

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

 **COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Migration and Mobility in a Digital Age
Paradoxes of Connectivity and Belonging

Columbia University, [Heyman Center for the Humanities](#)
April 10-11, 2018



Conference Organizer:

▪ **Prof. Sandra Ponzanesi**

Visiting Professor, Columbia University, Dept. of English and Comparative Literature/
Professor of Gender and Postcolonial Studies, Dept. of Media and Culture Studies,
Utrecht University, Netherlands

Keynote speakers:

▪ **Prof. Arjun Appadurai** (Visiting Professor, Institute of European Ethnology, Berlin, Germany/ Goddard Professor in Media, Culture and Communication at New York University)

Narrative Panic and the Edges of Europe

▪ **Prof. Mirca Madianou** (Reader in Media and Communications, Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK)

Technocolonialism: Digital Innovation and Data in Humanitarian Practice.

Sandra Ponzanesi

New York, June 2, 2018

CONFERENCE FINAL REPORT

In April 2018, a two-day international conference was held at Columbia University, hosted by the Heyman Center for the Humanities. The event was made possible through co-sponsorship by many units at Columbia University, including the Division of Humanities and the Department of English and Comparative Literature, and other universities in NYC (NYU-MCC and New School-Zolberg Institute) along with European partners. The conference, entitled “Migration and Mobility in a Digital Age: Paradoxes of Connectivity and Belonging,” brought together many international scholars who have been working at the intersection of media and migration for many years from an interdisciplinary and international perspective. The conference was opened with words of welcome by the Columbia University’s Dean of Humanities **Sarah Cole**. The organizer **Sandra Ponzanesi** (Utrecht University/Columbia University) introduced the themes and goals of the conference and highlighted the major strands of the seven panels and closing two keynote addresses.

The first panel, entitled Digital Cartographies ‘in’ Time, focused on how the cartographic and temporal representations of migrants are entangled with power relationships. **Alex Gil** (Columbia University) presented a multidisciplinary project called “In the Same Boats” that traces the migration patterns of the important cultural intellectuals of the Black Atlantic (e.g. Aimé Césaire).

Roopika Risam (Salem State University) referred to the visualizations of migration flows, such as “The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes” and “MigrationsMap.Net” among others, claiming that such maps are problematic because they turn migrants into data, and therefore dehumanize them into dots and pixels on a screen, without accounting for differences in gender, race, and ethnicity. These maps flatten out the dynamics of the movements, which become unidirectional, from the Global South to the North, reproducing the centrality of the West and the fixity of borders. The data is visualized in spectacular but troubling ways, such as moving dots that resemble swarms, or rats in flood. As such, these maps corroborate a narrative of invasion that can be mobilized by populist parties to trigger xenophobic reactions

Anne McNevin’s (The New School) presentation, “Time, Digital Media, and the Figure of the Migrant,” shifted the focus from visual cartographies to the temporal dimension of the migrant experience. Referring to Ghassan Hage’s concept of “stuckedness,” McNevin argued that time is a powerful device for separating refugees from access to citizenship. Digital media acquire a new dimension in the experience of waiting and feeling stuck, with migrants waiting for example at borders or in refugee camps until their application for asylum is processed. Time is the sign of difference between the host and the guests; stuckedness refers not only to time but also to belonging and acquiring rights in the fullest sense.

The second panel of the day focused on the topic of Networks, Affects, and Activism, and featured talks by Claudia Minchilli, Donya Alinejad, and Radhika Gajjala. Minchilli and Alinejad both presented preliminary findings from their fieldwork related to the ERC project CONNECTINGEUROPE. **Claudia Minchilli** (Utrecht University) presented work on Somali women living in Rome, and pointed out that Italy’s national silence about its colonial past

produced and enforced a sort of silence in the Somali-Italian community that could be mitigated through online networks of connectivity. Minchilli also analyzed the generational divide between the ‘Old Lira,’ who arrived decades ago, and the ‘Titanic,’ who are more recent migrant communities involved in the dangerous crossings of the Mediterranean, and the use of WhatsApp to distribute information quickly throughout the offline community. She argued that we should consider the interaction of lives ‘online’ and ‘offline’ not as binary but as a continuum.

