They come to steal our women and our jobs: Migrants, marriage, and national belonging in South Africa

This talk analyzes the ways that relationships between South African women “stolen” by foreign husbands illuminate the intertwining of intimacy and national belonging in South Africa. Since South Africa’s democratic transition in 1994, the country has shifted from producing to receiving refugees, most of whom hail from the rest of the African continent. From 2006-2012, the new democracy received the highest number of asylum seekers of any country in the world. Amidst high unemployment levels and deepening inequality, foreigners have become scapegoats for the economic and political ills of the country. Violent attacks on migrants in 2008 and 2015 were flash points amid persistent tensions manifested in daily acts of discrimination and the refrain that foreigners “come to steal our jobs and our women.” In a context where poverty thwarts socially coveted marriages, non-nationals’ employment and marriage to South African women is a clear source of frustration and jealousy. However, more is at issue than simply work and weddings. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2015 with mothers in Durban, South Africa, this talk argues that unions with foreign husbands afford South African women the status of full social adulthood and national belonging unavailable in domestic couplings. Counter-intuitively, by marrying foreigner men, South African women achieve a fuller form of citizenship than what is available to their local male counterparts. Yet, the security and status change women gain in these trans-national marriages comes at the price of other forms of marginalization and insecurity.

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