



Affective nationalism: Banalities of belonging in Azerbaijan



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ABSTRACT

While Michael Billig's 'banal nationalism' points to the significance of the trivial reproduction of national representations in everyday routines, feminist political geographers have highlighted how the nation is brought into being through embodied and emotional practices. Building upon and extending these notions of the nation as represented and embodied, the paper argues that the nation also takes shape through bodily encounters and joyful as well as painful affections. In what we call 'affective nationalism', the nation emerges in moments of encounter between different bodies and objects through embodying, sharing, enjoying or disliking what feels national. We combine a Deleuzian reading of affect that discloses the mechanisms of material becomings with feminist scholarship sensitive to how bodies affect and are affected differently by materially produced nationalisms. Based on ethnographic field research in Azerbaijan, which we present in three vignettes, we untangle the affective becoming of national bodies, objects and places during a publicly staged ceremony of the collective remembrance of martyr and the celebration of a national holiday within the realm of a family. The paper makes two contributions to researching affective nationalism. First, it enquires into how people identify with Azerbaijan through their capacities to affect and to be affected by what feels national and, second, it explores how affective nationalism can be captured through vignettes of affective writing.

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Introduction

The bustle makes me feel exhilarated. Hundreds of cheerful people crowd on the wide *Büyük Gala* street in the old town of Baku. In one corner a tighrope dancer prepares for his grand entrance. In another, a crowd of agitated people draws closer around a troupe of jugglers. The audience cheers them on with sporadic Aaaaahs and Ooooohs.

Through the speakers I can hear the entertainer announcing the next act. A formation is about to dance one of the most popular Azerbaijani dances, the *yalli*. About 20 girls and boys wearing colourful and glittering costumes run onto the stage. They line up holding hands and as soon as the brisk music begins, they move their legs back and forth and their hands up and down, the 20 dancers merging into one through the coordination of their movements. Then, they form a circle and whirl to the right. A squawking wind instrument plays fast runs as the rhythmic drumming grows ever more intense.

As I look around, I see people enjoying the dance performed on the stage. Some rock their bodies to the rhythm. Some 20 meters in front of the stage, I observe people making room in the crowd. Some teenagers start holding hands and while circling right move their hands up and down and their legs back and forth. They dance in the same way as the performers on the stage – with one difference: they haven't organised themselves to dance before. They also look like their dancing excites them more. The girls and boys on the stage make an effort to maintain their stiff posture and keep a uniform grin. The teenagers from the crowd burst out laughing, one boy tosses back his head and while their dance is picking up speed they beam with joy (field notes Elisabeth from 21 March 2014, Baku).

If Michael Billig (1995) is right that nationalism is banal, this scene in Baku, Azerbaijan, reveals more than mere amusement. With Billig, the teenagers on the *Büyük Gala* street perform the *yalli* as a marker of a distinct Azerbaijani national culture. The dancers reproduce Azerbaijan in the moment of recognising the dance as part of an imagined "we". Fundamental to Billig's banal nationalism is the idea that people feel a sense of national belonging through everyday practices such as a national style of dancing. Revealing

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how these everyday national practices are tied to bodies, feminist political geographers have developed the notion of “embodied nationalism” (Mayer, 2004; McClintock, 1995; McClintock, Mufti, & Shohat, 1997; Radcliffe, 1996). They have studied dancing (Nash, 2000), dressing (Nelson, 1999), or styling (Faria, 2013, 2014) to understand how the nation unfolds through embodied gender performances.

Yet, the situation above discloses more than Billig’s banal nationalism or feminist political geographies’ embodied nationalism allows us to see. What motivates the teenagers to move their bodies in coordinated rhythms in the first place? There is, we argue, an affective component binding bodies together – a situational configuration of noises, odours, objects, and memories. The dancing, as a contingent and temporary configuration of different bodies and objects, has the potential to affect, to unify differently marked bodies, and thus to create something new, such as a feeling of national belonging.

Three aspects mark out the affective moment of the *yalli* as national. First, corporeal reactions such as the spontaneous dancing of the teenagers are bound up with knowledge and past experiences referencing a collective shared feeling of the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) of a nation. As Sara Ahmed (2004a, p. 171) has argued, the politicisation of emotions binds bodies together or sets them apart. Second, the affective encounters of the dancing bodies on the *Büyük Gala* evoke enjoyment. This enjoyment of what feels national encompasses both happiness and anxiety. While the teenagers rejoice in the experience of what feels like national dancing, observers of the scene who feel different about those embodied national representations might as well encounter a sense of exclusion. Fantasies of a unique nation emerging from the momentary configuration of bodies and objects stimulate the constant reproduction of enjoyable as well as menacing experiences of the nation. Third, affect is national here because the idea of the nation through a national way of dancing (Bryant, 2005; Kaschl, 2003; Zhemukhov & King, 2013) is intertwined with its rhythmic incorporation. Even though bodily experiences of national affection are as diverse as different bodies (Tolia-Kelly, 2006), what feels national emerges in the affective space between bodies created through the music and rhythm of the *yalli* dance.

