

Sexuality and Migration

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How are sexuality and migration shaped and reshaped by one another? Varied definitions of sexuality have made this a challenging question to answer. Until recently, sexuality was frequently conflated with gender, or else addressed under rubrics like crime, deviance, morality, or disease (Manalansan, 2006). Moreover, sexuality was commonly understood as a private matter and irrelevant to the ‘big’ questions about migration. Studies of sexuality were often framed around the modernist belief that everyone has an individual sexual identity – even though this belief is not applicable to other times and places.

Queer theory, which emerged in the early 1990s, challenged these approaches and opened up new possibilities for thinking about the connections between sexuality and migration. Refusing essentialist and transhistorical constructs of sexual identities, queer theory instead explores the production of sexual subjectivities, how distinctions between normal and abnormal get created, and the relations of domination and subordination involved. It addresses sexuality as a regime of power that thoroughly shapes families, communities, state institutions, and economies; and it underscores that sexual norms, struggles and forms of governance always articulate hierarchies of gender, race, class and geopolitics.

Concomitantly, accelerated globalization processes – that extend histories of colonialism and global capitalism – produced a new ‘age of migration.’ The field of migration studies, which had naturalized the framework of the sovereign nation state that controlled its own borders, began to acknowledge the impact of globalization, the fact that migrants often lived transnational lives, the need to question nationalist analytic frameworks, the continuing impact of (neo)colonialism, and the significance of diasporic experiences. It also recognized that immigration policing has multiplied and dispersed national borders both inward into national territories, and outward to extraterritorial locations.

In this context, exploring connections between sexuality and migration often begins with the recognition that today’s global order emerged through colonial processes. According to Ann Laura Stoler (2002), sexual arrangements were never just metaphors, but also material mechanisms, for creating and maintaining racialized, gendered, economic and geopolitical distinctions between ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’. Consequently, ‘who bedded and wedded whom in the colonies... was never left to chance,’ and migration possibilities were organized accordingly (Stoler, 2002). With the shift to a

world of nation states that supposedly controlled their own borders, sexuality retained its importance in creating and naturalizing inequalities, this time through constructs of nation, citizenry, social ordering, and economy – and enforced by expanding state migration controls.

These processes variously shaped migration. For instance, sexuality has impelled migration by individuals such as: lesbians, gay men, and unmarried pregnant women seeking to avoid discrimination or stigmatization; married people seeking employment to support children; women and men using marriage as a strategy for legal migration; those going abroad to sell sex; individuals seeking HIV/AIDS treatment; sex tourists; and others. Sexuality also shapes people’s access to social networks that provide the information, resources, and contacts that enable migration. Nation states, in turn, often decide whether to admit or refuse entry to migrants based on sexual considerations that cross-cut racial, gender, class, and geopolitical calculations. For instance, legal admission often depends on fitting into normative definitions of family, kinship or marriage, or claiming fear of persecution that takes sexualized form or is based on sexuality. Conversely, migrants are often denied legal status when they cannot fit into normative definitions of family, or are believed to present sexual danger (for example, as supposed carriers of sexual diseases, or loose women, or men who might sexually prey on others, or sexual ‘perverts’). Migrants continue to be governed in sexual terms after entering the nation state, especially through their interactions with economic, health, welfare, and education systems. Moreover, citizens respond to migrants through a sexualized lens, often seeing them as exotic, sexually backwards/traditional/repressed, highly fertile, bearers of perversion and disease – or as models of sexual and moral values that the citizenry should emulate. Through these processes, binaries of us/them, citizen/migrant, normal/deviant become expressed, mapped onto bodies and places, and struggled over.

Migrants respond in complex ways to prevailing assumptions about their sexual practices and beliefs. Their sexualities are often evaluated in terms of their supposed success or failure in ‘assimilating’ to dominant cultural sexual norms (which are held to be superior to migrants’ cultures), and the presumption that exposure to dominant culture causes change. But new scholarship suggests that gender, racial and economic discrimination; housing and occupational segregation; precarious legal status; language barriers; transnational ties; and migrants’ own creative adaptations provide better explanations

for change. These frameworks reorient readers away from Eurocentric models of linear progress and assimilation, toward complexity, multiplicity, hybridity, transnationalism, and multiple modernities – that involve not an uncritical celebration of difference, but rather the negotiation of colonial legacies and power inequalities. The works also provide models of global flows that decenter the west, deconstruct binaries like local/global and traditional/modernity, and rethink what borders do.

Recent studies also explore how individual feelings of love and desire interact with large-scale social and economic structures that condition migration. Analyzing how migrants refashion their selves and subjectivities, scholars have paid particular attention to the role of mass media, virtual flows, and the internet. Scholars have also explored connections between migration, sexualities and the second generation (especially daughters); experiences of migrant sex workers; the politics of migrants' childbearing; migration and HIV/AIDS; sexuality, migration and asylum claims; experiences of transnational intimacies and families; and to some extent, the lives of migrant gay men and transgender people (lesbians have received little attention).

Given that both migration and sexual controls

are intimately tied to histories of colonialism, global capitalism, and slavery, scholars have posed challenging questions about interconnections among sexuality, migration, and struggles to end inequalities. Some explore how the criminalization of unauthorized migrants, the rise of the prison industrial complex, and sexual norms that articulate racial, gender, and class hierarchies, work in tandem to legitimize subjecting diverse populations to exploitation, violence, and shortened lives. Others problematize how global human rights discourses used in asylum cases, including those involving sexuality, may at once reinscribe colonial, racial and gender inequalities but nonetheless present opportunities for change. These and other analyses ask us to question critically how the connections between sexuality and migration may reinforce, or offer opportunities to transform, multiple inequalities at different scales.

References

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Stoler A. L. (2002) *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

