



## Engendering borders: Some critical thoughts on theories of borders and migration

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### Abstract

This paper examines migration from the perspective of border theory. It is argued that in the changed contexts of border situation, whereby modern concepts of national territoriality and cultural boundaries are being dismantled by processes of globalization, the usual view at migration as involving border crossing between two sedentary (state) entities no longer is theoretically adequate. To the contrary, notions of migration and rootedness, mobility and stillness, fluidity and permanence have lost their power of concepts by which to frame the debates on migration. Moreover, while the modern nation-states are being transformed from culturally homogenous to 'liquefied' societies, discourses on immigrants, aliens and foreigners face a serious challenge in terms of how they organize their reference point. Namely: who, or what, is the norm against which the immigrant is conceptualized as another subject, an Other, no longer is a self-evident realm. Finally, if the borders themselves have become moving objects, either as extraterritorial administrative points of control (e.g. Frontex) or as tools of social segregation and exclusion within a given territory (e.g. zoning), what are the conditions by which one becomes a migrant: is the legal status of citizenship still the proper means of describing one's relationship towards the state, or have other factors, such as economic, social or cultural capital and possessions, become more relevant in defining the status of belonging and identity?

**Keywords:** *borders, gender, transnationalism, migration, nation*

### Introduction

Contemporary critical theory of borders has made an impressive advancement in terms of (re)thinking borders, together with processes of bordering, re-bordering and de-bordering. Its contribution has reached beyond a narrow social field to involve interdisciplinary critical investigations of postmodern territory, space and belonging. Migration studies, on the other hand, have added an important perspective on contemporary migrants, both in terms of their various migration experiences and political settlements. Basing my argument on the work of Doris Wastl-Walter et al. (2004) and the critical introduction to the edited volume *Challenged Borderlands*, I will inspect

the mutual impact of the two strands of critical inquiry on the potential to re-conceptualize post-national citizenship, identity and belonging with respect to gender. This will be illuminated in the context of two historical cases: educated women's migration at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and de-privileged women migrants at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My main argument is that both cases of migration display how, by the virtue of being a border category, gender plays a constitutive role in defining symbolic thresholds of nation-state qua motherland, and, consequently, has historically also engendered the danger to rational, masculine organization of political territories of the nation state. However, socio-economic differences between two groups of women show how gender can also

become a power instrument in redrawing borders of exclusion and inclusion even when legal/rational organization of territoriality loses its grip. Then, it is the care economy (emotional and sexual), rather than intellectual, migration of female labour, which reconfirms terrains of privilege and cultural belonging. Therefore, in order to integrate the migrant into the very concept of the post-national citizenship, political framing of the theoretical debates on female migration will be determined in how democratic and plural future European societies will be.

### Theories of Borders

The last decade has witnessed an impressive development of theory of borders (Newman, 2006; Rumford, 2006; see also a special issue of the *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2006, 9: 2). Contemporary 'border thinking' has concerned the question of the reconstitution of borders as a parallel to processes of globalisation, deterritorialisation and denationalisation of the bond between the nation (-state) and society. Delanty and Rumford (2005), for instance, speak of a postnational, Rumford also of a post-territorial era (Rumford, 2006; 2008); Habermas debates 'postnational constellation' (2001a) and, with respect to the EU, supra-national constitutional democracy (2001b). To account for the plethora of emerging cultural diversities, Robins (2006) suggests the use of the term transcultural instead of multicultural whereas, with respect to global gendered solidarities and civic engagements, Yuval-Davis (1997) speaks of a transversal world. The variety of takes on the issue notwithstanding, a shared topic is that there no longer exists a strong and determinate link between territory and borders; and that in the contemporary arrangement, territory has lost the power of the exclusive agent in defining identity and belonging. Borders have become plural and pluralized. They are movable and can be removed, managed in-situ, or from a distant location by 'remote control'. There is an emerging, new post-modern class of administrative handlers with the borders who complement the 'traditional' modern bureaucratic apparatus of public servants, immigration and customs offices: travel agencies, hotel and tourist personnel, employers, who are involved in monitoring mobility of people as well as potential asylum-seekers or illegal passengers (Guirau-

don & Lahav, quoted in Walters, 2006: 193–194). This networking of borders via various existing and new agents of control presents a new chapter in the governmentality of society in which, arguably, power no longer exists as an exclusive state regulated system of surveillance of population, but has, together with the borders, acquired a transnational dimension.

