

Interculturality in crisis? Contemporary challenges to the encounter with difference

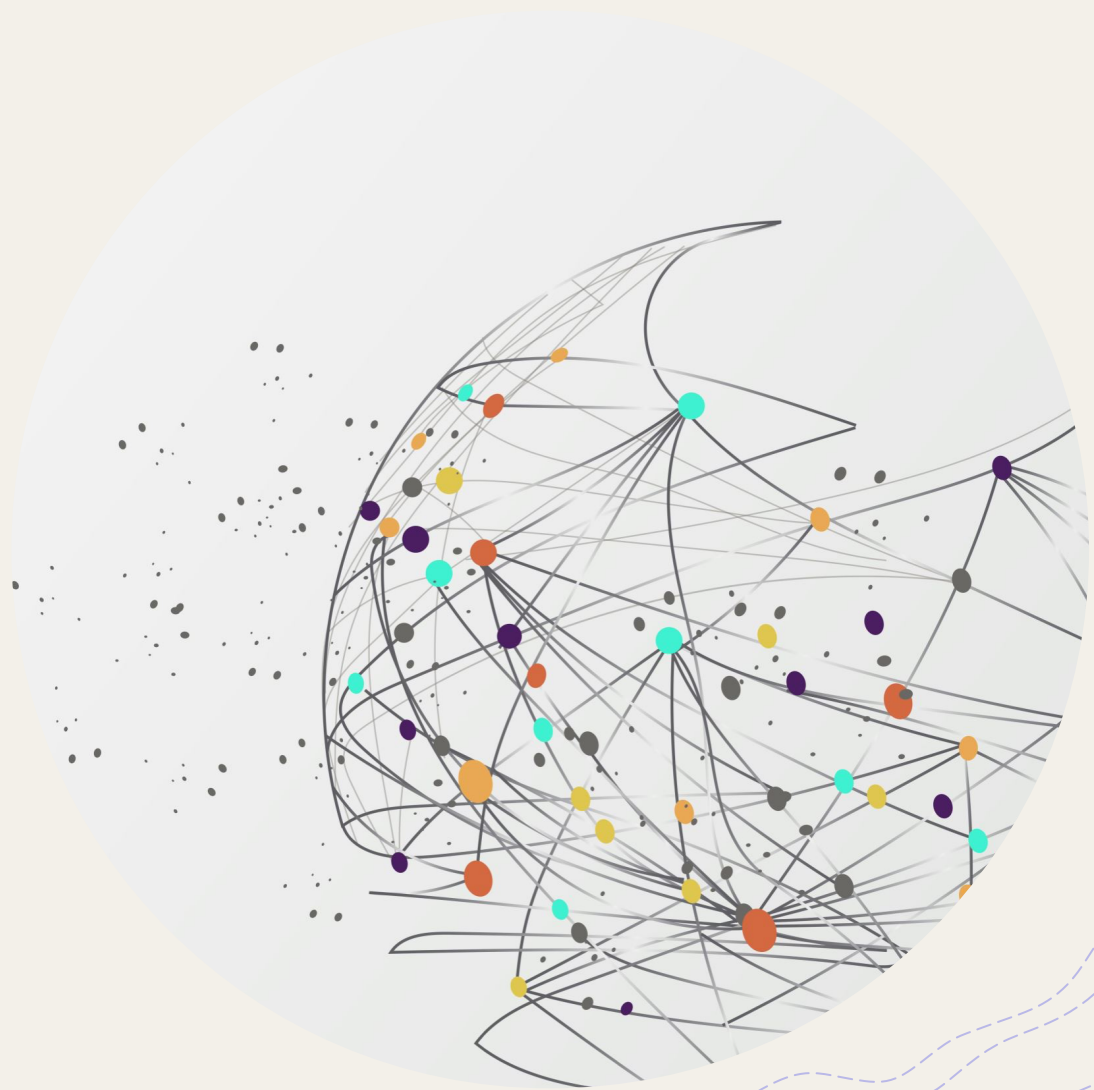
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School of Hospitality and Tourism, Polytechnic
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I: Interculturality in crisis?

What challenges emerge for interculturality in today's world?

“Identity is set to be perhaps the defining issue of the new millennium - and it is the task of progressive forces to show that we can shape this debate to strengthen our emerging international community, rather than getting caught in a much vaunted ‘Clash of Civilisations’” (Leonard, 2000, in Alibhai-Brown, p. viii)

In an age of uncertainty and inequality, we are concerned with the fate of interculturality in face of the growing diversity of local and national populations – a superdiversity which involves ethno-racial, socio-cultural, linguistic, religious identities, but also gender, age, migration status, life experience, education levels, etc. intertwined in complex ways which defy simplistic characterisations into identity compartments.

