

# Conclusions: On Doing Digital Migration Studies

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## Taking Perspective

This volume addressed how migrants navigate their being in the world, crossing national borders, shaping new forms of diasporic affiliations and transnational belongings, while facing new forms of surveillance, control and datafication. We took as a starting point the main premise that the relationships between digital media technologies and migration / mobilities cannot be captured within the limited confines of single disciplines. Aiming to animate an interdisciplinary exchange, we therefore purposefully invited contributors from various fields and areas of expertise, including media, communication, geography, anthropology and sociology, to share their perspectives on (studying) migration in relation to digital media technologies. The chapters included were all previously presented during the April 2021 online conference *Migrant Belongings. Digital Practices and the Everyday*. Clear shared foci could be observed in the 200-plus papers submitted to the conference. The chapters included here were selected to develop new insights in five thematic strands that we discerned at the conference and that are significant for the development of the field of digital migration studies:

- 1) Creative practices: researching media and migration by exploring the various creative practices and modalities through which figures, tropes, frames and imaginaries of the “migrant”, the “refugee”, the “border crosser” and the “mobile individual” may be constructed, negotiated, questioned and destabilized;
- 2) Digital diaspora and placemaking: nuanced claims about the possibilities afforded by digital technologies to transcend place and time by reconsidering the emotions, materialities and symbolic processes of translocal connectivity, socio-cultural integration and placemaking across situated contexts;

- 3) Affect and belonging: addressing the politics of emotion in the context of accelerating but uneven forms and experiences of mobility and mediation. Specific attention is paid to the intersections of sex and gender, as structuring forces and intense emotional registers;
- 4) Visuality and digital media: addressing how visual politics and sense making, within the context of the increasing platformization of migration and mobility, shape and give meaning to forms of belonging;
- 5) Datafication, infrastructuring and securitization: accounting for the shifting nexus between humanitarianism and securitization by addressing how digitalizing and datafying migration infrastructures are made and negotiated from below in everyday life settings.

Besides aiming to open up new ways of thinking around these themes, we purposefully brought together scholars at various stages in their academic careers, both younger and more senior scholars, who work with diverse groups of migrant and mobile people, in different geographical settings and in relation to a broad range of digital technologies. Taken together, the fifteen chapters and five thematic sections plus introductions included in *Doing Digital Migration* present a comprehensive entry point to the variety of theoretical debates, methodological interventions, political discussions and ethical debates around migrant forms of belonging as articulated through digital practices. Furthermore, because publications commonly offer little information on why and how particular decisions are made during the operationalization of a study, the contributors were invited to reflect on the rationales behind their choice of particular frameworks, including spelling out their methodological considerations and attempting to situate their case studies in comparative contexts.

### **Pluralizing “the Migrant” and “the Digital”**

One key recurring theme connecting the chapters is that they offer fundamental insight into how migration and digital media technologies are increasingly inseparable. Digital technologies impact upon everyday migrant life, while vice versa migrants play a key role in technological developments—be it when negotiating the communicative affordances of platforms and devices, as consumers of particular commercial services such as sending remittances, as platform gig workers (Van Doorn & Vijay, 2021) or as target groups and test cases for new advanced surveillance technologies (Molnar, 2020). Therefore, it is not productive to approach migration processes and

digital technologies separately as stable, stand-alone units that exist in isolation from one another. Rather, their entanglement should be taken as an ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical starting point of critical inquiry (Leurs, 2023).

In practice, by considering the various perspectives advocated by the contributors to this volume, we can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the entanglements between migration and digital technologies. Taken together, the chapters present us researchers with an important invitation, namely to pluralize our understanding of “the migrant” and “the digital.” Inspired by feminist, critical race and postcolonial theory, pluralizing as a research principle does not seek to advance one singular, all-encompassing explanation or homogenizing understanding of the world; rather, it is committed to diversifying discourse. This aim to think differently about migration and digitality seeks to acknowledge a variety of interconnected worlds, knowledges, stories, experiences and feelings, from the centre but also, and more importantly, from the margins. “Embracing pluralism” here does not suggest that anything goes, all is relative, or all knowledge claims should have equal weight (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 136). Rather, it seeks to acknowledge the standpoints from where people, communities, researchers, governments or corporations make truth claims about migration and technologies, and that claims made from particular positions are always “partial” rather than all-encompassing (Haraway, 1988). From which situated location in the world are these claims made, by whom, for whom and with what aims? Knowledge production thus does not end with pluralization; it is the basis for showing how unjust power hierarchies are shaped. This can be done by diagnosing how agency and domination emerge from intersectional assemblages of race, gender, sexuality, ability, nationality, religion, age, generation and location, among others (Crenshaw, 2022; Puar, 2018; Tsatsou, 2022). These insights in turn offer a basis on which to work towards social justice and transformation.

