**ERC Consolidator Grant**

# Digital Crossings in Europe: Gender, Diaspora and Belonging

## (CONNECTING EUROPE)

**Prof. Sandra Ponzanesi**
Utrecht University, NL

**Abstract**

Many immigrants enter Europe both legally and illegally every year. This creates multiple challenges for the Union, including the gender and ethnic segregation of migrant groups, especially women. While it strives for an inclusive and integrated society as envisioned by the EU motto 'Unity in Diversity', it is still often perceived of more as 'Fortress Europe.' This project focuses on the 'connected migrant', studying how virtual communities of migrants, or digital diasporas, convey issues of technology, migration, globalisation, alienation and belonging capturing the lives of migrants in their interaction with multiple worlds and media

More specifically, it will investigate whether digital technologies enhance European integration or foster gender and ethnic segregation, and, if so, how. Using a multi-layered and cutting-edge approach that draws from the humanities, social science and new media studies (i.e internet studies and mobile media), this research considers: 1. How migration and digital technologies enable *digital diasporas* (Somali, Turkish, Romanian) and the impact these have on identity, gender and belonging in European urban centres; 2. How these entanglements are connected to and perceived from outside Europe by focusing on transnational ties; and 3. How digital connections create new possibilities for cosmopolitan outlooks, rearticulating Europe's motto of 'Unity in Diversity.'

The **outcomes** of this work will be innovative at three levels. **a)** *Empirically,* the project gathers, maps and critically grounds online behaviour by migrant women from a European comparative perspective. **b)** *Methodologically,* it breaks new ground by developing new methods of analysis for digital diasporas contributing to the development of 'postcolonial' digital humanities. **c)** *Conceptually,* it integrates colonial and migrant relations into the idea of Europe, elaborating on the notion of cosmopolitan belonging through virtual connectivity.

**Section 1a: _Extended Synopsis of the scientific proposal_**

## Background

The 2014 World Press Photo, 1st prize for contemporary issues, was awarded to the American photographer John Stanmeyer for his 'Signal', taken for National Geographic magazine. It depicts African migrants on the shore of Djibouti city at night, raising their phones in an attempt to capture an inexpensive signal from neighbouring Somalia – a tenuous link to relatives abroad. The photo symbolises the lives of migrants attempting to connect to loved ones, conveying issues of technology, migration, globalisation and alienation from human, dignified life (Ponzanesi and Leurs, 2014).
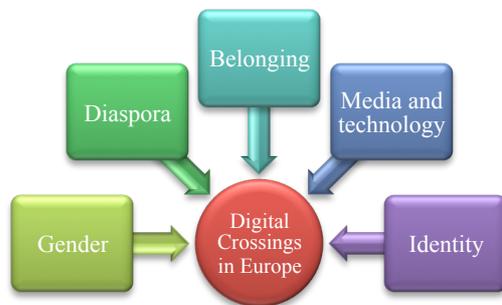


The ethereal shot of these migrants evokes the precarious life of people in many developing regions, while, at the same time, it underlines their access to modern advanced technologies. The symbolic value of the radio 'signal' testifies to the still fragile and unpredictable forms of connectivity and crossing. This is in keeping with the notion of the digitally connected migrant (Diminescu, 2008) whose empowerment through technology is coupled with an ongoing material reality of everyday life.

This connection has taken many different forms in the past two decades, its centrality and visualisation emerging not only through traditional media (newspapers, radio, cinema, television) but exponentially through new digital engagements that remediate the old media into the new ones (big data journalism, vloggers and YouTube channels, trending topics on Twitter, protest selfies on Instagram and location-based services). The latter create new opportunities for reaching, rethinking and re-linking Europe as well as for unpacking, disrupting and deconstructing the EU motto 'Unity in Diversity.'

## Aims and Objectives:

Addressing the notion of digital connectedness and migration to and within Europe is of paramount importance for several reasons. **First,** issues of migration have often been kept separate from studies on new media technologies, though they are clearly related as they refer to a shift in the notion of space and time, central to globalisation patterns. As Appadurai writes, subjects and images circulate concurrently, and "neither images nor viewers fit into circuits or audiences that are easily bound up with local, national or regional spaces" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 4). Yet, these two fields have hardly been interconnected in a systematic and coherent way. **Second**, new forms of participation and belonging are emerging that defy national boundaries or ethnic straightjackets creating digital diasporas, also called e-diasporas or virtual communities, which accounts for the interplay of gender, race, class, religion, age and sexual orientation. **Third,** digital technology and migration reshape the way Europe is reached, experienced and kept in place. It is necessary therefore to understand the notion of Europe, not as a fixed historical, geographical or institutional entity but as a multidirectional networked society (Castells, 1996; Gilroy, 2004) that challenges the dominant double paradigm of Fortress Europe [inclusion and exclusion] by opening up to alternative cosmopolitan outlooks (Balibar, 2003; Beck, 2007; Ponzanesi and Blaagaard, 2012).

