

# Migration and Mobility in a Digital Age: (Re)Mapping Connectivity and Belonging

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## Abstract

This article charts new directions in digital media and migration studies from a gendered, postcolonial, and multidisciplinary perspective. In particular, the focus is on the ways in which the experience of displacement is resignified and transformed by new digital affordances from different vantage points, engaging with recent developments in datafication, visualization, biometric technologies, platformization, securitization, and extended reality (XR) as part of a drastically changed global mediascape. This article explores the role of new media technologies in rethinking the dynamics of migration and globalization by focusing in particular on the role of migrant users as “connected” and active participants, as well as “screened” and subject to biometric datafication, visualization, and surveillance. Elaborating on concepts such as “migration” and “mobility,” the article analyzes some of the paradoxes offered by our globalized world of intermittent connectivity and troubled belonging, seen as relational definitions that are always fluid, negotiable, and porous.

## Keywords

migration, digital media, mobility, connectivity, security, visualization, biometric, datafication, surveillance

This special issue with the ambitious title “Migration and Mobility in a Digital Age: (Re)mapping Connectivity and Belonging” aims to bring about a dialogue between migration and digital technologies to resignify the experience of displacement as transformed by the affordances of new media technologies.

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It draws from a very successful two-day international conference that was held at Columbia University on April 10–11, 2018, hosted by the Heyman Center for the Humanities.<sup>1</sup> The conference brought together many international scholars who have been working at the intersection of media and migration from an interdisciplinary and transnational perspective. We see *Television and New Media* as an ideal interdisciplinary platform that combines both media specificity and visual registers with new societal engagements around new technologies and digital practices. This special issue offers a significant, if not representative, selection of some of the interventions that chart new directions in digital media and migration studies from a gendered, postcolonial, and multidisciplinary perspective. In particular, the focus is on the ways in which the experience of displacement is resignified and transformed by new digital affordances from different vantage points, engaging with recent developments in datafication, visualization, biometric technologies, platformization, securitization, and extended reality (XR) as part of a drastically changed global mediascape.

The assembled contributions avoid methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) by thinking beyond the strictures of specific groups, ethnicities, or even nations, instead reaching out to new intersections that foreground hybridity, diaspora, and cosmopolitan affiliations. These interventions are by no means utopian, nor do they celebrate technology use as a solution to migration issues. On the contrary, they take the digital migrants as participants and activists within a broader discourse on citizenship rights, exploring the intersections between social identities, such as race, class, and gender, from the user's perspective as well as engaging with the role of media institutions as complicit in upholding structures of inequality and surveillance.

"Migration and Mobility in a Digital Age" aims to address some of the paradoxes offered by our globalized world of intermittent connectivity and troubled belonging. It is therefore important to focus on the terms chosen and their application not as normative terms but as relational (Glissant [1990] 1997), meaning in conversation with other definitions, always fluid, negotiable, and porous.

## Migration or Mobility?

Although the two terms, "mobility" and "migration," are not synonyms or interchangeable, they both refer to problematic definitions of transnational circulation that focus on ruptures, breaks, and flows (either voluntary or forced), capturing the complexity of the people on the move.

Nonetheless, these are terms that often pertain to different schools of thought, or disciplinary entrenchments, and we take the opportunity to rethink migration in the light of mobility, not to dilute it within a more globalized and cosmopolitan term, but to enhance the different ways of charting movement and resettlement as ongoing and not static.

Mobility studies is an emergent interdisciplinary field that focuses on social issues of inequality, power, and hierarchies in relation to spatial concerns, such as territory, borders, and scales. Normatively, mobility justice aims to reduce social inequality by

removing obstacles to peoples' everyday mobilities (Adey 2009; Adey et al. 2013; Salazar and Jayaram 2016; Sheller 2009; Urry 2007; Vannini 2009). Scholars of mobility studies acknowledge that movement is neither a recent nor a distinguishing feature of contemporary times and therefore consider mobility studies to have a more holistic approach than migration studies.

However, the view of migration as solely linked to population movements in recent times is also rather restrictive and distorted. As a consequence, critical migration studies has expanded its scope and assumes that migrants have some form of agency or control over their movements and engage with discourses, representation, and contestations.<sup>2</sup> Migration in itself has many subtexts: from educational migration to economic migration, environmental migration, and forced migration and from family reunion to asylum seekers and refugees, trafficking, and illegal smuggling, making the intersection between ethnicity, class, and generations hard to disentangle.

