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Post-Humanitarianism and the Crisis of Empathy

Abstract: The constant mediatization of conflict, violence, and suffering has created a feeling of “compassion fatigue” (Möller 1999; Sontag 2003) among viewers who consume images of “distant suffering” from the safe space of their own living rooms (Boltanski 1993; Chouliaraki 2006, 2013). This has prompted not only a sense of context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2011) but also a crisis of empathy. How should we respond to, and continue to engage with, disasters, underdevelopment, pandemics, and political conflicts, as part of multiple competing worlds of short-term and long-term humanitarian crises?

The booming virtual reality (VR) industry has broken new ground as allegedly the “ultimate empathy machine” (Milk 2015; Bailenson 2018; Uricchio 2018; Raessens 2019) which puts the viewer in other people’s shoes. VR as a unique and novel form of “immersive technologies” has been postulated as a “technology of feelings,” a good technology that promotes compassion, connection, and intimacy by allowing the viewer to experience the lives of those who are distant others, e.g., migrants or refugees. This chapter explores the enthusiasm, but also the ethical reservations, surrounding this new media genre of post-humanitarian appeal through the analysis of some VR projects dealing with migration and refugee issues, namely Nonny de la Peña’s *Project Syria* (2012), Gabo Arora and Chris Milk’s *Clouds over Sidra* (2015), Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail’s *The Displaced*, (2015), and Tamara Shogaolu’s *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration* (2020).

Keywords: humanitarianism, Virtual Reality, migration, postcolonialism, mediatization, distant suffering

1 Humanitarianism and the crisis of empathy

This chapter aims at conceptualizing the relations between postcolonial theory and the crisis in the present day. It tries to understand, situate, and analyze postcolonial theory in the face of new ‘posts’ that signal new crises but also new transitions. These ‘posts’ require a renewed understanding of the past legacies in the light of contemporary challenges. For example, what is signaled with the notion of post-humanitarianism is not only the death of the grand narratives and the breakdown of the notion of a “common humanity,” as a universal and shared value, but also a

change in attitude towards the suffering of the Other. This implies a turn from cosmopolitan solidarity towards narcissism and self-gratification, often played out by celebrities and influencers via social media (Chouliaraki 2013). What we have now is a proliferation of platforms and media modalities for engaging with distant suffering. These new modalities of engagement, which respond to various consumeristic and branding strategies, do little to change the history of dehumanization of the Other or alter economic structures of oppression and inequality.

This fragmented, volatile, and more opportunistic form of engagement is also caused by the constant mediatization of conflicts, violence, and suffering, which has created a feeling of “compassion fatigue” (Möller 1999; Sontag 2003) among viewers who consume images of “distant suffering” from the safe space of their own living rooms (Boltanski 1993; Chouliaraki 2006, 2013). This provokes not only a sense of context collapse, referring to the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one’s social network (Marwick and boyd 2011) but also a crisis of empathy. How should we respond to, and continue to engage with, disasters, underdevelopment, pandemics, and political conflicts, as multiple competing worlds of short-term and long-term humanitarian crises?

This chapter seeks to argue that “compassion fatigue” is not a recent phenomenon, but the mediatization of suffering has changed the modes of engagement and the avenues for response. The advent of digital technologies has brought distant suffering close to home through digital proximity. However, the shock effect is now scattered across different social media platforms which conflate different timelines and geopolitics in the here and now of everyday life. This creates not only ethical issues on how to assess what crisis is worst or most deserving of our attention when prioritizing our response and action, but also a competition of tragedies that severely diminish our attention span, and with it, the commitment to solidarity.

In this chapter, attempts to reinstate the connection between the distant sufferer and the viewer will be analyzed through a series of Virtual Reality (VR) productions made by the United Nations, artists, and major media organizations, in efforts to use new technologies to break down the “compassion fatigue,” or apathy generated by the exposure to too much crisis. VR is an innovative technology that allows you to experience another person’s point of view through immersion and embodiment. For this reason, it has been postulated as the ultimate “empathy machine,” a technology of feeling that promotes compassion, connection, and intimacy by allowing the viewer to experience the lives of those who are distant others, for example, migrants or refugees. It has been increasingly used to this effect in humanitarian appeals to solicit donations and renew public engagement, therefore changing the strategies adopted for humanitarian communication.

2 Humanitarianism in the twenty-first century

Humanitarian communication refers to public practices that take human suffering as a cause for collective action and intervention. It frequently implies the representation of vulnerable others – often “out there” – that Western organizations, such as the UN or NGOs, feel called to protect from harm and alleviate their suffering. Therefore, it is important to underline that humanitarianism has a double narrative of precarity, on the one hand, and human rights, on the other (Barnett 2020). Precarity refers to war zones, famine, natural catastrophes, and the need to alleviate the suffering of the vulnerable through immediate help or more long-term relief actions, which are also part of more systematic development strategies. Humanitarianism as human rights refers more to post-conflict and legal resolutions, a moral commitment to human rights for the whole of humanity.

