Essay

Fungibility at the border: selfies, proxies, and (faux) self-representations in the European border regime

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Abstract: The article argues that the (new) media landscape of the European border regime rehearses colonial and slavocratic tropes often excised from canonical narratives of Fortress Europe, namely the fungibility of the other's body and self. By discussing examples of (feigned) refugee self-representation, I demonstrate how the ostensible oppositionality of race and racial thinking (primitive past) and technology (modern future) fundamentally erodes in the European border regime while contributing to the further erasure of those most harshly targeted by it. The examined self-representations are caught in fungibility as the gaze of the other is circumvented by a proxy, instituting a relation of substitution that inherently depends on the erasure of the racialized subject for the purpose of White enjoyment.

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Introduction

While the 2015 migration event has been repetitively named a crisis and a rupture in the status quo of the political order, some scholars insisted that what we are witnessing today is less a moment of exception but the continuation of racialized violence that formed part of Europe's ongoing encounter with the world that it created through more than 500 years of Empire, colonial conquest and enslavement. Although often disarticulated from contemporary inequalities shaping the European border regime today, some scholars fervently insisted that migration and displacement are the historical products of the aftermath of European colonialism, including the North-South relationship and its colonial legacy, and that the majority of migrants seeking asylum in Europe are coming from countries that until recently were under colonial rule (Bhambra, 2017; Broeck & Saucier, 2016; Danewid, 2017; Hegde, 2016; Khiabany, 2016; Ponzanesi & Blaagaard, 2011; Saucier & Woods, 2014; Zaccaria, 2015). Taking the postcolonial condition of the European border regime as imperative starting point, this essay brings into play a theme often disarticulated from the colonial legacies reverberating through contemporary European borderlands: refugees' smartphone practices, including digital (self-)representations and their representation in the broader media landscape of the European border regime. By a border regime I mean a set of rules, current and historical procedures that control people's ability to move and live. I will argue that these representations rehearse colonial and slavocratic tropes that were distinctly engrained in historical contexts often excised from canonical narratives of Fortress Europe, namely the fungibility of the other's body and self. By discussing examples of (feigned) refugee self-representation, I will show how the ostensible oppositionality of race and racial thinking (primitive past) and technology (modern future) fundamentally erodes in the European border regime while contributing to the further erasure of those most harshly targeted by it.

Border selfies

In 2015, when the event that commonly became known as the "European refugee crisis" began to emerge on the European and international media landscape, a picture of a Syrian refugee emerged as she snapped a selfie on the shores of the Greek island of Kos after having crossed the Aegean Sea from Turkey with her family. Still wearing her orange life jacket, the woman smiles exhausted into the camera while behind her we see the remains of the perilous sea crossing: the rubber dinghy, emptied by volunteers or her family members and red lifebelts thrown into the sea, now dismissed of their service after the family's safe arrival. While the woman's name in the picture remains unknown, the snapshot of her moment of arrival circulated online and promptly became a meme in anti-refugee groups. Its caption read: "NOTHING SAYS TRAUMATISED REFUGEE LIKE A GRINNING SELFIE TOOK [sic] ON THE LATEST SAMSUNG MOBILE PHONE" (Glaze, 2018). Right-wing and other anti-refugee groups commonly associate possessing a

smartphone with financial wellbeing and use this argument to claim that those portrayed are "economic migrants" rather than victims of war. In this meme and similar anti-refugee narratives, what is discredited are not only technological gadgets as indicators of wealth but the social capital assumed to come with self-representation. To make use of self-representation and to give away the face for digital circulation voluntarily seems to come with social privilege reserved for some, but not all.