To theorize borders is to theorize about the nature of the social, Rumford claims (Rumford, 2006: 155). Despite the impressive development as regards the modern border situation, we should not limit our attention to the exclusiveness of the present. To the contrary, to understand current social arrangements of identity and belonging (as defined by borders), we need to engage in a transhistorical perspective. Only a larger, and a *longue duree* view at the history of bordering of societies and nations can allow us to grasp the meaning of the present day reconfigurations; but also deconstruct the ideologies which frame the understanding of our historical time. Understanding migration in a transnational context, as the next chapter will argue, can greatly help us in decomposing the modern myth of the nations as a trans- and a-historically stable political and cultural units and 'natural' patterns of organization of humanity. In addition, the aspect of gender allows us to examine how this myth has been created and, by means of either repression or tolerant liberal socialization, or both, women have been made complicit in this unique project of modernity.

### Nation as a modern project

Nation and nationhood can be defined as the unique, while impressive, product of modernity. It is unique in the sense that no previous periods, but also no afterward eras, as it becomes evident now, achieved, nor struggled for, the cultural homogeneity of society to be the governing political ideal. In Europe, Mokre (2006) argues, traditionally, collective identities have been understood as cultural identities. This is not to say that the ideal has been an accomplished project(ion), but certainly, it has generated political and ideological power of nationalism to deter alternative social visions and civil movements from their full political articulations.

"We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch

of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (Foucault, 1986 quoted in Morehouse, Pavlakovich-Kochi & Wastl-Walter, 2004: 3). With this quote, Wastl-Walter and her colleagues open the introduction to *Challenged Borderlands*. As the authors go on, “the tensions and interactions between globalization and nationalism redefine borderlands as condensation points, where changes in economic organization and power relations meet cultural identities, thus creating new complexities and contradictions” (ibid.: 7). A critical issue is how to understand this development in a transhistorical perspective (Hoerder, 2002): is it a result of the previously unfinished project in which nationalism is a disturbance rather than a logical middle-step; or is it a consequence of unpredictable and contingent forces that have pulled the history in a different direction? Authors are not unanimous on this: for Viroli (1995), for instance, nationalism is an anomaly in the history of the political development of patriotic civic loyalty; for Smith (1992), ethno-nationalism is larger and longer than just a modern project. My concern here, however, is not with the question why, but rather with understanding ‘how’: how it has happened that we take the nation-state form as a ‘historically natural’ accomplishment of human society, no matter how oxymoronic this sounds? As we know it from theory of ideology, ‘common sense’ best operates when it lacks a real sense. Gender arrangements in nationalized societies can, in my view, uncover a great deal of evidence of how the hegemonic project of nationalism has been carried out; and, related to this, how patriarchal visions of women as sedentary subjects have partaken in the construction of national borders.

Women have been assigned the role to reproduce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically (Yuval-Davis, 1997). They have been called the mothers of the nation, and treated accordingly. In terms of their biological mission, this could mean a glorification of their reproductive body; or the dispossession of the control – as the debates over the right to abortion or cases of forced sterilization attest – over their actual bodies. Culturally, women have been assigned the role of socialization of the off-spring into the existing socio-sexual order of the nation-state, together with language, tradition, myths and customs; symbolically, this role has been accompanied with sexual reproduction of the patriarchal order in which, as feminist

saying goes, “girls are mothered to become mothers” whereas, we may add, boys are mothered to become independent from emotional commitments and care for others.

In order to perform their role as mothers, women had to be made available in time and space. Nurturing and family care demand a subject whose daily routine is defined by the needs of the household. This means a restriction on movement and mobility which is then so accurately termed the ‘private sphere’. The private denotes the inward social world of the family which is, organized as a natural, biological and emotional unit, closed off from the intervention of the political. Run by women and headed by men, it is conceived as a socialized nature in a culturally bounded space. The social organization of labour is spatially defined, which means a limited, task-legitimized movement over the threshold of domesticity for women; and freedom of crossing of borders between private and public worlds with no need for justification for men. Whereas the public world is open to man for either work, leisure or pleasure, for the woman, the world outside exists only as a social extension of the space for the performing of her maternal role in public: in the realm of the ‘feminized’ professions and non-paid, voluntary care work.

