

# Queer migrations and straight subjects

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*Through asking what queer migrations may have to do with straight subjects, this snapshot suggests putting scholarship concerned with the transnational social space, the gendering of migration research, and insights from queer migration studies into productive dialogue with one another. After a brief rationale for the wider project on subject formation in transnational social spaces, three examples illustrate how the gaps and overlaps between these literatures lead me to argue for the queering of social science methodologies to address heteronormative assumptions underlying much theorising and research on gender and transnational migration.*

*Keywords: Transnational Subjects, Queer Methodologies, Queer Migrations, Gender and Migration*

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True to the 'snapshot' idea, I begin by briefly outlining the rationale for my project, and then narrow down the focus to a single question relevant to my work. By the means of selected examples, I discuss how the gaps and overlaps between scholarship concerned with the transnational social space, the gendering of migration research, and insights from queer migration studies lead me to argue for the queering of methodologies beyond the study of queer subjects.

In short, my research is interested in how people become transnational subjects. The analysis engages with the notion of transnational

social space emerging from transnational migration studies and theories of subject formation on the one hand, as well as with feminist, post-colonial and queer interventions into transnational migration research on the other. Drawing on intersectional theories in gender studies and the queering of methodologies beyond the study of queer subjects, I am working towards a queer intersectional approach to subject formation in transnational social space. To illustrate, discuss and critically evaluate how a queer intersectional approach plays out in an empirical context, this emerging approach is then adopted in a case study on sub-

ject formation in the British South Asian transnational social space.

The notion of transnational social space has emerged from the study of transnational migration and its definition remains contested terrain. Much of the literature emphasises simultaneous links between migrants' societies of origin and residence (Glick Schiller et al 1992; Vertovec 2004; Vertovec 2009), the social networks through which economic, cultural and social capital is organised and transformed, as well as regulations and constraints imposed by nation-states and institutions (Faist 2000; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). While some scholars have argued for a sounder empirical delimitation of the phenomenon (Portes et al 1999) and meticulous definition of the units of reference, analysis, and measurement (Pries 2008), I follow Peter Jackson, Philip Crang and Claire Dwyer (2004) in extending the scope 'beyond the confines of still-bounded-but-displaced "ethnic communities" to encompass a more multidimensional, materially heterogeneous social field, characterized by multiple inhabitations and disjunctions' (Jackson et al 2004, 15). This allows for a conceptualisation of space as no longer confined to particular ethnically defined communities and their bifocal negotiations of subjectivity between home and host-society, and accounts for heterogeneity of relations and experiences within transnational social spaces. Based on the idea that not

everyone participating in transnational social spaces is necessarily a migrant (see Mahler 1998; Jackson et al 2004; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Vertovec 2004), this definition decouples the transnational social space from the act of migration as such and extends it to people from diverse backgrounds. For example, subsequent post-migration generations who 'may have residual affinities to the transnational identities of earlier migrant generations or emergent identities as a result of their own current transnational experiences' (Jackson et al 2004, 3).

The transnational social space holds the potential for transforming and uniting a set of different temporal and spatial locations in one social space; 'by being experienced, expressed, and performed, transnational spaces transform into different forms of places' (Sørensen 1998, 244), that are 'complex, multi-dimensional and multiply inhabited' (Jackson et al 2004, 3). While the transnational social space is thus conceptualised in a rather fluid and hybrid manner, I root it in the framework of transnational migration to avoid the uncritical use of abstract concepts of 'in-betweenness' and 'deterritorialised' free-floating identity formation which Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith warn against when they note that 'transnational practices cannot be construed as if they were free from the constraints and opportunities that contextuality imposes' (Guarni-

zo and Smith 1998, 11). Within the contextuality of the transnational social space, and bearing in mind that transnationality is 'embodied in specific social relations established between specific people, situated in unequivocal localities, at historically determined times' (Guarnizo and Smith 1998, 11), this project explores ways to investigate subject formation within such spaces. Accounting for the heterogeneity such an understanding of the transnational social space entails, requires a theorisation of subject formation that challenges any stable and homogenous notions of identity. Subjects are understood as discursively produced in their temporal and spatial units of reference, ambivalent and hybrid, as well as always material and embodied. Drawing on Michel Foucault's work on the subject (1979; 1982; 1984; 1988), Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990; 1993; 2004), and the notion of entanglement (Barad 2007; Kirby 2011), I theorise the transnational subject as a material-discursive entity.

This conceptualisation of the transnational social space and of the material-discursive production of transnational subjects appears to contrast with much of the empirical research in transnational migration. Here, the main focus has been on identifying patterns of transnational migration, networks across national borders and transnational practices such as hometown associations and

remittances (Goldring 2001; Vertovec 2004). How the participants in such transnational social spaces come to view themselves as transnational subjects, and how they negotiate the multiplicity and hybridity such an understanding of transnational social space entails, has been neglected. My project takes this gap as a starting point to further explore how gender and transnational migration research can benefit from integrating an open conceptualisation of transnational social space and the material-discursive production of subjects, towards a more complex picture of transnational subjects than has been accounted for so far. To that end, I examine how the conceptual literatures outlined above and empirical work on transnational migration (see Goldring 2001, Levitt 2001; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), feminist and post-colonial interventions into transnational migration research (see Bhachu 1993; Brah 1996; Mahler 1998; Pessar and Mahler 2001, 2003; Pratt and Yeoh 2003; Puwar 2003) and scholarship on queer migrations (see Luibhéid and Cantu Jr. 2005; Manalansan IV 2006; Luibhéid 2008; Cantu Jr. 2009) complement one another in fruitful ways and illustrate one another's limitations. While they share a concern with similar (if not the same) social relations, spaces and subjects, they have often evolved in parallel rather than in dialogue. This snapshot invokes three brief examples to illus-

trate why I argue for the queering of methodologies beyond the study of queer subjects. In other words, what do queer migrations have to do with straight subjects?

