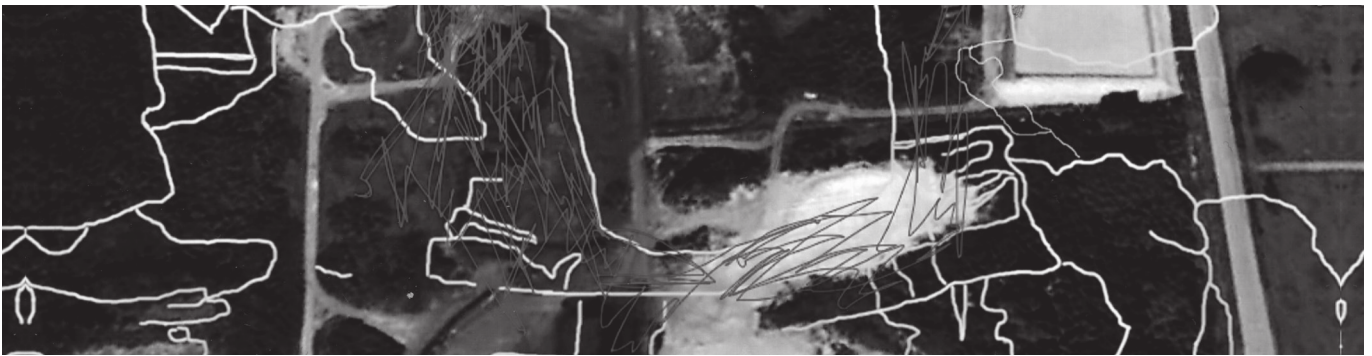


The SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration



Edited by
Kevin Smets, Koen Leurs
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London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/1 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
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SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Michael Ainsley
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Marketing Manager: Lucia Sweet
Cover Design: Naomi Robinson
Typeset by Cenveo Publisher Services
Printed in the UK

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2019938759

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

978-1-5264-4721-0

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Queer Migrants and Digital Culture

Lukasz Szulc

INTRODUCTION¹

Some migrants are queer. Some queers are migrants. In the increasingly popular and pervasive digital culture, they are all quite likely to navigate diverse aspects of their lives online. In this chapter, I will have a close look at the emerging body of research which queries this very intersection of queer *and* migration *and* digital. The chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first one, I will introduce key theoretical frameworks employed in research on queer migrants, showing how they challenge heteronormative assumptions in migration studies (queer theory) and demand to recognize that the experiences of queer migrants, as much as of any other migrants, are rooted in complex tangles of identity positions (intersectionality) and geographical scales (transnationalism). In the second section, I will extend the discussion to the role of digital culture for queer migrants. Drawing on my review of about 30 academic articles

and books on this topic, I will map six of the most prevalent themes in this literature: two related to the idea of community ((1) imagined diasporas, (2) counterpublics); two focused on individuals ((3) migration motivations and acculturation, (4) context collapse); and two devoted to discrimination ((5) homonationalism and racism, (6) designed ethnocentrism). In the third section, I will point to the general tendencies across the themes, reflect on the limitations of research on queer migrants and digital culture, and put forward a number of propositions to help advance this research. I will conclude the chapter by arguing for the broader importance of research on queer migrants and digital culture. Before I start, a short note on terminology is in order. Like many other authors writing on this topic (e.g. Fortier, 2002; Gorman-Murray, 2007; Luibhéid, 2008), I will use the word *queer* as an umbrella term to indicate the diversity of non-normative sexual and gender identity positions as well as their fluidity and

instability. At the same time, while reporting on particular works, I will remain faithful to the terms chosen by their authors.

QUEER THEORY, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND TRANSNATIONALISM

Research on queer migrants encompasses a growing number of works which cover a great diversity of topics. It often focuses on relocation motivated by sexuality, so-called sexual or queer migration (see e.g. Carrillo, 2004; Manalansan, 2006), which includes mobility between countries (e.g. to join a partner or seek asylum based on sexual orientation or gender identity), within countries (e.g. to move from rural to urban areas), and within cities (e.g. because of gentrification), as well as queer tourism (Yue, 2012). More recent works point out that motivations for migration are complex and that queer reasons to migrate may intertwine with or be overshadowed by other reasons, especially economic and educational ones, which suggests a need to expand the research on queer migration to the research on migration of queers (Gorman-Murray, 2009; Stella, Gawlewicz, and Flynn, 2016). As diverse as it is, research on queer migrants nevertheless shows a strong inclination towards specific theoretical frameworks – queer theory, intersectionality, and, to a lesser extent, transnationalism – which, when combined into a unified approach, may provide great inspiration for any studies of migration as well as of digital culture. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly discuss these frameworks one by one.

