

Book Review

A Queer Way Out: The Politics of Queer Emigration from Israel

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Published: September 10, 2019

Book's Author: Hila Amit

Publication Date: 2018

Publisher: USA: SUNY Press

Price: \$21.95

Number of Pages: 252 pp. paperback

ISBN: 978-1-4384-7010-8

† The book has been awarded *The 2019 Association for Middle East Women's Studies (AMEWS) Book Award*

Despite its title, *A Queer Way Out: The Politics of Queer Emigration from Israel*, freelance researcher and fiction author Hila Amit's latest work has less to do with emigration as a process than with the affective dimension of relocating. Amit explores what she terms 'queer migration' out of Israel; that is, the relocation of self-identified queer Israelis who choose to leave the Israeli Zionist project behind. Following Amit, their relocation allows them to 'create a sense of self, belonging, and citizenship amid the exigencies of migration in the face of the ongoing violent conflict in their homeland' (p. xx). It would be wrong, though, to assume that Amit's interlocutors are driven by nihilistic aspirations or are politically passive. On the contrary, by opting out of the Israeli state's chrono and homo- normative schedules, they exhume a particular agency – understood by Amit as an 'unheroic resistance' that undermines the Zionist project.

In Chapter 1, Amit introduces the reader to what she terms 'emigration anxiety' and the paradox it poses to the Israeli state. On the one hand, the Israeli state cannot prevent *yerida*, or outbound migration *from* Israel at the risk of betraying its democratic appeal. Instead, we learn from Amit that the Israeli state counters such anxieties by exaggerating the virtues of *aliyah*, or inbound migration *to* Israel and by putting a 'positive gloss' on emigration through 'new uses for the diaspora' (p. 34). Amit relies on a myriad of registers in order to show the continuities between scholarly works, popular media, and the Israeli state's discourse on emigration. Contrary to classic migration studies where economic motivations for migrating are distinguished from political ones, Amit, whilst basing her analysis on her interlocutors' narratives, urges us to collapse the two. In her words:

By promoting a discourse that frames emigration as an economic question, other political issues (and most visibly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the security consequences of it), are deemed irrelevant to the decision to leave. (p. 24)

Amit's aim is to relate the 'standard' emigration story where academic, political and popular texts converge in upholding the narrative of 'emigration anxiety' and to show the Zionist biases of academics themselves, whose approach readily undermines the violence(s) permeated by the Israeli state against some of its populations and the Palestinians.

Chapter 2 constitutes, in many ways, the anti-thesis of the 'standard' emigration story. In order to bypass Israeli conventional attitudes towards emigration, Amit privileges her interlocutors' personal accounts alongside an array

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of popular culture texts. In doing so, she shows how a ‘queer approach to emigration [destabilises] collective conceptions regarding motivations for departure’ (p. 38).

Chapters 3 and 5 successfully capture the argumentative potential of queer temporality analysis since it is capable of containing those energies and affects that are inherent to nation-building and yet largely absent from classic nationalism studies. This is not to say that Amit’s interlocutors are forging a new nation-space for themselves. On the contrary, it is precisely their affect of ‘unbelonging’, as Amit points out, and their constant bid to locate a home somewhere, elsewhere, which binds them. Home, however, is best understood along the lines of departure, not arrival. As Amit point out, ‘the subversive significance of departure is that it symbolises a refusal to answer Zionism in the currency of heroism and active resistance’ (p. xv). *Unbelonging* is also propagated by Amit’s interlocutors’ disillusionment with the chrono-normative, hyper -militarised and -masculinist logics of the Israeli state; that is, the Israeli state’s attitudes towards the Palestinian population, opposition to serving in the Israeli army, and the exclusionary (notably classist and Zionist) dynamics of Tel Aviv’s LGBT population are some of the themes that inform Amit’s queer emigration. Amit detects similar arguments and tensions in her short, though important examination of the queer migratory cyberspace in Chapter 4.

The last two chapters, 6 and 7, constitute the crux of Amit’s argument. She clearly conceptualises her interlocutors’ politics of avoidance as ‘unheroic political activism’ (p. 149), the opposite of the hyper-militarised Israeli everyday. All along, Amit distinguishes between pre- and post- Israeli state Zionist writing, and thus matches her interlocutors’ aspirations with the first. As Amit argues:

Israel ... is the failure of Zionism. Not only does the state of Israel not function as ‘an outpost of civilization against barbarism’ ... reality might suggest exactly the opposite (p. 192).

Amit’s interlocutors embody the Israeli state’s conceptualisation of the failed subject. At the same time, they appropriate failure and redeploy it as ‘radical potential’ and ‘unique alternative’ (p. 165), in line with their understandings of the unsustainability and grievance-inducing consequences of the Zionist project.

All in all, Amit opens up a space to conceive a human agency that is ambivalent and adaptive. Her overall queer approach to space and time, neither of which emerge as tangible per se – the very result of her interlocutors’ lived reality – allows her to navigate the messiness of contemporary global politics, largely dominated by a liberalist/nationalist binary. At the same time, it is important to not fall into the trap of romanticising resistance, something that Amit does, especially when we contrast her interlocutors’ day-to-day living in Berlin, London or New York with the discriminatory and debilitating mechanisms that the Palestinian population residing in Israel is permanently subjected to.

As was the case with Jasbir Puar’s 2018’s work *The Right to Maim*, which sat uneasily with the Zionist lobby in the US, it is likely that Amit’s work will fall flat with those ‘normal homosexuals’ (see Weber 2016) who sustain and uphold the Israeli state’s settler colonial project.

For the cynical reader, the absence of a direct engagement with self-identified queer Palestinians could be wrongly interpreted as an analytical hole in the author’s argument. Conversely, Amit is clear on her positionality, which could explain her unwillingness to speak on behalf of the Palestinian experience, and rightly so. Indeed, she informs her readers early on about her Iranian and Syrian roots. She also carefully unpacks some of the differences that shape each of the *Ashkenazi* and the *Mizrahi* populations’ relationships to the Israeli state. Amit is undoubtedly aware of the partiality of knowledge (see Harding 2004), as feminist theorists often remind us, and of her privileged position as a researcher.

A Queer Way Out is more than an ethnographic examination of a small yet significant migratory context, not in quantitative terms but in qualitative ones. The book is written in an accessible language and is thus likely to resonate with a wide audience, including novice readers. It is a highly inter-disciplinary work that cleverly alternates between theoretical writing and empirical examples and whose methodology aptly contains the very existential rhetoric it grapples with. By working her thesis through a queer temporality and affective framework, Amit readily challenges classic approaches to the study of the nation by providing an anthropological account instead. By stretching the scope of queerness beyond sexuality paradigms, her work offers an innovative queer analysis at each of the micro, meso, and macro levels.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my peer Dr. Kim Jezabel Zinngrebe for her valuable comments.

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Citation: Allouche, S. (2019). [Review of the book *A Queer Way Out: The Politics of Queer Emigration from Israel*, by Hila Amit]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 3(1-2), 20. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/5926>

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