



The Intangible Nation: Spatializing experiences of Britishness and belonging for young British Muslim women



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ABSTRACT

Critical developments within studies of nationalism trace the spatially dynamic tonalities of the nation through everyday routines, practices and encounters, considering how bodies and objects perform, reproduce and resist ideas of national identity. These studies have turned towards the more-than-representational and conceptualizations of affective atmospheres to unpack the ties between people and the nation, exploring how the nation is felt and embodied. Drawing on interviews and small group discussions with 10 young British Muslim women in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, this paper contributes to this emerging body of literature in two ways. Firstly, it considers how religious and national identities intersect and are embodied in the everyday on an emotional and experiential level through the headscarf. Secondly it explores the affective spatialities of these women's embodied identities, considering how emotional spaces, such as the home, affect how the nation is felt, (re) shaped and (per)formed in the intimate and mundane. Focusing upon the home and the headscarf, it demonstrates the complex relationship between the non-human, human, tangible and intangible, reconceptualizing how the nation is felt, experienced and lived across diffuse spaces and atmospheres. Through questioning how 'Britishness' is felt and spatialised, the paper highlights the complex nature of national identities and how they are navigated and embodied by young people, impacting feelings of belonging. It argues that national identities are not spatially and geographically uniform, but messy, emotional and situated, constantly becoming through everyday encounters across space.

1. Introduction

National identity is increasingly seen as a fluid and on-going series of connections within the scale of the everyday and, more often than not, within the geographical space of the nation-state (Jones and Merriman, 2012; Antonsich, 2015; Miltz and Schurr, 2016). Whilst understood as a social construct and not reducible to a specific point in time or group of people, dominant conceptualizations of nations have often assumed a unified and static notion of nationalism, therefore raising certain questions about these approaches and accounts of national identity (Closs Stephens, 2013). What happens when a person identifies with more than one nation? What happens when a person does not feel affiliated to any nation or to a different nation to the one they 'supposedly' belong to through birth or heritage? And how do dominant conceptualizations of national identities limit the ways in which the nation is felt and experienced by different members of the nation? It is these questions that I begin to address through exploring the varying tonalities of emotional experiences and encounters of the nation across multiple spatialities. It is important to move beyond dominantly representational and discourse focused analyses of the

nation to ask how we can resist reducing a nation to a singular and unified identity, and explore how national identities are made manifest and persist within the everyday. Often described as a 'feeling' (Closs Stephens, 2016), thinking of national identities from a more-than-representational perspective allows us to trace the ebbs and flows of national feelings, through encounters and feelings of belonging (Wood, 2012; Faria, 2014; Merriman and Jones, 2016). The more-than-representational considers the affective entanglements of things, bodies, emotions and spaces that work to shape our being-in-the-world, arguing for identities as processual and relational (Sumartojo, 2017). It is key, then, to explore how bodies and objects work together to both (re) produce and resist ideas of national identities, unpacking the connections and ties between people and the nation (Miltz and Schurr, 2016).

In this paper, I use affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; Sumartojo, 2014; Closs Stephens, 2016), the more-than-representational (Lorimer, 2005) and feminist geopolitics (Dowler and Sharp, 2001) to consider how religious and national identities intersect and are embodied through the everyday lives of young British Muslims. It adds two critical developments to studies on nationalism and religious identities. Firstly, the paper explores the spatiality of young British

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Muslim women's embodiment of their identities, unpacking the nation in the intimate and taken-for-granted spaces of the domestic and the body. Considering the agency of the non-human and the intangible, this research argues for a more nuanced understanding of national and religious identities, arguing they must be seen as an agglomeration of distinct components, which work together and affect one another. Secondly, it seeks to begin a dialogue between religious and national identities at an emotional and experiential level, considering how these identities are often taken-for-granted and not fully explored in relation to their felt and lived nature. In doing so it goes beyond conceptualizations of how national identities are (re)produced and considers how these narratives are understood and experienced, highlighting the complex intersections between them, and challenging static and singular understandings of national identities. By approaching national and religious identities through the more-than-representational it allows a more critical and fluid understanding of how feelings of national and religious identities intersect and provides space for new considerations of how national belonging is experienced in the everyday.

Religion has often been seen as a cohesive or foundational aspect of national identity (Kong, 2001; Mayer, 2004). However, both national and religious identities predominately exist within research as taken for granted, singular and bounded identities with little work unpacking the intersectional and affective aspects within the everyday (for exceptions, see Holloway, 2013; Williams, 2015). Specifically, research has highlighted the headscarf, worn by Muslim women, as an object intrinsically related to ideas of nationhood; the headscarf is an object that must be negotiated by the body but also works to simultaneously affect the body through its own capacities and inscriptions (Dwyer, 1999; Siraj, 2011; Gökariksel and Secor, 2010, 2012, 2014). Decisions to wear or not wear a headscarf can work to shape the experiences of young Muslim women's everyday lives, with the headscarf having inscriptions attached in terms of both religious and national identities (Tarlo, 2007; Siraj, 2011).