_Digital Crossings in Europe_ aims to remedy this cross-disciplinary lacuna by advancing a novel and comprehensive study on gendered migrant networks in Europe that combines digital media studies with gender and postcolonial theories. Anchored in the humanities, the project reaches out to new media (i.e. internet studies and mobile media) and the social sciences to provide a qualitative approach to the emerging field of Big Data studies, thereby contributing to the development of postcolonial digital humanities (Nakamura, 2002; Berry, 2012; Gajjala, 2012). Neither interfaces nor algorithms are neutral and computational language should therefore be analysed also in its possibility for resistance, along with acknowledging the problem of language used, the question of access and media literacy. To this purpose, the project will combine quantitative and qualitative methods in order to account for large-scale digital methods

(Rogers, 2013), such as data visualisation and network analysis, in combination with virtual ethnography, in-depth interviews, photo-elicitation techniques and discourse analysis. This will make digital interactions emerge as hybridised and heterogeneous forms of participation that change the way we understand, and account for, social inclusion, gender emancipation, intercultural identities and the idea of Europe itself.

**Stepping Stones:**

By studying the interplay of migration and digital technologies with a focus on gender, diaspora and belonging, this project will elucidate the potentialities of living together with difference in Europe. The outcomes of this work will yield insights at three levels. **a)** *Empirically,* the project gathers, maps and critically grounds online behaviour by migrant women from a European comparative perspective. Digital networks will be studied as instances of socioeconomic, gender, ethnic and class hierarchies, as well as affective ties, where the participation of female migrants entails the possibility of challenging these hierarchies. **b)** *Methodologically,* it break new ground establishing mixed methodologies drawing from the humanities intersecting with social sciences and new media studies (i.e internet studies and mobile media). It provides new tools for the understanding of digital diasporas and the development of 'postcolonial' digital humanities. **c)** *Conceptually,* it integrates colonial and migrant relations into the idea of Europe, elaborating on the notion of cosmopolitan belonging through virtual connectivity.

This will be achieved through a large-scale multidisciplinary project comprising participants from target groups who answer the question: do digital technologies enhance European integration or foster gender and ethnic segregation and, if so, how? The study focuses on how digital diasporas are constructed, sustained and mobilised through online activities (i.e. social networking, Twitter, Skype, etc.) that enable female migrants from different diasporic backgrounds (Somali, Turkish, Romanian) living in European cities (London, Amsterdam and Rome) to connect to each other and to their home countries.

The focus on gender migration, i.e. female migration, is motivated by the so-called femininisation of migration. Though a substantial body of theoretical, policy and case study literature has been produced on female migrants in Europe, the full extent of their digital participation and agency in diverse migratory processes has not been adequately acknowledged and assessed (Kofman, 2003). Global scale female migratory flows are connected to family reunion, arranged marriages, love-chain and care-drain (through which migrants leave their loved ones behind to take care of others, as nannies, domestic workers or for the care of elderly) (Parreña, 2001; Hochschild, 2000; Madianou & Miller, 2012), but also to more unsettling issues such as trafficking of women, or women escaping violent conflict. The project will unpack the relationship between gender and digital technology from an innovative intersectional perspective that accounts for the interplay of gender, nation, race, class, age, religion and sexual orientation (Leurs, Midden and Ponzanesi, 2012; Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2013; Midden and Ponzanesi, 2013). It will further contribute to the development of scholarship on digital diasporas, or online communities that support integration in host countries, thus helping to fill the social void in participants' "offline" life (Georgiou, 2006; Everett, 2009).

Focussing on female migrant diaspora from Somalia, Turkey and Romania living in Europe's main metropolitan centres (London, Amsterdam, Rome) is strategic for several reasons: **1)** it makes it possible to address different patterns of gender migration and integration in Europe (colonial, labour, postsocialist) that account for Europe's imperial past, as well as post-war patterns of migration and processes of European integration; **2)** it explores countries (UK, the Netherlands, Italy) that are heavy receivers of historically different migrant flows and have undergone several shifts in state multicultural policies; **3)** it explores the dynamic of European, as well as emerging transnational cities (Istanbul, Mogadishu and Bucharest), as cosmopolitan hubs where difference and conviviality are often grafted into each other, radiating from the local to the global (Georgiou, 2013).

Furthermore, studies on migration and integration have principally focused on economic, political, social and cultural articulations and have, for too long, overlooked the critical role of emotions, feelings and affect that is particularly significant for diasporic migrations. Digital technologies allow keeping in touch and bridging distance in novel and unprecedented ways, requiring new tools of analysis beyond the studies on emoticons, Facebook likes and smilies (Ahmed, 2004; Garde-Hansen and Gorton, 2013).