Mobility justice, as a newly developed term, combines the two strands—migration and mobility—in a critical way (Sheller 2018). Mobility justice recognizes that while mobility is a fundamental right for everyone, it is experienced unequally along lines of gender, class, ethnicity, race, religion, age, and able-bodiedness. Mobility justice as a concept is concerned with improving peoples' lives by enabling mobilities as a common basis for social justice. This includes broad issues such as improving infrastructures, housing services, transportation, education and health, and environmental conditions, alongside structural considerations such as power, governance, and accountability. But it also pays attention to digital virtual environments, racial justice, mobile borders, and migrant justice, which clearly resonates with the aims and concerns of critical migration studies.

It is in this context that we address digital migration studies from a critical perspective, studying how mobility and migration intersect with the rise of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the increased digital connectivity.

## **Connectivity**

In his intervention on cosmopolitanisms, Craig Calhoun (2017, 191) states that globalization is about different patterns of interconnections. Even though Calhoun argues that we are growing more connected, he emphasizes that the patterns of our connections are varied and incomplete, and most of all not universal. In short, he reminds us "We are connected, but incompletely. We have responsibilities because of our connections, because we are affected by and affect others; not just because of abstract similarities" (Calhoun 2017, 198).

Within media and communication studies, connectivity refers more specifically to relations enabled via digital media technologies. This can take different dimensions according to the focus given to everyday networked relations versus media-centric approaches that focus on the Internet as an autonomous realm of interactions. Thus, connectivity can be articulated via social media platforms, apps, and other online channels while generating new notions of digital diasporas and virtual communities that require new methods of analysis, such as digital methods or virtual ethnography.

Digital methods are oriented toward the study of social phenomena that are specific to, and inseparable from, the devices or platforms on which they emerge (e.g., links, engines, likes, shares, tweets). This use of research methods is geared toward the study of “natively digital” objects, devices, and phenomena to understand connectivity as an online formation and constitutes a relatively new field of research.

In “The Culture of Connectivity,” Jose van Dijck (2013) focuses more on the role of platforms and the ways in which social media have shaped connectivity and interactivity in the last few decades. Van Dijck critically considers the histories of five social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and Wikipedia—that define how connectivity is shaped and how it becomes profitable and part of a regime of socioeconomic and neoliberal exchange.

The “E-Diasporas Atlas Project” by Diminescu et al. (2011) focuses instead on establishing how connectivity works among migrant diasporic groups by analyzing online diasporic formations via web hyperlinks between migrant websites. The digitally “connected migrant” relies increasingly on ICT, and thus, it is essential to map out topics such as the “historical depths,” “geographical zones,” and “social strata” generated via mass digital data (Diminescu 2008, 576). Such an approach favors data-oriented methodologies and software tools that allow us to examine the digital traces of transnational diasporic connectivity.

Therefore, data-oriented research primarily focuses on websites and social media platforms. Following this more digitally oriented method, Saskia Kok and Richard Rogers (2017, 23–46) identify and trace Somalis’ transnational web-based connections when they engage or mobilize around a particular issue online. The method of “issue mapping” developed by Sánchez-Querubín and Rogers (2018) draws on digital methods to map user-generated “route-work” and critique contemporary practices of bordering.

It is clear that data-oriented research may help to identify and examine the issues and online networks on a larger scale. Yet, the question remains whether these visualizations capture the real nature of connectivity or the “digital reasons” behind the “digital traces” (Diminescu and Loveluck 2014). To explore the temporal and emotional dimensions of digitality that make connections dynamic and to establish what links matter and are meaningful to people, the integration of (digital) ethnographic approaches is required.

Going beyond the rhetoric of safety and surveillance on one hand versus hospitality and humanitarian aid on the other hand, this special issue elaborates on the large-scale and small-scale aspects of “digital migration.” It considers the domestication of technology and the everyday use as well as Big Data and border regimes.

The non-media-centric approach reflects an increased interest in using digital media in ethnography research, countering many of the claims of Big Data, and studying how digital media are involved in the formation of communities (digital diaspora and other networks) rather than their replacement online.

This is also the core of the European Research Council (ERC) project CONNECTINGEUROPE: a five-year interdisciplinary project that has focused on how connectivity and belonging shape the lives of migrant women living in Europe’s

main capital cities.<sup>3</sup> In this project, we argue for the foregrounding of the relationship between theory and empirical data in a context where Big Data–driven approaches to migrant web use begin to take on institutional dominance. Instead of succumbing to “digital positivism” (Fuchs 2017), it is important to continue to develop useful integrations of newer digital methods within qualitative research epistemologies applied to diaspora research (Alinejad et al. 2019).

