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Autor*innen/Author(s): Shola Adenekan, Julia Borst, Linda Maeding

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Author contact: borst@uni-bremen.de

Introduction to the special issue on *Textures of Diaspora and (Post-)Digitality – A Cultural Studies Approach* (guest editors: Shola Adenekan, Julia Borst, Linda Maeding)

Textures of Diaspora and (Post-)Digitality – A Cultural Studies Approach

Shola Adenekan, University of Ghent (Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Campus Boekentoren, Blandijnberg 2, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium), sholaadenekan@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-2703-8669

Julia Borst, University of Bremen (FB 10/Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften, Universitäts-Boulevard 13, 28359 Bremen, Germany), borst@uni-bremen.de, ORCID: 0000-0002-4068-0851

Linda Maeding, University of Bremen (FB 10/Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften, Universitäts-Boulevard 13, 28359 Bremen), maeding@uni-bremen.de, ORCID: 0000-0003-0791-0747

Abstract:

This editorial of the special issue ‘Textures of Diaspora and (Post-)Digitality – A Cultural Studies Approach’ explores the digital agency of diasporic communities by showing how cultural and literary studies genuinely contribute to scholarly debates and our understanding of digital diasporas. It explores the implications of the digital in a (post-)digital age, one in which the notion of diaspora is used to refer to actual ethnic, religious, etc. communities and to collectives that do not necessarily share any common origin or history but articulate their communality through a ‘diaspora rhetoric.’ It uses an approach that concentrates on the medial, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of diasporic (self-)representations, positionings and practices in cyberspace. It brings into focus the ‘textures’ of these communities and points to the need to decode diasporic imageries and the many meanings of those portrayals. It studies the textual and visual language with which diasporic communities are imagined in the digital space.

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diaspora studies, digital diaspora, (post-)digitality, imagined communities, cultural studies, literary studies, diasporic textures, digital aesthetics

Textures of Diaspora and (Post-)Digitality – A Cultural Studies Approach

This special issue emerged from the international workshop on “Diaspora and (Post-)Digitality – Imagined Communities in Cyberspace” (28-29 August 2020), organized by Shola Adenekan (formerly Amsterdam), Julia Borst (Bremen) and Linda Maeding (Bremen/Madrid) at the University of Bremen, Germany (see Borst and Maeding 2021). The workshop’s central aim was to ask for the genuine contribution a cultural and literary studies’ perspective can make to the soaring debate surrounding digital diaspora – a term widely discussed in particular in social sciences and migration and media studies – and its implications in a (post-)digital age.

The growing popularity of diaspora studies is happening around the same time as the news media and the arts and literature are showing a renewed interest in diasporic movements. This is a tendency, one can argue, that is linked to the phenomena surrounding globalization, particularly transmigration and transnationalization. In our age, migration, identity and nationalism are topics constantly being discussed in the media. They are of particular importance due to the increasing digital presence of diverse groups, including diasporic communities, that create and negotiate self-images and digitally perform identity positionings. Articles in this volume indicate that the digital space provides a robust way of articulating the ideas of home and homeland. Home is not merely where people live; it is also where they congregate as part of a community with a shared identity, and this community may be online as well as in the physical space. The homeland, however, may exist as a space physically far away or as a site of a memory of lost or imagined space. The discourse on diaspora is at the core of these online and offline communities, and, of equal importance, diaspora is at the core of the discourses on belonging, marginalization and privilege. Cyberspace reflects much of the power dynamic of the physical space (Adenekan 2021), giving rise to digital stagings of ethnicity, ‘race’, class, gender, sexuality and religion, as well as of the intersections of these regimes of inequality within cyberspace, which urgently need to be discussed.