First, research on queer migrants relies on queer theory to challenge the heteronormativity of much of migration studies. ‘Queering the diaspora’, as Fortier (2002: 183) calls it, may mean two things. On the one hand, it means to acknowledge that not all migrants are heterosexual and cisgender, and to critique such implicit assumptions in migration

studies which surface, for example, in the discussions of marriage, family and reproduction (e.g. Manalansan, 2006). On the other hand, and more in line with queer theory, it means not to simply add queers to migration studies but to question clear-cut dichotomies of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, and normal and deviant as well as to challenge the very idea of single, stable, and static identities. As Luibhéid (2008: 170) points out: ‘all identity categories are burdened by legacies that must be interrogated, do not map neatly across time and space, and become transformed through circulation within specific, unequally situated local, regional, national, and transnational circuits’. This ‘anti-normative turn’, as Manalansan (2006: 225) calls it, has been later extended to include the critique of homonormativity, defined by Duggan (2002: 179) as a neoliberal sexual politics ‘that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them’, as well as of homonationalism, short for ‘homonormative nationalism’, coined by Puar (2007: 2) to understand how ‘homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects’. Relating this scholarship to research on queer migrants, Luibhéid (2008: 179), for example, points to a contradictory position of queer asylum seekers who, to be granted the asylum, are required to generate colonialist discourses of their home countries as essentially and historically homophobic.

Second, research on queer migrants builds on intersectionality theory. Originating in black feminist critique (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), intersectionality raises attention to intersecting forms of discrimination and identification, which cannot be boiled down to the mere sum of identity categories (such as race, class, gender, sexuality, age, disability, religion, and nationhood) but are the result of their specific amalgamation (see also the keyword entry on intersectionality by Fisher,

Weuthier, and Gajjala in this *Handbook*). Crenshaw (1989: 149), who coined the term, focused on a unique form of discrimination based on being a black woman (rather than being black and being a woman) and compared such discrimination to a car accident: 'If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them'. Works on queer migrants somewhat naturally gravitate towards intersectionality since their common aim is to integrate the discussion of sexuality and gender into migration studies. Manalansan (2006: 236), for example, writes about some non-White queer migrants being alienated from both their own migrant communities and mainstream 'straight' cultures (because of homophobia) as well as from local queer cultures (because of racism). Mai and King (2009: 296–7) additionally point to the so-called 'emotional turn' in migration studies and ask to recognize not only the intersections of identity categories but also 'the intersectionality of love, sex and emotion in framing mobility behaviour', since emotions may play a pivotal role, for instance, in the decision to move (e.g. love for a partner, friend, or kin). Manalansan (2006: 243), too, insists on acknowledging that migrants, in this case Filipina caretakers abroad, are 'desiring and pleasure-seeking' subjects: they possess sexual desires and engage in sexual practices.

Third, research on queer migrants employs the concept of transnationalism. As used in this scholarship, the concept does not simply stand for international connections but indicates two crucial theoretical moves. The first one is to challenge nation-centrism in research methodologies (also called 'methodological nationalism', e.g. Georgiou, 2007). Rather than discarding nations as a useful scale of analysis, transnationalism recognizes that other spatial scales – such as continents, regions, provinces, cities and neighbourhoods – may be of equal importance. The second move is to acknowledge the interconnections of these scales, 'their combination