On the basis of the multiplicity of insights presented in *Doing Digital Migration Studies*, we advocate pluralizing the figure of “the migrant” in their interrelation with the “digital.” Consider for example the variety of migrant communities and technologies discussed in this book: Senegalese living in Louga in the north of Senegal and Senegalese living in the diaspora who gather together on the Festival International de Folklore et Percussion Facebook platform (Sendra, see Chapter 11); Latin Americans living in Spain and the United States who create content for TikTok (Jaramillo-Dent, Alencar & Asadchy, see Chapter 10); queer refugees from the Middle East living in Berlin, Germany who use dating apps like Grindr (Bayramoğlu, see

Chapter 9); Chinese transnational grandparents in Australia using WeChat for digital kinning and homing (Stevens, Baldassar & Wilding, see Chapter 4); and “highly skilled,” “international professional” migrants using platforms like Zoom for placemaking in the university town of Groningen in the rural northern Netherlands (Costa, see Chapter 7). Pluralizing our understanding of “the migrant” and “the digital” opens up new vistas to acknowledge the multiplicity, contradictions and messiness of how the digital co-constitutes migration and how migration co-constitutes the digital. Key in approaching migration and digital technologies here is acknowledging how both the digital and migration mediate differences that are often overlooked in their daily, mundane, banal everyday occurrences.

Categories and labels such as highly skilled migrants, expats, refugees, asylum seekers, *sans-papiers*, non-people and economic migrants are not ahistorical, neutral, naturally occurring differentiations of human beings. Rather, migration categories are contingent, socio-cultural and legal fabrications which have strong material and symbolic consequences. They reflect power-knowledge governance frameworks that differentiate people on the basis of a “good-versus-bad mobilities dichotomy” (Bruns, 2023), which “constructs immigrant identities along intersecting axes of inequality” (Cleton & Meier, 2023, p. 1). The differentiation between those who are eligible to move and those who are not is haunted by the historical projects of colonialism, modernity, capitalism and nationalism, as these legacies determine which bodies are allowed frictionless mobility and which bodies are immobilized (Andrews, 2021; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). In parallel, the digital is built on difference, which is reflected in how digital inequalities are constructed and perpetuated across the levels of ownership, access, literacies, participation, datafication, machine learning and artificial intelligence. Here, we take cues from the digital anthropologists Daniel Miller and Heather Horst, who “define the digital as everything that has been developed by, or can be reduced to, the binary—that is bits consisting of 0s and 1s” (2012, p. 5)—the digital encoding of human life on the basis of this binary reduces and abstracts human complexity, thereby producing “a further proliferation of particularity and difference” (Miller & Horst, 2012, p. 3). While dominant rationalities of migration produce difference by simplifying the complexity of the world to form hierarchical categories that determine restricted possibilities for legal movement, the digital simplifies the complexity of the world by turning it into zeroes and ones, thereby also (re)producing differences.

Taken together, migration and the digital mutually reinforce a systematic and violent differentiation of people. From above, this oppressive system

undergirds and shapes the uneven landscape of everyday migrant life and digital practice (Gallis, Bak Jørgensen & Sandberg, 2022). However, this is not the only story to be told about migration and technologies. In the words of Foucault, “where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1978, p. 95). In the context of digital migration, surrounding the apparatuses of “security,” there is “resistance” at the level of lived experience (Triandafyllidou, 2022) and it is up to researchers to locate, theorize and amplify such agential acts. For example, David Nemer in his recent work draws on decolonial and intersectional theory to address how favela residents in Brazil engage with and appropriate technologies mundanely, to navigate and fight oppression in their lives through digital and non-digital practices of spirit, love, community and resistance (Nemer, 2022). Similarly, Tanja Ahlin takes a relational perspective to analyse how families of migrating nurses from Kerala, India, establish and ambivalently experience “transnational care collectives” through tinkering with smartphones and social media (Ahlin, 2023).

