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Pushing Intersectionality, Hybridity, and (Inter)Disciplinary Research on Digitality to Its Limits

A Conversation Among Scholars of Gender, Sexuality, and Embodiment

Geerts, E. ; Rahbari, L.; Evolvi, G.; Zarabadi, S.; De Vuyst, S.

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**PUSHING INTERSECTIONALITY, HYBRIDITY,
AND (INTER)DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH ON
DIGITALITY TO ITS LIMITS:
A CONVERSATION AMONG SCHOLARS OF
GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND EMBODIMENT**Evelien Geerts^a, Ladan Rahbari^b, Giulia Evolvi^c,
Shiva Zarabadi^d, and Sara De Vuyst^e**ABSTRACT**

During the past two decades or so, the emergence and ever-accelerating development of digital media have sparked scholarly interest, debates, and complex challenges across many disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. Within this diverse scholarship, the research on digitality, gender, sexuality, and embodiment has contributed substantially to many academic fields, such as media studies, sociology, religion, philosophy, and education studies. As a part of the special issue “Gender, Sexuality, and Embodiment in Digital Spheres: Connecting Intersectionality and Digitality,” this roundtable consists of a conversation between five researchers from different (inter)disciplinary locations, all addressing matters of methodology, intersectionality, positionality, and theory in relation to the topics of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spheres. Said roundtable begins with a critical self-positioning of the participants’ (inter)disciplinary and embodied locations using examples from their own research. The conversation then progresses to how these researchers have employed contemporary theories, conceptual vocabularies, methods, and analyses of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spheres to then conclude with some ethic-political notes about collaborations between scholars and (digital) activists.

Keywords: Digitality, embodiment, gender, sexuality, intersectionality, (inter)disciplinarity, hybridity, positionality.

^a University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

^b University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

^c Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands

^d ULC, United Kingdom

^e Ghent University, Belgium

Since we all come from different academic disciplines and work with very specific conceptual genealogies, let us start this roundtable with a self-situating, albeit rather general, set of questions. Firstly, how are questions about the connections between gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spheres generally approached in the fields of media studies, sociology, religion, philosophy, and educational studies? And secondly, how have these connections found their way into your own research?

Sara De Vuyst (SDV): The connections between gender, sexuality, and embodiment have been central in several ways in my research in the past years. I have a background in feminist media studies and cultural studies. At the moment, I am working on the ERC-project *Later-in-life intimacy: Women's unruly practices, spaces, and representation*^f. My current postdoc focuses on the media component of the just-named ERC project, for which I am collecting and analyzing representations that challenge normative ideas on gender, ageing, and sexuality; interviewing media producers; and co-constructing alternative narratives on ageing and sexuality with older queer women.

Looking at the discipline of feminist media studies more broadly, the topic of digital activism has been high on its research agenda lately. On the one hand, there is a wide range of studies that focus on specific hashtags used in online protests against racism, sexism, and homophobia, such as #SayHerName, #BlackLivesMatter, #aufschrei, #BabaeAko, and #MeToo (see e.g., Alingasa, & Ofrenco, 2021; Gray, & Breigha, 2021; Williams, 2016; Zongxuan, & Yang, 2019). Digital media are explored for their potential to bring about connections between online and offline communities, set the agenda of mainstream media, and challenge existing forms of bias in news reporting. On the other hand, feminist media studies research has focused on more individual expressions of resistance in digital spaces, too. Think about the dynamics of self-representation on social media and expressions of online identities, for instance (see e.g., Abidin, 2016; Araüna et al., 2021; Caldeira, De Ridder, & Van Bauwel, 2020).

When social media came into being, there was a lot of optimism about these new media and the potential of creating a strong feminist participatory culture. The same can be said about social media's association with a novel form of the more networked fourth wave of DIY feminism. The boundaries between producers and users have increasingly blurred in digital spaces, offering opportunities to go beyond the deeply rooted inequalities in traditional media companies and produce more inclusive online stories. However, these optimistic assumptions are more and more

^fThis particular ERC-project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 851666).

being tempered, as studies are also showing that offline inequalities continue, or are amplified, in online spaces. Women are disproportionately confronted with name-calling, verbal and physical threats, stalking, and sexual harassment in digital spaces (e.g., Binns, 2021; De Vuyst, 2020; Jane, 2014). Sexism in online abuse intersects with other forms of oppression, such as ageism, racism, and homophobia. Topics related to migration, feminism, racism, and critical analysis of the politics and government of a country are triggers for all kinds of trolling, stalking, online hate speech, harassment, and intolerant discourses.

Evelien Geerts (EG): I want to take some time to situate myself and my research interests later, as Sara's comment about the ambiguity of digital spaces immediately struck a chord: Seen from a philosophical – or more aptly put, phenomenological embodiment-focused – point of view, material and digital lifeworlds strongly differ from one another. If we then throw some transhumanist, critical posthumanist, and new materialist approaches in the mix – three approaches that, by the way, decenter the human and make space for the nonhuman, more-than-human, and depending on the strength of the critical lenses used, the dehumanized – then we could arrive at the following analysis: Conceptualized through a transhumanist viewpoint (often a rather naïve perspective, equal to blindly worshipping all technological progress, see e.g., More, & Vita-More, 2013), the virtual world harbors various empowering possibilities for certain folks that the more mundane material world does not. One can find refuge in a fabricated virtual life, for instance, by wandering around in World of Warcraft as a not-so-human night elf, or escape one's bodily conditions and, consequently, certain societal restrictions, by creating a genderfluid Sims 4-avatar (see e.g., Schmider, 2016).

