

Online-Event „En-Gendering Borders: Media and Migration Reframed“

29. April 2022

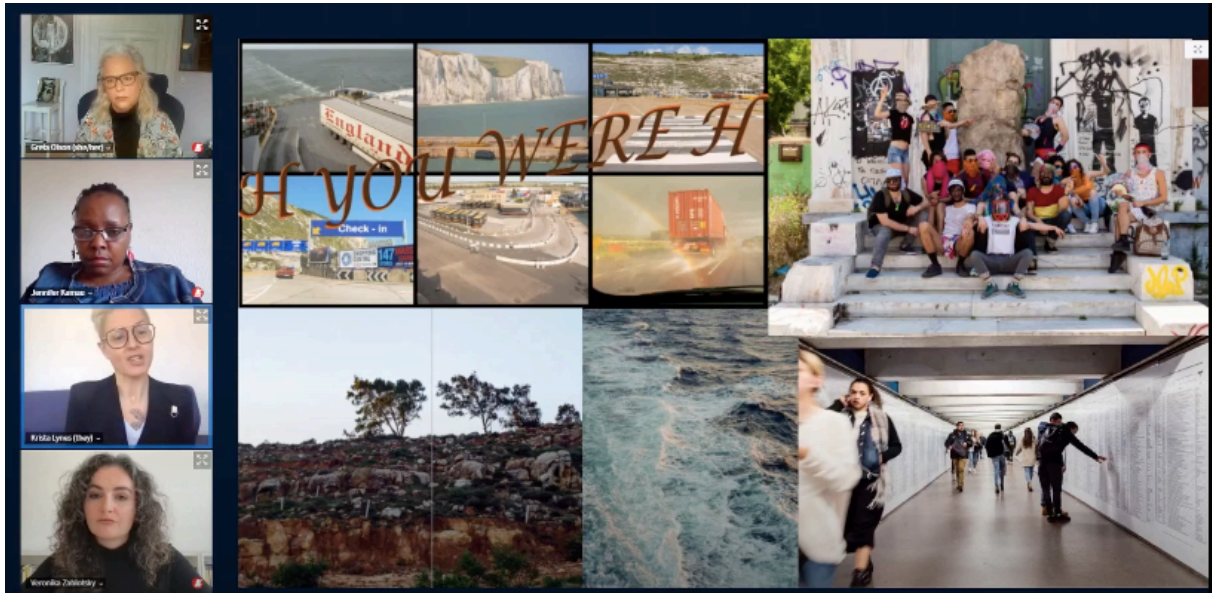
Who gets to feel pain, who is denied those feelings? Who gets to cross borders freely and whose movements are restrained and criminalized? Who is seen to have agency and who is – by default – viewed as either victim or perpetrator? How does US- and Eurocentric Media portray different groups of Refugees through the lens of the spectator, not the involved – and how does it affect us?

These questions were being discussed in the course of the Online-Event “En-Gendering Borders: Media and Migration Reframed” on **April 29th**, which was part of the Lecture Series “Transnational and International Critiques of Power”. Guest Speakers were **Prof. Krista Lynes** (Canada Research Chair in Feminist Media Studies and Associate Professor in Communication Studies at Concordia University, Montréal), **Jennifer Kaumau** (International Women*Space Berlin) and **Prof. Greta Olson** (JLU Giessen). The event was moderated by **Dr. Veronika Zablotsky** (Freie Universität Berlin). It was hosted by the ZMI’s Research Group on “Media and Gender”, the Giessen Graduate Center for Social Science, Business, Economics and Law (GGS) and the chair of Gender Studies at the Institute of Political Science at JLU.

Veronika Zablotsky, convenor and chair of “En-Gendering Borders: Media and Migration Reframed”, and **Dr. Jutta Hergenhan**, executive director of the Center for Media and Interactivity and spokesperson of the research group “Media and Gender”, opened the event. They both underlined the importance of bringing together knowledge created by political activism and academically produced knowledge in the fields of anti-racism and feminism.

Krista Lynes gave an insight into Migrant solidarity movements in the Americas and activist groups centering around Indigenous self-determination as well as the political usage of the word *crisis*. They started by pointing out that they would not use the word *crisis* as a periodizing term, but as a term relating to political operations. They argued that *crises* can be manufactured, and as a response have real effects that are thus lived as *crises*. Those perceived *crises* could then give way for both epistemic and real forms of violence. Lynes concluded this point by drawing attention to critiquing dominant media discourses as a feminist and anti-racist praxis, because those media discourses frequently accompany political decisions leading to discriminatory political actions.

The book “Moving Images: Mediating Migration as Crisis” is the first project of theirs Lynes spoke on. The central idea of this publication is an intersectional anti-racist feminist critique of the so-called Migrant *crisis* in Europe. Initially, the term is critiqued in the manner outlined above, which then leads to a closer look at the emergence of said *crisis* related to longstanding politics of imperial violence and racial capitalism. They stated: “It isn’t a European Migrant crisis, this Europe is a crisis for people on the move.” By then outlining the process of working on “Moving Images”, they gave an example for anti-racist feminist media praxis. Key points to this praxis were to remain in conversation with activist organizations and a firm refusal to reproduce the iconography of *crisis* in the pages of the book. The authors instead consulted with artists and activists whose forms of visual practice were themselves forms of critique.



