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Dressing down to fit in: Analyzing (re)orientation processes through stories about Norwegianization

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the relation between gender and social change in the context of east-west migration. Using a feminist phenomenologist and interpretative approach, the analysis shows that Russian female migrants in Northern Norway, although well-educated and generally well-integrated in the local labor market, often felt that they were on display and judged through their bodies. Their bodily visibility pushed them to make changes regarding their ways of appearing, dressing and in their migration status. We conclude that the migrants' self-consciousness, as well as their various ways of "becoming Norwegianized," may be conceptualized as an effect of local, gendered stigmatizing processes.

Introduction

This article examines the relation between gender and social change in the context of east-west migration.[1] Employing a feminist, phenomenologist approach, we draw on data from a qualitative study of female Russian migrants having settled in Finnmark, in northernmost Norway. The article reveals that Russian female migrants in Northern Norway, although well-educated and usually also well-integrated in the local labor market, often felt that they were on display and judged through their bodies. Their bodily visibility pushed them to make changes regarding their ways of appearing, dressing and in their migration status. We conclude that the migrants' self-consciousness, as well as their various ways of "becoming Norwegianized," may be conceptualized as an effect of local, gendered stigmatizing processes.

Finnmark, bordering Russia in the east, is a vast but sparsely populated county that for decades has experienced a steady population decline. Since 2007, though, the numbers have stabilized and even begun to grow, mainly due to immigration. Currently, migrants constitute approximately 10% of the population (Statistics Norway, Kommuneprofilen 2017),[2] originating from countries such as Finland, Poland, Lithuania, Thailand, Somalia and Afghanistan. The largest group of immigrants living in Finnmark today, though, comes from Russia. After the dissolution of the Iron Curtain in 1989, Russian migration was driven primarily by economic reasons, given the severe conditions in post-Soviet Russia. Nevertheless, over time, the motivations have become more diverse (Johanson & Olsen, 2012). Since its beginning, this east-west migration has been strongly feminized. Today, 70% of the Russian migrants living in Finnmark are women, among whom the majority obtained their residence permit after having married a Norwegian man, whereas 30% came as students or specialist labor migrants (Tevlina, 2015, p. 72). Although the political relations between Russia and Norway have softened over the years, at the same time, new symbolic boundaries have been created (Kramvig & Stien, 2002), often reinforced by ideas of cultural difference, as well as bureaucratic procedures that may be understood as discriminatory on an individual level (Viken & Schwenke-Fors, 2014).

Following the increase in female migrants across the east-west border in northernmost Norway, Russian women in (Northern) Norway have become the object of ample research. Various studies hence highlight how Russian women have for a long time been associated with, and must negotiate, negative stereotypes. Prostitution, in terms of Russian women selling their bodies to Norwegian men, became a problem in some places in Finnmark in the 1990s. Additionally, many studies have examined issues related to experiences and consequences

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[2] https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/statistikker/folkemengde (see '20 Finnmark/Finnmárku').

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of this cross-border prostitution (see e.g. Flemmen & Lotherington, 2009; Jacobsen & Skilbrei, 2010; Kramvig & Stien, 2002; Leontieva & Sarsenov, 2003; Lotherington & Flemmen, 2007). Russian women's experiences of gendered inclusion processes in local communities have also been examined (Wara, 2016a, 2016b; Wara & Munkejord, 2016). Even though, as mentioned above, Russian migrants in Northern Norway are generally highly educated and well-integrated (Aure, 2012; Munkejord, 2015), the media's depiction of them was for a long time one-dimensional (Flemmen, 2007). In particular, newspaper articles have emphasized those few involved in criminality, or criticized Russian marriage migrants assumed to be motivated by economic factors rather than "pure love". In combination, the pejorative media representations, the prostitution-oriented research and local stereotypes have had a long-term impact on Russian women's everyday life experiences in Northern Norway, as has also been found more generally in studies of female migrants from post-Soviet states in other countries, such as Italy (Näre, 2014) and Portugal (Hellermann, 2006). A study of female middle-class Russian immigrants in the US, likewise, found that former Soviet women often felt the need to redefine and downscale their professional identities, as well as to redress their sexuality in the new normative milieu (Remennick, 2007, p. 327). Moreover, a study by Krivonos (2017) on Russian-speaking young migrants and (un)employment in Finland is of relevance. Although a neighboring country, Finland has, compared to Norway, a more uneasy historical relationship to Russia due to the fact that Finland was part of the Russian Empire until 1917 and the subsequent Finnish civil war. Partly viewed against this ambiguous past, Krivonos's study reveals that Russian-speaking immigrants in Finland today, despite often having degrees from their country of origin, are immersed in processes of being racialized. Moreover, she shows that, as a strategy to "carve out spaces for respectability and worth," young unemployed Russian-speaking migrants in Finland claim belonging to the Finnish society at the cost of other ("undeserving" and "lazy") migrants, often simplistically referred to as "asylum seekers" (Krivonos, 2017, p. 13).