But considering how digitalized the lives of many are today, the boundaries drawn between the digital and material lifeworld are becoming increasingly porous, as feminist science studies scholar – and critical posthumanist-leaning thinker[§] – Donna Haraway (1985; 1991) already noted in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. And anyone regarded as differing from the standard 'cybersubject', so to speak, also knows this by and through their lived experience: Our cyber access and experiences are always impacted by virtual structures of exclusion that mirror offline ones, as Sara also pointed at earlier; often pushing us back into the trappings of our 'offline bodies'... Critical posthumanist and new materialist theories, such as Haraway's oeuvre, but also that of literary theorist Katherine N. Hayles (1999), neoliberalism-critical sociologist Melinda Cooper (2008), nomadic philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2013), and critical theorist Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020), offer us the tools to analyze how these crisscrossing networks of power relations seep into the digital realm as well, whereas transhumanist perspectives merely seem to hyperfocus on

[§] For those interested in the work of Haraway, and how she locates her work within posthumanist theory, see Gane, & Haraway 2006.

the liberating potential of the technoscientific world of today, therefore naïvely bypassing these trappings...

Shiva Zarabadi (SZ): I would also like to briefly reflect on Sara’s and Evelien’s arguments about the ambiguity of digital spaces before situating myself and my research. I can think of a link between what I have explored earlier in my research and how digital spheres could become a platform for marginalized people to be heard. In my research, I work with the viral mediological relational materialities that emerge between bodies, virtual, and material capacities in educational environments. These relations with digital spheres create “affective qualities” (Lupton, 2017, p. 13). In a chapter I co-wrote (Zarabadi and Ringrose, 2018), I demonstrated how these relational – affectively contagious (see Thrift, 2008; Grusin, 2010, p. 57 for this notion) – forces create new forms of sensory relations between Muslim women and jihadi Brideism. In that process, the perceived threat of all Muslim women becoming radicalized and fleeing to Syria to marry jihadi fighters^h becomes viral, thereby representing *all* Muslim women, and particularly Muslim school girls in the UK, as potential risks, and jihadi brides.

Examining what these affective relations with digital spheres working through the bodily, the virtual, and the material do to human and more-than-human bodies do, I pay particular attention to the enabling or constraining capacities of said bodies to act or not act. I think and work with digital spheres in a broader sense, as Evelien also mentioned, so, not as having either complete power over other agencies in these relations, nor as a passive container for interactions to happen in, nor as an inert tool to be used by human agency. But, rather, as *only one* of the agential actants in the events-to-come, or, as Evelien put it, as part of crisscrossing forces. In that sense, my research participants and I re-materialized the everyday lived experiences of Muslim schoolgirls on the way to and from school through what I called a walking methodology. I also worked with Skype to conduct walking intra-views, which allowed me to be physically absent from my participants’ commuting to school while being virtually present (see Zarabadi, 2021).

Ladan Rahbari (LR): Speaking of digital activism and the ambiguity of digital spaces that Sara, Evelien, Shiva refer to, my research is located at the intersection of migration, gender/sexuality, and digital media, and I find that within all these fields, I am working on what I could characterize as a type of ‘in-betweenness.’ And by this, I do not only mean in-between disciplines but also refer to my work on queer digital spaces in Iran. I am not only looking at hybridity and in-between identifications that defy everyday binarizations of gender and sexuality, but also spatial settings blurring the lines between online and offline environments, anonymity, and identification. And I specifically look at how (queer) Iranians deal

^h Also see e.g., Dearden, 2016.

with these in-between locations (see, e.g., Rahbari, 2021, Rahbari, 2020a, Rahbari 2020b, Rahbari, 2019a) and how the latter utilize spaces for explicit and implicit forms of activism (Horton & Kraftl, 2009).

My focus, furthermore, is on spaces that are not official – as in: legitimized by the Iranian government – but are also not closed down by the Iranian cyber police for a variety of reasons. In some instances, these spaces are not closed down because the Iranian State does not have the power or will to do so, and in others, because the users find strategies to mask their activities as non-threatening to the State.

In the case of the encrypted application Telegram that I am studying, some channels are used as political media and even employed to organize protests and resistance. Telegram – a Russian company – actually recently refused to hand in its encryption keys to the Russian authorities so that they could not access any user content, and as a result, Russia and Iran have both blocked the application. The State, of course, also allows some spaces of political resistance to function to attain information on the users, founders, and whoever manages them. Another reason is that what the State perceives as non-threatening defiance is allowed to exist online, precisely because for the authorities, small-scale digital activism seemingly poses a less fundamental threat than offline and street-level activism.

GE: To position myself, I am a scholar of religion and media, and I focus on digital religion, exploring how religious individuals and groups employ the Internet – and in that sense my research touches upon the idea of digital activism Ladan just referred to. Within the field of digital religion, gender and sexuality issues are increasingly relevant as they relate to secularization and religious change. In the European context, women belonging to religious minorities, particularly Islam, are often marginalized because of their garments and practices – think of Islamic veiling practices. At the same time, some religious conservative groups, usually belonging to Catholic denominations, oppose same-sex unions and feminist emancipation. These are just some examples of the debates going on in the European religious public sphere, which is mirrored in online practices and narratives. Moreover, these debates can be connected to what Sara said about digital spaces allowing for both the expression of identity and furthering marginalized groups' oppression. For this reason, Mia Lövheim (2013) calls on us to pay more attention to gender and sexuality questions in digital religion while incorporating feminist and gender theoretical perspectives in the field.

Discussions of gender and sexuality in online spaces also touch upon embodied religious practices. While religion has often been approached as a spiritual, immaterial practice, it is deeply embedded in sensations, practices, objects, and rituals. Anthropologist Birgit Meyer (2010) elaborated on the theory of religious mediation as involving material practices that help people attain transcendence and experience religion. The aforementioned veil, displayed in online videos and tutorials, could be regarded as embodied practice connected with

visibility and materiality. The use of the Internet does not erase these embodied aspects of religion, but rather sustains mediation processes by providing people with creative outlets to show, discuss, and negotiate religious garments, objects, and practices (see Hutchings, & McKenzie, 2016). Furthermore, attention to embodiment and materiality compels a focus on the notion of space: the Internet can become a hybrid third space, to employ a term coined by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (2004), where practices exist in-between online and offline venues (Pennington, 2018).