### **Gender, sexuality and transnationalism**

Feminist interventions into transnational migration scholarship have successfully shown how gender is relevant to all aspects and processes of migration (see Morokvašić 1984; Pedraza 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000; Pessar and Mahler 2001, 2003; Pratt and Yeoh 2003) and, as a consequence, gender-aware analyses of transnational migration and subjects have become widespread. However, the emphasis has rarely been on how gender impacts on the production of the transnational subject (or transnationality on the gendered subject), but on disaggregating research by gender in terms of a binary variable with the attributes male and female. While feminist work on migration seems to offer a setting for thinking about sexualities and migration, that very same research often reinscribes heteronormative assumptions by conflating sexuality with gender 'which in turn is often conflated with women — a triple erasure meaning that only women have sexuality, sexuality is gender, and gender or sexuality is normatively heterosexual' (Luibhéid 2004, 227). Taking an intersectional approach, particularly the sort Leslie McCall (2005, 1773)

defines in terms of anticategorical complexity, allows for an analysis of subject formation that pays close attention to the contextually prevalent multiplicity in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality or other potential axes of difference. This approach thus pushes the researcher to take into account the messiness Paula-Irene Villa attests human beings when she notes how 'real-life persons are — compared with discursive order — a mess: untidy, complex, fuzzy, multi-layered, dynamic' (Villa 2011, 173). Intersectional theory incorporates sexuality as one possible avenue for subject formation. It thus draws attention to the ways in which such axes of difference intersect and impact on the experience of, for instance, a queer migrant woman of colour compared to, say, a straight man of the same cultural and ethnic background. It does not, however, provide the researcher with a conceptual tool to pay attention to the ways in which gender and sexuality normalise social relations, particularly to heteronormativity.

### **Queering heterosexuality**

In queer migration scholarship, on the other hand, sexuality is at the forefront of research interest. The focus of much research, however, quite understandably remains on queer subjects engaging in cross-border mobility in different geopolitical contexts. Queer migration studies open the door to complicat-

ing heteronormative assumptions in mainstream migration research. A number of scholars (see Valocchi 2005; Manalansan IV 2006; Luibhéid 2008) suggest that queer methodologies need not be limited to the study of queer subjects, but used as an instrument to explore how heteronormativity and sexualities play a role in producing not only those constructed as queer but also those who become normalised by those very same discourses. They not only exclude non-heterosexual subjects, but are deeply entrenched in the production of all subjects. Heteronormativity on the one hand makes the social world intelligible to its inhabitants, while, on the other, meaning 'is also negotiated in, and emergent from, the mundane social interaction through which each of us makes sense of our own and others' gendered and sexual lives' (Jackson 2006, 112). It not only imposes normative sexuality and sexual practice, but also normative ways of life and legitimate forms of relationships (Jackson 2006, 110).

### **Queering transnationality**

Both transnational and queer migration scholarship can be read as interventions into mainstream migration scholarship to complicate the latter by shifting the focus to 'contradictions, relationality, and borders as contact zones, and the construction of identities, communities, practices, hegemonies and alternatives linked to local, national,

and transnational circuits' (Luibhéid 2008, 173). Both are thus invested in similar moves away from theorising migration as rational choice within push and pull frameworks towards a more holistic 'understanding that overlapping, palimpsestic histories of imperialism, invasion, investment, trade, and political influence' (Luibhéid 2008, 173) form the basis of migratory movements as well as transnational circuits. Perhaps surprisingly, the insights from queer migration scholarship have not yet found their way into transnational migration research practice. In most migration research, 'sexuality and heteronormativity remain ignored, trivialized, derided, or conflated with gender' (Luibhéid 2004, 233).

In conclusion, I believe that queer migrations have a great deal to do with straight subjects. It is scholarship on queer migrations that invites us to complicate heteronormative assumptions underlying much theorising and research on gender and transnational migration. From the margins of the sociology of migration, queer migrations serve as a focal point from which to re-examine the ways in which transnational subjects, straight or otherwise, have been approached in the past. Queer migration scholarship thus encourages us to put valuable insights from transnational migration studies, gender studies, and queer theory into productive dialogue with one another. An important concern driving my project is taking seriously

this call for the queering of social research, 'to bring [queer theory's] conceptual and theoretical apparatus to the study of heterosexuality and heterosexuality's relationship to gender and other axes of social difference such as class, ethnicity, and race' (Valocchi 2005, 762). Pairing an intersectional lens with queer methodologies acknowledges heteronormative discourses as part of the social space within which transnational subjects are produced and performed, and draws attention to the relationship between gender and sexualities and the (non-)normative alignments across those and other axes.

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