In this context, we need to revisit and re-think William Safran’s (1991) classic notion of diaspora as (among others) a minority community defined by physical separation, a memory – or, even a myth – about a lost homeland and the idea of a desire of actual return. As Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer stress in the *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies* (2018), such a concept of diaspora had to be extended and modified to allow us to study dispersed diasporic communities as transnational, multi-layered formations characteristic of a postcolonial, globalized and digitalized world in an era of rising migration and (physical and virtual) mobility. Studies of the African diaspora, for instance, have shown that the idea of home can be vague and illusory (Falola 2013). The ‘homeland’ can be (purely) symbolic, opaque and unknown, as Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant has put into words in his famous *Discours antillais* (1997 [1981]). Similarly, for several groups that refer to themselves, or are referred to, as diaspora, the frames of reference have diversified as their members no longer necessarily share the same origin but tend to conceptualize diasporic affiliation through shared histories or experiences (Clifford 1994).

While diasporic communities, in general, rely on the media to counteract their basic condition – dispersion –, the internet has created unprecedented opportunities for transterritorial networking both with the homeland and between decentralized diasporic networks. Koleade Odutola (2012) uses the term ‘cyber-framing’ when discussing how cyberspace enables digitally-wired Africans, based outside the continent, to shape and re-frame the way they and their societies are seen and perceived. Furthermore, in times of rising digitalization, we are aware that even the diasporic community itself might not be situated in a specific ‘hostland’ or in a shared geographical space. In some cases, the shared diasporic space has shifted – in parts or exhaustively – to the virtual sphere. What about these digital diasporic communities that

primarily or exclusively exist – and are ‘imagined’ (Anderson 1983) – in cyberspace? How do diasporic subjectivities and practices shift with regard to digitality if we consider that, for many migrant (and postmigrant) communities, the digital space is a site for everyday cultural engagement?

Recent research on migration, diaspora and digitality (e.g., Appadurai 2019, 2008; Bailey et al. 2007; Georgiou 2013; Hepp et al. 2011; Leurs 2015) has shown that digital networks and social media are crucial in diasporic community building as they play a decisive role in the self-imaginings of communities and the creating of diasporic public spheres; a trend that has gained momentum through digital technologies and the internet. New information and communication technologies (ICTs) can enable marginalized groups to destabilize mainstream views, challenge homogenizing narratives of nation states and become active agents in their own representations. The internet has opened up a digital ‘Über-All’ (Grasmuck/Wahjudi 2000: n.pag.), an ambivalent German neologism meaning ‘every-where’ but whose particular orthography also resonates an ‘overarching universe’. There, local communities overlap, network globally and synergize, potentially constituting a new joint virtual space that symbolically substitutes and/or complements an abandoned or non-existing ‘homeland’. Mihaela Nedelcu (2018) actually states that the digital diaspora does not oppose the traditional diaspora but rather reflects and recreates its agency in the digital age. Cyberspace, thus, allows new diasporic subjectivities to emerge and gives rise to digitally mediated de-territorialized and transnational diasporic formations that impact the offline world. Consequently, the notion of ‘digital diaspora’ is widely discussed nowadays (e.g., Candidatu et al. 2019; Gajjala 2019; Nedelcu 2018) in explorations of how ICTs affect diasporic ties and memories. It is used to explain how the internet can act as a displaced diasporic space where a diasporic consciousness is created or re-created through shared imaginations. However, we also need to ask if the opportunities really are the same for everyone and which hegemonic power relations smolder in an allegedly democratic digital space (e.g., Leung 2020).

Furthermore, this special issue ties in with the theorizing of Sandra Ponzanesi (2020) and Laura Candidatu, Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi (2019), who have been advocating for a relational approach of critical digital diaspora studies. They emphasize the pluri-connectedness of the (digital) diasporic subject – a subject conceptualizing versatile networks of belonging(s) that not only nurse the traditional connection to the homeland but also give rise to new and unanticipated relations transcending the homeland/hostland polarity. We agree with the results of their pioneering research on digital diaspora that, when it comes to theorizing digital diasporic fabrics and formations, a new approach is needed: a relational approach allowing us to consider the diverse diasporic constellations and positionings imagined online. We thus also believe that, in this context, a cultural and literary studies’ approach is needed: an approach that reads digitally staged (self-)representations as coded constellations of signs and allows the different layers of diasporic imageries to be decoded. Accordingly, the diasporic communities investigated in this special issue range along a continuum, one that starts with conceptualizations of actual ethnic communities and progresses to collectives that share not necessarily a common origin but rather a social experience, as in the case of the ‘Black minority’ in France analyzed by Pap Ndiaye in *La condition noire* (2008), before culminating in an all but metaphorical use of the term to describe groups such as online gaming communities, for instance, that do not exhibit any of the original features of a diaspora but use a ‘diaspora rhetoric’ to articulate communality.