Lessons from COP 30

COP 30 provides a space for considering some converging aspects of this complexity. Hosted in Belém, Brasil, in a venue quite unlike the usual venues for such gatherings and where civil society has (unusually) been called to participate. Besides bringing together the usual delegates, world leaders, etc., Brasil has mobilised indigenous leaders, youth activists, climate scientists, forest defenders, and others to contribute to an agenda for change. In contrast to the billionaires and lobbyists on their private jets, over 200 boats have made their way to Belém by river, bringing indigenous representatives and activists. This Voyage to Resist the End of the World is designed to “make the colour, flavour and sound of Cop30 unlike anything seen in the history of climate summits”. On the other hand, apart from this singular confluence of voices and manifestation of the force of diversity in action, COP 30 has brought into focus economic processes and environmental paradoxes which this organisation exists to address and mitigate: for example, a scarcity of accommodation, rising prices, civic sanitation projects, squeezing out and excluding local populations.



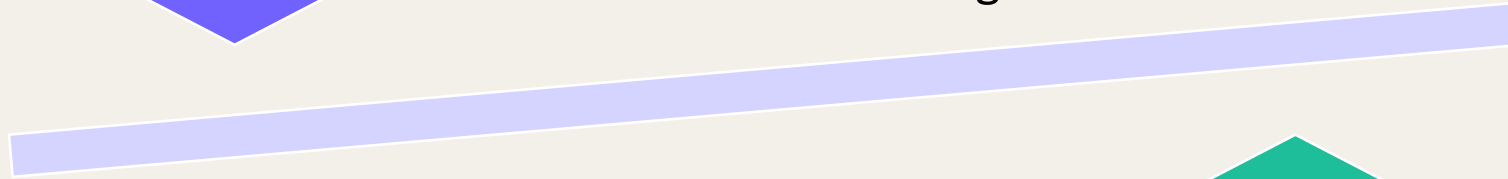
Referring to the mixing of the coloured waters of the Amazon river with the darker, clearer currents of the Xingu, Thais Santi says: “That confluence is like the people on this boat. All from different river basins but coming together for this journey.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/nov/05/a-meeting-of-voices-flotillas-head-into-belem-ahead-of-cop30-climate-summit>