LR: Giulia's reference to Homi Bhabha (2004) is apt here. With hybridity, Bhabha argues that there is no essential or 'pure culture.' The digital is not the only space where this hybridity manifests itself – or the only space that offers the affordances required for it. Digital spaces, as mentioned earlier, can be mediators through which already existing hybridities become explicit. Therefore, embodied elements – whether carrying symbolic religious meaning or hyperpoliticized or not – can be visual manifestations of hybridity and may carry this same meaning in digital spaces; furthermore, they can sometimes find new meaning as they turn into digital objects. This lack of fixity of identities and practices is something that needs to be remembered, especially as disciplinary practices sometimes tend to characterize specific objects, practices, or spaces – including 'the digital' and even hybridity – as uniform or as universalized concepts that have a set of specific traits. Doing so essentializes and reduces those concepts, practices, or objects.

Now, while I do locate myself within the field of sociology, I would also want to emphasize that I do not see a strict disciplinary line that differentiates sociological research from research in other disciplines, and even less so in the studies on digital spaces. I have always found this question of inter- or trans-disciplinarity a very difficult one, and this becomes even more complicated when it comes to studies of digitality – and this is, in a way, also embodied by the in-betweenness aspect we are now discussing. To illustrate, my own education has been in the fields of literature, anthropology, sociology, and gender and diversity studies, and I have come across similar, if not the same, types of research, thoughts, methods, and ideas across these named disciplines. Thinking of knowledge as this strict set of disciplines that expand within their own borders is, therefore, for me, not only artificial but also epistemologically counterproductive and symptomatic of existing disciplinary hierarchies in our academic habitus.

GE: To continue on Ladan's note on Bhabha's postcolonial perspective and its interdisciplinary applications in the field of digital religion, Bhabha's idea of hybridity has been very useful for a study I recently conducted on Neo-Pagan online rituals (Evolvi, 2020). Neo-Paganism is a new religious movement based on pre-Christian beliefs, and it pays particular attention to the feminine and feminist issues. While not all Neo-Pagans self-identify as feminists, they usually discuss

gender and sexuality as fundamental aspects of their practices. They often employ the Internet to form communities and perform rituals, which include raising and releasing energy in a sacred circle. For some, the Internet can thus enhance this embodied religious aspect, help them feel connected through their bodies, and give them a sense of community. It creates an in-betweenness of online and offline actions; something that can be defined as forming a hybrid third space.

EG: It is interesting that disciplinary in-betweenness is mentioned here and that by both of you! Like Ladan, I have been trained in a wide range of disciplines, such as political philosophy, critical theory, science studies, and queer theory, and tend to let the research phenomenon take the agentialⁱ lead instead of following strict disciplinary parameters. In that sense, I would say that I am a multidisciplinary philosopher moving towards the trans/disciplinarily^j, always focusing on the intertwined issues of identity, difference, and violence, and that together with the question of whose bodies come to culturally and socio-politically matter and *not* matter – to put in Butlerian (1993) lingo. I moreover have a great interest in posthumanist, critical (new) materialist, and affect theoretical approaches (see e.g., Haraway, 1997; Barad, 2007; Puar, 2007; Gregg, & Seigworth, 2010; Chen, 2012; Braidotti, 2013) – as embodiment & (de)humanization often go hand in hand, and the analysis of the latter entanglement requires approaches that deconstruct the subject-as-solely-human.

Now, as a political philosophical issue, gendered-racialized-sexualized embodiment – and the stickiness (see Ahmed, 2004) of the latter categories – is a topic that cannot be disconnected from contemporary conceptualizations of identity and the ongoing debate on identity politics – which is starting to look a lot like the Culture Wars 2.0, but then boosted by echo chamber-enhancing digital social media spaces and applications. Just think of Twitter, Facebook, and, of course, Telegram, as Ladan just mentioned; an application that not that surprisingly recently played a crucial role in the identity politics-laden case concerning the far-right soldier Jürgen Conings^k and Belgium’s leading allegedly ‘way-too-woke’ virologist, Marc Van Ranst.

ⁱ See Barad 2007 for more in the agential realist framework that characterizes Baradian new materialist thought, and Barad’s more relational take on the notion of agency, which is ascribed to all living material phenomena, and the notion of intra-action, which is referred to later in the main text.

^j By using the notion of trans/disciplinarity here, I am following in the footsteps of Barad (2001 and 2007) and feminist theorist Nina Lykke that both regard combining and working across different disciplines as a question of “[b]oundary work” (Lykke, 2013, p. 138) and taking up accountability for the disciplinary cuts made, here represented by a forward slash.

^k Past spring, virologist Van Ranst became the target of the far-right soldier-on-the-run, Conings, amidst heavily polarized Twitter discussions on vaccination strategies and what could be seen as digital back-and-forths on Flemish nationalism, racism, and other polarizing issues between the left-leaning virologist and several politicians and supporters of Belgium’s far-right and extreme right parties. Multiple Telegram chat groups and memes were later on discovered, created in support of Conings’ actions. Also see Geerts, 2021.

Let me make things a bit more concrete here: In these supposedly ‘post-’identitarian but actually hyperindividualizing neoliberal identity-charged times, the question of how one experiences and gets to be recognized as an embodied – and thus fleshy and existentially vulnerable – subject, positioned on various intersecting identity lines and axes of power and privilege, seems to matter more than ever before. And that on both an individual and collective level, plus within online and offline spaces. There appears to be a widespread societal desire to approach questions of gender and sexuality, to name but two, in less rigid ways; yet this increased attentiveness for more inclusive systems of intelligibility and recognition is currently being met with massive political resistance.