The modern woman therefore by definition becomes sedentary, a subject in space that is simultaneously also *her place*. Home and family denote the social geography, reserved for her gender. The woman on the move, on the other hand, connotes the collapse of spatial borders (of home) and gender borders of domesticity. As mentioned, she can retain her proper gender only if the move is legitimated by the needs of her family or when she volunteers her time and energy to care for others; if, in short, she moves to assure the economic/social/emotional reproduction of the nation. In this latter sense, she can move around to perform the role of the surrogate mother – either as a nanny, housekeeper, teacher – to other families; or to the imaginary family of the nation. In all other public appearance and settings, she is suspicious, quote likely a failed woman.

This binary definition of the woman in relation to the space also helps explain the migrant woman. For example, the (in)famous *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange,

photographed in time of depression as a way to appeal for government's help to farmers, is a documentary of the woman who appears in public as a means of triggering national imagination (Vidmar-Horvat, 2009). This is not a visual narrative about a woman with the name and biography, but a representation of the universal motherhood, displayed in the public to mobilise collective sentiments of a nation. The poverty, which in this case stands for the nation-wide crisis, is the legitimizing force by which to accept women's migration *as well as* avoid moral condemnation. When there is no such cause, the migrant woman in an open space speaks of digression: she is either deviant or eccentric – in either case, off line of her socially allocated space.

The class (and ethnic) distinction which structures public perception of women's mobility has been a well-explored subject of postcolonial feminist theory. However, to my knowledge, little attention has been paid to how the dominant modernist vision of nationhood qua patriarchal nuclear family has been sustained through images of migrant women. In Slovene scholarship, for instance, it has only been in the last few years that we have got a more systematic study of migrant women (Krilič Cukut, 2009; Koprivec, 2013; Lukšič-Hacin & Mlekuž, 2009). These isolated cases of study of (e)migration, however, have been restricted to the field of migration studies – with a little or no concern for the studies of Slovene homeland nationalism of the non-migrant population. In textbooks, for instance, they exist as an expansion, an outer organ of the national body, but with no backward reflection of the relationship between the two units. In public perception, they mainly exist as long-distance nationalists (or the caricature thereof) or are, except in time of elections when they are brought to media attention, non-existent. On the other hand, there is also a significant silence of the individual females who, mainly as artists and writers, contributed to national cultural heritage and achieved this, in part or exclusively, due to their experience of migration and border crossing.

### **Modern women as migrants**

Recent social discourse outlines the phenomenon of the 'feminisation of migration'. Quantitatively, this is an accurate description. According to the UNFPA, "one of

the most significant changes in migration patterns in the last half century is that more women are migrating than ever before. Women now constitute half the international migrant population, and in some countries, as much as 70 or 80 per cent"<sup>i</sup>. However, the term is also misleading, both quantitatively as well as qualitatively. It gives an erroneous impression that women migrants have increased in numbers only recently;<sup>ii</sup> and, more importantly, that this is a novel situation. The fact of the matter is that women, for different reasons, have been on the move throughout history and that migration has always included women. Rather than to numbers, the main change can be ascribed to public perceptions of women's migration. Arguably, a major shift in viewing migrant women comes with modernity and its governing sexual contract. The sexual contract splits the social world into the private and the public sphere whereas this contributes to the consolidation of the modern nuclear family in gender terms: the private is the domain of the female, the public is the domain of male. Women, who enter the public sphere for reasons that are different from sustaining the private sphere and domesticity, are, as stated above, deemed an outlier: a deviant, a trespasser, a disturber. It is for this reason that women on the move, especially those who move for personal reasons – to experience new intellectual, cultural, or artistic challenges – are kept at the margins of collective memory; and silenced by official historiography.

This certainly is true for public remembrance of travelling women in Slovene public culture. Whereas at the turn of the century, Slovene women writers and artists were frequent travellers to other cultural milieus, mainly within the Habsburg empire, but also other parts of Europe, their migration experience had not received much attention. In fact, the experiences of the most visible of women migrants, Zofka Kveder, Alma Karlin, Ivana Kobilca and Aleksandrinke, have become a subject of interest only in recent years, and mainly due to intellectual efforts of feminist researchers. Alma Karlin received public attention with the opening of the exhibition in the regional museum of her birth place Celje. It is stated on the museum's webpage that, although the institution has taken care of Karlin's memorial room since 1982, the interest for this 'creature of female gender', as self-described by the author, arose only recently<sup>iii</sup>. The