*Research Question:*

***Do digital technologies enhance European integration or foster gender and ethnic segregation and, if so, how?*** To answer this, the research will focus on how:

**A)** migration and technologies enable digital diasporas (Somali, Turkish, Romanian) that reconfigure notions of gender, diaspora and belonging in European urban centres (London, Rome, Amsterdam).

**B)** these entanglements are connected and perceived from outside Europe by focusing on transnational ties (Mogadishu, Istanbul and Bucharest)

**C)** digital connections create new possibilities for cosmopolitan outlooks, rearticulating Europe's motto of 'Unity in Diversity'.

**Groundbreaking nature/originality of the topic and approach:**
*Postcolonial Europe*: The project contributes to a novel understanding of Europe as a postcolonial place, which acknowledges its colonial past as well as migration fluxes as part of its project of integration.
*Digital Diaspora*: This project breaks new ground into the study of digital diasporas as enabling new forms of intercultural dialogue that explore migrant women's own perceptions of actual and virtual spaces from a comparative European perspective.
*Belonging:* The project proposes a paradigm shift that interrogates belonging, affective ties and emotions for the understanding of migration and digital connectivity.
*Postcolonial Digital Humanities*: This project brings new understanding to the digital turn in the humanities, interrogating digital technology and diversity, integrating the postcolonial perspective.

**Approach and Methodology:**
The project proposes a novel integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods from the humanities, social sciences and new media studies (i.e. internet studies and mobile media), and it will apply new digital methods. The corpus will be women of first second and third generation migration, aged between 18-40+.The project offers a fresh take on the digital turn in the humanities from a gendered postcolonial perspective.
1) *Digital methods* make it possible to study public user-generated content on social platforms (Facebook), video-file sharing (YouTube), Micro-blogs (Twitter), migrant websites and blogs. This content will be anonimised and analysed in all subprojects with support from the research assistant. Data from large-scale participants from target groups will be visualised (Utrecht Data School) to show patterns and categories of indexation, creating an inventory of the migrant websites, diasporic connections and networks among the groups studied. 'Digital methods' enable us to scale up the study of Internet practices (Rogers, 2013). Through network analysis using crawlers and scrapers, data will be gathered to map connections among websites, users, forms of diasporas and issues discussed online.
2) Multi-sited Virtual ethnography or Netnography will be used after the initial digital methods phase for subprojects 1-4. Virtual ethnographies will be conducted across urban and digital spaces, combining participant observations of practices and digital interactions. It makes it possible to capture digital experiences in more grounded ways compared with the aggregated databases of digital methods, enabling us to capture multi-layered identifications, individual profiles and performances (Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2010).
3) *In-depth interviews and focus groups.* After a preliminary inventory of online sources, semi-structured in-depth interviews (40 per each PhD project and 60 for the postdoc, 20 x group) on specific issues of connectivity will be carried out among female participants of migrant websites, blogs and forums across different countries. We will abide by the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR)'s ethical guidelines and, besides securing informed consent from participants, we will provide symbolic compensation for their participation.
4) *Photo elicitation* will be used by the Postdoc to track different forms of love and bonding across countries of departure and arrival. Participatory visual methods will enable the participants to express their own views, and as such "empower" them (Harper, 2002; Allen, 2012). This method asks migrants of different backgrounds to visualise their identities in photographs and images posted on profile pages (Facebook, Flickr, Tumblr, SnapChat, WhatsApp), and discuss how these relate to their rearticulation of a sense of home and belonging to European spaces.
5) *Discourse analyses* will be used by the Postdoc and PI. Based on Stuart Hall's critical approach to text in the larger sense (visual, written, oral, affective), discourse analysis relates to the study of culture in which power relationships are analysed (i.e. race, gender, ethnic, class, age) as both established through historical legacies and institutions, and also potentially unsettled through participation (Hall, 1997).
**Feasibility**
The rapidly developing expertise in digital methods will be provided through training and experts and by collaboration with the Utrecht Data School. An interdisciplinary team will be assembled to guarantee the complementarity and integration of skills and backgrounds. In order to avoid pitfalls and delay, the PI will create a detailed working scheme that will be flexible enough to adjust the quick paces of change in social media and the challenges of this project (i.e. development of new digital tools, exploration of new social networks, fine-tuning of team members, especially in the third year and fourth year).
The project is also embedded in the perfect scholarly environment. The PI is a member of one of the leading gender centres (NOG, Netherlands Research School of Gender School) co-seated in the UU Media

and Culture Studies department, and the UU New Media and Digital Culture Programme with the annexed Utrecht Data School. The project will further be embedded in the Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICON), interdisciplinary focus area Culture, Citizenship and Human Rights (CCHR) and hosted by the UU strategic theme Institution (Equality, Inclusiveness, Social Mobility).