All of this is creating a paradoxical situation that I am currently investigating for a project on identity politics and critical new materialist thought (see Geerts, forthcoming): On the plane of lived experience, or micro level, if you will, subjects fighting for more all-encompassing types of identity-based recognition are blamed by political – often conservative, populist – opponents for partaking in a so-called politics of ‘wokeness’, thereby allegedly re-politicizing identity in ‘post-’identitarian times. The existence of affect-driven but very much bodily felt microaggressions is being denied; gender is put aside as pure ‘ideology’ (see Kuhar, & Paternotte, 2017) and replaced by biological ‘God-given’ sex; and identity-propelled processes of (un)marking are met with resistance from those that would like to see minorities’ identities remain minoritized forever, often leading to counter-formulations of identity and embodiment that re-essentialize identities, identity categories, and self-chosen labels (e.g., Geerts, & van der Tuin, 2013; Geerts, 2019). Digital spaces, such as Twitter, and digital artefacts, such as what I consider to be affect-laden memes, are merely enhancing an already incredibly polarized climate...

SZ: I can connect my approaches to the ones Evelien uses, as I think and work with gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spheres through philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1987) concept of assemblage and Karen Barad’s (2007) concept of intra-action. I have been trained as a sociologist and ethnographer, however by working with feminist new materialist approaches in my PhD, I became a multi-disciplinary, or more apply put, *more-than-disciplinary* scholar and researcher.

Like other scholars in the field of posthumanist educational research, my interests are situated across philosophy, sociology, biology, quantum physics, critical terrorism studies, education policy, surveillance studies, media studies, ... and remains open to establishing new connections with other disciplines. I think these types of multidisciplinary thinking and researching, as Ladan also mentioned, not only help us move beyond disciplinary boundaries but also to think through inter/transdisciplinary methodologies – think of other ways of thinking, being, and doing, such as decolonizing Indigenous methodologies (e.g., Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) and Black methodologies (e.g., McKittrick, 2021) to work within and think outside

of the closed system or discipline. Inspired by these ways of thinking, I used a walking methodology to pay attention to human and more-than-human things that matter for my participants in their everyday practices of commuting to school.

To come back to the just-mentioned concepts of assemblage and intra-action: The reason I like to focus on assemblage and intra-action, is because these concepts enable me to think of gender, sexuality, body, and digital spaces as agential actants as inseparable components. I consider the connections between gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spheres a question of ethics and ontology as well as of epistemology (also see Barad 2007; Haraway 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Assemblage-based thinking and doings bring about ethico-onto-epistemological shifts in understanding the foregoing issues, and that by considering these as human and more-than-human entangled experiences that come into being through relations rather than separations.

Jane Bennett (2010, p. 23) explains assemblage thinking quite well when she states that:

[...] ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts [that] are living, throbbing confederations...have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface.

Thinking and doing with the idea of assemblage enables me to integrate and entwine with race, gender, sexuality, and disability as dynamic processes that circulate, accumulate, and stick to bodies than being identity markers (see Springgay and Truman, 2018, p. 47). Here I employ Jasbir Puar's (2012, p. 58) understanding of identity categories as assemblage, or, as she puts it, as "events, actions and encounters between bodies". New materialist approaches vis-à-vis power, agency, and identity provide us with radically different capacities for thinking and researching.

I would like to extend assemblage thinking and doing to what Ladan and Evelien pointed at earlier with regards to the experiences of in-betweenness, or, more specifically put, in-between-ness. Thinking with Braidotti's idea of nomadic subjectivity (2011), in-between-ness is a potential and powerful space to reside in; disrupting binaries; a state of never fully getting there; a nomadic positionality that is always in becoming, moving, and emerging otherwise. This, I guess, could also explain the vitality of transdisciplinary research (also see Taylor et al., 2020): In calling for transdisciplinary feminist research, Carol Taylor and others suggest that disciplines cut and separate human, more-than-human and other-than-human experiences, and understandings into hierarchized knowledge fields

EG: Interesting that you mention assemblage in this context, Shiva. I am also really fascinated by assemblage-focused philosophies and love how Puar (see e.g., 2007; 2012) has given the Deleuzoguattarian (2005) framework operating behind the notion a critical theoretical update, so to speak, by putting it into dialogue with

intersectional theory and activism. Like you hinted at just now, Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005) use the notion of assemblage – semi-correctly translated from the French *l'agencement*, denoting the process of bringing several elements together – as a way to refer to constantly changing intricate constellations of heterogenous material agencies (think: bodies, territories, qualities, ...) coming together to create something new. In that sense, assemblage could, just like intra-action, be regarded as a metaphor for a different type of onto-epistemology: one in which differences can exist and be conceptualized as such, without having to be hierarchically structured. Without fully letting go of representationalist, recognition-based politics (and rightfully so, because we are not exactly quite there yet), Puar (2012) pushes for an understanding of identity-in-becoming, while highlighting “the patterns of relations – [and] not the entities themselves, but the patterns within which they are arranged with each other” (p. 60-61).

Bringing this specific type of assemblage thinking back to the realms of identity politics and the digital realm, then, I am interested in analyzing how memes – videos, images, specific pieces of texts, ... usually with a humorous undertone that spread virally and are being recreated every time they get copied (also see Dawkins, 1976; Blackmore, 2002) – work like affect-laden micropolitical assemblages, supporting specific types of identity politics. Think of American alt-right meme culture, with Trumpian Pepe and other white supremacist-supporting variations of Pepe the Frog, or, more Continentally, the memes of the Flemish alt-right youth movement *Schild & Vrienden* [Shield & Friends] that are packed with microfascist colonial desire and nostalgia. Without an assemblage thinking that is also explicitly intersectional, we would not be able to philosophically analyze these memes' haunting (see Derrida, 1994), or, what I, following in the footsteps of del Pilar and Peeren (2013) also call spectro-micropolitical, qualities. Many of the memes made by *Schild & Vrienden* – such as the infamous Congo meme that depicts a Belgian colonial occupier being carried around by dehumanized black men, next to a very stereotypical drawing of a Congolese man with chopped off hands, signed off with the comment “Do it again, Leo”, referring to Belgium's King Leopold II who pillaged the Congo Free State in genocidal colonial fashion – can only be understood when seen as part of an assemblage of Belgium's current-day geopolitical situatedness; brutal colonial history and neocolonial present; and other *Schild & Vrienden* memetic artefacts, such as a typed up chant sung during their frat parties glorifying King Leopold II's plundering; and another meme, that looks like a children's cartoon version of a Pepe the Frog that, in Flemish, reads: “Roses are red, violets are blue. The little frog splashes around; the Congo is ours.”