To avoid reaffirming essentializing and homogenizing dominant rationalities of migration and technology, scholars in this anthology for example embrace an “autonomy of migration” framework to question state-centric analyses and attend to the subjective, lived and affective force of mobile people and communities (e.g., see Denić in Chapter 1 and Shah in Chapter 8). Similarly, considering how digital practices sustain translocal forms of belonging and place-making invites researchers to move beyond the dominant state-centric focus inherent in the study of transnationalism (Mevsimler, 2021, see Godin & Ghislain in Chapter 6 and Bayramoğlu in Chapter 9). Regarding methodology and ethics, researchers pluralize knowledge production by decentring technology. For example, in Chapter 2 Irene Gutiérrez Torres operationalizes a non-digital media-centric paradigm by co-producing knowledge with communities through forms of archival participatory filmmaking. Yener Bayramoğlu further problematizes previous one-sided perspectives by centring the perspective and multiplicity of experiences of queer migrant communities. These interventions do not ignore systematic conditions; rather, as part of a pluralizing commitment they invite researchers and the world to witness and acknowledge how migrant communities may claim agency through transnational and cosmopolitan practices from below.

### **Digital Cosmopolitanisms**

The anthology has been divided into different sections that reflect emerging key topics and debates in digital migration studies, from creative practices to

diasporic formations, from visual representations to affective connections, all in negotiation with top-down and bottom-up responses to increased digitalization, datafication, monitoring and surveillance. As mentioned in our Introduction, these thematic sections are criss-crossed by critical concepts that are steeped in the entanglement of migration and digital media technologies, such as the notion of the everyday as being important for understanding new cosmopolitan formations from below. The notion of cosmopolitanism is deeply entrenched in issues of mobility, citizenship and human rights. Therefore, when permeated with questions of technology, border control and surveillance, it needs to be resignified from those positions at the margins, as experienced by refugees, migrants and the exiled as an important nexus of the local/global, which is always marked by unequal redistribution of power, access and agency.

Digital connectedness, for example, allows physical distance to be bridged by digital proximity, creating new paradigms for understanding the experience of mobility in general and migration in particular (Diminescu, 2008; Nedelcu, 2012; Marchetti-Mercer et al., 2023), but also of transnational intimacy and global networks, as they are part of the affective turn online (Ahlin, 2023; Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2020; Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013). This new idea of connectivity also significantly reshapes notions of cosmopolitanism based on the trespassing and transgressing of borders, not only through displacement but also, as theorized by Arjun Appadurai (1996), through shared imaginaries on the move. These issues have been further elaborated upon in the rising field of digital diaspora studies and transnationalism, which criss-crosses and overlaps with that of digital cosmopolitanism (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010; Candidatu, Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2019; Gajjala, 2019; Gilroy, 1993; Franklin, 2013; Zuckerman, 2013; Ponzanesi, 2020).

In the discussions on cosmopolitanism, we can discern different perspectives that foreground either a normative approach, which embraces equality and solidarity among fellow human beings regardless of their background and ethnicities, or a more pragmatic and experiential approach that foregrounds different forms of coexistence and hospitality, often generated by forced migration and violent displacements. This latter approach seeks to acknowledge what is often called a “cosmopolitanism from below” where instantiations of “common humanity” are not dictated by the moral high ground of a shared experience as citizens of the world (cosmopolitans) but realized through the lived everyday practices of conviviality and ethnic coexistence that enables migrants on the move to create togetherness, despite the unequal access to mobility, integration and citizenship.

Indeed, when all legal and political structures fall short, cosmopolitan everyday practices have shown how aspirations to citizenship may be realized through acts of citizenship by people who may not be full citizens by law (Stavinoha, 2019). Such a conceptualization of citizenship is interested in how people “constitute themselves” as citizens through acts (Isin, 2012, p. 110). These acts of citizenship are meant to “disrupt habitus, create new possibilities, claim rights and impose obligations in emotionally charged tones ... and shift established practices, status and order” (Isin & Nielsen, 2008, p. 10). Acts of citizenship in these terms enable social change and promote a pluralization of flexible notions of citizenship (Ong, 1999). Therefore, cosmopolitanism can also be considered as something that comes into being through cosmopolitan acts. By addressing these acts, we researchers can increase awareness of shaping and participating in new transnational formations that cut across borders and boundaries, while establishing new forms of connectedness and belonging, away from institutional restrictions or banishments.

It is in that sense that digital technologies are regarded by some as the final turn of “ideal cosmopolitanism,” in which equal access is granted to all and virtual mobility is available for everybody, as is the opportunity to play with identities in ways that enable escape from racial, religious or gender discrimination. The term *digital cosmopolitanism* (Zuckerman, 2013; Hall, 2018; Ponzanesi, 2020) draws attention to how digital technologies have enabled and contributed to the acceleration of cosmopolitanism ideals (Ponzanesi, forthcoming 2024). However, digital cosmopolitanism is not only useful to address the potential of digital technologies to enable connections; simultaneously it invites us to question the top-down power of technology to create bias, othering and harmful classifications.