and imbrication' (Szulc, 2018: 10; see also e.g. Grewal and Kaplan, 2001). As Kim-Puri (2005: 143) explains, transnationalism 'shifts analyses to linkages across cultural contexts rather than reproduces analyses of scale'. Gorman-Murray (2007) additionally proposes a need to rethink queer migration through the scale of the body. Criticizing research on queer migrants for 'teleological finality' (that is, treating migration as a one-off movement with no returns, detours or subsequent moves), as well as for 'ontological closure' (that is, assuming that queer migrants form a sort of fixed 'queer' identity after their migration), Gorman-Murray (2007: 106) insists upon a focus on 'the actual movement of the queer *body* through space' (emphasis in original). Researching queer migration in Sweden, Wimark (2016) builds on Gorman-Murray (2007) and adopts a life course perspective to show how decisions to move are often related to such life events as graduation, employment and retirement. At the same time, the author points to the importance of a broader context for patterns of migration – in this case, the growing legal, political, and social support for queers in Sweden – proposing that research on queer migrants 'needs to be simultaneously downsized to the body and upsized in the structural context' (Wimark, 2016: 607).

RESEARCH ON QUEER MIGRANTS AND DIGITAL CULTURE

Some scholars researching queer migrants suggest that queers have a special affection for mobility. Fortier (2002: 189), for example, explains that queers often need to move out (of heteronormative family, community or country) to come out, redefining migration as homecoming rather than homeleaving, where home is defined as a queer-friendly environment. Similarly, Knopp (2004) connects queer identity quests to the practice of moving between places in order to find

welcoming communities and argues that queers may find emotional and ontological security in movement itself, in placelessness. At the same time, some scholars researching queers and digital culture suggest that queers also have a special affection for the internet, which tends to be imagined as an egalitarian and safe space. Gross (2003: 260), for example, argues that '[q]ueers were among the first to realize the potential of this new technology' and points to an Associated Press story published in 1996 which states that 'It's the unspoken secret of the online world that gay men and lesbians are among the most avid, loyal, and plentiful commercial users of the Internet'.

Such romanticized statements about queers' special affection for mobility and the internet may indeed be true, at least in relation to some queers, but my aim here is to go beyond mere statements and to discuss what role digital culture actually plays in the everyday lived experience of queer migrants. To this end, I will now move on to review about 30 academic articles and books that examine the role of digital culture for queer migrants *empirically*. I will map what emerges as the six most popular themes in these works which point to, and help us advance, our understanding of the specific opportunities and challenges that digital culture creates for queer migrants. As mentioned in the introduction, two of the themes are related to the idea of community ((1) imagined diasporas, (2) counterpublics); two are focused on individuals ((3) migration motivations and acculturation, (4) context collapse); and two are devoted to discrimination ((5) homonationalism and racism, (6) designed ethnocentrism).

Imagined Diasporas

The term *diaspora*, as used in research on queer migrants, does not necessarily imply migration experience. It is usually employed to emphasize the role of globalization for the

formation of queer 'diasporic consciousness' (Fortier, 2002: 191). While 'traditional' diasporas are about the connections among geographically dispersed people of one national, ethnic, or religious group, queer diaspora indicates a sense of shared belonging among geographically dispersed queers, a sort of transnational queer community. Schimel (1997) suggests that media of global reach, especially the internet, become queer 'sites of connections' that foster the formation of an imagined queer diaspora at the global scale.

Some recent research indeed concludes that the internet creates a global sense of belonging between queers. Atay (2015, 2017) conducts an ethnographic study of a particular chat room on a webcam-based social network site CamQueer. After encountering 'individuals from different cultures, geographical locations, and linguistic backgrounds' in the chat room, the author argues that CamQueer creates an 'organic global community', consisting mainly of gay men (Atay, 2015: 85). Most often, however, scholars are more cautious about proclaiming the emergence of the global queer diaspora (Szulc, forthcoming). They do point to the instances of shared symbols (such as rainbow flags, pink triangles, and lambda signs) and words (such as *gay*, *lesbian*, and *queer*) circulating online but point out that the shared symbols and words are creatively adapted, localized and nationalized, rather than simply reproduced by queers around the world (e.g. Heinz et al., 2002; Kuntsman, 2009; Szulc, 2012, 2016).