This special issue, therefore, proposes a complication of the concepts of connectivity and belonging, revisiting the idea that digital media radically transform transnational social formations.

## Signposts for Migration and Mobility in a Digital Age

The contributions to this special issue engage with many of these debates while also providing empirical work. They operate around six main signposts that are neither exclusive nor exclusionary: (1) migrant archives and hospitality, (2) mapping migration and data visualization, (3) biometric assemblage and humanitarianism, (4) digital governmentality and urban justice, (5) digital surveillance and securitization, and (6) XR and civic engagement.

In his opening article “Traumatic Exit, Identity Narratives and the Ethics of Hospitality,” Arjun Appadurai illustrates how the flow of populations in the contemporary world leads to the tension between diasporic pluralism and territorial stability, which is at the basis of the project of the modern nation-state. Referring to his influential *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai (1996) emphasizes how in an era of globalization the circulation of media images and the movement of migrants create new disjunctures between location, imagination, and identity. This has many consequences for the work of the imagination, which can now draw from multiple archives and new forms of electronic mediation. What is crucial in this opening article is the recognition that migrants are not just victims and disenfranchised, but subjects who have a capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004). This work of the imagination is not a privilege relegated to “elites, intellectuals, and cosmopolitans but it is also being performed by poor people, notably in the worldwide pursuit of their possibilities to migrate . . .” (Appadurai 2019). Migration is therefore not only about loss of memory and identity but also about the possibility to construct new imaginaries, new archives, and new narratives. New technologies allow for interactivity and simultaneity and the construction of new cultural archives that are maps toward building new identities. These aspirational narratives are essential to recognizing refugees, for example, not as “supplicants” but as “applicants” for citizenship in new countries. These new archives can turn “longing” into “belonging” and hospitality into a basis for citizenship. We need, therefore, on one hand, to deepen the migrant archives and aspirational maps, and on the other hand, to find a way to secure citizenship, for which we need to rethink the architecture of sovereignty.

Roopika Risam’s article in this special issue “Beyond the Migrant ‘Problem’: Visualizing Global Migration” (2019) offers a fascinating account of geo-spatial data visualization and how it contributes to the othering of the migrant and how it can be

used instead to challenge the instantiation of the migrant as a placeholder for the crisis. Data visualization is interpreted as a narrative genre, designed to represent human migration. The tension between maps and data is inevitable in any geo-spatial visualization that involves the representation of vulnerable communities. Risam makes us aware of the explicit and implicit rhetorical choices of the programmers, who through their composition process underscore their ideological positioning and contribute to mediated forms of communication around migration. Referring to the visualizations of migration flows, Risam claims that such maps are problematic for several reasons. First, migrants are reduced to dots and pixels on screen, and therefore dehumanized and reduced to data. Second, these representations flatten out the dynamics of the movements and become unidirectional, from the Global South to the North, in particular Europe, in smooth flows without interruptions or change of directions (e.g., not from the South to the South as is often the case in practice). Third, the speed is deceptive as the flow is shown as intensifying through the period of the refugee crisis, without considering the risks and changed conditions. Fourth, dots do not convey differences of identity, affiliation, race, or gender. Furthermore, these maps reproduce the centrality of the West and the representation of the borders as fixed and static instead of fluid and negotiable, reproducing assumptions about the nation states as devised by Western colonialism. Finally, the maps follow particular programming strictures that allow the data to be visualized in spectacular ways that are not aligned with its troubled content. Many of these maps show moving dots that resemble swarms, rats escaping floods. As such, these maps corroborate a narrative of invasion that can be mobilized by populist parties to trigger xenophobic reactions.

We must in turn look for alternative forms of representation that resist the inscription of the migrant as a problem. This is possible through digital participatory mapping and collaborative cartographies for human rights advocacy. Risam articulates this through the analysis of data visualization efforts such as “The Flow Toward Europe” (noncollaborative method) and “Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat” (collaborative method), the former showing its implication in the legacy of imperialism. And the latter showing the possibility of writing back to dominant knowledge structure while resisting the dehumanization of datafication by incorporating participatory methods. Resisting a totalizing map of migration is the strategy to account ethically for the plurality of migrant experiences and reinforce the individuality of the migrant.