There is tension between these two takes on humanitarianism. Humanitarianism as precarity is informed by the ethics of altruistic benevolence, which has both Christian and secular roots (Boltanski 1993), whereas human rights seem to stem from a morality of social justice, inspired by anti-colonial struggles and current institutionalized legal duties to protect human dignity (Moyn 2010). As Vestergaard and Chouliaraki write, this tension has given rise to

long term debates within the humanitarian field between the de-politicized practice of compassionate care inherent in aid and the political character of human rights in grassroots or NGO activism, there is nonetheless a shared premise that brings the two dimensions of humanitarianism together. Both aid and development *and* right-based activism rely on a universal conception of the human being (Edkins 2019). Both, in other words, begin from an understanding of humanity as a shared condition of existential openness to violence – corporeal, social or psychological – and consider every human-life-in-need to be equally worthy of care and protection independently of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. (Chouliaraki and Vestergaard 2021: 2)

This idea of common humanity (Omen 2023) is part of a universalist notion of humanitarianism, which needs precarious bodies to display its rescue operations. This goes hand in hand with images of victimhood that recollect Western iconographies of suffering, often of religious imprints such as the *pietas*, and the suffering of mothers, mourners, and innocent children (Zarzycka 2017) that inspire the selfless altruism of the Samaritan, based on Christian values of compassion. More recently, humanitarian imageries have mutated towards the secular imperative of doing good without asking for anything in return, which according to Chouliaraki is not only rooted in religious values but also part of Western public life at large. For this reason:

In this story-telling capacity of its imagery, then, humanitarian communication intervenes in public life not simply as a logic of communication that informs audiences of the unfortunate predicament of people-in-need. Rather, it also operates as a logic of sentimental pedagogy that mobilizes emotions (empathy or indignation) so as to catalyze communities of feeling and socialize these communities into disposition of care towards suffering others within and outside their community of belonging. (Chouliaraki and Vestergaard 2021: 2)

Therefore, as Didier Fassin also expresses, the vocabulary of suffering, compassion, assistance, and responsibility to protect has become central to our political life when it comes to qualifying the issues we are dealing with and the choices we make in that respect (Fassin 2012). The spectacle of bodies in need and its vocabulary of suffering and compassion are central not only to the humanitarian project but also to the idea of a common humanity and human rights that extend across Western society and the Global South.

Humanitarian action is therefore linked closely to postcolonial issues and debates as it rests on the legacy of colonial dominations and global inequalities that emerged from colonization, extraction, and the economic dependency created by post-imperial regimes and developmental practices. Despite the good intentions of transnational organizations such as the UN, UNHCR, UNICEF, FAO, World Bank, and various NGOs – from larger ones such as the Red Cross, Save the Children, the World Food Program (WFP), and *Médicins Sans Frontières* (MSF), to other NGOs such as War Child and Kiva NGOs such as War Child and Kiva – they cannot escape the neoliberal political economy that shapes humanitarianism, which is also based on funding and recruiting, competition between emergencies leading to the depoliticization of human rights, and the platformization of advocacy with its interconnected datafication of care.

This form of marketization and entrepreneurship has turned issues of morality into issues of utility, moving the sector away from the communities it is supposed to serve and help towards the increased expectations of the Western partners. This reorientation of priorities brings serious tensions in the relations between donors and beneficiaries, now based on measurable outputs and results. This utilitarian approach not only fails to help vulnerable groups but also preserves or reinforces existing hierarchies between donors and beneficiaries. As Sandvik writes, “we are left with a humanitarianism where inclusion is about access to markets, empowerment is about making beneficiaries more self-reliant and about putting the label ‘humanitarian’ onto the customer concept in innovation theory” (2014: 27).

Large-scale events such as live aid concerts, celebrities as humanitarian ambassadors (from Audrey Hepburn to Angelina Jolie), and fund-raising marathons populated by glamorous figures and media personalities all contribute to turning the humanitarian cause into a commercial one, aiming to nurture a deep emo-

tional attachment to the NGO as a particular brand. This turn to branding is seen as the response of the sector to compassion fatigue (Möller 1999), which desensitizes the public towards the sector's representation of suffering, with problematic tropes such as emaciated children who are to be turned into happy "saved" children (Dogra 2013).

The new politics of humanitarianism is characterized by a weak morality of solidarity reduced to a minimal baseline of protecting lives. This thinly politicized morality of compassionate benevolence is closely linked to the shift of the sector towards corporate strategies of marketing and branding, which promote a light political agenda of consumer activism while also helping its stakeholders to survive the global competition for funding in the humanitarian industry (Chouliaraki and Vestergaard 2021: 9).

3 The platformization of humanitarian communication

The new race for funding and monetization has also involved the digital realms and the increased platformization of the sector, for example in the form of crowdfunding via TikTok, and appeals for donations through social media platforms (van Dijck et al. 2018), which have replaced the telethons and charity concerts of the past. Connective platforms, big data and artificial intelligence (AI) have drastically changed not only the interventions and management of NGOs' structure and organization but also their communication strategies and campaigns, see the recent studies on and developments in digital humanitarianism (Johns, 2023). The platformization of humanitarianism is not without ambivalence, as digital innovations tend to take big leaps, and often technological quick fixes are chosen above understanding deeper socio-cultural implications.

The use of technological experimentation, as a laboratory involving more vulnerable groups, has often been seen as creating more harm than benefits (biometrics, fingerprinting, and iris scans for example), as Mirca Madianou has described in more detail in her notion of technocolonialism (2019a, 2019b). Tazzioli (2022) talks of extractive humanitarianism, whereby refugees are asked to be good citizens by actively participating in these digital experimentations, which are meant to make their management more efficient, turning them into data and making them complicit in this imposed regime of governmentality.

An example of this is the incremental use of AI, biometrics, and blockchain technology as a governmental practice to monitor, sort, and classify refugees. This way of outsourcing human management not only to machines but also to

third parties (e.g., Palantir) has been heavily criticized for using vulnerable groups as testing ground for digital innovations without considering the risks and damage done to these groups such as infringement of privacy, data breaches, and function creep, which means the use of these data for other purposes than planned, without consent (Pugliese 2010; Ajana 2013; Madianou 2019a; Jacobsen 2015).