This article builds on relevant national and international literature in order to examine the gendered and bodily experiences related to east-west migration analyzed through the stories told by Russian women having settled in Northern Norway. In the following, we will outline the conceptual and methodological framework adopted before presenting the empirical findings, our analysis and conclusions.

The body as a site of intercultural encounters

In our analysis, we take inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of the phantom limb in his Phenomenology of Perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2012[1945]), Ahmed's understanding of (re)orientation practices (Ahmed, 2004) and Näre's perspectives of migrancy (Näre, 2013a, 2013b). While the phantom limb refers to the ambiguous presence of a lost or amputated limb, the concept of (re)orientation practices is inspired by the phenomenological notion of intentionality, meaning that the body is always "oriented toward something" in its effort to make the world a familiar place (Ahmed, 2006, p. 553). Migrancy, moreover, is suggested by Näre (2013b) as a fundamental social category in line with, and intersected by, class, race and gender. Näre (2013b, p. 604) defines migrancy as "the socially constructed subjectivity of being a migrant, which is inscribed in certain bodies by the larger society in general and legislative practices in particular." Migrancy is thus a useful concept that helps us to understand interconnections between migration and gendered bodily experiences among migrants embodied in specific geographical contexts.

Before we continue, it may be relevant to clarify that phenomenology as an empirical methodology conceives experience as "always already meaningful, even prior to active reflection" (Sobchack, 2010, p. 52). This means that objects of consciousness and the values attached to them are "synthesized by an embodied consciousness," constituting a "lived body" (ibid.). This lived body, which is intentionally directed, moreover, "rises toward the world" through the activities of perception, interpretation and expression (Merleau-Ponty, 2012[1945], p. 78). A phenomenological approach thus makes a distinction between the objective, material body and the phenomenal, lived body. Moreover, it makes a distinction between the lived body and language. At the same time, these phenomena are interconnected.

The phantom limb or phantom pain is introduced by Merleau-Ponty as a metaphor to grasp what happens to a body when missing something that was there before (ibid., p. 78–85). Concretely, a phantom limb is a limb that has been removed or lost, for example, due to surgery or an accident, but that despite its absence may still be felt by the body (as if it was still there). In the case of a phantom limb, then, the lived body's knowledge "emerges provisionally as the correlation of the experience's subjective and objective aspects" (Sobchack, 2010, p. 53). To explain this, Merleau-Ponty says: "The phantom arm is not the representation of an arm, but the ambivalent presence of an arm" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012[1945], p. 83). The body, moreover, comprises two layers: the habitual and the actual body (ibid., p. 84). The habitual is what we have learned to do and can do without thinking (for example, always putting on lipstick before going outside the house). The habitual body, then, represents skills that function as a reminder of what we can call a complete, or whole, body. Our skills are well known to the actual body, but difficulties may emerge when something disturbs the communication from the habitual body to the actual body. Thus, in the case of a lost limb, either materially or metaphorically, the actual body can no longer rely on or relax in the habitual. The putting on of lipstick before going out is no longer an automated skill or habit but is questioned, perhaps even impossible to accomplish. This may cause pain for the person in question, and may result in the phenomenon of phantom pain.

In this article then, the perception of the phantom limb/pain can help us conceive what we can call an "amputated Russianness" among some of our participants, which again may shed light on why some of them feel the need to (re)orientate themselves, for example, through new dressing strategies in order to fit in after having settled in Finnmark.

Merleau-Ponty's perspectives on the phantom limb are used in combination with Sara Ahmed's (1999, 2004, 2006) postcolonial feminist phenomenology of (re)orientation practices. Ahmed understands migration as a (re)orientation, both in terms of movement and dislocation, and also as "a mechanism for theorizing how identity itself is predicated on movement or loss" (Ahmed, 1999, p. 332). When the migrant is dislocated, (s)he feels tensions between "here" and "there" and "estrangement," after which a process of (re)orientation may take place, in the sense of orienting oneself "towards certain objects that help us find our way" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 543).

Our analytical perspectives used rest on the idea of a body-in-the-world that knows itself through its active relationship with the world and its ongoing identification with it (Merleau-Ponty, 2012 [1945]). The Russian women's practices and experiences related to dressing will thus be examined as a conscious act that presupposes a capacity to reflect and locate meaningful connections between one's own practices and surroundings. Such perspectives are relevant for a discussion of the clothed body's "(re)orientation," understood as a meaning-seeking process and as a site for change resulting from specific interconnections between the gendered migrant body and specific geographical locations.

Data and methods

In order to obtain a description of the participants' own bodily experiences related to settling in their new place of living, a phenomenological and interpretative approach was considered most appropriate (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This article draws on data from participatory observation, individual interviews and focus group interviews. The data collection took place during five field visits (2012–2015) in a northern