While there is no strong evidence for the existence of the queer diaspora at the global scale, many empirical studies demonstrate the emergence of queer diasporas limited in scope, hence diasporas in plural. In fact, Atay (2015) analysed two other chat rooms on CamQueer where conversations took place only in Turkish. Because the chat rooms attracted Turkish-speaking users based in Turkey and abroad, Atay emphasizes their important role for queer transnational

communication. Other authors too point to the emergence of particular queer diasporas online, for example the Khush email group for queer South Asians and its lesbians- and women-only offshoots SAGrrls and desidykes (Roy, 2003), Queeristan blog also for queer South Asians (Mitra, 2010), E-SAMBAL mailing list for Singaporean and Malaysian lesbians (Yue, 2003), a website for Russian-speaking queers in Israel (Kuntsman, 2007), as well as a network of websites for Chinese-speaking lesbians – ‘a kind of electronic ghost nation’, ‘Lesbian cyber-China’ (Martin, 2009: 296).

Counterpublics

While research on queer diasporas tend to focus on the role of the internet as a safe space, which allows geographically dispersed queers to create online communities, digital cultures can also be conceptualized as counterpublics, providing ‘spaces of withdrawal and regroupment’ (Fraser, 1992: 124) as well as giving a platform to marginalized communities for speaking back to the mainstream culture.

Some works on queer diasporas mentioned in the previous section also discuss such outward-oriented activities. Yue (2003: 258), for one, points out that the E-SAMBAL mailing list included activist announcements about workshops, meetings and fundraisers as well as conference discussions. In a more recent article, Yue (2012) discusses a case of a transgender Malaysian refugee who was refused asylum in Australia but received it in the UK after creating a Facebook group which helped her to reach mainstream media in Malaysia, Australia, and the UK. Roy (2003: 183), too, when writing about South Asian groups based in North America, emphasizes the importance of the internet for organizing events aimed at raising visibility of queer South Asians, first among largely white queer mainstream culture in North America, and then ‘in their parent diasporic communities’.

Yet, the author also warns against the dangers of ‘keyboard activism’ and the problems with credibility and accountability of anonymous online activists (Roy, 2003: 189).

Other researchers record the use of social media by more professionally-organized activists. Dasgupta (2017: 139–143) discusses the use of Facebook and Twitter by activists in India to mobilize ‘queer Indians, the queer India diaspora, queer people of all countries, our supporters, relatives and friends’ for the ‘Global Day of Rage’, a reaction to the 2013 Supreme Court decision to recriminalize queer sexual activities in India. Rodriguez (2016: 329), in turn, looks into the use of Facebook and Twitter by US NGOs working with queer asylum seekers and refugees, pointing out that they mainly connect to other queer NGOs (rather than any other NGOs) which suggests the importance of social media for the accumulation of ‘queer social capital’. Finally, there is a growing body of research on the Undocuqueer Movement, a multi-media project by undocumented queers in the US which includes YouTube videos, Tumblr posts, and street billboards (e.g. Chávez, 2013; Palmeri and Rylander, 2016; Seif, 2014; Serrano, 2017).

Migration Motivations and Acculturation

Moving on to more individual uses of digital media, the internet may play an important role for queers in creating a desire to migrate and in facilitating their migration process. It often works as a safe space for identity work for queers – both non-migrants (e.g. Szulc and Dhoest, 2013) and migrants (e.g. Dhoest, 2016c; Peumans, 2014) – who may explore their desires online relatively anonymously. Queers may also use the internet to search information on the foreign places hailed as ‘queer enclaves’. Omari, who moved from Egypt to San Francisco and participated in Rodriguez’s (2017) research, says: ‘In Egypt, I would search online for pictures and ideas

about the city. I knew it was the only place I wanted to live'. Besides, prospective migrants may use the internet to organize practicalities related to their migration. Cassidy and Wang (2018: 9) show how Chinese men who want to move to Australia use the LINE app to connect to the Chinese queers who are already in the country to ask about, for example, the best airlines to travel to Australia or job prospects for holders of a working holiday visa. Boston (2016), in turn, writes about Polish queers who plan to move or travel to the UK and, because they express particular desire for black men, they use dating sites and apps to establish contacts with them beforehand.