Parallel to the right-wing discourse denouncing refugees' engagement with social media, refugees' digital traces and self-representations have, at the same time, fascinated spectators from the Global North, and media often portray refugees' smartphone and selfie practices in a positive light (Nikunen, 2019; Risam, 2018). These mediated stories and images make the complex of flight and displacement more consumable and cast it within the familiar screen design of platforms well known to us. The media event of Abdou Diouf, a fake Instagram refugee, is a case in point here because it hyperbolizes the rhetoric and aesthetics commonly associated with the social media platform to a point where only hyperbole remains, thus revealing the visual-digital scaffold undergirding self-representations and the truth claims attached to them. The Senegalese refugee posted a host of pictures on Instagram, charting his apparent attempt to illegally travel from Dakar to Spain to start a new life. His photos adopted a typical Instagram style and consisted almost entirely of Diouf posting selfies with #food or wrapped in a golden emergency space blanket (#fashion). Towards the end of his trip, Diouf accumulated almost 8000 followers, but his stories were soon denounced as the hoax of a film festival that created his persona as part of their press campaign (Broderick & Dehesdin, 2015). The media stunt is, of course, detrimental as it feeds into a media architecture that not merely proliferates fake content but provides ample space to voices questioning and delegitimizing the reality and precariousness of flight and the refugee experience. At the same time, what Diouf's digital performance illustrates is the instrumental function of social media tools to narrate and curate reality. These tools are put into the service of truth-telling and pertain to the "regime of veridiction" (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 36), along with the crucial status that the refugee selfie attained in a relatively short time, for it has become ready for persiflage.

The above selfies surface against a slew of other refugee selfies produced in the context of the European border crisis that has been dubbed the first event of large-scale displacement in an age of ubiquitous smartphone usage. While these self-representations might be used as evidence for the undeservingness of refugees, as seen in the arrival photograph of the unknown Syrian woman, Anna Carastathis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi (2020, p. 132) rightly remark that these same visual products are also used to secure claims of the sameness of refugees, particularly of young, urban people who, by taking selfies, participate in a transnationally legible cultural practice which allows European publics to identify with an assimilable Other. While the selfie has become a "recurrent media genre for the representation of migrants and refugees," (Chouliaraki, 2017, p. 4) Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi justifiably contest the notion that self-representation through portraiture necessarily interrupts the visual economy through which refugees are reproduced as objects of

humanitarian, documentary, administrative, sociolegal and other hegemonic gazes. Indeed, scholars have been profoundly critical of these circulating self-representations and have, for example, shown how selfies taken with refugees on the shores of Lesvos to power NGO crowdfunding campaigns "place the refugee body at the center of value extraction processes." (Franck, 2018, p. 13) Similarly, Roopika Risam (2018, p. 15) characterizes the "co-optation" of selfie-taking by refugees as "high-tech Orientalism", arguing that those selfies circulating in the media portray refugees taking selfies—rather than the selfies themselves, thereby denying both self-representation and agency to refugees. Also in the arrival selfie, the triangular constellation assembles spectator, selfie taker, and the machinic gaze of the smartphone, but it denies "the right to look back" (Mirzoeff, 2011). The spectator is not confronted with the other's gaze, and the other is not allowed to circulate her gaze directly facing the spectators. The right to look back is interrupted by the proxy of the photographer. In the case of the fake Instagram refugee, the refugee persona is literally substituted with those who have curated the hoax.

The fungible refugee body

The word proxy captures the offhand, unthinking and default manner in which race often influences decision making. Race can act as a proxy for a long list of characteristics, qualities and statuses such as criminal deviance and racial profiling in law enforcement. In the above examples, self-representations are caught in the structure of substitution, the right to look is interrupted or denied as the gaze is circumvented by a proxy or someone assuming the position of the "other". I understand this violent moment of substitution as fungibility which is one of seven dimensions that, according to Martha Nussbaum (1995) constitute objectification: along with instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertia, violability, property, and the denial of subjectivity, fungibility means that the object is interchangeable with other objects in the same category. In economics, fungibility is the property of a good or a commodity whose individual units are essentially interchangeable and each of whose parts is indistinguishable from another part, referring to the equivalence and indistinguishability of each unit of a commodity with other units of the same commodity. To be fungible, in both its economic and legal meanings, is to have all distinctive characteristics and content hollowed-out. It is a relationship of equity that requires a purely formal semblance. Afro-pessimists have described fungibility as a violence-effect that marks the difference between Black positionality and white positionality, and as Saidiya Hartman (1997) makes clear, the difference in positionality essentially marks a difference between capacities of speech. The violence-induced fungibility of Blackness allows for its appropriation by white psyches as "property of enjoyment" (Hartman, 1997, p. 23) which tends to the term's etymological roots in late 17th century medieval Latin, from fungi 'perform, enjoy' with the same sense as fungi vice 'serve in place of.' More recently, the concept has provided an apt framework to make sense of digital blackfacing which, in short, is the act of inhabiting a Black persona in virtual digital space that some have

understood as the painful legacy of Black minstrelsy developed in the early 19th century (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2020).