To critically assess the potential and limits of these new technological developments is not to be the killjoys (Ahmed 2010) who spoil the enthusiasm for new technological possibilities, but to make sure that we are not pouring old wine into new bottles (Uricchio 2018). What is meant by this is that we should not attribute to new technologies innovative potentials that are not so new, but which stem from a long tradition of media development and show more signs of a continuation than a real break, with the reproduction of all the implicit problems and bias of the past.

4 VR as an empathy machine

AI innovations and virtual reality technologies, for example, have been increasingly used to develop computer-generated simulations that place the viewers in three-dimensional environments that reproduce war zones, disaster areas, or refugee camps. A break with the previous two-dimensional imagery through an immersive experience as proposed by VR promises to defeat compassion fatigue and reactivate the connection between donors and beneficiaries by letting donors step into other people's shoes and experience through affective and immediacy strategies what it is like being a refugee, from the safe space of technology.

VR is an innovative technology that allows you to experience another person's point of view through immersion and embodiment (Milk 2015; Bailenson 2018; Uricchio 2018; Raessens 2019). For this reason, it has been postulated as the ultimate "empathy machine," a "technology of feeling" or a good technology that promotes compassion, connection, and intimacy by allowing the viewer to experience the lives of those who are distant others, for example migrants or refugees (Boltanski 1993; Chouliaraki 2006, 2013; Ong 2019). It has been increasingly used to this effect in humanitarian appeals (by UNCHR, IOM and the Red Cross for example) to solicit donations and renew public engagement.

Examples are VR productions by UNHCR (e.g., *Clouds over Sidra*, 2015; *Life in the Time of Refuge*, 2017), NGOs, and artists (e.g., Nonny de la Peña's *Project Syria*, 2012; Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail's *The Displaced*, 2015; Alejandro G. Iñárritu's *Carne y Arena*, 2018; Martijn Kors' *A Breathtaking Journey*, 2016), aimed at sensitiz-

ing the public to the plight of refugees and migrants, offering new “platformed” interventions in humanitarian campaigns (Omen et al. 2021; van Dijck et al. 2018). Many examples of VR on Migration and Displacement can be found in the excellent mediography of VR produced by Bevan and Green as part of the Immersive Documentary project (2018).¹

This chapter, therefore, explores more closely the enthusiasm, but also the ethical reservations, surrounding this new media genre of post-humanitarian appeal through the analysis of some VR projects dealing with migration and refugee issues, namely Nonny de la Peña’s *Project Syria* (2012), Gabo Arora and Chris Milk’s *Clouds over Sidra* (2015), Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail’s *The Displaced*, (2015), and Tamara Shogaolu’s *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration* (2020), all projects that could be considered part of VR for humanitarian action.

Humanitarian VR refers to specific projects that make documentary claims to the real, claims that are intended to bring the spectator-participant into a space of collective consciousness about existing states of crisis, suffering, and emergency (Wilson 2010; Pedwell 2012; Bujic et al. 2020). Therefore, humanitarian VR presents tremendous opportunities, but there are also major pitfalls. While advocates of humanitarian VR emphasize the value of the embodied presence simulated by this advanced technology, critics point to the inherent bias of the technology itself, as “humanitarian VR is an ambivalent sensory experience of bodily absence triggered by its technological limits” (Zimanyi and Ben Ayoun 2020). Humanitarian VR should seek to move beyond provoking *feelings* on the part of the spectator to raising the possibility of tangible action *outside* of the representative space.

VR risks becoming personalized and flexible media consumption, leading to forms of “ceremonial humanitarianism” (Chouliaraki 2013: 13) and “compassionate consensus” (Fassin 2012: 176). Chouliaraki for instance describes critiques of the “dark side” of humanitarianism where “solidarity may be claiming to be a manifestation of benevolence in the cosmopolis, yet it ultimately contributes to reproducing an unequal world order founded on the colonial legacy of the West” (Chouliaraki 2013: 35). In this sense, solidarity is attacked in its logical relation to hierarchy. “A critique of compassion,” Fassin states, “is necessary not because of the attitude of superiority it implies but because it always presupposes a relation of inequality” (Fassin 2012: 4).

On the other hand, VR offers tremendous opportunities not only for the tech industry and the humanitarian sectors but also for artists, refugees, and activists. They can use the new affordances to reach new publics but also to create differ-

¹ *VR Nonfiction: A Mediography* was created with funding from the UK EPSRC as part of the Virtual Realities – Immersive Documentary Encounters project (EP/P025595/1). University of Bristol.

ent forms of storytelling and interactive techniques to emphasize empathy and generate attention, interest, and support for the plight of the many migrants and refugees who seem to have fallen under the radar of urgent crisis though they are now considered here to stay.

VR is considered to be a game changer with many useful applications and is expected to have an impact in many different areas. Let us have a look at some of the productions that have generated wide responses among viewers, critics, and policymakers.

5 VR – migration and displacement

Nonny de la Peña's *Project Syria*² was originally commissioned by the World Economic Forum and was created at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. It is an immersive piece of journalism that focuses on the plight of children in conflict zones. Nearly half of Syria's 23 million people have been displaced in its civil war and no group has been as severely affected as children. Children make up more than half of the three million refugees living in camps or makeshift housing, and some news reports indicate that children are being specifically targeted in the violence.³ By coupling pioneering virtual reality technologies with audio and video captured at a tragic event, *Project Syria* transports audiences to the scene as the story unfolds.

