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*Title: **Collisions**.* **Postcolonial Crises and the trouble with Empathy**

Abstract
In this talk I discuss the idea of crisis from a postcolonial perspective, highlighting how crises are both historical events and ways of knowing, as seen in "the age of extremes" (Hobsbawm 1994) or the "state of exception" (Agamben 2004). In addition to viewing crisis as a sudden break from the past, I contend that crisis has been a recurrent and structural aspect of late modernity and has become much more common because of neoliberal globalization, forced migration, and digital mediation (Appadurai 2004; Nixon 2011). Instead of considering crisis as an exceptional event, I will explore how the "afterlives" of colonialism continue to shape today's circumstances of visibility, mobility and precarity (Ponzanesi and de Medeiros 2024).

I will first consider the crisis of the intellectual as I argue that the postcolonial intellectual is increasingly caught between complicity and critique. Thinking of the academic critic reveals how they work within institutions that exist across the globe and promote inequality. This dynamic raises fundamental issues of authority, representation and voice. The "crisis of critique" has made it very difficult for scholars to discuss suffering without perpetuating unequal structures of knowledge production. Additionally, digital cultures are destabilizing traditional forms of intellectual authority, as new forms of knowledge are being created through networks of activists, diasporic communities and grassroots movements. This movement does not suggest that the intellectual is disappearing; rather, that they are being reshaped into more distributed and collective forms of knowledge production.

I will second explore the crisis of empathy in the context of the European refugee crisis, and I will examine problems with the use of suffering images to motivate compassion from Western audiences through humanitarian discourse. Multiple views of suffering can lead to compassion fatigue, voyeuristic behaviour, and "post-humanitarian" irony (Boltanski 1999; Sontag, 2003; Silverstone, 2007; Chouliaraki, 2006 and 2013). Solidarity with refugees, who often fluctuate between hypervisibilty and dehumanization, demonstrates the fragility of humanitarian empathy under neoliberal regimes. Therefore, we can see that crises are not only geopolitical but also affective because they represent the inability of dominant social groups to continue to respond ethically to suffering (Butler, 2004, 2009).

In the concluding part I examine the prospective role that virtual and immersive technologies can play within this landscape. I suggest that immersive experience, specifically through virtual reality and interactive literature, can aid in repairing the crisis of solidarity and compassion fatigue. Ethically grounded immersive experiences have the potential to transform the quality of witness between proximity and distance. Rather than consuming suffering through spectacle format, witnesses can enter into relational modes of witnessing to foreground voice, agency, and context as collective witnesses. Virtual space can generate spaces of literary engagement, where narrative, embodiment, and spatial presence can yield novel attentiveness forms. Yes, like any other new technology it is ridden with paradoxical implications (Nash, 2018; Nakamura 2020).

The presentation assesses crisis within postcolonial theory both as an analytical lens as well as the generator of new possibilities. Crisis highlights fractures within empathy, critique and solidarity, while simultaneously offering new pathways to reimagine collective forms of engagement through digital medium. Ethically grounded immersion may represent one avenue for revitalizing solidarity imaginations during a time of great dislocation and disconnection.

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Sandra Ponzanesi is Professor of Media, Gender and Postcolonial Studies in the Department of Media and Culture Studies/Graduate Gender Programme at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. She is founder and director of the PCI (Postcolonial Studies Initiative). Her research interest focuses on postcolonial critique from a feminist, comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives. She engages with issues such as the role of postcolonial intellectuals in Europe, the connection between digital media and migration, views on postcolonial cinema and the position of women in conflict zones. She is author of *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* (Suny Press, 2004), *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry* (Palgrave, 2014) and *Gender, Globalization, and Violence* (Routledge, 2014). She has also co-edited many volumes such as *Postcolonial Theory and Crisis* (De Gruyter, 2024), *Doing Digital Migration* (AUP Press, 2024), *Postcolonial Intellectuals in Europe* (Rowman and Littlefield 2018) and *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* (Routledge 2014) among others. She is currently leading the project 'Virtual Reality as Empathy Machine: Media, Migration and the Humanitarian Predicament' funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). She is working on a new book entitled *Digital Belongings: Cosmopolitan Geographies of Media and Migration* (NYU Press forthcoming). More info: https://www.uu.nl/staff/SPonzanesi. More info: https://www.uu.nl/staff/SPonzanesi