Donya Alinejad (Utrecht University) elaborated on her work with second- and third-generation Turkish-Dutch returnees who have moved from the Netherlands (where they were born or had migrated) to Turkey (where their parents come from). She focused on the strengthening of community ties between migrants, through the cultivation of what she called “careful co-presence.” The various platform interfaces allow migrants to strategically navigate their connections with their loved ones at home, maintaining deliberate intimate contact with some through direct-messaging platforms like WhatsApp, while relegating others to a curated self-presentation on scroll-feed platforms like Instagram.

Radhika Gajjala (Bowling Green State University) closed the panel with a wide-ranging analysis of the #LoSha movement, on the Indian feminist Internet and how it challenges the boundaries between the ‘streets’ and the ‘digital streets.’ Digital streets question ontologies of subjectivity and corporeality and reactivate historicisms of caste and gendered cultures of servitude in different ways. Gajjala theorizes the ways in which the lines between online and offline life become blurred, focusing on the ways in which the women of the #LoSha movement negotiate their visibility and identity/anonymity differently between the streets and the ‘digital streets.’

The third panel, Digital Migration in Europe, included presentations by Melis Mevsimler, Myria Georgiou, and Koen Leurs, and focused on the relation between migration and digital technologies with a specific focus on Europe. **Melis Mevsimler** (Utrecht University) also presented preliminary findings from her fieldwork related to the ERC project CONNECTINGEUROPE. She focused on Turkish communities in London and how recent political events have created divides among the diaspora communities. Although the Turkish diaspora in the UK is relatively small in size, it is very diverse and fragmented along the lines of social class and ethnicity due to different migratory flows. In this context, North London, where Turkish, Kurdish, and Alevi migrants from Turkey predominantly reside, has become a site of intense political campaigning and polarization.

Myria Georgiou (London School of Economics/USC Annenberg School of Communication) explored the communication architecture of humanitarian securitization by focusing on the response to the refugee crisis at the borders of Europe. Drawing on fieldwork on the island of Chios at the height of the refugee crisis, Georgiou argues that institutional networks and discourses reaffirm securitized power, while interpersonal and informal networks attempt to challenge this order in connections of compassion and solidarity.

In conclusion, **Koen Leurs** (Utrecht University) explored the emergence of digital migration as a new interdisciplinary field of studies that captures how the scale, intensity, and types of migration have changed drastically and accelerated due to the advent of digital communications. He showed this by explaining how top-down uses of digital technologies by governmental border control and migration management authorities have contributed to new

forms of discrimination whereas bottom-up appropriation of digital technologies by forced migrants counter these stereotypes. Focusing on Europe in particular, Leurs proposed specific interventions on the relevance of digital migration studies, also theorizing about the larger picture of what makes such a field necessary but also prone to media-centric approaches.

The fourth panel, Cosmopolitanism Interrupted, featured talks by Bruce Robbins, Negrón-Muntaner, and Wouter Omen that broadly focused on the consequences of colonization and the role of humanitarian help. **Bruce Robbins** (Columbia University) emphasized economic inequality and the fact that the West is unwilling to acknowledge its participation in the economic crises of globalization that caused the current refugee crisis. As a consequence, the refugee crisis is seen in a vacuum, without accounting for the deep colonial roots and current destabilizing foreign policy carried out by the US and other neo-imperial powers. Robbins considered the notion of cosmopolitanism as not just about ideas and values but also about economic equality and redistribution.

Francis Negrón-Muntaner (Columbia University) spoke of Puerto Rico as the “Emptying Island” in which US policy, even before the devastation caused by the disaster, actively discouraged Puerto Rican population and economic growth. Negrón-Muntaner explained the colonial history of the island to show how the seeds of inequality were sown. Similarly, after the hurricane Maria, there were many speculations on properties and rebuilding work that perpetuated the inequality. Negrón-Muntaner pointed to the importance of the large Puerto Rican diaspora, which offered solidarity and civil aid when the US government failed to offer support.

