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# Feminist periscoping in research on border enforcement and human rights

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## ABSTRACT

Border and immigration enforcement is a key contemporary site for human rights concerns. The policies and practices of enforcement are notoriously difficult to research. In our work as feminist political geographers of immigration and border enforcement, we have repeatedly navigated methodological challenges in our attempts to understand how border enforcement policies emerge and play out in ways that infringe on the human rights of migrants and other marginalized populations. In this article, we explore feminist periscoping, a methodological approach developed by feminist geographer Nancy Hiemstra, which we have employed in our own efforts to understand the policies and practices of contemporary border and immigration enforcement and their impact on human rights. As a distinctly feminist and geographic methodological approach, feminist periscoping is useful for studying a broad range of difficult-to-access sites and processes.

## Introduction

Contemporary border and immigration enforcement efforts have been linked to human rights abuses throughout the world. The militarization and securitization of national borders, spaces of transit and waiting, and detention centers have been tied to dramatic increases in migrant mortality rates, sexual and gender-based violence, kidnappings and extortions, and mental and emotional trauma (e.g., Falcon 2001; Dunn 2009; Staudt, Payan, and Kruszewski 2009; Nevins 2010; Lind and Williams 2013; Mountz and Loyd 2014; Slack, Martínez, Lee, and Whiteford 2016). Although this reality raises a number of important research questions and topical *foci* for human rights researchers, border and immigration enforcement policies and practices are notoriously difficult to research (Belcher and Martin 2013; Hiemstra 2017). This is particularly the case in the contemporary era, in which border enforcement is discursively framed and institutionally positioned as a security issue that justifies systems of obfuscation and secrecy (Belcher and Martin 2013).

In our work as feminist political geographers of immigration and border enforcement, we have repeatedly navigated methodological challenges in our attempts to understand how border enforcement policies emerge and play out in ways that infringe on the human rights of migrants and other marginalized populations. Here, we build on the concept of *feminist periscoping*, a methodological approach developed by feminist geographer Nancy Hiemstra, and discuss how we have employed it in our efforts to understand the policies and practices of contemporary border and immigration enforcement and their impact on human rights. Our experiences with this methodological approach involve research on border and immigration enforcement; however,

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feminist periscoping—as a distinctly feminist and geographic methodological approach—is useful for studying a broad range of difficult to access sites and processes.

## **Feminist political geography and periscoping as feminist method**

Feminist political geography emerged as a geographic subfield in the late twentieth century as a reparative critique of the way in which geographers tended to identify and examine political issues and process (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004; Massaro and Williams 2013). As part of the larger cultural turn in geography, feminist political geographers pointed to the narrow way in which politics was conceptualized within the field of geography more broadly. They highlighted the marginalization of feminine subjects and spaces in examinations of the spatiality of political processes, in particular. Instead, feminist political geographers argued that the intimate sites of the body, home, and community are deeply political and worthy of investigation. Since the 1990s, intersectional feminist theory and research has compelled the expansion of the subfield beyond “women” and “gender,” to explore the way power relations emerge and are negotiated and contested over and through space, in ways that (re)produce particular forms of subjectivity and differential access to power and resources (Coddington 2015; Mollett and Faria 2018; Faria, Massaro, and Williams 2020).

Methodologically, feminist political geographers call attention to the scalar implications of our research methods and approaches. In particular, feminist political geography challenges top-down analyses of state power and highlights the analytical and epistemological utility of embodied and situated methods. In practice, this approach often manifests in the use of robust qualitative (e.g., ethnography, interviews, focus groups) and visual (e.g., participatory mapping, feminist GIS) methods, through which individual, subjective experiences can be understood in their spatial context.

Feminist periscoping emerged as a distinctly feminist geographic method in order to overcome the challenges associated with engaging in research on difficult-to-access subjects and spaces. Coined by feminist political geographer Nancy Hiemstra, feminist periscoping is an approach to research that “aims to reveal systems, processes, and experiences typically out of view that have previously been left uninterrogated due to lack of access or awareness” (Hiemstra 2017: 332). Just as a periscope uses a careful arrangement of mirrors and prisms to allow the viewer to see things out of a direct line of site, researchers can use this methodological approach to assemble a variety of lenses (i.e., methods and research *foci*) to acquire a coherent picture of a process or practice.

