated with practices, organizations, and concepts that paint them in a problematic light” (boyd, 2011a). Similarly, Eighteen-year-old Safae told me after her friend who covers her hair uploaded a picture on the Dutch social networking site Hyves, somebody sent her a message that stated “*we live in 2010, a headscarf is out-dated, and it’s something of the past.*” Thus, digital spaces are not mere mute, neutral and external backdrops of identity formation, but distinct expressive cultures filled with ideologies, hierarchies and politics. These

two examples remind us that digital space is not neutral but power-ridden: indeed, new digital divides are constructed this way.

### Digital divides

Inequality in/of the Internet has first and foremost been considered with the digital divide metaphor. Scholarship on digital divides initially focused on making visible material divides across static geographic scales and across markers of difference. An uneven geographical distribution in terms of ownership of hardware and access to the Internet was noted: the rich, overdeveloped parts of the world were highly connected, while underdeveloped third countries were disconnected. Ownership and access was also unequally spread across different isolated axes of differentiation: younger and/or white and/or upper-class males were found to be more connected versus older and/or nonwhite and/or lower-class females. Used this way, the term “digital divide” is thus ideologically loaded, particular in its proposal that once the gap is closed, a “computer-revolution” will take place, spreading democracy, promoting equality and potentially ending poverty (Murelli & Okot-Uma, 2002). Emerging in the early 2000s, the second wave of scholarship on the digital divide shifted its focus from access and ownership toward skills and literacies. The gaps between “the information haves” and the “information have-nots” were again purported as operating at geographical and personal markers of difference (Selwyn, 2004). Policy makers and government institutions mobilized resources to provide the information have-nots with the skills for a more egalitarian distribution of knowledge.

Focusing on digital spatial hierarchies and their contestations, using feminist, postcolonial/antiracist, critical geography and Internet studies approaches this book contributes to a new wave of scholarship aiming to situate digital divides in everyday user contexts. There is an urgent need to acknowledge that so-called “have-nots” are people who are embedded in an intersectional web of power relations differentiated along axes including gender, race, religion and generation (Gilbert, 2010). As nonmainstream users, they may possess agency to appropriate digital spaces in order to counter or negotiate exclusion (Leurs, 2015). A grounded and intersectional perspective allows us to move beyond technologically deterministic utopian and dystopian renderings of social media use. On the one hand, promising alternative ways of being and the collapse of difference, postmodernism and neoliberal progress reconciled in a Californian ideology that framed cyberspace as a disembodied, equalizing, liberating, democratizing and empowering world separated from

the offline world (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011a). On the other side of the spectrum, techno-pessimists have made sweeping dystopian remarks in response to utopian appraisal of the Internet. Most famously, Jaron Lanier warns that digital technologies make us lose democracy, devalue individuality and deaden creativity (2010) and Evgeny Morozov argues Internet activism is a delusion that makes us unable to recognize technologies are used for the purposes of propaganda, manipulation, censorship and surveillance (2011). These two perspectives, however, are not helpful to explain why migrant young people who encounter excluding practices online are still also heavy users.

So-called Web 2.0 Internet applications promise users to become active agents over their own representations. Internet applications such as blogs and SNSs signal the ongoing shift from people being represented by the media to people asserting self-presentation. Internet researchers have reached consensus in seeing the Internet as “an extension of life as it is, in all its dimensions, and all its modalities” (Castells, 2001, p. 118). As more users are promised to have a presence online, scholars need to start acknowledging the inherent unevenness in the ways in which they call all to make a contribution to digital culture (Graham, 2011). Unfortunately, Web 2.0 is no great equalizer, digital territories augment material, fleshy and concrete power relations of offline lives: indeed, “self-representation is actually a condition of participation in Web 2.0” (Thumim, 2012, p. 17). As audience members are increasingly also expected to construct a representation of themselves to sustain a public presence, Nick Couldry asked the question “are changing norms and expectations of presencing generating new types of political repertoire”? (2012, p. 51). The answer is yes, in tandem with offline locations, any digital space should be seen as organized around a durable but not fixed “habitus” of embedded hierarchical divisions (Kvasny, 2005; Freishtat & Sandlin, 2010; Leurs, 2015b; Papacharissi & Easton, 2013).