Wouter Omen’s (Utrecht University) talk on “Humanitarian Communication – Common Humanities Playground” addressed the concept of humanitarianism in Europe and the specific case of Kiva, a micro-lending platform. Drawing from Lilie Chouliaraki’s work, he examined the idea that the suffering of distant others is always mediated and therefore subject to manipulation and invested interests. The idea of common humanity, which is invoked in order to activate humanitarian campaigns, becomes threatening when ‘the refugee’ or ‘the other’ becomes too close, e.g. arriving in Europe, generating what Zygmunt Bauman has defined as a moral panic.

The first day closed with a keynote address by **Mirca Madianou** (Goldsmith, University of London) on a neologism, Technocolonialism: Digital Innovation and Data in Humanitarian Practice, in which she explored the implications of migrant-oriented innovations in new digital technologies and the related data practices of humanitarian aid organizations. Her keynote talk problematized the intentions of aid organizations that have supported the use and creation of new technologies to collect and monitor biometric information or have developed apps oriented towards refugee populations. Madianou’s work was focused on analyzing the structures of these organizations and the application of technology as a reiteration of oppressive colonial power dynamics and the ease with which technology obscures exploitative practices. She articulated how the marketization of the refugee experience is an extension of colonial legacies which maintain asymmetrical and non-reciprocal exchanges, but now applied to personal and biometric data collection. The refugee camp becomes a site of further oppression rather than a sanctuary, as displaced victims must broker their privacy and identity in order to gain access to aid.

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The second day opened with Panel V on Technologies for Change, which focused on technologies for alternative notions of open access, cosmopolitan conviviality, and migrant games. **Dennis Tenen** (Columbia University) presented work on “Global Book Piracy as Peer Preservation,” introducing *Genesis*, which is a very popular digital library in Eastern Europe as it enables access to learning and knowledge outside of the privileged Western universities system. **Jonathan Ong** (University of Massachusetts, Amherst) and **Maria Rovisco** (University of Leicester, UK) introduced two case studies of conviviality in New Orleans and the UK through collaboration among urban spaces and artists. They explored affective relational forms created by artistic interventions that depict forced migration. Drawing on comparative research with migrant and refugee artists in the visual and performing arts, they curated their expressive encounters along a three-fold typology of conviviality: 1) conviviality as healing, 2) conviviality as empathy, and 3) reflexive conviviality.

Joost Raessens (Utrecht University/New York University) introduced the importance of serious games as capable of informing, inspiring, and change public opinions about the destiny and experience of refugees and migrants, in the form of immersive games and virtual reality possibilities that allow us to ‘feel’ and ‘experience’ the life of a refugee through ludic interactions and playful modalities. Games such as the ‘Migrant Trail’ (2014) among others and the VR experience *Carne Y Arena* by Alexandro Iñárritu (2017) were mentioned as tools that can not only change the way we perceive migration and undocumented lives but also our notion of distant suffering by making us immersed in the migrant condition and responsible for the consequences we are asked to confront as a player.

Panel VI was dedicated to Mediating Migration. It was moderated by Marianne Hirsch, with speakers Laura Candidatu, Radha Hegde, and Ato Quayson. **Laura Candidatu** (Utrecht University) also presented the preliminary findings of fieldwork related to the ERC project CONNECTINGEUROPE. Her talk on “Digital Media and Diasporic Mothering” focused on Romanian mothers and the complicated process of ‘home’-making after they migrate to the Netherlands. She presented her ethnographic study covering the social networking aspects of mothering and cultural reproduction in a diasporic setting, which she called “diasporic mothering,” a concept she drew from Irene Gedalof. Candidatu’s project is based on a “non-media centric approach” to digital ethnography by integrating ethnographic research and Facebook analysis.

Radha Hegde’s (New York University) talk, “Diasporic Itineracy and Remediated Authenticities,” continued the discussion of cultural reproduction within the diaspora, but was oriented more towards the use of technology as a mediating resource that allows access to ‘authentic’ cultural experiences for those living away from their home countries. She challenged the assumption that a diaspora is severed from their national roots because the modern networks of media usage have opened up new zones of encounter and reworked affiliations. This makes the homeland (or Mother India in her example) reconfigure itself as a space that is pure, authentic, and pristine. Therefore, this nostalgic return to the ‘authentic’ was problematized.