screening of the TV documentary “The Odyssey of a Lonely Woman” in 2009 further contributed to the popularization of her work and life. Writer Zofka Kveder received a complex portrait of a public woman in conflict with her gender (and motherhood) with the thorough research by feminist literary historian Katja Mihurko-Poniž (2003); and through the critically acclaimed theatre monodrama *a mystery of woman* in 2010. Ivana Kobilca has been recovered from public amnesia with the TV documentary in 2007; young scholar Sandra Kraljič (2013) has presented the study of her biography as a female nomad in 2013. Last but not least, the screening of the documentary *Aleksandrinke* in 2012 opened up a debate on the Slovene wet nurses and housekeepers, a group of women individuals from the Primorska region who were travelling to Egypt to help in the economic survival of their families at home (Hladnik-Milharčič, 2013).

Significantly, as the years of the publications reveal, the interest for Slovene female nomads is of a recent date. This holds true also for the growing fascination with these women in public, and among feminist scholars. Several reasons can be listed as to why there has been such a persistent silence in public discourse about their migrant experience. All the above-mentioned women shared the experience of travelling abroad as a self-empowering initiation into the public sphere which, at least in part, freed them from the confines of their gender and the prescribed commitment to family, motherhood and domesticity. Writing on the experience of *Aleksandrinke*, Hladnik-Milharčič states that “this emigration had a profound impact on women's self-esteem and at the same time on the public image of migrants as non-conventional female characters whose reputation fluctuated between silent thankful adoration and loud moral condemnation. It is thus not surprising that the phenomenon was, for almost half a century, buried under a thick blanket of oblivion, denial, shame and traumatic memories we have only recently started to remove” (Hladnik-Milharčič, 2013: 14). This may be the main reason for the suppression of memory of their migrant biographies; as well as a more general amnesia of their presence in history.

## Global women migrants

Postcolonial feminist theory has been strengthening inquiries into the epistemological aspects of female nomadism and its potentials for the undermining of the hegemonic Western male history (Passerini et al., 2007; Ponzanesi & Merolla, 2005). Postcolonial studies continue to mount evidences for the need of the study of immigration, travel and mobility of women in a way that will acknowledge and account for differential historical power regimes of gender, class and race which determine the manifold social experiences of the female migrant. Striking as this new wave of intellectual curiosity for women migration in Europe and its placement in the formation of the transnational societies may be, one finds only a very superficial attempt to situate women migrants and their cross-national and cosmopolitan identity into a historical perspective; not to mention the alarming lack of concern for the women travellers and their contribution to alternative narratives of nation and nationhood. Women travellers, usually posited as a genre group per se, are studied in relation to imperial politics of gender, race and class of their dominant patriarchal native home nations. Investigations of how this legacy of women nomadism within and beyond the changing historical maps of nation-states plays a role in the construction of postnational cultural memory, however, yet awaits to be recognized as an important academic task.

The case of *Aleksandrinke* throws an important light on the existing interpretive framing of migrant women in public discourse. With their movement between two homes, the one of their own family and motherhood, and the other of the substitute, paid motherhood, *Aleksandrinke* crossed the territories of two homelands: the two nations, Egyptian and Slovene, became connected in an imaginary, as well as concrete daily-life, reproduction of the collective. For the Egyptian community of receivers of this kind of maternal help, this was a welcome, and, as reported only lately, highly valued service. For the local (and national) sending community, the label *Aleksandrinke* was a source of shame and moral condemnation. Although she was helping her family, and her migration thus was economically motivated to assist to the survival of the private sphere of domestic national (regional) life, the movement to another family of a different (other)

nation constituted a drama in the naturalized discourse of national patriarchy.

The nature of the disturbance can be observed from the reverse angle, when women migrant work force travels to Slovenia – to perform service or care work. Consider the case of Thai female masseurs employed by temporary contracts in Slovene health and beauty studios. This is a foreign labour that has been growing in numbers yet, significantly, there has been no publicly expressed concern of either numbers or potential cultural impact. To make the point starker, there have been public outbreaks in relation to Chinese families opening restaurants in Slovenia; and as concerns low-wage blue collar workers in construction industry from former Yugoslavia. At least in part, Slovene public is sensitive to immigration and ready to react in xenophobic and culturally racist rhetoric. So far, there has been, to my knowledge, no visible public resistance to Thai female immigrants to Slovenia.