When considering Internet applications as platforms, their intricate functioning becomes more obvious. As an actual and symbolic stage from where to speak and perform actions, the “platform” is a semantic construct that combines computational and architectural fundamentals with socio-cultural and political figurative imaginations (Gillespie, 2010). Digital practices increasingly take place in distinct spaces, resulting in a “platformed sociality” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 5). Such platforms on the “Internet hails its audiences” in a way that is similar to how nondigital environments are intended for particular groups of people (Nakamura & Lovink, 2005, p. 61). As a result, there is a need to consider not only different levels of access but how through “differentiating practices” some digital identities are relegated to the periphery and some are privileged (Sims, 2013).

Repurposing Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of the habitus, online platforms can be considered as social structures where communities of practice engage in digital practices that cultivate habituated dispositions. Conceptually, a habitus dialectically emerges at the interplay of structure and agency, and continuity and change. In the words of Bourdieu, the habitus emerges around

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72)

The user is both the creator and product of their habitus, and micro-politics resides in the individual, subjective strategies of meaning making that may challenge or reproduce organizational principles.

Across online platforms, habituated routines offer users a sense of stability, while everyday sociality is constantly evolving, most notably in the lives of the informants during their dynamic life phase of adolescence. For example, normative behavior on the social networking site Facebook is shaped and disciplined through the habitus of mainstream digital practice “in ways that are similar to the ways they perform in face-to-face interaction – policing the persona and actions of others within the social norms associated with those personas in particular cultural contexts” (Freishtat & Sandlin, 2010, p. 517). In contrast to Bourdieu, scholars have flagged that markers of difference such as gender, race and class impact upon habitual “embedded predispositions” of individuals and coconstruct digital taste preferences (Papacharissi & Easton, 2010, p. 177). However, so far little attention is paid to how these markers intersect in the everyday life of marginalized users across different locations where digital culture is expressed (Gilbert, 2010). The general lack of scrutiny of how intersecting power relations relate to spatial configurations of Internet applications is problematic because digital spaces are not neutral and/or innocent.

### **Internet platforms as passages**

Building on the analogy of Internet platforms as passages and the notion of invasion of space I carve out a middle-ground position to account for how nonmainstream people in their everyday use are hailed and bound by

but not fully determined by medium-specific characteristics, commercial incentives and user norms. First I will posit that Walter Benjamin's work on passages can be transposed to theorize social and symbolic meanings attributed to technological developments. In the mid-nineteenth century, arcades or pedestrian passageways ('passages' in French) emerged in Brussels, Bologna and Paris among other places. Historically, the term "arcade" refers to a pedestrian passageway that links two streets. Unlike public space, this glass, iron or brick roofed passage is open at both ends and concentrates a row of commercial establishments (shops, cafés, restaurants) in a small space. In the words of Walter Benjamin, arcades were "the most important architecture of the nineteenth century" (1999, p. 834). In parallel, it can be argued that nowadays, social media platforms play a fundamental role in the daily lives of millions of people.

Benjamin recognized that passages carried an ambivalent meaning, as objects of history they simultaneously contained a "dream and wish image of the collective." He observed the dialectic tension between collective desires and exploitative "ruins." Indeed, Benjamin urged to reflect on the social and technological imaginaries surrounding arcades by assessing whether technology users were truly "emancipated" (1999, p. 115). As a "technical organ of the collective," innovations such as the arcades were imagined as a "new nature": "these images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social order." "Caught in a dream," Benjamin added "the new, in order to shape itself visually, always connects its elements with those pertaining to a classless society." The "new nature" furthering utopian imaginings remains "concealed within machines." Instead of these imaginations, Benjamin argued for the figuration of "ambiguity." The role of the arcade is double-faced, as Benjamin exemplifies: "during sudden rainshowers, the arcades are a place of refuge for the unprepared, to whom they offer a secure, if restricted, promenade – one from which the merchants also benefit" (1999, p. 31). Neither skepticism nor evangelism captures the dynamics of passages completely, and Benjamin argued for a consideration of its "constellation saturated of tensions" (1999, p. 475).