Gabo Arora and Chris Milk's *Clouds over Sidra*⁴ is an eight-minute virtual reality film created by Chris Milk and Gabo Arora and directed by Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman in partnership with the UN Millennium Campaign, UNICEF Jordan, and VRSE Hollywood production studios and the UN. The 360-degree documentary allows us to peek into the life of 12-year-old Sidra, a Syrian refugee housed in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, which is home to 130,000 Syrians fleeing violence and war, half of whom are children. The film follows Sidra, who has lived in the camp for over a year and a half, through a typical day in her life: you see her school, her home, the gym, and even the soccer field where she plays with the other children in the camp. *Clouds Over Sidra* is the first ever film shot in virtual reality for the UN, and it was followed by many others. It uses the medium to generate greater empathy and new perspectives on people like Sidra,

² See interview with Nonny de La Peña ("Project Syria: An Immersive Journalism Experience" 2014).

³ Watch VR: <http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/detail/49/>.

⁴ Watch VR: <http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/detail/8/>.

who live in conditions of great vulnerability. The film has a powerful capacity to allow anyone to see what life within a refugee camp looks like and the ability to inspire a message of hope among not only displaced Syrians but also global citizens motivated to act.

Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail's *The Displaced*⁵ was created by *The New York Times* and focuses on the 30 million children who have been displaced from their homes because of war. This powerful VR production tells the stories of three of them – from South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine. It puts the viewer in refugee camps and desolate villages, where you can witness first-hand the lives of the displaced refugees – their limited options and their extraordinary, heartbreaking resilience, as the promotional material announces.

Tamara Shogaolu's *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration*⁶ is a multi-platform project (film, VR experience, and interactive web application). It follows the journeys of LGBTQ refugees from the Middle East across continents and cultures – from the 2011 revolutions to the world today. It is an animated transmedia series consisting of *Another Dream*, *Half a Life* and *They Call Me Asylum Seeker*. *Another Dream*, a hybrid animated documentary and VR game, brings the gripping, true love story of an Egyptian lesbian couple to life. Faced with a post-revolution backlash against the LGBTQ community, they escape Cairo to seek asylum and acceptance in the Netherlands. An accompanying installation allows audiences to reflect on what they have seen, heard, and felt in VR.

What these different productions have in common, besides the focus on the plight of refugees, is the consistent use of VR across the span of a decade to promote empathy and foreground immersive experiences to generate public interest and renew engagement. They target different kinds of audiences, to be reached through the print media such as *The New York Times*, exhibition venues as in the case of *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration*, and at the more institutional level through the commitment of the UN and collaboration with the World Economic Forum.

Initially commissioned by Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab of the World Economic Forum, *Project Syria* uses new virtual reality technologies to put the audience “on scene” and experience the plight of these children in a truly visceral way. Nonny de la Peña is considered to be the godmother of VR and *Project Syria* is one of the very first productions to engage with VR to create an immersive journalistic experience of the war crisis, migration, and refugees. It is linked to the Syria uprising and civil war and consequent exodus, which has displaced more than four million Syrians across the Middle East (especially Lebanon, Jordan and

5 Watch VR: <http://vrdocumentaryencounters.co.uk/detail/102/>.

6 Watch VR: <https://filmfreeway.com/ANOTHERDREAMVR090>.

Turkey) and Europe. Some news reports indicate that children are being specifically targeted in the violence. As the maker reports:

The World Economic Forum initially commissioned *Project Syria*, an immersive journalism piece that conveys the plight of the child refugees in Syria. It has also been selected for the 2015 Sundance Film Festival. *Project Syria* uses virtual reality technologies to put the audience “on scene,” enabling people to feel as if they are truly witnesses to the violent events in Syria. This piece was requested to be displayed at the World Economic Forum by the Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab, in Davos on January 21, with the idea of compelling world leaders to act on this crucial issue. (“_Project Syria”, 2014).



Figure 1: *Project Syria* by Nonny de la Peña (2014). Symbolic figures were injected into the piece to represent the number of children affected by the war. © Emblematic.

The first see Fig. 1 scene replicates a moment on a busy street corner in the Aleppo district of Syria. In the middle of the scene, a rocket hits with dust and debris flying everywhere. The second scene dissolves to a refugee camp in which the viewer experiences being in the center of a camp as it grows exponentially in a representation that parallels the real story of how the extraordinary number of refugees from Syria fleeing their homeland have had to take refuge in camps. All elements are drawn from actual audio, video, and photographs taken on scene. Utilizing the real-time graphics of the Unity game engine and the sense of presence evoked

through high-resolution virtual reality goggles and compelling audio, *Project Syria* lets the audience experience the real events “as they transpire.”⁷

In an interview the maker, Nonny de la Peña, speaks about the importance of VR as putting you “on the scene” and making you feel like you are an actual witness to the event; rather than being separated by the television or screen, you feel like you are there (“Project Syria: An Immersive Journalism Experience” 2014). She talks about the process and the selection of the material, audio and visual. She explains that more than one-third of the population of Syria has been displaced by the war and that 52 percent of the refugees are children. The preference for VR and the recreation of the scene, rather than showing a normal video, is the astonishing sense of presence that the technology affords. You feel you are there; you feel like you are witnessing this event and, argues the maker, if we can make people understand how difficult these circumstances are, perhaps they can start to think about what kind of change they too can help bring about.