Ato Quayson’s (New York University) “Modes of the Selfie from Orality to Social Media” placed the selfie within a continuum of self-representation and narrativity construction, from oral to digital, that enables the spectator to identify with the protagonist. In other words, the

popularization of the selfie has allowed people to stop identifying with fictional characters on the television and in novels as now people can insert themselves within a narrative. This multi-modality is an essential aspect in the digital diaspora because it allows for a reinstallation of the cultural identity and value in abstract space.

The final panel, Beyond Connectivity and Surveillance, included presentations by Inderpal Grewal and Miriam Ticktin. Unfortunately, **Sandro Mezzadra** (University of Bologna) could not be present but we read out his statement about his proposed intervention on the role of “The Border Regime as a Black Box? Migration, Logistics, and Digitalization in Europe and Beyond.” His hypothesis is that the border and migration regime is becoming increasingly logistical, or to be more accurate it is increasingly shaped by a logistical rationality. Mezzadra wanted to question the implications of this new mobility paradigm for the dynamics and governance of human mobility.

Inderpal Grewal (Yale University) discussed how the "digital native," a term used for persons believed to be "at home" with digital media and ICT, is a figure of racialized and gendered citizenship. Her paper on the role of “Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants: Racial Logics of Digital Production” addressed the loadedness of the terminology, which reinforces the skewed relationship between what digital technologies actually enable and the ways in which they have been appropriated by the neo-liberal system, creating divides that are gendered, racialized, and sexualized. **Miriam Ticktin** (The New School) discussed how to re-imagine border technologies in order to design new political forms. Using the border as a way of rethinking and reformulating the possibility for new horizons, she proposed using different terms for the border that go beyond the dichotomy of open or closed. Terms such as permeable, temporary, and multi-layered allow for different imaginaries of the borders. The image/metaphor of the flyway and of the bird as trespasser repurposes the role of digital technologies in creating and eliding borders, pushing anthropological methods into the speculative: how might we imagine, design, and amplify some of these possible alternate political forms?

This was the perfect bridge to the final and closing keynote address by **Arjun Appadurai** (New York University) on Narrative Panic and the Edges of Europe. His keynote address focused on the fear and crisis experienced by the modern nation state in Europe, which is created by fixed narratives of blood, religion, language, and territory while forced refugees destabilize all these notions by posing a threat to its cohesion. Appadurai elaborated on his notion of *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006) because this anxiety is not justified by the small numbers of actual border-crossers but more by the unsettling of ideas of sovereignty, economic conditions, and citizenship. Accordingly, modern nation states feel constantly obliged to drive out those who fall into territorial ambiguity. He therefore called for a work of the imagination to generate new narratives and potentials for migrants and create new archives that should go beyond the narrative of victimhood in order to focus on the migrant’s capacity to aspire. This projection into future citizenship is the only way to turn migrants from supplicants to applicants, so that their longing can be transformed into belonging.

To conclude, the conference interventions could be summarized in four strands:

- 1) **Digital Passages**: What are the mechanics of mapping migration? How is migration monitored, tracked but also subverted and circumvented?

Several sessions explored the importance of cartographies, mapping, and geospatial data visualization, through the role of digital humanities and digital activism.

- 2) **Networks and Diaspora:** How are digital diasporas and virtual communities constituted online? Internet applications make it possible to sustain new forms of diaspora and networks, which operate within and beyond national boundaries. Several sessions analyzed how these reconfigurations take place and impact on everyday life.
- 3) **Connectivity and Affect:** How does digital technology bridge distance by creating digital intimacy? Several papers explored the embedding, embodiment, and materialization of technology to stay in touch and transfer emotions, attachments, and belonging as well as fear, anxiety, and alienation.
- 4) **Cosmopolitanism and Humanitarianism:** We are connected but incompletely so (Calhoun, p. 198). We have responsibilities because of these connections, which affect us and others, and are not just marked by abstract similarities. Several papers explored how cosmopolitanism is not only about the easy mobility of the privileged, or the forced mobility of the disadvantaged, but also about specific webs of connections that position us in the world, and function at different scales, from the local to the global.

For more information, please visit the website: <http://heymancenter.org/events/migration-in-a-digital-age-paradoxes-of-connectivity-and-belonging/>



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