Although focused on the scrutiny of economic power relations in a striated modernizing society, the argument can be expanded to account for the ambiguous power relations with regards to politics and culture technologies sometimes conceal. Insights on ambiguous power relations in a modern, democratizing and urban mass society allow us to draw parallels to contemporary forms of exclusion, distinction, and contestation. Similarly in their scrutiny of Internet culture, critical media and feminist theorists

have developed a creative, ambiguous middle-ground position between the utopian dreams and dystopian nightmare perspectives that were dominant in writings on digital embodiment, identity, and activism. For example, Judy Wajcman unravels the constellation of gendered technologies from the perspective of “mutual shaping,” “where neither gender nor technology is taken to be preexisting, nor is the relationship between them immutable” (2007, p. 287; Van Doorn & Van Zoonen, 2009). In particular, I will empirically sustain how the situated negotiating of hierarchies and inequalities online may be an empowering experience.

### **Space invader tactics**

My middle-ground perspective acknowledges early-twenty-first-century Internet platforms – analogous to nineteenth-century arcades – as ambiguous constellations full of tensions and hierarchies but with room for subversion. Power emerges at the interplay of top-down forces that Michel Foucault described as “the great strategies of geopolitics” and everyday subversion from below which he labels as “little tactics of the habitat” (1980, p. 149). Institutional and corporate power “strategies” may be negotiated by individuals or collectives through potentially subversive everyday life “tactics” (De Certeau, 1984). Accounting for both negative experiences of exclusion and positive experiences of agency and empowerment, digital practices are coconstructed by digital-space-specific user norms, application templates and interface decisions as well as their subversions. Spatial boundaries and hierarchies are not visible to those who can freely flow, they only show when bodies cannot pass and physically or metaphorically bang their head into a wall: “When a category allows us to pass into the world, we might not notice that we inhabit that category. When we are stopped or held up by how we inhabit what we inhabit, then the terms of habitation are revealed to us. We need to rewrite the world from the experience of not being able to pass into the world” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 176). This book documents such experiences as felt among young migrants in the digital realm.

During fieldwork, for instance, it became apparent that in video game culture, the tide of anti-immigrant feelings is perpetuated online. From the experiences of interviewees Ryan and Oussema, I learned that computer game culture is structured by mainstream Dutch normative and habituated ways of being. Fifteen-year-old Oussema shared that he often encounters racism and stigmatization in video games. He explained having similar experiences away from the screen. He mentioned, for instance,

being frustrated when seeing people anxiously keep a firm grip on their purses upon encountering him in the supermarket. In the first-person shooter game *Counter-Strike*, players have the opportunity to talk to each other through their headsets and microphones. After saying, “*I am a Moroccan, I am a Muslim*,” when asked to introduce himself by people in the game, Oussema sometimes finds ethnic-majority Dutch opponents cursing him out and calling him a “*terrorist*.” In contrast, Fifteen-year-old Ryan explains that he feels accepted as a gamer, because he argues he does “*not look like a Moroccan*,” in the sense that he is seen as “*very different from what normal Moroccan youth in my school do, they mostly use MSN, YouTube and listen to music*.” He feels gaming is more “*Dutch culture*” and it is mostly “*Dutch kids who play games*.” He is accepted, as a space invader tactic he backgrounds his Moroccan affiliations during in-game interaction using voice-chat programs like Skype or Teamspeak: “*When I talk I do not appear to be Moroccan*.” On his Hyves SNS profile page he also subverts the dominant image of Moroccan-Dutch youth: “*When someone sees me there, they say I do not look like a Moroccan, but obviously I am one, but I do not let it show*.” Masking his Moroccanness, Ryan passes as an ethnic-majority Dutch boy.

Ryan’s act of passing acts offers self-protection but also reflects his desires to be accepted by the majority group (Sánchez & Schlossberg, 2001). Nakamura notes that “racial impersonation” is a form of passing that “reveals a great deal about how people ‘do’ race online.” However, she argues that passing does keep the foundations of dominant exclusionary, white national identities intact (2002, pp. xvi, 37). The ambivalence of passing is elaborated by postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha, who recognizes processes of passing as “mimicry.” Mimicry offers camouflage and can become a site of resistance and transgression. The other achieves “partial presence” by passing for something one is not and “becoming a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (1994, pp. 122-123). Ryan does so by strategically employing dominant Dutch cultural repertoires and making less visible the ways he diverges from majority norms while emphasizing resemblances. These examples illustrate that digital terrains are hierarchical passageways, they are uneven geographies marked by material, symbolic and affective borders. Young, white, masculine and middle-class bodies participating in mainstream digital spaces produce and occupy certain habituated dispositions, ideal types and mainstream reserved positions, but young migrants can begin to destabilize representational hierarchies by using digital space invader tactics to manifest themselves across different online territories.