As one among the many forms of contemporary cosmopolitanism, digital cosmopolitanism is about exploring the power of the internet and other digital tools and platforms to distribute worlding experiences created by digital publics and counter-publics, and the way this re-centres discursive power by challenging the idea of fixed flows of communication (fixed in the direction from the West to the rest of the world). Kurasawa, for example, uses the concept of cosmopolitanism from below to demonstrate that cosmopolitanism is a transnational practice which is not about cultural assimilation, but about acknowledging global diversity and the way it can be advanced in a decentralized and dynamic fashion through “crisscrossing webs of affinity between multiple groups from around the world” (Kurosawa, 2004, p. 236).

Mixing, therefore, does not imply the loss of individual and collective cultural distinctiveness. This insight is corroborated by the chapters in this anthology directly addressing issues of cosmopolitanism. For example, in her exploration of African digital cosmopolitanism, Fungai Machirori (see Chapter 5) argues that normative articulations of cosmopolitanism have recently come under criticism for their omission of non-Western cosmopolitanisms. As a result, a research agenda centring cosmopolitanism from below has emerged, bringing with it a sharp focus on alternative forms of cosmopolitanisms that interrogate the nexus between the local and the global from different locations. Machirori shows in her chapter how connection patterns remain diverse, incomplete and non-universal, with engagements enriched by embracing the dynamics of local and cultural specificities, rather than avoiding them. This is in line with Achille Mbembe, who suggests that for alternative thinking about borderless worlds we should turn away from Western concepts, and reconsider how everyday life under modernity in Africa has always revolved around pursuing mobility, circulation and networking across borders, to escape the entrapment of confinements, displacement and forced labour (2018).

Similarly in her chapter on “Affective Performances of Rooted Cosmopolitanism Through Facebook”, Estrella Sendra (see Chapter 11) analyses how the performance of rooted cosmopolitanism involves the expression of feelings of belonging to the homeland. By studying the case of the Festival International de Folklore et de Percussion in Louga, Senegal, Sendra shows how the use of Facebook in practice promotes a sense of rooted cosmopolitanism. For people based abroad, the engagement in the festival through social media reflects a sense of pride in belonging to Louga. This practice resonates with the notion of cosmopolitanism as conviviality (Gilroy, 2005), which is an agential modality of choice for togetherness, shared values and bridging in practice. When people are unable to be physically present, or are only present temporarily around the festival dates, many of these practices reflect a further feeling of nostalgia about their hometown. The practices enhance the territorialization of the project beyond the geographic boundaries of the festival location, thus expanding the decentralization upon which the festival is conceived, as a project of territory. Here the notion of rooted cosmopolitanism, as theorized by Anthony Kwame Appiah (2005), can be considered to refer to how the local and the international meet, through emotions and a sense of transnational belonging.

Cosmopolitanism is also indirectly addressed in the chapter by Moé Suzuki on the analysis of virtual reality to situate humanitarian discourses that foreground notions of common humanity (see Chapter 12). Suzuki argues

that there is an assumption of universalism that is embedded in the notion of “humanity.” Therefore, VR films dealing with displacement are often based on the idea of the virtual body-as-container that serves as a vehicle through which to experience and understand other people’s lives and experiences, irrespective of their background, situation and condition. This is of course based on an apolitical and pre-existing idea of “humanity” that produces a disembodied epistemology of displacement that avoids questions of power and politics, as if we are all equally vulnerable to being displaced.

Here the notion of cosmopolitanism is brought to more inevitable global structures of the “everyday” as imposed by “banal ways” of cosmopolitan coexistence (Beck, 2010; Calhoun, 2003). Yet “cosmopolitanisms” in the plural (Robbins & Horta, 2017) accounts for how different articulations of belonging in the world can still be marked by localized and rooted forms of connection. The connections between digital cosmopolitanism and migration show how to learn to recognize alternative forms of cosmopolitanism that are not *per se* linked to Western normative definitions of cosmopolitanism, and open up a way towards differentiated patterns of connections which remain diverse, incomplete and non-universal. Cultural specificities are embraced here rather than avoided, providing a profound engagement enriched with the dynamics of the local as an expression of the transnational.

### **Future Directions**

This volume is an invitation to fellow researchers to pluralize understandings of digital migration and produce new accounts of the situated, localized and context-specific digital practices of migrants and their lived experience of digital borders, datafication and migration technologies. Alongside the communities, technologies and processes covered here, there are also inevitably limitations to the volume. To close the volume, we would like to signal several new developments in the domain of migration and technology that may warrant further scrutiny.