Yet, exploring the notion of diaspora not only requires us to overcome the dichotomy of ‘here’ and ‘there’ to look into the continuities and overlappings. Here, thoughts must turn to how the idea of the diaspora is simultaneously a function of digitality and physicality. Diaspora is performed, reenacted and experienced in real-time as a functionality of digital

interconnectedness and as an affirmation of physical presence. The diaspora exists as a function of physical-cyberspace symbiotic existence. This signposts us to the idea of postdigitality, with the notion of the ‘postdigital’ pointing us to the necessity to overcome the opposition of a digital and an analog reality, two dimensions that cannot be studied in isolation (Cramer 2014). Even at the threshold to the 21st century, Nicholas Negroponte (1998) proclaimed that we live in a world in which the analog and the virtual sphere keep converging. Negroponte described this new condition in ‘Beyond Digital’ as a non-territorial form of existence in a global(ized) world characterized not only by the erosion of the nation as physical proximity gradually loses importance in forming communities. He also heralded the end of the digital revolution as the digital has been absorbed by and soaked into all spheres of modern life, also the analog ones. Therefore, the presence of digital devices and ICTs is no longer noticed – ‘[l]ike air and drinking water’ (Negroponte 1998: n.pag.).¹ Negroponte’s vision was prophetic at the turn to the new millennium and is even more relevant today. The concept of postdigitality, thus, refers to a configuration in which the analog and the digital inextricably intermingle. It requires us to critically revisit the debate on the potentials of digitality: the utopian dimension of transnational online community-building and solidarization are increasingly challenged as the power asymmetries of the ‘real’ world jut into the digital sphere, a controversial aspect many of this special issue’s articles raise.

The contributors to this special volume, thus, want to explore the entanglements of diasporic communities, their digital presence and notions of (post-)digitality. They aim at providing new theoretical ideas and discuss case studies from different cultural spaces, looking for both commonalities and discrepancies in the digital (re-)presentations of ‘traditional’ diasporic groups as well as other (e.g., non-ethnic) groups that use the label ‘diaspora’ to describe and articulate their particular experience of marginalization as opposed to those of a majoritarian society. This special issue’s goal is to examine the medial, cultural and aesthetic nature of those representations as well to take a decidedly cultural-scientific look at the ‘textures’ of the diasporic movements: *textures* being a concept that not only refers to the structuredness of digital platforms but also to the textuality of online diasporic positionings. These are inscribed with meanings that need to be unraveled and construed to disclose the inventory of narratives shaping a symbolic diasporic community building.

Rather than focus on the sociology of digital diasporas in Europe, this issue’s contributions, emerging from the fields of Anglophone, German and Romance cultural and literary studies, draw on their disciplines’ strengths to critically examine the discursive strategies, narratives and symbolism that arise in the context of diasporic positionings in cyberspace. Adopting an approach that goes beyond a pure sociologic or ethnographic reading of websites, they unfold such a perspective’s potential to decode diasporic imageries, decipher their meanings and study the textual and visual language used by a diasporic community to establish a vision of collectivity. Looking beyond the referential function of language, they aim to unveil the functioning of shared symbols and narratives that give rise to a collective system of (symbolic) references on the basis of which diasporic communities are conceptualized and imagined online.

