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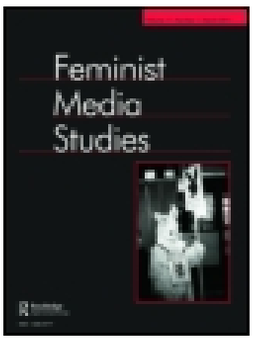

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COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

Methodological heteronormativity and the "refugee crisis"

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All migration politics is reproductive politics. The nation-state project of controlling migration secures the racialised demographics of the nation, understood as a reproducible fact of the social and human body, determining who is differentially included, who is excluded, and who is exalted. Citizenship, illegality, and asylum are often affirmed or rejected as inheritable transitive properties that adhere to a person by virtue of heteronormative (or, more rarely, homonormative) configurations of kinship. As Eithne Luibhéid (2013, 4) has argued, sexual normativity is crucial to nation-state projects of "biological and social reproduction of the citizenry, but also for the cultivation of particular kinds of social, economic, and affective relationships." Sexual normativity is a key register through which the (in)assimilability of non-citizens is projected in media representations of migrants, which increasingly proliferate in a time of declared "crisis" (Karma R. Chávez 2013). As Radha Sarma Hegde (2016, 2) observes, we are "routinely exposed to images of men, women, and children undertaking the harsh journey across Central America … [or] perilous sea voyages from North and Sub-Saharan Africa" and the Middle East. In this commentary, we wish to put forward a provocation about the omnipresence of methodological heteronormativity in the (visual) discourse surrounding the declared "refugee crisis."

Consider what became the trademark image of the Refugees Welcome movement in Europe.[1] In the summer of 2015, while European leaders were declaring a "refugee crisis," this image became iconic in protest and solidarity cultures, not only displayed on placards in demonstrations, but also used to mark spaces that were "friendly" towards refugees. A man leads a woman, who holds a child by the hand; the child is nearly lifted off her feet (she is marked as a girl by her billowing pigtails) as the three are frantically running. Sometimes the image is captioned "Bring Your Families." The origin of the image seems dissonant with the movement's diverse ideological stances: some advocate open borders (at least to asylum-seekers, as opposed to the criminalised "economic migrant"), while others espouse a "no borders" politics. The image's original manifestation was a highway sign commissioned by the US transportation authority in the late 1980s to warn drivers of "border crossers" along Interstate 5, where at one of the most violently policed borders in the world, prior to the construction of the fence, hundreds of people crossing from Mexico into the USA were killed by cars. Its designer, John Hood, stated that he wanted to elicit US citizens' empathy with migrants crossing the border, hence choosing to represent them, in his design of the immigration sign, as a fleeing family in whose place any American could substitute their own (Victor Morales 2008; Scott Gold 2008).[2]

This image and its reproduction illustrate the concept of methodological heteronormativity. Extending the conceptualisations of "methodological nationalism" (Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller 2002) and "methodological whiteness" (Gurminder K. Bhambra 2017), we use this term not only to refer to the ways in which states and supranational organisations construct the figure of the deserving "refugee," but also connect it to the ways solidarity movements have adopted the same logic in constructing an ideal subject of solidarity. Critical scholarship on forced migration engages in a similar representational move in producing research about the "refugee crisis." The "refugee"—whether embraced as a victim or reviled as a threat—is constructed as presumptively heterosexual and as (potentially) reproductive—that is, as a displaced reproductive citizen deserving, or undeserving, of moral concern. On the one hand, "refugees" are "welcomed" into the affective economy of the nation by becoming "part of the family" (e.g., in private sponsorship and hosting schemes). On the other hand, "refugees" are represented as a demographic or cultural threat according to nationalist and fascist ideologies. For instance, as Jill Walker Rettberg and Radhika Gajjala (2016, 180) argue, the "[p]redatory sexuality and undisciplined male aggression" imputed to Syrian refugees in hostile discourses reacting to the Refugees Welcome movement in Europe draws on Orientalist tropes eliding Middle Eastern men variously with rapists or terrorists. Sympathetic representations rely on the heterosexualisation of "refugees"—their participation in family and kinship structures makes their loss, grief, or vulnerability legible, as they are gendered variously as courageous but desperate fathers, sacrificing mothers, and innocent children. In hostile representations, "refugees" may be said to embody "queer" or "monstrous" heterosexualities (Cathy J. Cohen 1997; Jasbir K. Puar 2007). Their uncontrolled, undesirable (from the point of view of the state) reproductive agency is constructed as dangerous to the continuity and coherence of a racialised national subject, understood in biological terms of heredity and heritage.

By offering this provocation, we want to problematise the multiple forms of bordering that make possible the above-mentioned substitution: that of a citizen's family for a family of refugees. Methodological heteronormativity is ubiquitous in the move to humanise (or dehumanise) refugees through framings of their own reproductive histories and futures, constructing them as fathers, mothers, families, pregnant women, or, in taken-for-granted binary gender terms, as "men" and "women-and-children." These figurations affirm their (in)capacity to reproduce institutions—family, religion, nation—as a precondition of their social belonging, conditioning both empathetic and hostile responses. The survival of refugees is framed in reproductive terms—both in fascist discourses, which view them as a demographic threat (as in the discourse of "anchor babies" in jurisdictions that grant citizenship on the basis of *jus soli*), and in solidarity discourses urging their integration. We are mainly concerned with the latter—namely, political ideologies that challenge the legitimacy of nation-state borders yet reproduce one of the nation state's most important institutional logics, what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has termed "reproductive heteronormativity": the "assumption that producing children by male–female coupling gives meaning to any life … the oldest, biggest sustaining institution in the world, a tacit globaliser," which reproduces itself through "war and rape" (quoted in Nayanika Mookherjee 2012, 125).

As an ahistorical assumption, normative projection, and affective structure, "methodological heteronormativity … has silenced other forms of embodied and social experience" (Rosalba Icaza and Rolando Vázquez 2016, 67) that exceed and threaten the

hegemonic economy of desire/reproductive violence. This economy is reproduced visually through framings that naturalise normative desires and normalised violence. We suggest that movements in solidarity with people on the move and feminist researchers of migration and borders should engage in a critique of methodological heteronormativity.

Notes

1. See https://www.logolynx.com/images/logolynx/94/9448192a0b6db823ac59481aa8aeb042.png.
2. In the summer of 2018, the immigration sign was given a new iteration. In the wake of the scandal of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement separating more than 2000 children from their parent(s) or adult caregiver(s), who are subjected to automatic detention (Tom Dart 2018), the immigration sign—albeit no longer visible along the border, which is now sealed by a fence, soon to become a wall—was used by one cartoonist to denounce the child separation policy in the USA. Added to the three familiar figures on the sign was the monstrous shadow of the current US president snatching the child, whose outstretched hand reaches for her mother, pigtails still billowing (Rob Rogers 2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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