**Team and Projects**

This project comprises five subprojects to be conducted by the PI, a postdoctoral fellow and three PhD candidates, supported by several research assistants, one specific for data visualisation and 3 others for language and translation support:

|  | *Title* | *Personnel* | *Months* |
|---|---|---|---|
| WP1 | Literature Review on digital networks | PhD1, PhD2, PhD3, Postdoc, PI | 6-12 |
| WP2 | Research Design | PhD1, PhD2, PhD3, Postdoc, PI | 12-18 |
| WP3 | Digital Diaspora 1 (London) | PhD1 under supervision of PI | 18-54 |
| WP4 | Digital Diaspora 2 (Amsterdam) | PhD2 under supervision of PI | 18-54 |
| WP5 | Digital Diaspora 3 (Rome) | PhD3 under supervision of PI | 18-54 |
| WP6 | Homeland 3 – Politics of Home | Postdoc under supervision of PI | 18-54 |
| WP7 | Postcolonial Digital Humanities | PI | 18-60 |
| WP8 | Dissemination: Summer School, Final Conference, Exhibition, Website, App | PhD1, PhD2, PhD3, Postdoc, PI | 52-60 |

**PhD1, PhD2 & PhD3:** *Digital Diasporas. London, Amsterdam and Rome*

Three projects consider diasporas in their complex digital extensions, expressions and reinventions in both physical and virtual spaces. Diaspora from former colonies (Somalia), labour diaspora (Turkish) and diaspora from Eastern Europe (Romanian) are the focus. This work studies their interconnection through links and movements in main urban centres (PhD1 London; PhD2 Amsterdam; PhD3, Rome). All 3 PhDs will work on WP1, assembling a literary review on diaspora studies in general and on their community of focus, and then moving to the field of digital networks (6-12 Months). Once completed, the PhDs will work with the PI and Postdoc to develop a common Research Design (WP2), and then on their individual fieldwork studies (WP3, WP4, WP5). Each PhD will focus on interviewing all three communities in their target urban centre. The PI and Postdoc will ensure close collaboration and data sharing.

**Postdoc: Homeland 3 – The Politics of Home**

The Postdoc will build on the data provided by the PhDs by elaborating on the connections that the migrants have left behind. This will expand Europe's footprint through migrants' many transnational ties. 60 Interviews will be conducted in the countries of origin (Somalia, Turkey, Romania) with family members, loved ones and peers in order to explore how Europe is imagined from elsewhere and love ties are sustained and mediatised. Along with applying digital methods, virtual ethnography, interviews and fieldwork, the Postdoc will focus on photo-elicitation techniques (see methodology) that will make it possible to monitor, visualise and discuss diasporic sentiments such as love, nostalgia, melancholy, memories, and longing. The photos, if permission is granted, will be used for the final interactive exhibition,

**PI: Postcolonial Digital Humanities.**

This project will directly contribute to postcolonial digital humanities. It builds on the findings of the other 4 subprojects to consider the real and virtual cosmopolitan Europe. As this project deals with "big data studies", it will emphasise that big data is never neutral or fully accurate, as gender, geography, race, income and other social and economic factors always play a role in how information is produced and received. This project will contextualise, ground and theorise the overlooked power relations in data collection, cleaning and analyses, in order to avoid what Nakamura defines as "cosmetic multiculturalism" (2002: 21). This refers to the utopian myth created by the technology industry about the democratic power of internet and the chances for levelling and elision of differences, gaps and divide.

**Research Assistants: data visualisation and language support fieldwork**

A research assistant will support the team, provide links to engineers and experts, and assist in creating data visualisations for the mapping of our results. See: http://www.dataschool.nl/. Three language assistants will be used for fieldwork support.

**Training**: Training on digital methods and expert meetings will be provided, through summer schools and tailor-made courses throughout the project for the 3 PhDs and Postdoc.

**Outcomes and Dissemination:**

The project will be publication intensive. The PI will produce one academic monograph integrating the whole of the research. The PI will also publish with the Postdoc a special issue and at least five articles in A

ranked journals. The PhD students will collaborate with the PI on at least one publication each, and prepare his/her doctoral thesis. The whole team will contribute to a final summer school on 'Postcolonial Digital Humanities', an international conference on 'Digital Europe', a photographic exhibition and an interactive website 'Connecting Europe' and a final App.

**Advisory Committee**:
The following experts will offer training and feedback, enhancing also the interdisciplinary character of the project. The PI will be ultimately responsible for all decisions and content: Prof Rens Bod (UVA, NL); Prof Miyase Christensen (Stockholm University, S); Dr. Dana Diminescu (Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme, F.); Dr Myria Georgiou (LSE, UK); Prof Radhika Gajjala (Bowling Green State University, USA).

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