In her sophisticated article on “The Biometric Assemblage: Surveillance, Experimentation, Profit and the Measuring of Refugee Bodies,” Mirca Madianou (2019) introduces us to “humanitarianism in the networked age” by foregrounding the notion of biometric assemblage. She analyses how biometric technologies are routinely used in the response to refugee crises, with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) aiming to have all refugee data from across the world in a central population registry by the end of 2019. Madianou introduces the notion of biometric assemblage (blockchain, biometrics, and artificial intelligence [AI]) as part of a recent trend toward digital innovation and data practices in the humanitarian field that use refugees as a laboratory for the implantation of new data practices. While biometrics is not something new, the acceleration

of the utilization as part of the technological convergence that amplifies the risks associated with each constituent technology of the biometric assemblage *is* a new phenomenon.

This article identifies five intersecting logics that reflect wider transformations within the humanitarian sector and explain the reasons driving the biometric assemblage: (1) the logic of accountability—interactive technologies are seen as a way to empower refugees, improve the quality of assistance, and offer a “digital identity” in the form of biometric data that are portable across borders to be used for access to jobs, remittances, and banking; (2) the logic of the audit—digital technologies provide instant metrics about the beneficiaries and, within an increased marketization of humanitarianism, can measure the effectiveness of donors and offer evidence for the effectiveness of the interventions; (3) the logic of capitalism—private partnership becomes more common with services being outsourced to commercial partners; technological companies such as Facebook and Google are interested in piloting new technologies, using the involvement in humanitarian causes as a branding opportunity; (4) the logic of solutionism—referring to the desire to offer solutions to complex problems, which often implies the involvement of technological companies in the aid sector. Given the complexity of humanitarian challenges, technological innovation is often seen as a quick fix, whereas a more meticulous assessment of the situation is needed before digital interventions; and (5) the logic of securitization—biometric technologies are a way through which states control their borders and ensure security. Biometrics makes refugees legible and controllable. The concern is that biometric registrations exceed the original scope of the registration in what is termed “function creep,” which refers to the ways in which data collected for one purpose (e.g., to address fraud in aid delivery) may end up being used for a completely different purpose (e.g., antiterrorism). Madianou offers an informed and detailed analysis of the various risks that this race for biometrics in the humanitarian sectors has entailed, regarding biometric bias and errors, lack of data safeguards, data sharing and function creep within states and commercial companies (surveillance and profit), and experimentation with untested technologies among vulnerable people. Madianou questions not only the disputable ethical grounds for the biometric assemblage but also its effectiveness and indispensability. In the name of technological innovation, followed by the hype around blockchain technology, refugees are being used as a testing ground for data practices. What blockchain does could easily be realized through other methods, without putting the refugees in jeopardy because of errors and illicit use. The sweeping scale of biometric registrations therefore deserves serious scrutiny to avoid what she calls “technocolonialism” (2018).

Myria Georgiou’s “*City of Refuge* or Digital Order? Refugee Recognition and the Digital Governmentality of Migration in the City” (2019) analyzes the digital governmentality of *the city of refuge*. Drawing from a multi-sited study in Athens, Berlin, and London, the article makes an important intervention on issues of digital governmentality and urban justice. Using a multi-method qualitative approach, the study focuses on refugees and civil actors in their negotiation of the urban digital order that enhances opportunities for recognition as well as imposing prescribed ways of being and acting

as citizens in the making. As shown in the article by Georgiou, a digital urban order requires a *performed refugeeness* as a precondition for recognition: that is, a swift move from abject vulnerability to resilient individualism.

This article shows how digital infrastructures support refugees' new life in the European city. These infrastructures are intended as complex sociotechnical systems that consist of two dimensions: a functional one relating to issues of access, connectivity, and use of technology and a performative one, relating to engagement with technology, representing the self and enacting citizenship. The city becomes an important nexus where citizenship can be enacted as claim, articulating forms of justice that would not be possible at the state level. The city, therefore, becomes a site that offers different pathways to citizenship. Digital collaborative projects are mentioned, such as *Give Something Back to Berlin*, an initiative that fosters urban conviviality by destabilizing the hierarchy between citizen and noncitizens. Many of the digital initiatives expect refugees to comply with a model of entrepreneurial integration while retaining the status of precariousness that is associated with refugeeism. Cities are identified as locations of openness that promote solidarity and recognition for citizens in the making that the nation denies. By participating in the digital order of the city through disruption or mobilization of wider networks, the opportunities for recognition are expanded.