The concept of the home is another area that has been studied in much detail within both sociological and geographical research (see Mallett, 2004; Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012) yet is an important scale often missed within research on national identity. The home is a key everyday space in which religious and national identities are often performed and encountered (Tolia-Kelly, 2004). Critically, the home is an un-thought-of space, an aspect of everyday life that is equally intimate and private. Drawing on the concept of affective atmospheres enables the home to be understood as an affective space, brought into being through the dynamic entanglements of bodies, things and emotions, whilst simultaneously shaping identities through the encounters, experiences and performances within this space. The home, then, becomes an example of a space in which the nation is encountered in multiple, intimate and private ways, and allows new insights as it reveals the negotiation of national identities as bodies move in and out of the home. Through this, it is possible to begin to pull apart the multiple and shifting nature of national identities and uncover how emotions and affect can bring forward new understandings of identity and belonging across different spaces, considering how places, like the home, become key sites in the embodiment of national identities. (Closs Stephens, 2016). In doing so, this moves beyond ideas of simply belonging or not belonging to a group (Hyams, 2002) and instead locates national identities as intimately private and emotional, working towards more nuanced conceptualizations of what it feels like to encounter and embody national identities in the everyday. The work here seeks to contribute to an emerging literature on a more-than-representational approach to the nation, which argues that national identities are emergent and multiple, shifting as bodies move through and encounter different spaces (Wood, 2012; Sumartojo, 2014; Closs Stephens, 2016; Militz and Schurr, 2016).

The paper is split into four sections. Initially exploring the emergent bodies of literature on affective atmospheres, everyday emotions and

nationalism, the paper discusses how these ideas have been conceptualized and framed within cultural and political geography literature. The paper draws on a study that was undertaken with ten British Muslim women in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England. I present an investigation into the feelings and embodiments of Britishness in the lives of these young British Muslim women. I argue for a wider conceptualisation of national identities beyond that of a singular, unified narrative, and for the constant re-articulation and reproduction of the nation within the everyday and through mundane, taken-for-granted objects. Finally, I conclude by arguing for the importance of the intangible and emotional aspects of national identities, considering how other identifiers, such as religion, can play a role in how they are felt, imagined and embodied in the everyday. I suggest that the move towards affective atmospheres provides a useful conceptual framework for bridging the distant and the embodied to provide a more nuanced account of national identities.

2. Affective atmospheres, everyday emotions and the nation

Feminist geopolitics has long been working to locate and ground geopolitics at the scale of the everyday and the body, considering emotion and experience (see Dowler and Sharp, 2001). There has, however, been a reliance on the representational, as well as a lack of engagement with the non-human and intangible, such as feelings or atmospheres, although exceptions can be found (Williams, 2014; Pain, 2009; 2010; Dixon, 2015). Emotions and feelings play a crucial role in how we understand and navigate our everyday lives (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Pain, 2009; 2010), impacting how spaces and bodies are encountered, as well as the way our identities are performed and expressed (Faria, 2014). Simonsen (2012) reiterates the importance of this relationship between bodies, spaces, the affective and emotional, highlighting how the movement of bodies through space constantly shape themselves and each other. She argues that bodies and spaces are always in process, or becoming, as they are performed and situated spatially and temporally (Simonsen, 2012). It is important to consider this recursive relationship between bodies, spaces, emotions and affect as this enables further exploration into everyday lived experiences of the nation, something lacking within current literature (Dixon and Marston, 2011). Critically this paper considers how works on emotional geographies, the affective and the nation come together to explore how national identity comes into being through feelings, performances and encounters with specific spaces, bodies and objects (Faria, 2014).

Key to this paper is the work of Anderson (2009), Closs Stephens (2016) and Edensor (2015) who suggest affective atmospheres are a way to explore the theoretical contestations surrounding bodies, cognition and the re-presenting of emotions and affects (Pile, 2010) as atmospheres belong to distinct and wider situations, yet are felt on a personal and embodied level. Stewart (2011:452) suggests that atmospheres are a "lived affect – a capacity to affect and to be affected", a sensory, emotional, bodily attunement to something that influences a way of living, becoming and performing. An atmosphere is not passive or active, but sits in the middle and must be understood as experiential and relational. Approaching the performance of national identities through the lens of affective atmospheres means that emotionally subjective experiences of belonging to nations are important within wider narratives of national identities, formed through affective encounters with bodies, spaces and things (McCormack, 2013). Seeing emotions as relational doings, brought into being through performance and triggered by affective qualities, helps to explore how emotions intertwine bodies, spaces, atmospheres and things through encounters, gestures and movements (Simonsen, 2007; 2012). For Closs Stephens (2016), it is atmospheres and the little, mundane and taken-for-granted movements and rhythms that are important to consider as they permeate different parts of everyday life across spaces, cultivating feelings of nationalism, which are expressed through emotional doings.

Critically, combining work on affect, emotion and feelings of

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