Moreover, the internet proves to be useful for queer migrants to facilitate their acculturation process, that is, the process of gaining social and cultural capital in the host country. Shield (2017) points out that dating sites and apps are used by non-Western queer migrants in Copenhagen (Denmark) not only for romantic or sexual purposes but also for practical ones: to find a job, secure accommodation or practice language skills. Similarly, in the study of Cassidy and Wang (2018), Chinese men who had already moved to Australia used LINE to exchange basic information and organize meetings offline, for example, to go to the movies together. McPhail and Fisher (2015) look into a more privileged group of 'lesbian and gay expatriates' and point out that this group uses social media to find out the level of queer acceptance of their new employer and to connect to queer allies in the new workplace. Finally, Atay (2017) and Dhoest (2018) – also writing about more privileged queer migrants, 'global queer nomads' and 'cosmopolitans' respectively – show how social media gives them the feeling of stability by providing continuous connections despite geographical disparities. These works point to a number of similarities as well as differences between queer migrants of different social class in their uses of digital media for facilitating the migration process.

Context Collapse

Because of its immense popularity, Facebook is a special case of a digital media platform which augments the collapse of social contexts, that is, it requires unified performances of the self for a diverse group of, for example, family members, friends and colleagues (boyd, 2011). Research shows that context collapse may create specific problems for queers generally (Duguay, 2016) and queer migrants particularly (Dhoest, 2016a; Dhoest and Szulc, 2016), especially those who are only partially out. Dhoest and Szulc (2016) point out that the extent to which queer migrants experience context collapse on Facebook strongly relates to their social, cultural and material contexts such as social or economic dependence on family and ethnic community, linguistic proficiency, sense of psychological and physical safety as well as the conditions of internet access. However, queer migrants may also use context collapse to their advantage, for example, to come out across different audiences or to test the waters before coming out. Regarding the latter, Rodriguez (2017) describes a case of an Egyptian gay man in San Francisco who was not out to his family back in Egypt but posted a Facebook comment in support of the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States. Soon after, when his father called him to ask about the comment, he had a chance to talk to him about homosexuality without directly coming out to him.

Still, those queer migrants who prefer to stay in the closet for some of their Facebook friends, employ a number of strategies to prevent context collapse. One such strategy, as discussed by Dhoest (2016a), is to create two Facebook profiles, usually one for family members and another one for queer friends. Some additionally use different browsers to access different Facebook profiles so to avoid an accidental connection of the queer profile with other online services where they log in with their Facebook account (Dhoest and Szulc, 2016: 6). Another strategy is to

compartmentalize the queer self away from Facebook, and to express and act on it only in other online environments, for example on dating sites or apps. Therefore, Dhoest and Szulc (2016) speak of ‘navigating online selves’, emphasizing that queer migrants use different digital media to express different selves for different people (a similar point is made by Cassidy and Wang, 2018).

Homonationalism and Racism

Digital culture may also become a space where queers are co-opted into or become complicit with homonationalism and racism. Discussing the aforementioned case of a transgender Malaysian refugee, Yue (2012: 282) points out that in order to receive asylum, the refugee presented herself on Facebook, and was represented by others in different media, as ‘a victim of an oppressive political and religious regime’, supporting homonationalistic construction of Malaysia. Similarly, Shakhshari (2012) shows how the Iranian diasporic blogosphere, as well as some queer Iranian migrants, promotes exaggerated and highly sensationalized images of homophobia in Iran so to secure their position as experts on democratization of Iran, which translates into receiving greater funds from Western organizations. Kuntsman (2008: 108), in turn, offers an ethnography of a website for Russian-Israelis, arguing that on the website ‘national belonging [to Israel] is claimed through adoration and adoption of Israel’s military violence’, for example in the website’s section entitled ‘Israeli Beauty’ which includes romanticized images of Israeli soldiers (see also Kuntsman, 2008b, 2009).

Additionally, researchers criticize various forms of online racism against queer migrants on dating sites and apps. Drawing on the project with (mainly non-Western) queer migrants in Copenhagen, Shield (2018b) offers a useful typology of online racism, which includes (1) everyday racism

(‘Where are you *really* from?’ type of questions); (2) sexual racism (either positive or negative expressions of sexual preferences based on race, see also Boston, 2016; Ong, 2017; Peumans, 2014); and (3) entitlement racism (e.g. negative stereotypes and blatant insults). Shield (2018a) adds that online racism intersects with other forms of discrimination, especially based on gender and gender expression (e.g. against transgender people and feminine gay men) and body norms (e.g. against people who are not ‘in shape’ or ‘muscled’). Interestingly, some participants in Dhoest’s (2016c) project, non-Western queers in Belgium, point out that they encounter more racism online than offline, suggesting that the strong sense of anonymity online – one of the biggest advantages of the internet for queers (Szulc and Dhoest, 2013) – also provokes more instances of racism. On a more positive note, researchers show how the internet is also used to deal with and fight racism, for example by reading blogs on racism (Peumans, 2014) or posting anti-racist messages in dating profiles, such as ‘Dating based on racial preferences is racist’ and ‘No racist guys pls!’ (Shield, 2017: 255).