The second project Lynes recounted is called “Doing Feminism in the Pandemic”, which was a community project centered around the already existing but, with the arrival of Covid, increasing inequalities, which made vulnerable members of the community even more vulnerable. Lynes mentioned that the quarantine protections and isolation were not available to everyone, particularly essential workers, many of them undocumented healthcare workers or people who were working in temporary foreign agricultural labor programs. They pointed out that the pandemic disclosed a sharp divide between people seen as deserving of care and people seen as instrumental in providing it, which then lead to the question what the Feminist Media Studio could do to remain in solidarity with those made vulnerable by the *crisis*.

Jennifer Kamau brought a distinguished activist perspective into the discussion, which connected Refugee activism and anti-racist feminist resistance. The activist collective *International Women*Space*, an organization she co-founded in 2012, pushes back against media framings of Fugitivity and narrates Migrant Womens* lives on their own terms. In 2019 Kamau initiated the “Break Isolation”-Group within IWS, which is a self-organized Refugee Women’s* working group that formed out of the urgent need for political organization by and for Refugee Women* against isolation and discrimination in and out of the German asylum system. The group regularly visits accommodation facilities to connect with and support Women* on the inside. When this work was becoming increasingly impossible due to the pandemic restrictions over the past few years, the group initiated its so-called “Camp Reports” which feature audio messages from Women* on the inside.

She first mentioned that the cause of the IWS’ activism was a direct reaction to the discrimination Migrant Women* were facing in Germany, including the *Residenzpflicht*-law, which made it illegal for Refugees to move between different districts once they had been registered in one. Kamau asked what could possibly justify this jurisdiction apart from Migrants being seen as criminals who have to be kept as prisoners? Secondly, she brought to attention the dehumanizing effects of the Voucher-system with which Refugees could buy food, but only at very specific supermarkets and for a firmly set amount of money. Following this, she recounted the IWS’ demands to be allowed to study the German language and the right to work, which were always accompanied by a continuous resistance against the threat of deportation and the isolation that was forced upon them by having to live in camps.

Kamau, just as Lynes did, pointed out that in her experience, the “Migrant crisis” of 2015 as well as the declaration of the Pandemic as a *crisis* served as an incentive to implement dehumanizing laws against Refugees. She argued that the media portrayal of Migrants played a huge role in this by declaring these very people either victims or criminals – without taking into account that the German asylum system deprived them of their basic human needs and forced them into a position of vulnerability. The IWS, as Kamau summarized it, demands Europe to take accountability for its colonialist history and ongoing exploitation of the countries people are now fleeing from. Lastly, she points out the media coverage and the political as well as societal European response to the *white* Refugees fleeing the Ukraine War and how greatly they differ from responses to former Migration movements.

Greta Olson continued the conversation by drawing attention to Kamau’s latter points. She noted that Ukrainian Migrants seeking shelter in Europe are met with an enormous outreach of generosity and solidarity. Opposed to this, however, she proposed that this is a moment of racism and ethno-sexualization, considering the prominent media discourses concerning former Migration movements.

Her presentation was concerned with looking at images of how the so called European *Migrant crisis* was framed in prominent media discourses. Referencing images from the 2015/2016-period, she pointed out the importance of gender, because her research showed that male Refugees or Refugees gendered as masculine were treated as non-humans in two different ways: they were either depicted as a natural disaster threatening the tranquility of *white* bourgeois Europeans or as criminals, especially as sexual predators, posing a danger to the safety of *white* womanhood.

Images from the 'crisis' (2015/6) 1) Dehumanizing or ethnosexualizing

“Waves of Syrian Refugees in Europe”
<https://www.indystar.com/story/opinion/columnists/varvel/2015/09/16/cartoonist-gary-varvel-waves-syrian-refugees-europe/3249967>

“Rapefugees Not Welcome”
 available at Southern Poverty Law Center
<https://www.splcenter.org/file/12585>

Olson then pointed out that the other kind of most prominent image from the *crisis* and its aftermath were the *Humanitarian Images*, where the object was either a child or a woman or a person gendered as feminine. What those images had in common, she argued, was the impression they evoked: the people were depicted in a way that implicated they had no agency, that they were eternal victims, that they were not able to advocate for their own rights and that they needed a *white* savior. This notion was reinforced further by a tragic

photography that very quickly went viral on social media: “The Death of Alan Kurdi”, obtained from a series of pictures depicting Refugee children lying dead on the beach, made by the Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir. Olson recounted that this image being all over twitter and even newspapers created a huge outcry for the European leaders to change Refugee policy. Ultimately, she stated that those *Humanitarian Images* are regrettably most of all concerned with the *white* European viewer and their feelings.

Lastly Olson, following the previous speakers, drew attention to the great difference between the images from the 2015/2016-period and the now prominent images of Ukrainian Migrants. Citing political scientist Heather Johnson, she called them depictions of *Heroic Migrants* – who are represented favorably, not only *white*, but middle-class, well dressed, and looking like they have agency. Concluding her statement, she argued that a mixture of gender and race in prominent media discourses regarding Migrant movements is being weaponized in racist and sexist ways.

The presentations then sparked a lively debate. For example, Kamau elaborated on the IWS’ work and the importance for Migrant Women* of being the authors of their own stories, because, citing a famous feminist statement, the personal indeed is political. Relating to this, she explained how the IWS has very strict standards for working with researchers, so as to not degrade Migrant Women* to mere objects of research. Answering a question from the audience, the speakers presented their views on the ways in which allyship with Migrants and Migrant Women* can be productive and helpful. Lynes spoke further on racial capitalism and how a de-colonial approach of solidarity could be fruitful. Lastly, Olson concluded her statement by underlining the importance of allyship in the sense of an intersectional approach to the de-colonization and en-gendering of borders.

For further information, the recording of the event can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWXkl2ndt48>.

Report by Carina Müller, June 2022