Researchers use a multitude of methods (e.g., interviews, discourse analysis, policy analysis, visualization) and engage in an ongoing process of iterative methodological development as new points of access become available. As Hiemstra (2017: 330) wrote, “a strategy of the periscope entails pursuing the fragmentary present by honing in on specters of obscured spaces that escape full containment.” By mobilizing different methods of data collection, different aspects of the phenomena under study become visible, allowing us to piece together a more robust understanding than any individual method would allow.

Moreover, periscoping highlights the masculinized frameworks under which much social science fieldwork operates. Within geography, Mona Domosh’s (1997) critique of masculinist fieldwork revealed a discipline that relied heavily on a “muddy boots” research tradition, grounded in “long-duration, exploratory fieldwork in faraway places” (Lahiri-Dutt 2019: 865) that prioritized access to geographic sites. Such access was historically and continues to be deeply gendered, racialized, and otherwise unevenly available. Rigor in geographic fieldwork often implicitly relied on the ability to “get in” to faraway places, social networks, or closed sites (Maillet, Mountz, and Williams 2017: 931).

Periscoping, on the other hand, draws from feminist traditions rejecting the assumed objectivity of the researcher who “got in,” implying instead that *all* knowledge is partial, incomplete, and

influenced by the situated positioning of the researcher. The mirrors and prisms never fully capture the object of study, and the researcher never truly “gets in.” Feminist periscoping explicitly and intentionally foregrounds the always limited nature of knowledge production rather than assuming the possibility of or aspiring to a god’s eye view (Haraway 1988).

Similar to the long-accepted framework of triangulation, feminist periscoping brings together multiple datasets in order to create a broad and cohesive understanding of the topic of study while at the same time adopting the epistemological position of feminist scholars that recognizes the always partial and situated nature of knowledge. Synthesizing multiple methods not only provides depth to the research but also encourages the interaction of different types of data and allows for the gaps and absences in the data to be understood in context (Valentine, Butler, and Skelton 2001; Hiemstra 2017). Synthesis of the various data types collected ensures that conclusions are both strong and rigorous, as it allows important crosscutting themes to emerge and inconsistencies to be noted (Valentine et al. 2001).

Feminist periscoping is distinct from other forms of methodological triangulation in that it is less about using multiple data sources to assess the validity of research findings and more about using various methods simultaneously to “see” different aspects of a phenomena in order to piece together a more complex understanding. Similar to Bosma, de Goede, and Pallister-Wilkins’s (2020) notion of “encircling,” feminist periscoping is about constructing a complex collage of the possible, while acknowledging that a complete picture will never fully emerge. As Bosma et al. (2020: 14) wrote, encircling is “less focused on uncovering the kernel of the secret, than it is on analyzing the mundane lifeworlds of security practices and practitioners that are powerfully structured through codes and rites of secrecy.” Periscoping similarly sheds light on pieces of the desired data set, while also making visible the prisms and mirrors necessary to “see” these data—and the research practitioner doing the seeing. This methodological approach recognizes that extensive data sets may not be obtainable, but that the practice of making visible the search for data also sheds light on other valuable and often concealed practices, strategies, and relations.

Feminist periscoping is a distinctly geographic and feminist methodological approach in that it uses the metaphor of the periscope to draw attention to the situated and spatial nature of knowledge production and research. The periscope foregrounds the constraints to access. Using the periscope therefore calls attention to the obfuscation of knowledge, forcing researchers to ask the question posted by Bosma, de Goede, and Pallister-Wilkins (2020: 3): “what does become possible if we take barriers of secrecy as objects of study?”

Revealed by the periscope are the barriers, containment, and secrecy the researcher must navigate, as well as the embodied positionality of the researcher: For whom are these barriers permeable? Periscoping can be a means of understanding the sought-after data, but it can also reveal strategies of sovereign power and social relations (Belcher and Martin 2013) or the entanglements of the researcher. This is what Bosma et al. (2020: 10) referred to as the relational understanding of secrecy, that “what becomes important to understand about the secret is less its hiding per se, and more the way in which it structures social relations, regulates communication, and distributes political power.”