The VR *Project Syria* itself, which foregrounds the term VR recreation, is highly impactful as you feel immediately that you are at the center of a war zone, with bombing and buildings collapsing all around. This is not a video game. Nonny de la Peña specializes in creating virtual worlds based on real life. As the maker explains, the bomb is from an actual event, and they had to collect multiple sources to figure out both what the building looked like before the bombing hit and what happened in the aftermath. This included mobile phone videos, films from a video camera, and various audio recordings that people at the scene had made. The material was gathered from a refugee camp at the border. This sense of being there, this sense of empathy, this sense of deeper understanding of the story makes this footage valuable for the future of journalism. It may not look like reality just yet, but the scenes the maker recreate can still have a very powerful effect on those who experience them.⁸

The unique quality of VR as an empathy machine is also the main argument put by Chris Milk, the maker of *Clouds over Sidra*, in his extremely popular Ted Talk “*How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine*,” in which he states that:

VR connects humans to other humans in a profound way that I have never seen before in any other form or media. So, it is a machine, but through this machine we become more compassionate, we become more empathetic, and we become more connected. And ultimately, we become more human. (Milk 2015)

⁷ See MIT open documentary lab: <https://docubase.mit.edu/project/project-syria/>.

⁸ See BBC special on project Syria ‘BBC Click, Immersive Journalism’ from July 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugmFP4UfnRY>.



Figure 2: *Cloud Over Sidra* by Gabo Arora and Chris Milk (2015). The Za’atari Refugee Camp in Jordan is home to over 80,000 Syrians fleeing war and violence. Half of these are children. © UNVR, United Nations Virtual Reality.

Milk says that we can change minds with these machines. *Clouds over Sidra* see Fig 2 was presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos, with the aim of influencing powerful people who might not otherwise be sitting in a tent in a refugee camp in Jordan, but who through this experience – of going through the frame and of suddenly being there – were affected and solicited to take actions. The different VRs made for the UN were shown to the people who can change the lives of those in the films. This is the true power of virtual reality, which is not peripheral as in video games: it connects humans to other humans, as Milk continues, in a profound way that we have never seen before in any other form of media. It can change people’s perception of each other and that is how Milk thinks that virtual reality has the potential to change the world.

The belief in the extraordinary power of VR also reached public news media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and the BBC, which started to create their own VR sections. In November 2015, *The New York Times* launched its virtual reality application “NYT VR,” distributed one million disposable Google cardboard VR headsets to its subscribers and published its first 360 video: *The Displaced* by Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail. In an observational documentary style, the 360 video tells the story of three displaced children: an 11-year-old

boy from eastern Ukraine named Oleg, a 12-year-old Syrian girl named Hana see Fig. 3, and a 9-year-old South Sudanese boy named Chuol.⁹



Figure 3: *The Displaced* by Ben C. Solomon and Imraan Ismail's (2015). Hana Abdullah left her home in Mabrouka, a small Syrian town, and now lives with her extended family in a makeshift tent settlement in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. © New York Times.

The children allow us to become guests in their lives for a few minutes; they speak about how they escaped war zones, about their memories of their homes, and their hopes for the future. *The Displaced* portrays the impact of war and displacement on children with heartbreaking, immersive realism. As the makers say:

Nearly 60 million people are currently displaced from their homes by war and persecution – more than at any time since World War II. Half are children. This multimedia journey in text, photographs and virtual reality tells the stories of three of them. (Silverstein 2015)

In *The New York Times Magazine* issue introducing the VR project, the journalist Jake Silverstein writes that in the current migration crisis nearly 30 million children worldwide have been driven from their homes by war and persecution.

⁹ See Oleg: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/magazine/the-displaced-oleg.html>; Hana: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/magazine/the-displaced-hana.html>; Chuol: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/magazine/the-displaced-chuol.html>.

Media coverage has lately focused on the Syrian dimension of this tragedy, but the crisis impacts children from all over the world, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Libya, Nigeria, Honduras, El Salvador, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. The *New York Times* has chosen to build a portrait of three of them: all three have seen their homes destroyed; two have lost family members. Yet they carry on. Their stories are told in a multimedia documentary project, comprising a feature story, interviews, three photo essays and, for the first time in the history of *The New York Times*, a virtual-reality film. As Silverstein (2015) writes:

We decided to launch The Times's virtual-reality efforts with these portraits because we recognize that this new filmmaking technology enables an uncanny feeling of connection with people whose lives are far from our own. By creating a 360-degree environment that encircles the viewer, virtual reality creates the experience of being present within distant worlds, making it uniquely suited to projects, like this one, that speak to our senses of empathy and community. What better use of the technology could there be than to place our readers within a crisis that calls to us daily with great urgency and yet, because of the incensancy of the call, often fails to rouse us at all?

Tamara Shogaolu's *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration (Another Dream* is the VR production within the multi-platform project) was on show at the Amsterdam Museum and is available to tour museums, galleries, and educational institutions worldwide see Fig. 4. The VR production starts with animated images of female asylum seekers, with the caption that since 2019 there has been a 400 percent rise in the number of LGBTQ+ people asking for asylum. The VR is presented as an immersive story of love across continents.

Tamara Shogaolu realized that new and immersive media tools allow stories not just to be told and heard, but to be felt as well. She asserts, like the other VR makers, that mediums like VR have the power to make the political personal and the personal universal. As the director writes in her statement:

I believe that sharing these stories in innovative and engaging ways is all the more urgent today. Politically and in the media, we hear so much 'us' versus 'them,' but because of technology, our world actually now has the potential to be more 'we' than ever. [. . .] Ultimately, I hope that ANOTHER DREAM gives audiences the experience to truly live within the stories we represent, as well as the opportunity to reflect on their own values and beliefs after experiencing another person's intimate memories in VR" (Tamara Shogaolu n.d.)