the diversity challenge

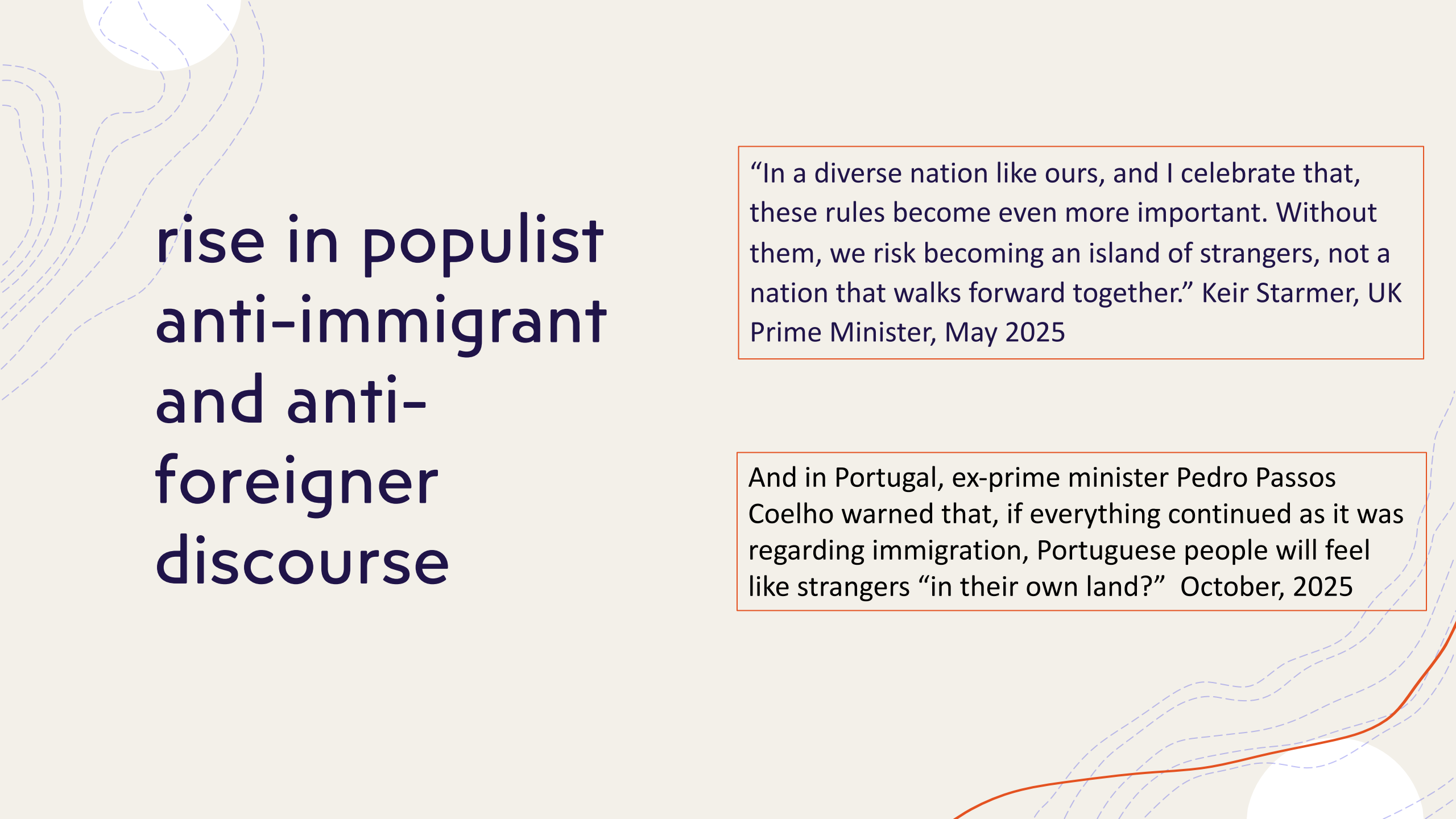


nationalist and ethnocentric turn
'return' of essentialist identities, 'real'
belonging
the threat of the 'other'
silencing and exclusion of difference



commitment to respect for difference
cultural inclusion
recognition of diversity
diversity, equity and inclusion policies





rise in populist anti-immigrant and anti- foreigner discourse

“In a diverse nation like ours, and I celebrate that, these rules become even more important. Without them, we risk becoming an island of strangers, not a nation that walks forward together.” Keir Starmer, UK Prime Minister, May 2025

And in Portugal, ex-prime minister Pedro Passos Coelho warned that, if everything continued as it was regarding immigration, Portuguese people will feel like strangers “in their own land?” October, 2025


What role for AI?



The divisive nature and tone of political and popular discourse, magnified through social media and algorithmic tools, contributes to a polarisation of public opinion, a consolidation of stereotypes and fear of difference.



And so we ask, what role do the tools of artificial intelligence play in the the development and maintenance of interculturality as an ideal for the management of diversity?



In the great human experiment we are undergoing, controlled by a small number of super-powerful hi tech companies, what threats and opportunities might be emerging for understanding intercultural relations and the diversity of humankind?

II: interculturalidad, interculturalidade, interculturalité, interculturality ...

In the literature produced in both European and Latin American contexts a tension is increasingly perceivable between, on the one hand, *an understanding of interculturality as programmatic, political-educational strategy for smoothing over, softening, or mitigating relations* and, on the other hand, a view of interculturality *as transformative strategy to unveil, question, and change historically rooted inequalities within society*. (Dietz, 2018, p. 3).

interculturality as a response to cultural interactions that result from wide-ranging political and economic processes, such as conquest, the slave trade, and imperialism, as well as migration, dislocation, environmental catastrophe or war.

THE EVOLUTION OF INTERCULTURALITY



1950s–1970s

Early concepts of cultural contact and communication
Edward Hall, *The Silent Language*

1970s–1980s

Emergence in European educational discourse
Intercultural education

Late 1980s–1990s

Political and educational turn in Latin America
Interculturalidad

1990s–2000s

Critical and decolonial interculturality
Catherine Walsh, Ecuador

2005

UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity
Global institutionalization of the term

2000s–2010s

Mainstreaming in policy and education
Soft version communication

2010s–Present

Resurgence of critical interculturality & Global South perspectives
Indigenous data sovereignty
Decolonial AI
Knowledge pluralism

emergence of interculturalism



The diagram features two large orange arrows pointing in opposite directions. The left arrow points left and contains the word 'multiculturalism'. The right arrow points right and contains the word 'interculturalism'. Below each arrow is a list of associated concepts. The background is light gray with decorative blue dashed lines and white circles in the corners.