In this paper, we propose the notion of an affective nationalism – the banal affirmation of the national emerging in moments of encounter between bodies and objects. Bringing into dialogue a Deleuzian interpretation of affect (de Spinoza, 1883; Deleuze, 1988) with feminist approaches to affect, bodies and becoming, we acknowledge bodily markedness and different affective capacities (Colls, 2012; Tolia-Kelly, 2006; Wetherell, McCreanor, McConville, Barnes, & le Grice, 2015) as central characteristics of an affective nationalism. With our idea of an affective nationalism, we expand notions of banal, embodied and emotional nationalisms to reveal how processes of national signification grip different bodies, effecting sentiments of national belonging and alienation.

We begin by revisiting how (feminist) political geographers have approached the study of nationalism as banal, embodied, and emotional. We then illustrate our proposition of an affective nationalism, before we present our methodological approach of affective writing. Drawing on ethnographic research in Azerbaijan, we then highlight how collective bodily experiences of sharing, enjoying or disliking (re)produce an affective nationalism.

Nationalism revisited: banal, embodied, emotional

In *Banal Nationalism*, Billig (1995) argues that nation states are unknowingly reconstituted in banal everyday practices through which people constantly reproduce their nationhood. Billig

searches for the banal dimensions of nationalism in symbolic representations of the national, such as the daily flagging of the nation, the use of shared languages, or the daily reference to the weather “here” (p. 116) in the news.

In political geography, scholars have echoed Billig’s (1995) concerns with the mundane making of the nation in two ways. First, political geographers have explored how social practices mark out banal nationalism (Benwell & Dodds, 2011; Jones & Desforges, 2003; Paasi, 1996). They have analysed the inconspicuous manifestations of nationalism such as postage stamps (Raento & Brunn, 2005) and banknotes (Penrose, 2011), road signs (Jones & Merriman, 2009), license plates (Airriess, Hawkins, & Vaughan, 2012; Leib, 2011), supporting national sport teams (Koch, 2013) and national maps as in school textbooks and flag-map logos (Batuman, 2010).

Second, feminist scholars have explored Billig’s banal nationalism highlighting how the nation emerges through embodied gender performances in everyday life (Mayer, 2000; Staeheli, 2001; Warren, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 1997). With the notion of an “embodied nationalism” (Mayer, 2004), they have challenged the disembodied and abstract nature of much nationalism research in political geography (Blunt, 1999; Fluri, 2008; Hyndman, 2004; Radcliffe, 1999). Examining the political “through the scale of the body” (Dowler & Sharp, 2001, p. 169) and asking how “citizenship is embodied” (England, 2003, p. 615), feminist political geographies have interrogated how the nation is “affected by and reflected in embodied practices” (McDowell, 1999, p. 35). They have investigated how the nation is embodied in such diverse sites as reproductive politics in India (Smith, 2012), women’s gender performances in Israeli’s occupation (Mayer, 1994), rape as an embodied form of warfare in former Yugoslavia (Mayer, 2004), gender performances in Ecuadorian electoral politics (Schurr, 2013a), and the staging of the new nation South Sudan through beauty pageants (Faria, 2013). While not always focusing on the nation as the main scale of analysis, feminist political geographies advance our understanding of the importance of embodied practices in shaping the national body.

Feminist scholars have advanced research on nationalism by emphasising its emotional dimension (Berlant, 2008). While political geography was initially hesitant to incorporate the emotional turn into the subdiscipline (Pain, Panelli, Kindon, & Little, 2010, p. 973), in the meantime a rich body of literature under the labels of emotional geopolitics (Pain, 2009; Tyler & Henkin, 2015), intimate geopolitics (Smith, 2012), and emotional political geography (Wilkinson, 2009) has emerged. Caroline Faria (2014, p. 319) points out that the emotional turn in geography offers “rich opportunities to rethink nationalism”. She argues that “nationalism is emotional – marked at once by contradictory feelings of fear and desire that require, and indeed depend on, a foreign other” (Faria, 2014, p. 318). Her work on the becoming of the South Sudan nation demonstrates that nationalism needs to be understood as a feeling of connection, belonging, and attachment to the collective body of the nation as well as detachment from those outside of or threatening the nation.

We both build on and expand (feminist) political geography’s engagement with banal, embodied and emotional nationalisms by inquiring into the affective nature of feeling a national belonging.¹ A focus on the affective dimension of nationalism serves to analyse the *emergence* of feelings of national belonging. The paper asks how materially produced national representations affect different bodies: First, national sentiments arise through a specific assortment of elements that stimulate the emergence of certain feelings and practices. Second, through this assortment of elements, different bodily histories become relevant in moments of affection and enable feelings of proximity and distance. Lastly, this embodied becoming of national meaning connects different bodies with multiple capacities to affect and to be affected through sentiments

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