Fungibility is also that property which inaugurates white empathy toward Black suffering, allowing a white subject to inhabit multiple sites of suffering. In "Ex Aqua: The Mediterranean Basin, Africans on the Move, and the Politics of Policing" P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods (2014, p. 67) identify fungibility in the European border regime when discussing how an Italian commentator compared the public stripping and high-pressure hose washing of African detainees on Lampedusa to the Italian immigrant experience on Ellis Island in the late nineteenth century. "Although not nearly as demeaning as what the refugees in Lampedusa undergo on a regular basis," the commentor states, "we were humiliated by, and decried, the primitive physical examinations intended to discover which infectious diseases we were carrying. Only, at the time, it was easier to be outraged as we were the victims" (quoted from Saucier & Woods, 2014, p. 67). For Saucier and Woods (2014), this effort to identify with "the captive African," the migrant held in EU detention spaces, turns in on itself "because rather than feel what it means to be left to drown within sight of the European coast, over and over again, the Italian commentator instead begins to feel for himself, or for his national kin" (p.67). The comparison with the immigration experience on Ellis Island inserts a white body into a Black or Brown position in order to make the suffering legitimate. The white gaze becomes a proxy for Black suffering, Black suffering is deemed impossible as suffering is a quality attached to a white body.

The structure of substitution is present in a media film produced by BBC Media Action with the stated goal to raise awareness of refugees' communication issues in transit (BBC Media Centre, 2016). Your phone is now a refugee's phone asks spectators to watch the clip vertically on their mobile phones, an attempt to render the spectator's phone as if it were the refugee's phone. "If you had to flee your country," the screen asks, "what's the one piece of technology you'd take with you?" Spectators, now confronted with a simulated refugee smartphone-frame, watch their phones running out of battery, are unable to connect ("Could not activate cellular data network"), and receive messages from family members (Dad: "Where r u?"). The BBC clip frames the lack of technology and communication during migrant journeys as the real problem, instilling a techno-rational imperative suggesting that "more" technology is the life-saving ingredient missing in migrant journeys. Scholars, however, have shown that refugees' "digital passage" to Europe is profoundly ambivalent (Gillespie et al., 2018; Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2018; 2014). On the one hand, smartphones present important lifelines as they facilitate planning, navigating, and "communication rights" (Leurs, 2017). On the other, online surveillance practices render refugee journeys more dangerous as travelers strive to remain invisible to gatekeepers, and surveillance continues after arrival in Europe, prompting many migrants to "clean" their online profiles (Latonero & Kift, 2018). What we, as spectators, are consuming with "Your phone is now a refugee's phone" is the refugee experience as a spectacle of potential death, and a precarious life that

inherently depends on the smartphone as a crucial lifeline during flight. While the short film promises "immediacy" (BBC Media Centre, 2016) and proximity to the refugee experience, it iterates a structure of substitution, also common to the phenomenon of the substituted gaze in the refugee selfie. Asking the spectator to "be" the refugee and look into the smartphone "as if" they were the refugee, the refugee body is––in my case––substituted with the white spectator-body––a relation of substitution that inherently depends on the erasure of the racialized subject for the purpose of white enjoyment. In the case of Your phone is now a refugee's phone, the other is both replaced with the phone-device and the white spectator taking the refugee's place. The racist structure of this "fetishism of representation" (Fanon, 1986, p. 169) promises to create a place where fantasy becomes real, fantasy, here, of feeling and experiencing like the other. The other, however, can only emerge as projected image or text, and projection takes place only to the extent our fear of being exposed to the stereotypical other allows it. Fanon (1986, pp. 169–170) finds dozens of examples of this fetishistic substitution, in whose attachments the other (the Black man, in Fanon's case) remains both tantalizing and frightening, and he famously claimed that the structure of racial fetishization eclipses the Black man only to become a "member," that is, a penis. The parallel between phobia and fetishism Fanon outlined surfaces again on the screen-device that can only create the fantasy of proximity and experiencing like the other by making her a proxy. She is both replaced by the phone-device (Fanon's proclaimed "member") and the spectator-subject, becoming diminished for white infotainment. This violence of repudiation is also characteristic for the media architecture of refugee (self-)representations in the European border regime. It facilitates the denial of the right to look back and, by suspending the other and rendering them fungible, evokes the structure of feeling of compassion and white empathy rather than the call to political struggle.

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