The project is part of an animated documentary transmedia series, *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration*, which brings the interviews Shogaolu has recorded with LGBTQ asylum seekers over the last eight years to life through film and mixed reality storytelling. The maker chose animation to protect the identities behind the voices of the people who opted to share their stories, but also to emphasize the personal nature of their accounts and to encourage new ways of witnessing their

journeys. The maker writes that they realized that new and immersive media tools underline the fact that stories don't just need to be heard – they need to be felt.



Figure 4: Tamara Shogaolu's *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration* (2020). Multi-Platform Project (Film, VR Experience, & Web Interactive) Follow the journeys of LGBTQ refugees from the Middle East across continents and cultures – from the 2011 Revolutions to the world today © Ado Ato Pictures.

Tamara Shogaolu hopes that her work can prompt a productive discussion about identity and promote inclusivity and diversity in what it means to be an inhabitant of Amsterdam – an “Amsterdammer” – by allowing Amsterdammers of all colors, genders, sexual orientations, and cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to see themselves represented.

6 The empathy machine and its discontent

There seems to be a consensus among the different makers about the unique qualities of VR and the advantages of using this new technology for humanitarian crises. As Nonny de la Peña states, VR technology, which was first developed in the 1980s and 1990s, is now hailed as “a visceral empathy generator. It can make people feel in a way that nothing, no other platform I’ve ever worked in can.” (Volpe 2015). And Chris Milk in his influential TED Talk calls VR “the ultimate empathy machine” (2015) as it allows us to step into other people’s shoes and feels what it is like to be a refugee and be there with them; “It is a machine but inside

it feels like real life, it feels like truth” (Milk 2015).¹⁰ For Silverstein, VR creates the experience of being present in distant worlds, making it uniquely suited to projects, like *The Displaced*, that speak to our sense of empathy and community. And for Tamara Shogaolu, maker of *Queer in a Time of Forced Migration*, new and immersive media tools allow stories not just to be told and heard, but also to be felt. This is why VR experiences are better understood as “actual experiences” rather than “media experiences” because they “feel real” (Bailenson 2018: 46). VR reduces the imaginative work required when reading a book or watching a movie as the viewer can “feel” what it is like to be there (Bailenson 2018: 84).

As Moi Suzuki summarizes so well, VR can be defined as a computer-generated virtual environment in which the user can interact:

Key features of VR include immersion (various properties of the VR experience such as visuals, sound, compelling narrative, and haptics that create a sense of deep engagement with the virtual world) and presence (the user’s subjective sense of ‘being there’ in the virtual environment) (Bailenson 2018; Evans 2019). These features are said to make VR film superior in cultivating empathy, compared with other types of media like literature or television shows (Engberg and Bolter 2020). VR experiences are therefore not only visual but visceral. The sense of presence undergirds claims about privileged access to truth. (Suzuki 2022: 6).

All this enthusiastic embracement of VR as the ultimate tool for stepping into other people’s shoes and experiencing other realities that might be different and unknown to us, such as the distant suffering of migrants and refugees, is, on the one hand, exciting but, on the other hand, extremely problematic. Numerous VR documentaries aim to immerse the audiences in the full experience of distant suffering (Chouliaraki 2013) as crafted for the spectators of the Global North. Between 2015 and 2019, the United Nations released at least 21 VR documentaries covering crises around the world.¹¹ As Bimbisar Irom writes, this raises questions about the use of VR for humanitarian advocacy which may end up flattening the real differences between sufferers and spectators, who stay comfortably in their safe zones and get a kick through the experience of temporary “co-suffering” that can be interrupted at any time. This creates what Nash has described as “im-

¹⁰ Milk is not the only one who believes that in VR we have the potential to become better listeners, caretakers, and global citizens, using pixels and haptic technology to tap into a shared universal experience. As enthusiasm for VR’s gaming capabilities wanes, curiosity about its applications to the fields of mental health, rehabilitation, and community-building has only grown. Dozens of projects and research studies currently under development are breaking ground in areas ranging from opioid addiction and substance abuse to physical therapy and PTSD, all of which have the cumulative effect of potentially overhauling the entire field of patient care.

¹¹ <https://unvr.sdgactioncampaign.org/vr-films/#.ZZM5NjpbXbg>.

proper distance,” by translating the irreducible alterity into familiarity and intimacy (Nash 2018).

This is part of a larger trend in the humanitarian sector, which is moving into “feel good” activism (Chouliaraki 2013: 14), tapping into a market that prefers the “emotionality of the donor” as a monetizable item over the “vulnerability of distant sufferers” (Chouliaraki 2013: 17). This self-centered politics of authenticity contributes to the undermining of cosmopolitan solidarity, as the voices of distant sufferers are marginalized in the narcissistic quest for the authentic humanitarian experience (Chouliaraki 2013). This is what leads to post-humanitarianism, the turn from social justice to self-gratification through volatile engagement with the politics of pity that serves to confirm the status of the Western subject as do-gooders, now engaging in “clicktivism,” referring to instant activism via social media and donation apps. These easy actions linked to online campaigns offer instant visibility, especially used by influencers for their self promotion. It also let people quickly forget the protracted need of support after the instant “crisis.”

