

Considerations on the Digital Subaltern: Researching Migrant Women's Transnational Online Practices

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On April 2016, the Guardian released on its site a report named 'The dark side of Guardian comments'.³ The aim of the report was to analyse the content of more than 70 million comments left on the site since 2006, exploring patterns and dynamics of online harassment. As stated in the report, 'the first quantitative evidence' is that 'articles written by women attract more abuse and dismissive trolling than those written by men, regardless of what the article is about';⁴ furthermore, the report observed that 'ethnic and religious minorities, and LGBT people also appear to experience a disproportionate amount of abuse'. Internet is not a neutral, disembodied and value-free space,⁵ as the report shows. The gendered, geo-political, racial character of online harassment on the Guardian demonstrates the existence of a matrix of power relations which put the online and offline realms not at distance but as intertwined, mutually shaped realities.

My aim in this paper is to show how the postcolonial approach can be highly productive for the development of digital media studies, exposing the hierarchical and multiple characters of power dynamics which influence complex social phenomena, including digital ones.⁶ As part of the team working for the ERC consolidator project 'Digital Crossings in Europe: Gender, Diaspora and Belonging'⁷ headed by Sandra Ponzanesi, my interest is in investigating the relation between female migration and digital technologies, through the use of a mixed methodology which encompasses ethnographic research and digital methods to gather quantitative data from different digital media platforms. I will inquire on the symbolical and concrete consequences that transnational and local digital connectedness has on migrant women's experiences of displacement, resettlement and everyday life in a specific urban setting, which in my case will be Rome. This project has also a comparative aim, focusing on women who belong

³ Becky Gardiner and others, 'The Dark side of Guardian comments', *The Guardian*, April 12, 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/12/the-dark-side-of-guardian-comments>> [accessed April 09, 2017].

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ María Fernández, 'Postcolonial Media Theory', *Art Journal*, 58.3 (1999), 58–73.

⁶ Sandra Ponzanesi and Koen Leurs, 'On Digital Crossing in Europe', *Crossings, Journal of Migration and Culture*, 5.1 (2014), 3–22.

⁷ For more information: <http://www.digitaleurope.nl/> [accessed April 09, 2017].

to three different communities, the Somali, Romanian and Turkish ones. The choice of these three communities is based in the matter of how the use of digital technologies is intertwined with different histories for transnational mobilities. The comparison will outline the impact that postcolonial, postsocialist and post-labour migration pasts have on processes of diasporic identity construction. Consequently, it will be possible the identification of those intersectional economic, political, racial, gendered and cultural forces⁸ which differently impact on migrant women's experience of displacement and on their access or use of digital technologies. Attentiveness towards structural impediments will help, in other words, to give meaning to the everyday 'multiple identifications',⁹ strategies and agency that women perform through transnational online practices.¹⁰

Terms such as *connectivity*, *links*, *crossings* are recurrent in digital media studies. Despite that recurrence, it is essential to investigate the space which is positioned in between, the territory which is crossed: the border. The imaginative and concrete deployment of the concept of 'border' gives to the researcher a privileged perspective to look at social patterns, showing the matrix of power relations that are enacted when the subject tries to cross them. Borders are a space in which mechanisms of systemic construction of 'us' and hierarchically intelligible 'Others'¹¹ are set in place, and are hence 'part of the discursive materiality of power relations'.¹²

The digital realm represents another dimension in which these mechanisms are reproduced. The role and level of agency of the 'connected migrant'¹³, as a subject who actively creates a culture of bonds through everyday digital border-crossing practices, is subjected to these dynamics. Rejecting a blind utopianism that considers the Internet as a space that enables infinite possibilities for identity construction and allows social relations based on networks of *peer* subjects,¹⁴ I see the online reality as entrenched in gendered, classed, racial ascriptions¹⁵ influencing one subject's voicing and online (in)visibility. This brings me to

⁸ Pramod K. Nayar, *An Introduction to New Media and Cybercultures* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁹ Radhika Gajjala, 'An Interrupted Postcolonial/Feminist Cyberethnography: Complicity and Resistance in the "Cyberfield"', *Feminist Media Studies*, 2.2 (2002), 177–93.

¹⁰ Mirca Madianou, 'Migration and the Accentuated Ambivalence of Motherhood: the role of ICTs in Filipino transnational families', *Global Networks*, 12.3 (2012), 277–95.

¹¹ Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London, NY: Verso, 1991)

¹² Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 198.

¹³ Dana Diminescu, 'The Connected Migrant: An Epistemological Manifesto', *Social Science Information*, 47.4 (2008), 565–79.

¹⁴ Judy Wajcman, 'From Women and Technology to Gendered Technoscience', *Information, Communication & Society*, 10.3 (2007), 287–98.

¹⁵ Lisa Nakamura, Peter A. Chow-White, *Race after the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002); *Cyberculture and the Subaltern: Weavings of the Virtual and Real*, ed. by Radhika Gajjala (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

Considerations on the Digital Subaltern

one of my central research questions which borrow very much from Spivak's¹⁶ concerns: when, how and at what price can the *digital* Subaltern speak? Where is the space of agency for the connected migrant?

Imagining the Subaltern's voice as 'hearable' or not at all is a very common framework but, nevertheless, highly problematic.¹⁷ A change of perspective is needed here, shifting the focus from 'borders' as inexpugnable barriers to their conceptualisation as 'points of contact'. Borders are a porous and creational locus, a place where individuals are exposed to different encounters which transform the barrier in a 'contact surface'.¹⁸ In this context, digital media are a liminal space where first strategies thought to overcome social, economic, cultural, political, gender constraints are set in place. The deployment of a postcolonial paradigm can help to avoid the risk of researching on these 'new constellations of power'¹⁹ reducing the analysis on binary oppositions which inscribe diasporic digital practices merely as forms of empowerment/oppression following a Western-centric approach to the study of media consumption,²⁰ and hiding the complex, multiple and contextual ways through which different Subaltern voices emerge or are 'permitted' to emerge.²¹

Of course, theory alone cannot explain the influence that digital connectedness has on the creation of diasporic subjectivities, which can only be inquired on the field, both online and offline. In this site, my aim was specific, and merely interested in complicating the debate on digital media studies and migration, outlining some of the main conceptual frameworks that postcolonial theory gives to my research in order to discern the complex entanglement of power hierarchies, asymmetrical social relations and hegemonic discourses in studying digital media usage.

¹⁶ Gayatri Ch. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

¹⁷ Gajjala, *Cyberculre and the Subaltern*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

¹⁹ Mirjam de Bruijn and Rijk van Dijk, 'Connecting and Change in African Societies: Examples of "Ethnographies of Linking" in Anthropology', *Anthropologica*, 54.1 (2012), 45–59.

²⁰ Raka Shome, 'When Postcolonial studies meets media studies', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 33.3 (2016), 245–63.

²¹ Gajjala, *Cyberculre and the Subaltern*, p. 15.