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Gendering cosmopolitanisms: Hospitality and the asylum seeker Other

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ABSTRACT

Debates about cosmopolitanism have pointed both to its exclusionary character as a problematic child of western modernity, analytically and politically dubious, and to the possibilities offered by the new cosmopolitanisms stressing cosmopolitan practice and ethics. This paper suggests that a gendering of such arguments can add important dimensions to these debates. Exploring the gendered character of the hospitality at the heart of cosmopolitanism's founding arguments, the discussion is grounded in an examination of the situated cosmopolitan hospitality offered by several prominent women-centred asylum seeker and refugee support and advocacy groups in Australia. These groups have created significant spaces of hospitality welcoming "Others," deploying explicitly feminine imaginaries against the counter-cosmopolitanisms of the increasingly securitized and militarized border politics of the Australian state, and xenophobic anti-refugee nationalisms. The situated cosmopolitan hospitality and affective politics of these practices are linked to feminist arguments about political mobilizations of the feminine, especially the maternal, in social movements.

A very elderly man gives a moving account to a conference in Melbourne of his experiences during the evacuation and deportation of Polish Jews to the Soviet Union during World War Two. He recounts how he and his companions were helped and fed by the *babushki*, the Russian peasant "grannies" who took them in on their trek in the snow, often giving them their "last piece of bread." The women, he told us, all alone in their houses with their families' children, "saved us," "the stranger." (The Dr. Jan Randa Aftermath Workshop in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, "The Holocaust and the Soviet Union," Public event at Monash University, Caulfield campus, May 28th, 2015. http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/acjc/dr-jan-randa-workshop-in-holocaust-and-genocide-studies-the-holocaust-and-the-soviet-union/.)

Introduction

As Seyla Benhabib (2006:17) argues, cosmopolitanism has become one of the keywords of our times. Critics, however, point to its many ambiguities, contradictions and exclusions, especially the exclusionary universalisms of neo-Kantian, transcendental models of cosmopolitanism. Against this, the proponents of new cosmopolitanisms make strong arguments for a new ethical cosmopolitanism: rather than denying the legacy of the "old" Enlightenment cosmopolitanism of universalism beyond the local, this aims "to incorporate the Greek and Kantian ideas which first defined cosmopolitanism into a more complex and subtle understanding of what it means to be a cosmopolitan at the turn of the twenty-first century" (Werbner, 2008: 15).

A core issue for this present discussion is the frequent neglect of the gendered character of many forms of cosmopolitanism. As I argued in an earlier piece (Stivens, 2008), the continuing gender absences and silences within the central discussions of cosmopolitanism have been remarkable (see also Reilly, 2011; Vidmar-Horvat, 2013). A gendered reading should have pointed scholars to significant sites for exploring the many meanings of the concept, especially cosmopolitics within feminist movements and the cosmopolitanisms and counter-cosmopolitanisms of affective politics. Much work on cosmopolitanism, however, continues to ignore the illuminating feminist struggles with issues of universalisms, ethnocentrisms, neo-imperialisms and subsequent moves towards ideas of transversal politics, versions of grounded cosmopolitanisms, and an often wary embrace of cosmofeminisms. In particular, it is argued here with some recent feminist philosophy that a gendered rereading of the hospitality at the heart of the founding normative arguments about cosmopolitanisms can add important dimensions to these current debates.

To ground the discussion, I explore the cosmopolitan practices of a number of recently-formed woman-centred asylum seeker support and advocacy groups located in several cities in Australia. Peopled mainly by Anglo-Australians, these groups have been reaching out to refugee and asylum seeker "Others." As a supporter of the social movement in the country working against the asylum seeker detention policies of recent Australian governments, I became aware that a sizeable majority of both the volunteers involved in offering support to refugees

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and of members of several prominent advocacy organizations were in fact women. I am interested in the ways in which these groups' passionate cosmopolitics can be seen to create significant spaces of cosmopolitan hospitality within both the contemporary Australian political assemblage and beyond. I also became intrigued by the adoption of titles by some groups that invoked familial/mothering/grandmothering/kinship tropes. I argue that these groups have been politically deploying explicitly feminine imaginaries within the public against the often equally gendered counter-cosmopolitanisms of state, nationalism and xenophobic politics. Linking the situated cosmopolitan hospitality and the passionate affective politics of these maternalist initiatives and practices to feminist arguments about political mobilizations of the feminine, especially the maternal, in social movements,[1] I argue for the ultimate value of the moral, ethical and political imperatives behind such work. My positionality as an anthropologist should be noted here, recognizing the limits of transdisciplinary intellectual capacity.

"New" cosmopolitanism(s)

The large-scale theoretical contests around cosmopolitanism are not surprising, given the normative weight and political promise of the concept, as Kendall, Woodward, and Skrbis (2009) suggest. But a growing body of critical scholarship has had serious reservations about the concept, seeing it as.an ambiguous and highly contested term, carrying contradictory images and visions – of, for example, cosmopolitanism old and new; cosmopolitanism of the "West" versus cosmopolitanism of the rest; and a cosmopolitanism from above versus a cosmopolitanism from below. Particular critical concerns surround the universalisms of neo-Kantian, transcendental models of cosmopolitanism, and the failures of cosmopolitan humanitarianisms on the global stage (Braidotti, Hanafin, & Blaagaard, 2012; Werbner, 2008; Chouliaraki, 2013; Glick Schiller & Irving, 2015).