Feminist periscoping draws on and contributes to research and *praxis* aimed at dismantling inequitable power relations by unearthing and exposing the structures that ungird inequality and oppressive practices. Rather than abandoning the study of difficult-to-access topics or research sites, feminist periscoping gives researchers a methodological framework through which partial views can be merged to create a robust understanding.

## **Feminist periscoping in practice**

We have used feminist periscoping in research on the human rights implications of border and immigration enforcement in a number of different geographic sites, including the United States,

Australia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. All of these sites present unique challenges when trying to understand state policies and practices, due to both intentional and unintentional practices of obfuscation. In this section, we offer concrete examples of periscoping carried out in two research contexts. We demonstrate how this approach has helped us negotiate the challenges of doing research on the human rights implications of border and immigration enforcement. In the following two sections, each of use will speak individually of our own research experiences. Finally, we will discuss the additional research insights that periscoping reveals.

### ***Jill Williams's research at the US–Mexican border***

In my analysis of state responses to migrant deaths along the US–Mexico border, I wanted to understand how state actors and agencies understood and responded to migrant deaths in discourse, policy, and practice. Since the late 1990s, Southern Arizona had become the epicenter of migrant deaths, as border militarization concentrated in urban areas funneled migrants into the remote deserts and mountains of Southern Arizona. Although the exponential increase of migrant deaths had been tied to enforcement policies, we knew little about how the rise in deaths had been interpreted by the Border Patrol and influenced state policies. In turn, my project worked across scales to explore how policies and practices changed from the institutional scale to the scale of the individual border enforcement agent and the migrants they interacted with. Although the project always intended to use multiple methods—e.g., interviews, surveys, discourse, and policy analysis—unexpected challenges emerged requiring a periscoping approach.

During the initial stages of the research, public relations personnel from the Tucson Sector of the US Customs and Border Patrol were supportive of the project and committed to providing access to Border Patrol agents and supervisory personnel. However, access was unexpectedly denied once data collection was ready to begin (this type of reversal is not uncommon within the US Border Patrol).

However, as Hiemstra (2017) reminded us, even subjects and spaces that are intentionally obscured can never be fully contained. Within the context of US border enforcement operations, information seeps out and opportunities arise as enforcement often takes places in public (although often difficult-to-access) spaces, individuals involved resist attempts to silence them, and institutional inconsistency provides unexpected spaces of access.

A broad network of interviewees was constructed in order to create a system of mirrors and prisms capable of understanding the paradoxical ways the state responded to migrant deaths discursively and in practice. These prisms and mirrors also help reveal the larger institutional, political, and cultural context(s) in which these policies and practices emerged. Interviews with humanitarian aid workers, for example, provided an opportunity to understand how Border Patrol policies related to sick and injured migrants were put into practice on the ground and in times of crisis. The nature of Border Patrol operations and practices—which often require individual agents to go on patrol alone and in remote, sparsely populated areas—provides much room for inconsistency and variability in the space between policy and practice. Humanitarian aid workers thus served as a prism through which to “see” these inconsistencies of border patrol policies and to discern their wider implications.

Interviews with current and retired Border Patrol agents—obtained outside of the direct purview of the agency, through personal connections and via solicitations on privately run online forums for agents—provided additional insight into how institutional culture and policies have shifted over time, along with insight on the “why” of how policies were put into practice. Such insights were crucial when trying to understand how policies had shifted and changed over time: Retired agents were able to speak to these shifts in a way that current public relations personnel within the agency were not. This information served as an additional set of prisms and mirrors

that complicated (and sometimes tempered) the perspectives provided by humanitarian aid workers. Through interviews with diverse actors, I was able to piece together a complex understanding of how the provisioning of humanitarian aid was increasingly regulated in the borderlands, with negative consequences for migrants' ability to access medical assistance without the risk of subsequent detention and deportation (Williams 2015).