VR is based on the assumption that the “emotional knowledge” generated through VR is pure, unbiased, and unfiltered, and therefore a more “real” or legitimate way of knowing or having access to the Other (Pedwell 2012: 83). This felt truth is considered to be more effective than conventional methods of humanitarian campaigning in inspiring actions and incentivizing fundraising. This might be true, as UN Virtual Reality reported that VR is twice as effective in generating donations (UN Virtual Reality, n.d.). For these reasons many non-profit organizations have resorted *en masse* in recent years to VR and 360-degrees productions to solicit donations (Garcia Orosa-Perez Seijo 2020).

However, as Nash points out, VR forecloses the possibility of the viewer reflecting on the unequal power relations in which they are implicated by collapsing the distance between self and other. Without distance, VR productions are just a narcissistic consumption of the Other (2018). VR therefore risks reproducing neoliberal trends in humanitarian communication where Western feelings, instead of structural change, are magnified as the celebrated intervention (Chouliaraki 2013; Grunewald and Witteborn 2020; Nash 2018).

Lisa Nakamura also offers an excoriating critique of VR’s claims to be an empathy machine in an article that she aptly titles “Feeling good about feeling bad: virtuous virtual reality and the automation of racial empathy” (2020). She asserts that VR works as a form of identity tourism touring the lives of others, who are the embodiment and spectacle of pain and suffering. VR puts the viewer, often the Western spectator, in the shoes of others, mostly children, women, refugees, minorities and people of color, whose narratives and enforced hospitality in their personal VR domestic space are one more example of digital labor and digital exploitation. The immersive embodied experience, or co-presence, leads to the fur-

their victimization and appropriation of already disenfranchised people. VR risks becoming just one more form of consumerism and narcissism, a safe way to temporarily experience uncomfortable and confrontational realities without putting yourself at risk (Nakamura 2020; Grunewald and Witteborn 2020; Hassapopoulou 2018; Andrejevic and Volcic 2020).

Furthermore, VR tends to focus on disaster stories, fraught journeys at sea, war and traumas, encampment, and alienation. Pathos is the proof of concept of VR, yet there are many humdrum, everyday banal realities of the lives of women, migrants, and refugees that better represent their daily lives, agency, and resilience. The overwhelming focus on pity, guilt, and disaster deprives many of the characters represented of their dignity, agency, and capacity for self-affirmation (Nakamura 2020; Grunewald and Witteborn 2020).

Therefore, Nakamura concludes that this is “toxic empathy” that enables white viewers to experience digitally mediated compassion from the safe space of their location, where mobility can be navigated as will in contrast to the “stuckness” (Hage 2009) of the people represented, stuck in camps, who have their hospitality towards the Western gazer in their domestic space enforced upon them. This is also the myth always surrounding new technologies, as if they exist in a void without the socio-economic context that produces them. It is a clear merger between big tech corporations and the humanitarian sector, promising new technologies of feeling as able to connect people in unprecedented ways, mobilizing affect, compassion, and identification:

Virtuous VR does not preclude more useful ways of addressing the real world that it frames as a site of suffering. Psychology experiments in VR labs have demonstrated that users can indeed take on new attitudes from watching titles about deforestation and racial bias; users have scored better on implicit bias tests and used less paper towels after watching titles about beautiful redwood trees and experiencing social exclusion within a raced body. However, trees and people are not the same; fixes for imperialism, hypercapitalism, racism and sexism are more difficult to envision in everyday life. Hence the intense need for these VR titles that tell us how to feel about the suffering of racial other’s way of viewing. Feeling takes the place of doing precisely because there seems to be no viable liminal space between the two. (Nakamura 2020: 61)

Nakamura is critical of the automated empathy that these new tools generate when people of color, refugees like Sidra from Syria/Jordan, Oleg from Ukraine, Chuol from South Sudan, and Hana from Syria and other vulnerable people, welcome viewers into their private space, and the way in which the tools “provide absolution framed as information” (Nakamura 2020: 50). Women and children, who represent innocence and an “infantilization of peace” (Malkki 2010), continue to offer “invisible labor” in the form of digital presence in their war-torn homes, refugee camps, favelas, immiserated spaces. Hence the protracted exploi-

tation of women of color, refugee children, and queer people in VR documentaries. Attempts to decolonize the medium, as Nakamura complains, have always required the participation, consultation, and collaboration of these marginalized groups, thereby repeating and reenacting forms of digital labor and exploitation in the name of co-design and the voicing of the subaltern subjects, now used as native informants (Spivak 1999: 342). This can make VR part of the problem that it aims to solve. As Nakamura continues:

a creator of idealized compassion-enhancing, dream-like ‘experience’ rather than the nightmare of yet more monetized and surveillant digital media platform and content. [. . .] Virtuous VR documentaries leverage the prestige of the *BBC*, *Al Jazeera*, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. These platforms have produced hundreds of titles about unfree and marginalized humans: refugees, the disabled, the incarcerated, people of color, and the other bodies that can be virtually occupied by users as a temporary way to feel something ‘good’ as moral cover during both a move toward regulation and a backlash against the internet and racial terror in the US. (Nakamura 2020: 50)

With VR there was suddenly the idea that tech companies could invert their monetized drive into a more altruistic and humanitarian goal.¹² Developing VR for social innovation or VR for good meant a virtuous turn towards accountability, scrutiny, and reckoning. However, the first phase of VR has the same idealism and blind optimism that was exhibited by developers and critics from the early internet phase (Negroponte 1996; Turkle 1995; Rheingold 1992, 1993) who embraced the technoutopian promise of the internet enabling access and participation for all, widespread democracy and identity play. Of course, that bubble has been pierced and nowadays both the internet and its extension, social media platforms, are experienced as highly divisive, fomenting extreme content. VR seems to renew the bold gambit of technology and reinstate the belief that it can repair the wrong turn taken by digital media towards distraction, detachment, and misinformation (Nakamura 2020: 49). But VR as an empathy machine, “to learn what it is like” to be a gorilla, a refugee or a tree, simply reproduces many of the toxic forms of appropriation and essentialization (oppression, discrimination, and misperceptions).