As I suggested in my introduction, on the other hand, the proponents of new cosmopolitanisms make strong arguments for a new ethical cosmopolitanism. Whether elite, vernacular or rooted, Werbner (2008) argues:

> Cosmopolitanism has to be grasped as an ethical horizon – an aspirational outlook and mode of practice. Cosmopolitans insist on the human capacity to imagine the world from an Other's perspective, and to imagine the possibility of a borderless world of cultural plurality. (2008: 2).

Werbner (2008:13) makes the important point in considering cosmopolitanism from an anthropological viewpoint that it is always in some sense at least vernacular, historically and spatially positioned and hence also necessarily political, contested [and] dialectical. The conjunctural dialectic between particular and universal is never fully resolved, however (Werbner, 2008: 16, cf. Moore, 2012). It is useful with Glick Schiller and Irving (2015) to propose the importance of experience and practice in theorizing ordinary people's experiences or engagements with diversity and difference (see also Nowicka & Rovisco, 2008). This can range from the most basic "rubbing along" (Watson, 2013; Landau, 2013), to the much more intense engagements discussed here, of people engaging in support and advocacy groups committed to making cosmopolitan space offering hospitality to Others and bringing about social change through cosmopolitan practice.

In thinking about such spaces, a range of conjunctural cosmopolitanisms have been proposed, including "vernacular," "grounded," "rooted," "situated," "subaltern," "ordinary," "mundane," "tactical," "everyday," "discrepant," "working-class," "ethnic" and "ambivalent" cosmopolitanism (Werbner, 2008). While such conjunctures attract some critique, they do seek to capture some of the complexity of practical cosmopolitanisms on the ground, as Henrietta Moore (2012) notes. In my view, they can go some way towards posing new versions of situated ethical cosmopolitanisms which recognize the multiple meanings, dimensions and experiences of cosmopolitanisms. At the same time they need to be fully cognisant of "the limitations, frailties, tensions and possibilities of a situated critical cosmopolitanism" (Glick Schiller & Irving, 2015:4).

Gendering cosmopolitan hospitality

Has the move from an emphasis on normative political philosophical understandings of cosmopolitanism to an emphasis on conjunctural grounded/rooted/situated/vernacular/subaltern/cosmopolitanisms seen a greater interest in gendered accounts? The answer is both yes and no. A growing number of the proponents of such qualified ideas of cosmopolitanisms are concerned to explore intersectional location, including anthropologists, feminists and others. They have moved beyond the image of the mobile travelling – mostly assumed to be male – individual, who is at best an abstract ungendered subject, and at worst, as in many normative theorizings, an unacknowledged male subject. The continuing neglect of gender in much writing on cosmopolitanisms is especially clear in relation to women's movements, however: Werbner (2004) for example has noted that the study of women activists had been "a glaring blind spot" in the new cosmopolitan literature.

It is significant that there has been an ongoing and continuing exclusion of gender from much normative theorizing about cosmopolitanisms, writing located mainly within sociology and political philosophy. As noted, arguments for the usefulness of exploring the gender dimensions of cosmopolitanism(s) pointed to the ongoing gender absences within liberal universalism in general and within discussions of cosmopolitanism in particular (Stivens, 2008, see also Reilly, 2011; Vidmar-Horvat, 2013). Feminist debates about the proper path(s) to gender justice and rights should have offered many lessons for the theoretical, political and moral projects of cosmopolitanisms, but are still too frequently ignored. I point out below, however, that recently some feminist philosophical work on hospitality – the core notion in Kant's (1991) formulations about cosmopolitanism – has addressed issues of gender, engaging in particular with Levinas (1969) and Derrida (2001) on hospitality. Of relevance here, too, is a recent small study directing empirical attention to the gendering of cosmopolitanism among Melbourne informants (Høy-Petersen, Woodward, & Skrbis, 2016).

In my own work I have been particularly interested in the ways in which gendered political action – what some would term agency, but which I want instead to term political effectivity – makes new cosmopolitical spaces. I am also interested in how ideas of the domestic, the intimate and the affective configure cosmopolitan spaces, arguments pioneered by Mica Nava (2007). As I shall show below, such ideas have been elevated in the contemporary Australian political assemblage to the national political level, disrupting public space in interesting ways. During 2013–2014, familial titles were adopted by several groups supporting asylum seekers and refugees, and protesting about their treatment: these names included "Kindred Kindness," "Mums 4 Refugees" and "Grandmothers against Detention of Refugee Children". In all these cases, it has been women who were responsible for creating what I see as highly political cosmopolitan spaces of hospitality.

Recent years have seen a renewed interest in the concept of hospitality and its rich history (Hamington, 2010a, 2010b; Rundell, 2016), spurred on by massive global movements of refugees. As Marguerite La Caze (2004: 313) notes, philosophers, political scientists and cultural theorists have suggested that the concept of cosmopolitanism is not only useful to theorize an ideal relationship between different nations but also to confront the problems faced by asylum seekers and refugees at a time when numbers of displaced people worldwide are now higher than after World War Two. This body of work on hospitality has drawn particular inspiration from the work of (Derrida 2001; Derrida &

[1] See Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) on passionate politics within social movements.

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