An apparent difference in public perception relates to the gender of the migrant labour. The majority of Thai masseurs are women, not only biologically, but socially. Often, they are mothers who have been forced (for economic reasons similar to Aleksandrinke's) to leave their family and children behind. Frequently, this means an end of marriage and a loss of contact with children. They work to support their families and usually send most of the earned money back home. Mainly, they spent their lives closed in the darkened studios where the customers are 'natives', the Slovenes, both male and female. They are workers in the service industry with no other income and social security than the one provided by their employers. The employers obtain the required documentation (visas, work permits etc.) for them, they are responsible for their whereabouts (often contacted by different offices); in turn, migrant women are often at the disposition of their employer, thus forming a highly dependent and far from free market labour. The dependency and isolation increases due to their poor knowledge of English; and no knowledge of Slovene.

Most importantly for my argument is that they perform their work in a most intimate manner – on the nation's bodies, literary. Why is there no moral panic or cultural concern? I will argue that Thai female workers are acceptable migrant subjects because they are engaged in the

care labour. That is, they continue to perform their gender task of care for the others: they are substitute caretakers in the most direct patriarchal sense of the domestic female. It is not irrelevant that this group (or class) of workers has been entering in great numbers (which means a loosening of border control) in time when the Western welfare state is in crisis. It is also not insignificant that this class of migrant women helps in either domestic work or public (health and beauty) service whose users are mainly middle and upper middle class women (see Calavita, 2005; Sevenhuijsen, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2011). This, then, is the Aleksandrinke's story turned the other way around. It is a case of a transnational motherhood whereby this time, class and ethnic exchange of women is admissible to the dominant culture. This is because female migrant care workers do not constitute a threat, they bring escape from the threat (of the collapse of the capitalist welfare).

### **Conclusion: postnational sexual contract**

What conclusions can be drawn from this historical comparison between two classes of women migrants and how do they relate to border theory?

I have argued that women, by definition, are a border subject. They maintain the thresholds of the community, and, precisely because of this 'border-guarding' role, are also subject to close monitoring and inspection. In principle, crossing the border is tolerated as long as it is consistent with their domestic function of the reproduction of the nation.

With their prescribed involvement in emotional labour, women are located outside the masculine realm of domestic politics. When they move abroad, the boundaries of motherland are challenged; with the passage, symbolic thresholds of nation-state qua motherland become perforated and movable. This constitutes a major danger to rational, masculine organization of political territories of the nation state.

A mobile female thus is an anachronism in the historical definition of the modern state and its patriarchal socio-sexual order. However, as my two historical cases suggest, female nomadism is not always equally morally monitored by the mainstream society: surveillance and

condemnation are class and ethnically structured. Although not seen as really ‘true mothers’ of the nation, women intellectuals and writers are tolerated in their nomadic lifestyles: their migration is permissible, although not desired as a role model for young women, and, consequently, is made into a silent document. Economic migration, on the other hand, is stigmatized when concerning ‘our mothers’ going abroad; and tolerant towards the foreign care workers performing their work for the common good of ‘our’ nation. Care economy and emotional labour thus are accepted in the host community as not crossing the borders of the national socio-sexual norm: they are in the function of the reproduction of the nation. This migrant pattern becomes an object of moral panic when the same kind of labour is exported to another nation. Then, it is not only the immigrant female, but also the emigrant woman, who either through dismembering and/or disremembering, become united in the same fate of being a permanent Other: either at home or abroad.

This, in my view, is an important aspect of cross-border and cross-ethnic coupling of women into a transnational arena of the reproduction of the nations. When scholars and social policy-makers discuss migration and border control, they should be made aware of the modernist legacies of gender. These may have had a historical agency in the reproduction of the national sexual contract; but can no longer serve as pillars of the postnational sexual contract.

Unless of course, we want to maintain postnational order within the parameters of a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century democratic nation-state. But then, soon, we will find out that history has made a further move – ahead and beyond us.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> <http://www.unfpa.org/pds/migration.html>
- <sup>ii</sup> <http://www.caritas.org/includes/pdf/backgroundmigration.pdf>
- <sup>iii</sup> <http://www.pokmuz-ce.si/stalne/alma-m-karlin-poti>