Radha Hedge's "Itinerant Data: Unveiling Gendered Scrutiny at the Border" (2019) explores the question of mediation at the border and in particular the question of digital surveillance of minority communities at the airport. As part of a longer genealogy of immigration control, the new logic of digital reinforcement at the border reproduces orientalizing perceptions of the Muslim woman as Other. This article uses the case of the U.S. citizen Rejhane Lazoja re-entering the United States and having her cell phone confiscated after refusing to unlock her phone for screening. Thereby, this article questions the larger issue of security surveillance machinery and the role of biometric technologies for the categorization of cultures and nations that contribute to systemic racism. This article explores the implications of data archives, technologized infrastructures, and border regimes from the standpoint of gendered vulnerability. It considers in particular (1) how power is enacted at the border, (2) the modular control of the data body, (3) the veil as a threat to corporeal transparency, and (4) the cell phone as an archive of private digital identity.

This article carefully analyzes how the experiences of mobility and migration are entangled in the networked infrastructure, where voice, image, and data capture the granular details of transnational life. The objections raised by Muslim women about the circulation of their cellular data serve as a point of departure to rethink national belonging in terms of the new itinerancy of data and bodies.

In his article "Virtually Present, Physically Invisible," Joost Raessens (2019) analyzes Alejandro G. Iñárritu's Oscar-winning mixed reality installation *Carne y Arena*, which lets the viewer experience the harsh reality of migrant lives. Premiered in Cannes in 2017, the work has been exhibited at several locations worldwide (Cannes, Milan, Mexico City, Los Angeles, Washington, and Amsterdam), receiving many accolades and critical acclaim. Raessens contests the limited interpretation of *Carne y Arena* as a simple VR installation and places it within the larger umbrella of "XR" by defining it as a form of "mixed reality" (MR), merging real and virtual worlds. The installation



consists of a combination of computer-generated simulation, to recreate the Arizona desert, with real-world components, such as sand, wind, and heat, that turn the event into an immersive, sensorial, and affective experience. The goal is to encourage empathy and compassion with the migrants as sufferers and contribute to real-world change. Drawing from Chouliaraki's (2006) insights into the "spectators" and "distant sufferers" of television news, Raessens argues that *Carne y Arena* turns the spectator into a participant by letting them experience the migrants' situation in an immersive way, therefore transforming the distant sufferer into a "close" and "proximate" sufferer. Further elaborating on Henry Bergson's ([1903] 2007) philosophical notion of intuition, Raessens compares the challenge of mediation with that of metaphysics, namely how to bridge the gap between real and mediated experience. According to Iñárritu, his installation leads to "a transcendental experience of things" that makes you feel, act, and connect with the other and therefore want to implement change and social justice.

## Conclusion

This special issue is both a transdisciplinary endeavor and transnational occasion, which addresses urgent issues in our contemporary world questioning theoretical issues, methodological approaches, and empirical findings. It combines robust thinking about mobility and migration in deep time, thinking about migration as always being an unsettling and enriching force of human civilization.

The contributions in this issue explore the role of new media technologies in rethinking the dynamics of migration and globalization by focusing in particular on the role of migrant users as "connected" and active participants, as well as "screened" and subject to biometric datafication, visualization, and surveillance.

Therefore, the intervention proposed is to study the role of the media both from a bottom-up perspective—migrant users' engagement with technology for the purpose of acquiring agency, finding expression, establishing new connections, and maintaining bonds with their homelands—and from a top-down perspective—focusing on the infrastructures that monitor mobility and enforce datafication, security, surveillance, and e-governance—without posing these perspectives as binary or mutually exclusive. It is indeed in the interweaving of new digital media affordances with regimes of power and knowledge that a complex system of connectivity and belonging emerges as inextricably linked to the changing forms and experiences of contemporary migrations.

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## Notes

1. <http://heymancenter.org/events/migration-in-a-digital-age-paradoxes-of-connectivity-and-belonging/>
2. See “Global Compact for Migration.” Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. Intergovernmentally Negotiated and Agreed Outcome, 13 July 2018. [https://refugeemigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/180713\\_agreed\\_outcome\\_global\\_compact\\_for\\_migration.pdf](https://refugeemigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/180713_agreed_outcome_global_compact_for_migration.pdf). See also Maansi Kumar and Amyaz Moledina “Mobility Studies: An inclusive interdisciplinary approach to understanding migration.” (The College of Wooster) <https://challengingborders.wooster.edu/blog/2017/06/13/mobility-studies/>
3. See <http://www.connectingeuropeproject.eu/>

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