Designed Ethnocentrism

Discriminatory norms may also be built in the very design of digital media. Gajjala et al. (2008: 1130–1) ask an important question about ‘how we construct technologies constructing us’, ‘how bodies become marked by the categories of difference—race, gender, geography, literacy, sexuality, physical ability—and marginalized at the expense of sanctioned or encouraged practices’. Gosine (2007: 141) presents a case in point, indicating a change in Gay.com’s interface design between 1998 and 2005 from a free-text box to a menu-driven interface, the latter with predefined identity categories (including race and ethnicity), which leave less room for displacing ‘dominant, colonial narratives of “race”’ – ‘the

tyranny of visibility', as Nakamura (2002: 55) calls such menu-driven identity categorization in interface design. Shield (2018b) makes a cross-cultural comparison of 'ethnicity' categories in different dating apps and notes that differences between the interfaces indicate that (1) ethnicity is indeed a social construct, and (2) interface design reflects the cultural context of the designers. One example Shield (2018b: 93) gives is the category of 'whiteness' encoded as 'white' in a US-based dating app, divided into 'Caucasian' and 'Mediterranean' in a Germany-based app, and crumbled into five categories in a Sweden-based app ('North', 'Western', 'Central', and 'Eastern European' as well as 'Mediterranean' [sic]).

Not rarely, such categorizations of 'ethnicity' remain ethnocentric and one-dimensional: they reflect the values of the hegemonic culture and preclude the possibility of multiple belongings (e.g. Bayramoğlu and Lünenborg, 2018). As one participant in Shield's (2017: 254) project comments on the 'Middle Eastern' category in Grindr: 'It's not like when you're in the Middle East it's one race. But now [here in Denmark] I'm "Middle Eastern"'. Moreover, the very existence of the 'ethnicity' category, and its specific sub-categories, on dating sites and apps can be considered as a manifestation of sexual racism: at the very least, it legitimizes and naturalizes them as important categories for romantic and sexual relationships. As Mowlabocus (2010: 114) explains, 'individual subjectivity is defined against a pre-existing taxonomy and is judged against such classifications'. Boston (2016: 304–5) illustrates that point by showing how some research participants tend to use the pre-defined interface categories for 'ethnicity' casually during their interview and in their dating profiles as well as put the interface categories to use by filtering out profiles based on 'ethnicity', either to discriminate against or favour non-White people. Thus, Western-based but internationally operating dating sites and apps promote through

their interfaces Western understandings and ideals of identity, body, and desires which are often incompatible with non-Western understandings and ideals, and create particular challenges for self-presentation of non-Western queers, including non-Western queer migrants in the West.

TENDENCIES, LIMITATIONS, AND PROPOSITIONS

I will now briefly go back to the three main theoretical frameworks in research on queer migrants (queer theory, intersectionality, and transnationalism) to point out some tendencies and limitations across the prevalent themes in research on queer migrants and digital culture as well as to propose a number of future directions for this research.

Queer theory is somewhat naturally embraced by many works on queer migrants and digital culture. Not all the works directly draw on queer theory to conceptualize queer migrants' identities as multiple, dynamic, and volatile, but by the sheer fact of engaging with the issues of gender and sexuality in migration studies, they all challenge a number of normative assumptions in this respect, albeit in different ways and to a different extent. In general, research on queers and media tends to fall under one of the two dominant models: gay and lesbian 'minority studies' model or queer theory and cultural studies model (Gamson, 2002). I argue that diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches can only be beneficial for research on queer migrants and digital culture. Therefore, my only recommendation in this regard is, much in the queer spirit of deconstructing binaries, to go beyond the dichotomy of normative gay and lesbian (or LGBT) studies versus anti-normative queer theory. As Yep (2003: 46) pointed out in an early discussion on queer theory and media studies, 'sexuality research in communication needs to maintain the productive tension

between the constructive impulses of lesbian and gay studies and the deconstructive impulses in queer/quare theory’.