A micropolitics-focused assemblage thinking, as also hinted at by Shiva earlier, with critical new materialist tenets focuses on the relations between these phenomena, and helps us see that these memes are more than just signs or discursive regimes – these digital phenomena in fact play an active role in the denial of

humanness and the being-made-disposable of certain embodied beings within today's neoliberal extractive capitalist system; a system that is, after all, strongly anchored in racialized colonial imperialism (see Chakravartty, & Da Silva, 2012)...

Since intersectionality was just brought up: Do you all spot a need for more scholarship that focuses on one or more specific contemporary methodological approaches or frameworks? How could we for instance approach digitality and embodiment from an intersectional viewpoint, or a perspective that explicitly focuses on intersecting macrostructures of oppression, discrimination, and privilege? Are there also particular (dis)advantages attached to intersectional thinking that we should consider?

LR: In my current research, I specifically engage with standpoint feminism and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Harding, 2004). Besides Kimberlé Crenshaw, I also always think of Brittney Cooper (2016) and Sirma Bilge (2014) every time I reflect on intersectionality, and I myself employ an intra-categorical approach to intersectionality (McCall, 2005), meaning that I focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection. When it comes to specific challenges attached to intersectional thinking – which is not limited to the realm of digital research – I think that it is the complexity and multiplicity of research approaches and methods associated with it.

With this, I do not intend to claim that there should be one way that we engage with intersectionality, but that because of this rich complexity, it sometimes becomes harder for researchers – and, in my experience, also students – to understand and put it to practical use. Another issue that other scholars have raised is that intersectionality is at times translated to or conflated with identity politics in stable and intact categories (see e.g., Cooper, 2016). This creates a challenge when studies focus on power relations constructed on the basis of identifications that do not easily fall within neat categorizations. This issue has implications for my research because of the in-betweenness that we discussed earlier. Some of these identity categories come with historical baggage that can be rooted back to Euro-American contexts. This introduces difficulties for researchers like me, who often produce scholarship by studying non-Euro-American contexts.

While all of the above challenges exist and matter, I also believe that those of us working within or close to the fields of gender, sexuality, queer, and feminist studies have access to reminders in the form of keynotes, publications, and in general, a robust body of scholarship on intersectionality. While I do not mean that this is not the case for the field of sociology as a whole, there are subfields of digital sociology that do not adequately engage with intersectionality as a method or an analytical model. On the other hand, there are also valuable attempts to incorporate intersectional thinking in digital sociological work and quantitative methodology.

SDV: I find conversations with scholars and activists working in different fields beneficial when approaching intersectionality, exactly because, as Ladan just pointed out, there is such a robust body of scholarship available to us. I work in an interdisciplinary research team with colleagues that have a background in anthropology, arts, and geography. Thinking about and discussing intersectionality from these different disciplinary perspectives has added extra layers of depth to my research. In the project, we depart from a more dynamic understanding in which intersectionality is part of an ongoing discussion and not a ‘fixed’ starting point (also see Geerts, & van der Tuin, 2013).

My own research is shaped by intersectionality in several ways: Currently, I am studying ageing women’s experiences – and primarily the experiences of older queer women – with(in) media. Representations of older women’s sexuality in media are rare, and if portrayed at all, these portrayals mostly stay within heteronormative frames. Women’s sexuality is commonly expressed in reference to men’s pleasure, making it so that relationships between women are de-eroticized. The aim of my study is to challenge dominant narratives on women and ageing that are produced by medicalized and consumerist visions and portray older women as asexual, unattractive, and abject. And this is where the digital comes in: Digital spaces actually seem to increase the opportunities for marginalized communities to let their voices be heard. They can be used to create alternative representations outside traditional media frameworks where women, queer people, older people, and ethnic minorities are still underrepresented or misrepresented. I am thinking, for example, about the magnificent creations of Rachel House (2021) that challenge ageism and sexism in several ways. House frequently shares images of her zines and art online and is also included in the edited collection *Menopause: A Comic Treatment* by M. K. Czerwiec (2021). Her work challenges the dominant discourses on ageing, women, and menopause expressed in advertisements and women’s magazines. It provides alternative representations of women’s ageing that focus on resistance, joy, and solidarity. Digital platforms are also used by older women as a means of resistance. *Omas Gegen Rechts* [Grandmas United Against Right-Wing Politics] (2021), a group of mostly older women operating in Germany and Austria, share videos online about their protests against extreme right-wing politics. They dance and sing to resist inequalities. These representations all offer us new visions of gender, sexuality, and ageing that counter pre-existing norms of beauty, heteronormative desirability, and anti-ageing (see also De Vuyst, 2021).

SZ: Continuing on Ladan and Sara’s notes, I like to revisit the assemblage thinking, as there is a connection with intersectional thought. I employ Puar’s (2012) intersectionality-assemblage to relocate the critiques of the normative. This approach helps me in my understanding of subjectivity formation, while not dismissing the existing structural and institutional racism, sexism, homophobia, and

Islamophobia while remaining attuned to the more-than-human agencies that oftentimes stay invisible in some intersectional conceptualizations of identity.