multiculturalism

Recognition &
coexistence of multiple
cultural groups within
the same society
Respect for difference
Protection of minority
rights

interculturalism

Interaction
Dialogue
Exchange
Transformation
Shared belonging




multiculturalism by another name

the emergence of interculturalism as a paradigm for restructuring increasingly diverse societies did not correspond to a rejection of the main problems of multiculturalism

“a clear political consensus that we need a post-multicultural alternative, to be called ‘interculturalism’” (p. 161) -> the introduction of a new narrative, one which aimed to enable inclusive politics and counter popular discontent with diversity

The “interculturalism-as-remedy-for-failed-multiculturalism” myth was an interesting political strategy for reviving the popularity of diversity, which by now had become an integral part of the neo-liberal project



new directions XXI Century

Shift from interculturality as dialogue and exchange to **critical interculturality** as ethical-political project for aimed at building democratic societies that articulate equality and the recognition of cultural differences, questioning power relations and the prevailing social and cultural asymmetries. “Critical interculturality, on ..., is a construction of and from the people who have suffered a history of subjugation and subalternization” (Walsh, n.d.)

Shift from diversity policies which separate national citizens from immigrants and foreigners, and a majority ‘us’ from minority ‘them’. Zapata-Barreiro argues for a new approach to diversity policies which include all members of a given society, which position diversity ‘within the mainstream’ and focus on ‘how to live **in** diversity’ rather than ‘how to live **with** diversity’ (Antonsich, 2015; Zapata-Barreiro, 2017).

in the educational field

“interculturality denotes the encounter with the unfamiliar, while culturality represents the fabric of easily decipherable “familiar multiplicity”. (Bolten, 2015, p. 118; Conti, 2024, p.20)

- + interculturalism favours inclusion and integration (of students of different origins, ethnicities, religions, languages, etc.), rather than exclusion and segregation
- + diverse languages and cultures may coexist with the dominant language and culture of the State
- + exposure & engagement with different histories, knowledges and values, countering ethnocentric assumptions and ‘universals’
- + a focus on culture as competence, as doing, being & interacting, rather than facts and folklore
- + uncertainty and unfamiliarity should not be understood as a threat, but as a challenge to be faced constructively in order to create new normalities

III: into the AI era

Digital technologies and AI increasingly:

- + shape modes of co-existence, intercultural mediation, knowledge production, and identity formation
- + guide and control our lives, mould our opinions, mediate our life decisions and desires
- + influence how we live, who we associate with and enable us to make connections and socialise with people who share our interests, ambition, hopes and dreams

**‘DeepSeek is humane. Doctors are more like machines’:
my mother’s worrying reliance on AI for health advice.**

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/oct/28/deepseek-is-humane-doctors-are-more-like-machines-my-mothers-worrying-reliance-on-ai-for-health-advice>



Hi, I'm DeepSeek.

How can I help you today?

Global networks

- + New opportunities for intercultural interaction emerge in digital spaces, requiring a move away from the person to person, culture to culture, approach to intercultural encounter, still dominant in intercultural theory (Lenehan, 2024)
- + The ubiquitous encounter with 'unfamiliarity' constitute opportunities for intercultural learning and the global expansion of one's *lifeworld* (Bolten, 2015; Conti, 2024)
- + From essentialist understandings of intercultural interaction to a kind of cosmopolitan networking based on shared interests, values, goals, ...
- + This potential cosmopolitanism, facilitated by digital media and AI platforms, has the potential to contribute to more inclusive and cohesive societies
- + The opportunity to access and engage with multiple linguistic and cultural worlds, as well as diverse epistemologies and contextualised histories, is a major resource of AI, and one to be exploited for intercultural learning, critically, questioningly, and collaboratively.



“Algorithmic racism and digital colonialism constitute a real threat to humanity” (ChatGPT)

The infrastructures underlying AI are concentrated in the hands of a few powerful actors -> this fosters forms of digital colonialism, whereby cultural production, representation, and epistemic sovereignty are subordinated to external control.

“Digital colonialism” is the decentralized extraction and control of data from citizens with or without their explicit consent “through communication networks developed and owned by Western tech companies.” (Coleman, 2019)

“data colonialism” (Couldry and Mejias, 2019), refers to the domination and control of data and data flows by powerful countries, corporations or entities in “the Global North” over those in “the Global South” (Arora et al., 2023).