Intersectionality, too, is relatively often discussed in research on queer migrants and digital culture with a special focus on the intersections of gender and sexual identities with national, ethnic, and race identities. Class, or, more broadly, social position, is either acknowledged (e.g. by Martin, 2009; McPhail and Fisher, 2015; Yue, 2003) or explicitly interrogated, especially by Dhoest (2016b: 174) who differentiates between three categories of research participants: ‘second-generation migrants, who were born in Belgium; sexual refugees, who escaped to Belgium; and voluntary migrants, who chose to move to Belgium’. Religion is also taken up, especially Islam (e.g. Shakhari, 2012) and Judaism (e.g. Kuntsman, 2009) but also, though much more rarely, Buddhism and Taoism (e.g. Dhoest and Szulc, 2016), with the most conspicuous absence of Christianity. At the same time, virtually no scholarship in this area focuses on issues related to age or disability, while gay men and lesbians remain as overrepresented as in other queer studies. To push further the discussion of intersectionality, I suggest paying more attention to Puar’s (2012) discussion of assemblage, which problematizes the stability of intersections in intersectionality theory. Puar’s (2012) understanding of identity as an event, a specific arrangement of different identity positions in a specific situation, encourages researchers to be attentive to which intersections actually matter in which situation – which cars actually crash into each other, to borrow Crenshaw’s (1989) metaphor – rather than decide in advance which intersections to analyse.

Compared to queer theory and intersectionality, transnationalism is less often taken up by research on queer migrants and digital culture. While countries remain the most popular unit of analysis (e.g. Australia in Cassidy and Wang, 2018; Belgium in Dhoest, 2016a, 2016c, 2018; Israel in Kuntsman,

2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009), researchers also analyse other geographical scales, such as cities (e.g. Copenhagen in Shield, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; San Francisco in Rodriguez, 2017) and transnational networks (e.g. for queer South Asians in Roy, 2003). Nevertheless, reflections on the importance of the scales different to country are scarce, as are the discussions of how different scales are imbricated. Besides, the majority of works in this area focuses on migration of queers from the Rest to the West, with a notable exception of Ong (2017) who studies interactions of Western aid workers with local queers in Philippines. Such an overwhelming focus on queer mobility from the Rest to the West, similarly to the focus on rural-to-urban queer migration (Wimark and Östh, 2014), risks naturalizing the West as the most desirable queer destination in the world, in a quite homonationalistic fashion. Finally, I also recommend engaging more with Gorman-Murray’s (2007) proposition to treat the body as a scale of analysis: to follow the actual multiple movements of the body through space rather than fixing it within a simplified narrative of one-off, one-way movement.

CONCLUSION

Digital culture plays a complex role for the experiences of queer migrants. First, it helps queers to create geographically dispersed communities, be it inward-looking imagined diasporas or outward-looking counterpublics. Second, digital culture provides queers with spaces for personal connections, which may create desires to migrate and facilitate the migration process but also collapse different social and cultural contexts where queers may or may not want to reveal their queerness. Third, digital culture is not free from discriminatory practices and normative values – specifically homonationalism, racism, and ethnocentrism but also gender and body norms – which may be enacted by

queers themselves or encoded in the very design of digital media interfaces. My review of the growing body of empirical research on queer migrants and digital culture, presented in this chapter, clearly indicates that this research is fundamental for our understanding of specific opportunities and challenges which digital media create for queer migrants. But the importance of the research extends beyond the narrow area of queer migration. It is indispensable for any migration study that does not want to fall into the trap of heteronormativity as well as for any digital media study that does not want to remain ignorant of particularities of the uneven digital distribution of structures and agencies. Moreover, research on queer migrants and digital culture provides some excellent examples on how to productively combine queer theory with intersectionality and transnationalism so to recognize that all people – be it queer migrants or not – are desiring subjects who navigate complex tangles of identity positions at multiple and interconnected geographical scales.

Note

- 1 This chapter was written within the scope of a post-doctoral fellowship funded by the European Commission's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, grant number: 699745-FACELOOK-MSCA-IF-EF-ST.

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