¹² The VR industry as a whole is growing at a fast pace, with the global VR market size projected to increase from less than five billion US dollars in 2021 to more than 12 billion US dollars by 2024. See: <https://www.statista.com/topics/2532/virtual-reality-vr/>.

7 Conclusions

This chapter has tried to highlight the possibilities and pitfalls of curating empathy through VR. It remains to be seen whether this turn to VR by humanitarian organizations, journalists, and artists – because of its unprecedented ability to conjure empathy and defy compassion fatigue – will actually lead to sustainable humanitarian actions. Sustainable because the effect of VR may only be temporary or immediate, and the question is whether possible attitudinal or behavioral changes can be guaranteed or established over the longer term.

So far there is no solid scientific proof that 360-degree documentary videos or more interactive, computer-generated VR experiences influence empathy in a different way (Ventura et al. 2020; Martingano et al. 2021, 2022) to previous, traditional media (such as literature, photography, and cinema). Often the empathy and desire to help and donate is experienced at the moment but does not translate into tangible action; in sum, it does not lead to structural change.

VR is a wonderful tool to think about the current crisis and issues of representation, engagement, and civic action. It should certainly be embraced as a new technology of feeling that can bring about change and reach out to wider audiences, who would not otherwise be affected or implicated by the question of global crisis and humanitarian relief. Yet, as with any technology, it is deeply enmeshed and implicated with the tech sector and therefore, like non-profit organizations in a post-humanitarian age, it inevitably follows a neo-liberal model that prioritizes monetization and economic revenues. Furthermore, it taps into a recent trend of self-aggrandizement and narcissistic gratification that Western viewers prioritize through a feeling of empathy and “real experience” that ultimately only further dispossesses and racializes the other, distant sufferer. That sufferer has no choice in the representational format and is often involved without consultation, in productions spearheaded by Western companies and clearly targeted at Western consumers with an ambivalent gesture towards inclusion, equality, familiarity, and intimacy.

VR creators might want to design experiences that are more subtle and ambiguous but either they do not have the critical tools to do so, or the business model behind the quick gains of VR still has the upper hand, as is the case in many tech industries. Facebook was one of the first to enter the race by acquiring VR headset maker Oculus for approximately two billion dollars back in 2014. It has now launched FB Metaverse promising a true transformation which will allow to explore virtual 3D immersive digital spaces which are all interconnected, and will feel like a hybrid of today’s online social experiences (Ball 2022). This signaled not only the integration of social networking and VR but also the marrying of visually immersive media with socially addictive networking media. In this

way, social media platforms and VR have become so strongly intertwined and interdependent that an alternative critical model can only be destined for the fringe or marginalized market. Therefore, cultural work needs to be done in order to promote social justice, without engaging in fleeting, temporary, voyeuristic impressions of “other” people’s lives.

There is a need to critically understand new technologies not only as empowering and innovative but also as carrying implicit bias and detrimental effects for vulnerable groups who are often not at the table with designers, programmers, and tech companies. What could be realized with the thrust for innovation and making technology achieve the impossible can at times backfire if not understood within a socio-critical context in which humans from different backgrounds are taken into account, avoiding easy universalism and stereotypes.

Firstly, this would imply envisioning VR not as an “empathy machine” but through a reorientation of positionality. “VR as empathy machine” is used for short-term and volatile immersion, geared towards narcissistic self-gratification as a do-gooder. It is important to put the immersive experience of VR to the benefit of migrants themselves, avoiding identity tourism and hierarchies between viewers and actors. Secondly, the focus should be not just on extraordinary experiences but on everyday mundane events. Bailenson (2018) states that VR is too expensive to use for normal things and should be developed to experience the extraordinary (flying above buildings, swimming with tropical fish in the coral reefs, landing on the moon, growing as a tree, etc.).

In VR for humanitarianism, this often involves disaster tourism or poverty porn. It would be worthwhile to focus not on spectacular things but on ordinary problems, the at times negative aspects such as “diaspora boredom,” the feeling of apathy, “stuckness,” and melancholy that migrants and refugees experience in their daily lives. The representations of migrant women are often limited to gendered roles like cooking, rearing children or providing schooling, with restricted mobility both in space (restricted to refugee camps, ethnic neighborhoods, or the home) and in a social sense (Bourdieu’s habitus) with little upward mobility. Thirdly, VR should be deployed not to solicit pity or compassion but to achieve social justice. Therefore, VR has the task to focus not on empathy as pity but on the politics of injustice, in which VR gives insight into the violation of human rights, integration challenges, and social isolation to propose systemic change, not just “feeling what it is like.”

Finally, it is important to develop new haptic functions and music scores with the collaboration of migrant artists and co-creators to defy stereotypical representations of pain, fear, danger, or sadness and contribute to the development of alternative VR-scapes and immersive modalities (Nordahl and Nilsson, 2014). Many VR productions have a very discordant soundscape or background music that either

verges towards sentimentalism or is totally disconnected from the cultures and people represented. Therefore, more research is needed to steer the development of VR towards more responsible, accountable, and equitable productions, especially in the field of humanitarianism.

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