For Puar, intersectional representational politics alone cannot capture the bordering of the body when subject positioning happens. The shift to intersectionality-assemblage allows repositioning of our focus from a simple epistemology to an onto-epistemology of multiplicity. Thinking through intersectionality-assemblage has enabled me to extend my research focus to the intersectional construction of the Muslim ‘Threatening Other’ in the works of Black feminist poststructuralist scholars (see Mirza and Meeto, 2018; Mirza, 2013; Shain, 2003) to the affective power and relational materialities that events such as racial harassment experienced by Muslim schoolgirls in and outside of the school environment engender.

And what about the posthumanist, new materialist, and affect theoretical frameworks that have been referred to a couple of times now? Could you expand on these a bit more? Are there any particular pitfalls attached to these approaches?

SZ: As noted earlier, I use Barad’s (2007) intra-action to understand the connections between gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spheres as a series of fluid and flowing mutual becomings that co-constitute the assemblage that is gender-sexuality-body-digital space. I furthermore employ feminist theorist Hillevi Lenz Taguchi’s (2011, p. 47) accounts of Barad to understand these flowing mutual becomings as entangled with an ethics of immanence and potentiality that is to be attentive to “the inter-connections and intra-actions in-between human and non-human organisms, matter and things, in processes of constant movement and transformation”.

Put more concretely: I work with stories, places, objects, thoughts, and feelings to research on racial harassment and the atmosphere of fear which governs Muslim schoolgirls’ lives and jeopardizes their well-being. I look at how Muslim schoolgirls’ subjectivity becomings are produced through the fluid, heterogenous assemblage of entities that agentially participate in schooling events, such as other humans, materialities, architectures, technologies, commuting to/from school, home, time, space, feelings, and more. New materialist and posthumanist approaches have helped me zoom in on the following questions: Who and what matters; who and what is excluded from mattering; how and what relations are materialized; what particular boundaries and meanings are enacted; and what political and ethical consequences emerge?

EG: I feel obliged to jump in here, as both Shiva and Sara have brought up some important points when it comes to the potential challenges attached to intersectional and posthumanist/new materialist thinking. Sara, you referred to a piece on rethinking intersectional thought that I wrote with critical epistemologist

Iris van der Tuin a couple of years ago, in which we examined some of the limits of intersectional thinking – such as its epistemic, ‘Othering’, bias; representationalist focus; ... – to then use interferential thinking (based on the diffractive theorizations of identity by literary theorist Trinh Minh-ha, Haraway, and Barad; also see Geerts, & van der Tuin, 2021) as a potentially more open, non-paralyzing way of looking at identity, and consequently, self/other relations.

The irony of course is that one of the philosophical motors behind interferential thinking, i.e., new materialist thought, has itself become more and more paralyzed since then, or, put differently, seems to have transformed into a theoretical paradigm, that, not unlike intersectional thought, is in the process of becoming more and more academically mainstreamed. Shiva’s question about ‘who and what are excluded from mattering’ is thus of importance when looking at new materialist thought epistemologically – and, in a way, has also been prefigured by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2013) when critiquing the geographical and geopolitical limits of posthumanist philosophy.

When working with all these just mentioned paradigms, the challenge in my regard consists of situating, contextualizing, and also opening up the oeuvres, authors, and concepts used...

Are there other methods, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks that you are working with currently, or are planning on exploring? What are some of the newly developed theoretical, empirical, analytical, and critical approaches in the study of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spheres that have inspired your research?

GE: I tend to employ qualitative approaches to highlight the connections between different media platforms, as well as online and offline spaces. I often assume a perspective informed by theories of media hybridity (Chadwick, 2013) and media ecology (Treré, 2019), which look at actions that exist in different media spaces. I believe this is a useful approach when taking into account Internet spaces, because communication practices never occur in a single moment and a single venue; rather, we increasingly see networks of actors creatively and performatively employing the visual and narrative potential of the Internet across platforms and simultaneously organizing actions in offline spaces. By assuming this theoretical and methodological perspective in the study of religion, gender, and sexuality, it is also possible to see how the online-offline divide is blurred, and how new spaces are formed at the intersection of virtual and physical practices. Moreover, it helps putting emphasis on material, embodied, and affective practices that are reproduced and enhanced by Internet spaces.

Methodologically speaking, I like to analyze online texts through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Because CDA pays particular attention to the structure of discourse that points to hegemonic social narratives and power (im)balances

(Fairclough, 2013), I believe it is helpful to highlight the point of view of marginal groups, including religious, sexual, and gender minorities. Hence, CDA is a useful methodological tool to examine intersectional voices, and to understand various layers of inequality that may exist in society in relation to religion, gender, and sexuality.

SDV: We have been discussing inter-, multi-, trans-, and trans/disciplinary research so far, so when it comes to different methods and methodologies, I believe that research that crosses boundaries between academia, arts, and activism is of added value, too. The work of Elke Zobl and Ricarda Drüeke (2012) on online counterculture, feminist zines, and online participatory spaces is an excellent example of a dialogue between feminist media scholars, DIY culture and zine makers. Conversations across disciplines are moreover needed. In this respect, I appreciate initiatives such as the LSE Digital Ethnography Collective (2021). This interdisciplinary group explores the intersections of digital culture and ethnographic methods and brings together people interested in the ethnographic study of online spaces and digital technologies. Their reading list and workshops are excellent resources for anyone interested in the latter topics!

SZ: I like to expand on Sara's point about research methodologies that cross the boundaries between academia and other social fields. I mentioned earlier that I used a multisensory methodology for my research in the field of education: Walking intra-views; creating photo diaries; face-to-face interviews; ... Doing so, I follow Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei's (2012) call for thinking with theory in practice: Walking while interviewing, for instance, allowed me to move across and cross various spaces, times, and bodies – and that all while interviewing via Skype and mapping human and more-than-human worlds (also see Springgay and Truman, 2018). As an art practice, creating photo diaries moreover mobilizes feelings and materiality.