In this context, we argue with Arjun Appadurai (2008) that the transnational circulation of shared narratives and symbols on digital platforms perpetuates diasporic public spheres. It allows these frequently marginalized communities to create their own archives, as Koen Leurs

¹ Interestingly, Negroponte uses two elements – air and drinking water – that have been considered a matter of course but that, particularly in recent years and to an increasing degree, have found their way into the ongoing debates about the unequal distribution and accessibility of natural resources like clean air or clean and sufficient drinking water, which echo the global power asymmetries in a modern/colonial world. Similarly, access to the internet and digital literacy is not the same everywhere and for everyone, an aspect that needs to be considered when exploring the digital agency of diasporic communities and other marginalized groups.

showed in his keynote lecture at the Bremen conference in August 2020 – archives that enable them to renegotiate memories and (re-)think diasporic identities. The internet as an interactive space offers them the textures to imagine themselves as a community, create self-images and identity positionings and, from a ‘subaltern’ perspective, thwart exclusion by employing a strategic identity politics. That politics, while being aware of the dangers of essentializing, employs positively connotated self-images to claim a collective identity and gain agency as a group (Borst and Gallo González 2019). These textures, however, do not just reflect objective facts and experiences but are shaped by their rhetorical and poetic structures, which is where our contributors’ cultural and literary analyses tie in.

The first text of this special issue is an activist contribution written by Afrofeminist and antiracist activist and director of the widely read Spain-based digital journal *Afrofeminas* **Antoinette Torres Soler**. It explores the importance of online activism for Black and racialized people (in Spain and elsewhere) in shaping their own narratives and stories online. It shows how digital networks enable Black and racialized people to overcome systemic obstacles that tend to silence these communities but, at the same time, does not conceal that the internet is no power-free space.

Julia Brühne and **Hauke Kuhlmann** examine whether the concept of diaspora can be extended to describe internet communities such as gaming communities or video cooking platform followers that employ a ‘diaspora rhetoric’ to imagine themselves as a collective and create a feeling of cohesion. In her article on Teju Cole’s ‘Hafiz’, **Ricarda de Haas** investigates how Twitter can be used to create a complex and multi-layered literary text that uses the medium’s own polyphony to challenge the concept of authorship and maps Cole’s short story as a collaborative project of diasporic literary performance. Using the example of online reviews and commentaries about the work of the renown Francophone writers of African descent Fatou Diome and Marie Ndiaye, **Gisela Febel** analyses the significance of shared symbolic capital and its potential to offer empowering spaces of identification for Black people in France. **Danae Gallo González** addresses the question of how digital networks such as Instagram have developed into a ‘showcase’ for Afropunk aesthetics that, in a context of a politics of dis-identification, undermine hegemonic cultural logics. She shows how they generate highly aestheticized images that display an empowering diasporic praxis of enacting a transnational digital imagined community of Afropunks. In his article, **Adrián Menéndez de la Cuesta** explores the concept of ‘queer diaspora’ and, using examples from Twitter, studies social media as an innovative space to negotiate queer identities and create alternative communities for LGBT+ people in Spain. Viewing a different medium, **Johanna Vollmeyer** draws our attention to a literary text – Sibylle Berg’s novel *GRM* – which discusses digitalization from a dystopic point of view. In *GRM*, imaginations of ‘home’ are deconstructed due to the increasing *Zerstreuung* (which, in German, means dispersal *and* distraction). Consequently, in Berg’s novel, belonging tends to be constituted through the subject’s withdrawal from the digital space. Finally, **Miriam Llamas Ubieta** deals with Senthuran Varatharajah’s ‘Facebook novel’ *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen*, which recreates a social network conversation of two individuals that belong to different diasporic communities (Sri Lanka and Kosovo). Llamas Ubieta outlines the novel’s innovative postdigital poetics that understand multiple affiliations and transnational, de-territorialized movements as common characteristics of diasporic constellations and postdigital communication practices that interact with each other.

The special issue ends with a commentary by **Koen Leurs**, in which he reflects on digital diaspora as a travelling concept that can be applied to describe diverse phenomena (as do the articles of this special issue). Moreover, he argues that, to capture the complexity of our age, we have to adopt a fluid thinking of concepts that should be situated on a continuum. To conclude, he discusses the potential of new key issues to guide further investigations on digital

diasporas and on the implications resulting from their platformisation, investigations that should, for instance, include the sounds of the diaspora.

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