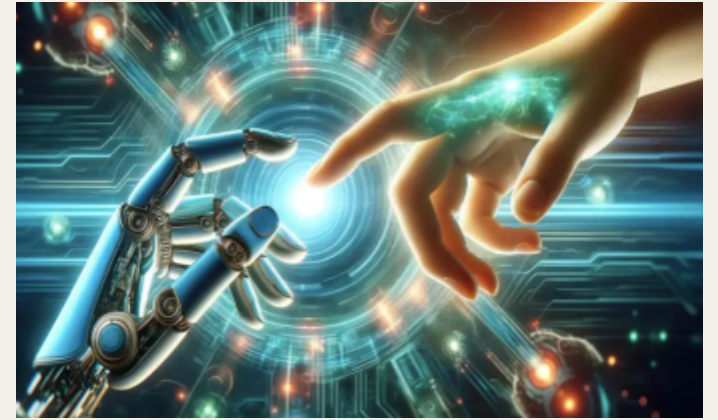
“Today’s colonialists, ... are digital. They build communication infrastructures such as social media platforms and network connectivity for the express purpose of harvesting data, which can then be transformed into profit and/or stored as raw material for predictive analytics” (Coleman, 2019, p. 422/433).

Algorithms

- + sets of rules used by computer systems to personalize and automate user experiences on platforms like social media, search engines, and streaming services, analyse user data and behaviour to deliver tailored content, and may also lead to issues such as filter bubbles and echo chambers, the spread of disinformation and the amplification of polarizing content.
- + key elements in shaping user experiences across digital platforms and associated with a number of challenges, including the capacity to exacerbate existing inequalities and threaten democracy (Gagrčin, Naab & Grub, 2024)
- + algorithmic racism and discrimination result from the uneven use of AI, in a cycle of exclusion, marginalisation and silencing (Ventura & Amaral, 2025)



AI is not your friend



- + ChatGPT is a linguistically gifted but fundamentally oblivious sycophant; if it were a person, it would be all IQ and no EQ, which is to say the very worst person to talk to about your emotional wellbeing, but one that it is tempting to share your problems with. ChatGPT will say all the right things but not mean any of them. It will give you the sense of having shared a problem, but ultimately sharing is a reciprocal and active process on both parts, which requires someone to actually accept as well as give.

“People are telling ChatGPT about their most intimate problems – but AI is not our friend”

- + Sycophancy is a common feature of chatbots: A 2023 paper by researchers from Anthropic found that it was a “general behavior of state-of-the-art AI assistants,” and that large language models sometimes sacrifice “truthfulness” to align with a user’s views (Caulfield, 2025)

<https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/chatgpt-mental-health-openai-b2856120.html>

An abstract graphic on the left side of the slide. It features a blue rectangular area containing a network of black and white dots connected by lines, resembling a neural network or a stylized brain. The background of the slide is a light beige color with decorative elements: a white circle with a dashed blue outline in the top left, and a solid orange line with a dashed blue outline curving along the bottom right.

AI is not human

- + Finally, it becomes clear to us that AI is not human although when communicating with it, the urge is to do so as if it were. But AI responds to our input and adjusts its responses to our interaction, it is endlessly compliant and uncritical (Chen and Dervin, 2025).
- + It can process and analyse vast amounts of data, but lacks the ability to understand the emotions, embodied and contextual nuances of human communication, identity and interculturality.
- + Speed, efficiency, and standardization take priority over cultural nuance, and automated translation systems, recommendation algorithms, and content moderation tools can flatten cultural specificities, leading to the erosion of deep intercultural engagement.

WANTED: critical AI literacy

- + Interculturality depends on human actors who can listen, interpret, mediate, and act in culturally complex contexts; intercultural awareness fosters reflexivity, empathy, and criticality.
- + Critical AI literacy, paired with intercultural awareness, is needed to equip individuals to understand how AI systems encode cultural power, shape narratives, and may enshrine existing inequalities.
- + This literacy is essential for ensuring that humans engage actively rather than passively with algorithmic mediations, thereby countering the tendency for underrepresentation and marginalisation.
- + This literacy must also embrace algorithmic and decolonial literacies and include the willingness and ability to communicate and collaborate with AI allowing us to move beyond the human vs machine paradigm and work together to build a better world.



“AI can facilitate intercultural exchange; it can also exacerbate inequalities and reproduce existing asymmetries of cultural power” (ChatGPT)

- + But can it move us beyond exchange, coexistence and dialogue, and contribute to the kind of critical and engaged interculturality that can effect change, social and epistemic justice, and power redistribution?
- + And if so, how?



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