These multisensory art-based and walking methodologies not only create connections between art, the body, movements, voices, materiality, and so forth, but also provide possibilities for various data to emerge; an assemblage of spoken, written, made, walked, felt, audio, video, visual and digital data. EJ Renold and Jessica Ringrose (2016) have also done interesting things with art-based methodologies and posthumanist feminist theory: Through mapping and challenging forms of what they call the coercive phallic touch of Facebook-tagging processes, they have explored teenagers' engagement with the bio-technological spheres of image creation and exchange in networked peer cultures.

LR: One of the recent works that I draw on a lot is Jack Giesecking's research on queer spaces, which uses digital methods but interestingly is not necessarily *on* digital spaces. I got inspired by Giesecking's recent book, *A Queer New York* (2020),

and the notion of queer constellations. ‘Constellation’ is an analytical term used by Giesecking to map queer spaces in New York. The notion is used to follow presences, accumulations, and interruptions, whereby Giesecking traces the spatial and temporal queer presences in New York using hand-drawn maps. The concept speaks to the mythical (*imagined*), calendrical (*temporal*), and navigational (*wayfinding*) qualities of lesbian and queer life in the city (see Giesecking, 2020, p. 3). I use the notion of constellations to study queer spaces in both Persian-language language digital spaces and everyday offline spaces. This notion helps me illustrate how queer networks are not constantly ongoing flows or permanent presences but on and off, appearing and disappearing ‘stars’ within sometimes stable and other times short-lived constellations. The stars are queer spaces, from physical gatherings, communities, and parties to online forums and support groups, online dating channels, and chat rooms.

The method that Giesecking employs could be used for a combination of digital and physical spaces precisely because Giesecking lets his participants create their own imagined maps by sketching what their version of a queer New York looks like by means of shapes, lines, movement patterns, etc. Now connecting this to my own research on digital spaces in Iran: because of the heavy surveillance regime of the Iranian State, queer platforms (the stars in the constellation) are always at risk. This also means that they pop in and out of the map, and hence, there is no single constellation as different constellations appear as new stars appear, and others go (permanently) dark. The hand-drawn mapping method Giesecking uses is thus very useful to me.

EG: I love how you are weaving mapping methods and methodologies into our roundtable, Ladan, as this is precisely what I am working on right now as well (see e.g., Geerts, 2021) – but then seen through a more philosophical lens! In my work, I mainly use Braidotti’s (2011) Deleuzoguattarian (2005) – i.e., more rhizomatic – take on mapmaking. This new materialisms-driven methodology of critical cartography – of course highly influenced by postcolonial thought and critical geography, as maps have been used as representational-explorative tools to dominate, and create, but also destroy, worlds – demands more from us as knowledge producers than merely creating a history of the present through genealogies. There also needs to be a certain openness toward the future – to not paralyze the object of interest – as well as a clear, accountable engagement with the mapmaker’s geopolitical situatedness. It is also the latter emphasis on accountable, situated knowledge production that runs through new materialist thought as well.

SDV: This does not necessarily relate to a recently developed theory or method, but the growing focus on free and openly accessible information matters to me. Freely available information on gender and media, to illustrate, could make the existing ties between researchers and activists even stronger. There lies a lot of

potential in the collaboration between feminist academics and data journalists, especially when it comes to placing gender issues such as gender-based violence, femicide, and the gender pay gap on the agenda. The knowledge that has been gathered over the years by feminist scholars on methodologies and ways to study issues pertaining to gender are of added value to data journalism projects, while techniques from data journalism could be essential add-ons to science communication to spread, translate and visualize results of studies on gender issues and feminist topics. I think the *Hacks de Vida*-project by Estrella Soria and Luisa Ortiz Pérez (2018) in collaboration with the Institute for War and Peace Reporting provides a guide to better understanding online gender violence in Latin America and how to support those who face it, is an inspiring example of how research can go hand in hand with activism. The relationship between gender, intersectionality and innovation was central in my PhD research and previous postdoc project.

The question has organically popped up a couple of times during our conversation already, but do you think that collaborations between academics and (digital) activists, as Sara just pointed at, are needed? And how do you, as scholars, envisage this kind of collaboration?

GE: When looking at digital religion and discussions of gender and sexuality, I find it particularly relevant to try and include the voices of the people whose practices I am exploring. This is something that scholar Alberta Giorgi (2021) did in her study on the Italian feminist group *Non Una Di Meno* [Not One Less]. Giorgi employed interviews to invite conversations with religious women and validate their experience and activism as feminists. In some cases, these women felt ambivalent about being both Catholic and feminists because feminist groups criticized their faith. Being interviewed as part of Giorgi's research gave these women a sense of being legitimized in their feminist activism and space to talk about their faith. By fostering similar interview practices, I believe that it is possible to validate and amplify interviewees' experiences, especially when they come from marginalized standpoints. Considering interviewees not only as research subjects but also as partners in the knowledge that can provide new viewpoints could open up new possibilities for better including them in the conversation. This can be enhanced by open access practices, but also, for instance, by university seminars and workshops that include members of feminist and LGBTQ+ groups.

However, there are instances where it can be challenging to cooperate with research subjects. For instance, I have researched Catholic-inspired groups in Italy and France who oppose LGBTQ+ rights and feminism (Evolvi, forthcoming). As analyzed in the work of Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) that Evelien mentioned, these groups dismiss gender as an 'ideology' and support heteronormative and traditional family values inspired by conservative Catholic principles. They do employ a repertoire of activist strategies and can be considered digital activists (Graff, 2016),

but they generally refuse any collaboration with academics. This happens in particular because these groups often criticize academic works, such as those of Judith Butler, as allegedly propagating a ‘gender ideology’ that erases differences between men and women and ‘forces’ women outside of traditional, Catholic-inspired family roles (Peto, 2016)

In such cases, while I personally believe it is important to study these activist practices, there is a need to define the researcher’s positionality. In my specific case, I choose to study these anti-gender movements without amplifying their voices, but rather embedding them in the larger debate on LGBTQ+ and women’s rights. For the future, I hope that collaborations with activists can be made by sharing information about such groups with feminist and LGBTQ+ groups and analyzing conflicting positions about gender and sexuality within religious movements.