In addition to interviews and participant observation, data requests to individual Border Patrol sector offices and filed via US Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to the Customs and Border Protection Agency, yielded insights into shifting institutional practices for regulating and documenting migrant rescues. These data were crucial for understanding the grey area between arrests and rescues that is central to the humanitarianization of border enforcement. The data were also necessary to interpret the related implications for migrant human rights. Obtaining institutional data in a timely fashion required flexibility, creativity, and persistence—in other words, the continual repositioning of the periscope.

The US-Mexico border is broken into nine geographically determined sectors of responsibility, each operating with a degree of autonomy and having different relationships with the public, migrant advocacy organizations, and researchers. Although the Tucson Sector was the geographic site of my research, I quickly realized that information requests to the Tucson Sector were quickly denied, whereas other sectors were much more willing to fill information requests. Just as a submarine operator might reposition his or her periscope to gain a different line of sight, I began shifting requests from Sector to Sector in order to find those that were most accommodating. For example, when trying to obtain basic figures on the number of migrant rescues conducted in a particular time period, I was told by the public relations representative in the Tucson Sector that I would have to file an FOIA request to obtain that information. A call to another sector, minutes later, resulted in the information being immediately released without question. The inconsistency that permeates border enforcement agencies demands flexibility and adaptability from the researcher.

By combining the data obtained through interviews, participant observation, and institutional data requests, I was able to create a system of prisms and mirrors that allowed me to “see” the system through which state policies shifted in response to migrant deaths and the (un)intended impacts these shifts had as they were put into practice. Moreover, this approach—in all its partiality, inconsistency, and complexity—exposed the paradoxical and inconsistent way in which policies were put into practice. The inconsistency itself was a key phenomenon crucial to interpreting the human rights implications of these policies: It enabled me to make sense of shifts in state practices in a way that sheds light more broadly on how the seeming humanitarianization of border enforcement functions to shrink the spaces of care available to migrants.

### ***Kate Coddington's research in Thailand***

Meanwhile, I also encountered constraints to research about asylum seekers in a very different context. Since the 1980s, Thailand has been a regional migration hub. More than 100,000 refugees have crossed the Thai–Myanmar border, and Thailand has also been the destination for a small, diverse group of urban asylum seekers who have fled Pakistan and countries in East Africa. Previous research in Australia and Indonesia had indicated that regional efforts to curb asylum in the Asia-Pacific region were increasingly affecting migrants moving through transit countries like Thailand. My aim was to learn more about the urban asylum seekers who were settled (either temporarily or permanently) in places like Bangkok. Thailand, however, is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees; particularly since the 2014 *coup d'état* and the rise to power of General Prayut Chan-o-cha, advocates in the country have been increasingly concerned about calling attention to human rights issues in Thailand.

I needed an official government research visa to carry out my 2015 field research in Bangkok. My partner institution, working with me on the documentation, gave me strict instructions: Talk about migration trends rather than refugees. Nevertheless, research permissions were granted with the stipulation that I could do research, but I was not permitted to speak with asylum seekers.

This requirement clearly presented a challenge, and my first step was to pivot to a wider selection of people to interview. In addition to advocates and nongovernmental employees who worked with asylum seekers, I also began attempting to interview a larger group of policymakers, including people involved in advocating for different human rights issues (including human trafficking and child labor concerns). I was prohibited from obtaining information from asylum seekers, so I began to learn much more about the constraints placed on advocates and the strategies used by the Thai authorities to muzzle human rights concerns, including arbitrary and *ad hoc* policy changes (Coddington 2018) and erratic enforcement that kept advocates preoccupied with responding to each unfolding crisis (Coddington 2020). Using a feminist periscope clarified some of my interview responses while also highlighting the barriers to knowledge manifest in authoritarian spaces.