The contributions by Rosa Wevers with Ahnjili Zhuparris (see Chapter 3), Daniel Leix Palumbo (see Chapter 13), Stavinoha (see Chapter 14) and Kaarina Nikunen and Sanna Valtonen (see Chapter 15) offer fundamental insights into digital and data-driven securitization. However, with the roll-out of artificial intelligence, the securitization of migration may be “spiralling” further (Léonard & Bello, 2023). For example, according to EuroMedRights—a network of human rights organizations in the Euro-Mediterranean region—there are strong consequences to the European Union’s border externalization strategy: countries in the Middle East and North Africa are made into

a breeding ground for “invasive surveillance” where AI is expected to play a growing role in tracking, controlling and monitoring migrants. This fear is growing with the AI act, which risks effectively creating a “two-tiered AI regulation, with migrants receiving lesser protections than the rest of society” (Napolitano, 2023, p. 5, 15). Additional research is needed on how people experience securitization, alongside digital and data-driven forms of humanitarianism, across the Global South and the Global North. There has been a growing interest in the use of digital platforms, metrics and digital tools for humanitarian purposes in the context of migration, raising new urgent questions about the implications of data sharing with authoritarian regimes, data security, data breaches and function creep as well as data preservation (Cheesman, 2022; Marino, 2021).

In the volume we touch on questions regarding the political economy of migration and digital technologies. Daniela Jaramillo-Dent, Amanda Alencar and Yan Asadchy address platformed belongings among content creators on TikTok (see Chapter 10); while Marie Godin and Bahati Ghislain analyse practices and experiences of refugee influencers on YouTube (see Chapter 6). Questions about money are a key concern, perhaps especially in the lives of mobile people, and this thematic has been firmly placed on the research agenda of media and migration researchers. For example scholars have addressed the “multi-directional” circulation of remittances, feelings and experiences within transnational families (Singh, 2016); how telecommunication companies target migrants and become part of the migration industry (Gordano Peile, 2014); the corporate and governmental brokering of ideal migrant workers on the basis of a “migrant platformed subjectivity” (Cabalquinto & Wood-Bradley, 2020); as well as how gig work has become racialized as migrant work (Van Doorn & Vijay, 2021). As public-private partnerships proliferate, particularly in outsourcing decision-making to AI, future researchers can explore further how migrants experience the “politics of privatisation” (Molnar, 2022) and how digital payments, mobile money and blockchain-supported pre-paid debit cards impact upon and constitute migrants (Cheesman, 2022; Tazzioli, 2019).

According to the United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs’ report *World Social Report 2020: Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World*, global inequality is impacted by four mega-trends: international migration, technological innovation, climate change and urbanization (UNDESA, 2020). Future researchers can address the interrelationships between the latter two processes. There is established literature on post-disaster communication and recovery (Madianou, Longboan & Ong, 2015; Ong, 2017). However, as Saskia Witteborn also underlines in

her introduction to Section V, the digital migration infrastructures and digitally mediated experiences of environmentally-related migration and climate refugees demand more attention (see Boas, 2020; Boas, Dahm & Wrathall, 2020).

As scholars increasingly turn to digital data traces of mobility, questions of data privacy, security and ethical considerations become even more crucial (Witteborn, 2022). For this purpose, scholars have found inspiration in ethics of care paradigms to reconsider the ethical implications of privacy, informed consent and data protection (Sandberg et al., 2022); as well participatory-action-research and design-justice frameworks to ensure knowledge production cycles align with the interests of the communities involved (Costanza-Chock, 2020). Researchers are expected to take care to reflect upon and avoid perpetuating harm or furthering discrimination against migrants. More specifically for digital migration studies researchers, it is imperative to avoid technological fetishism in pursuit of studying the latest technological innovation. Additionally, “categorical fetishism” (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 48) which isolates and homogenizes particular types of mobile subjects should be avoided, for example by going beyond ethnic-centric and nation-state-centric approaches, and by studying migrants and non-migrants together (Dahinden, 2016). For this purpose we should ask ourselves to whom and to what our digital migration research is a contribution (Sandoval-García, 2013). By taking up such questions, scholars are reminded to see if they can collaborate and open their institutions up to people with migration, refugee, asylum or mobility backgrounds (see Chapter 6 by Godin and Ghislain) as well as to artists, activists and designers (see Chapter 3 by Wevers with Zhuparris). Pursuing such difficult questions allows us researchers to become accountable for our knowledge production, reflect on our standpoint and positionality and take a firm normative stance when needed, which may include deciding to do harm to oppressive migration governance structures (Stierl, 2022).

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