LR: I work on both implicit and explicit forms of activism in my research; therefore, I will answer this in the most sociological way possible by saying that I think this depends on the field, context, and research topic. I was asked a similar question during the *Queering Authoritarianisms: Conflict, Resistance, and Coloniality* (CRAASH, 2021) conference in March 2021, where I presented my (hitherto unpublished) paper ‘Queering Iran, Digitally: Implicit Activism and LGBTQI+ Dating on Telegram.’ I spoke about implicit activism in online spaces in Iran. While I was compelled to answer ‘yes’ to this first question of whether academics should collaborate with activists – assuming that these are two separate categories – I think it is important to raise the point that some digital activists, especially those in precarious or risky conditions such as being under surveillance by undemocratic political regimes, may need to tread carefully. My work on queer and digital spaces in Iran (e.g., Rahbari, 2020a; Rahbari, 2020b; Rahbari, 2019a) reveals this precarity and how important it is for academic work, where this collaboration is possible, to represent and research implicit and explicit activism keeping in mind that activist works may get exposed to further risks.

What I can say for the specific context of my research is that research and activism inform each other and can interact, but depending on the context, academics’ or activists’ wellbeing or lives may be at stake. This is not always the case, but in my research, there is a clear difference between researchers like me and the activists. There is also a clear difference between activist spheres depending on where and how they are active. When you look at the case of a successful campaign such as My Stealthy Freedom, for instance, you see a mainly digital campaign against the compulsory veiling laws in Iran (e.g., Rahbari et al., 2019b) as an explicit form of activism. There is an almost permanently flowing activist space there. Instead, when we look at smaller-scale spaces of solidarity that are often organized in Iran, there are what I consider implicit forms of activism. I use Horton and Kraftl’s (2009) critique of activism as a practice that is organized, collective, intentional, agentic, connected to a known movement, that makes lots of noise to

discuss that theorizing it like this, we end up eliminating those acts that are not constantly in flow. These are still practices that go against the political current but are seemingly banal and perhaps attract much less fanfare (Ryan, 2016). The latter is more common in social contexts where the former is impossible, such as in the Iranian context, where activism bears substantial risks.

SZ: Looking at this roundtable as a whole, it is clear that we all have our own approaches when it comes to the entangled questions of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spheres – but we do all seem to share the same kind of creativity when it comes to thinking, theorizing, and writing. The following quote by Deleuze neatly summarizes our shared attachments to creativity:

Once one steps outside what's been thought before ... once one ventures outside what's familiar and reassuring, once one has to invent new concepts for unknown lands, then methods and oral systems break down and thinking becomes, as Foucault puts it, a "perilous act", a violence, whose first victim is oneself (Deleuze, 1995, p. 103)

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ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS' BIOS:

Evelien Geerts (Ph.D., e.m.l.geerts@bham.ac.uk) is a multidisciplinary philosopher and Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham, where she is part of the *Urban Terrorism in Europe (2004-19): Remembering, Imagining, and Anticipating Violence* ERC-project. She holds a Ph.D. in Feminist Studies and History of Consciousness from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and (research) M.A. degrees in Philosophy and Gender & Ethnicity Studies. Her

research interests include new materialisms & Deleuzoguattarian philosophy, critical epistemologies, and political philosophical questions of identity, difference, and violence. She has published in *Philosophy Today*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, and *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*—publications that can be found at www.eveliengeerts.com—and is a Posthumanities Hub & PhEMaterialisms affiliated researcher.

Ladan Rahbari (Ph.D. mult.; l.rahbari@uva.nl) is an assistant professor at the Department of Sociology University of Amsterdam and a senior researcher at the International Migration Institute (IMI). She was formerly an FWO post-doctoral fellow (2019-2022). She obtained a Ph.D. in Gender and Diversity (Studies) (UGent & VUB, 2019) and a Ph.D. in Sociology (University of Mazandaran, 2015). Her research interests include gender politics, migration, race, body, and digital media. She is affiliated with Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research and Amsterdam Research Centre for Gender and Sexuality. Rahbari was formerly the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* (DiGeSt).

Giulia Evolvi (Ph.D., evolvi@eshcc.eur.nl) holds a Ph.D. in Media Studies from the University of Colorado Boulder, USA. Previously, she obtained a M.A. in Religious Studies from the University of Padua and the University of Venice “Ca’ Foscari”, Italy. Evolvi completed a postdoc at the Center for Religious Studies at Ruhr University in Bochum, Germany and she is currently a lecturer in Media and Communication at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. Evolvi’s first book, *Blogging my Religion: Secular, Muslim, and Catholic Media Spaces in Europe* (2018), explores how digital practices define religious experiences in contemporary society. Evolvi’s works are available at www.giuliaevolvi.com.

Shiva Zarabadi (Ph.D., shiva.zarabadi.15@ucl.ac.uk) holds a Ph.D. in Education, Gender, Feminist New Materialism and Posthumanism from UCL Institute of Education, and MSc degree in Sociology from London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Her research interests include feminist new materialism, posthumanism and intra-actions of matter, time, affect, space, humans, and more-than-humans. She uses walking and photo-diary methodologies to map relational materialities.

Sara De Vuyst (Ph.D., s.devuyst@ugent.be) is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Languages and Cultures at Ghent University in Belgium and is working on the ERC-project *Later-in-Life Intimacy: Women’s Unruly Practices, Places and Representations*. Her research interests are feminist media studies, queer women’s media experiences, representations of women’s later-in-life sexuality, and gender issues in journalism. Sara De Vuyst is chair of the ECREA Gender, Sexuality and Communication section and author of the book, *Hacking Gender and Technology in Journalism*, published in the *Routledge Disruptions: Studies in Digital Journalism* series.