For instance, several interviews with knowledgeable regional migration scholars inexplicably pivoted to minimizing or denying altogether an ongoing regional migration crisis involving the Rohingya population fleeing persecution within Myanmar. In the summer of 2015, as I was conducting field research in Bangkok, Rohingya migrants were sailing across the Andaman Sea, seeking the tacit protection of Malaysia. Yet many of my interview respondents explained away the crisis as a manufactured photo opportunity. I began to see this outright lie as a way of understanding the burden that scholars in Thailand faced: Compliance with this clearly false narrative functioned as a release valve for the pressure related to tensions about migration more broadly. Denying the Rohingya crisis may have allowed Thai scholars leeway to investigate other human rights issues related to migration, thus making visible some of the unstated pressures Thai academics faced within their national context. The pivot to related topics exposed the barriers to knowledge production, part of the constrained context that necessitated my use of the periscope.

Finally, the barriers to research also helped frame another element of the research process. On August 17, 2015, after a busy day crisscrossing Bangkok's skytrains and meeting several people for interviews, I came back to my lodgings to discover that the Erawan Shrine in central Bangkok (which I had passed several times a day) had been bombed. Frantic rumors bombarded Twitter as Bangkok's residents tried to understand what had happened and to assess danger. Uncertain of how to proceed in a now-violent research context (Brigden and Hallet 2020), I canceled several interviews and continued with others haphazardly. Although Thailand has never made public information about the cause of the bombing, the most consistent story frames the event as an attempt by Uigher nationalists to retaliate for the return (*refoulement*) of more than 100 Uigher asylum seekers to China, making explicit the stakes of those seeking asylum in Thailand.

I began research in Thailand with the pivot away from direct interactions with asylum seekers, but I broadened the project's focus yet again after the bombing. The need for the feminist periscope, combined with the secrecy made visible by the periscope, enabled me to construct a fuller account of the dangerous human rights context in Thailand faced by asylum seekers and their advocates. The process of feminist periscoping increasingly made clear the riskiness of asking questions about asylum: It illuminated not only the context in which asylum seekers attempt to survive in Bangkok but also the precariousness of human rights research opportunities that involve asking questions about refugees' lives.

## Conclusions

Feminist periscoping allows researchers to bring together multiple, partial perspectives to better understand human rights issues such as migration and asylum seeking. Through a combination



of mirrors and lenses, the periscope bridges barriers that constrain knowledge about human rights issues, and in so doing makes visible the constraints themselves. Research from our comparative field contexts illustrates the different uses of feminist periscoping within the context of qualitative field work. At the US–Mexico border, periscoping demonstrated the utility of a multipronged research strategy, illustrating how data are differently constrained in different contexts. Meanwhile, in the Thai context, periscoping made visible the barriers to knowledge and the wider context within which research occurs.

Periscoping clearly has limitations. This methodology makes sense when data sets become obstructed in some way and access is no longer straightforward, so it begins from the standpoint that data collection will be partial, incomplete, and constantly evolving—not always the assumptions behind data collection in the social sciences. As Hiemstra (2017) noted, ethical issues can also emerge from prioritizing certain groups of participants over others. For instance, in our projects, we each differently interpreted the veracity of claims made by border enforcement officials compared with migrant advocates, an ethical and political decision that framed our research findings in many ways. The political imperatives that underscore such decisions, Hiemstra (2017: 334) wrote, are part of the explicitly feminist intentions of this methodology: “[I]t cannot be said that triangulation and mixed methods approaches by definition aim to disrupt. In contrast, liberatory, feminist goals are inextricable from a periscoping approach.”

We envision periscoping as a method of stretching taken-for-granted boundaries between what is accessible and available and what remains hidden. In both of our examples, the research datasets that emerged were not comprehensive or objectively complete. Rather, periscoping allowed a richer, deeper context to emerge, one that contextualized research within wider perspectives and generates multiple views of the same phenomena. Each slightly different angle revealed slightly different understandings of sovereignty, border enforcement, and the status of asylum.

We have come to believe that the multiple lenses and prisms together reveal a richer collage of research data—data that tell us not only about migrants and asylum seekers and their experiences but also about the layers of often-hidden enforcement and secrecy that conceal these experiences from wider view. Feminist periscoping offers similar promise for research on human rights issues in other contexts in which secrecy, barriers, and containment are common. Although periscoping has value in many contexts, it is an especially important methodological strategy for sites and processes that are difficult to access, making it well-suited for research on contemporary human rights challenges.

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## Notes on contributors

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