

QUEER MIGRATION IN HOMONATIONALIST TIMES

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

Hila Amit

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018. 227 pp.

Pathways of Desire: The Sexual Migration of Mexican Gay Men

Héctor Carrillo

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 369 pp.

*Real Queer? Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Refugees
in the Canadian Refugee Apparatus*

David A. B. Murray

London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. 188 pp.

Since its emergence in the early 2000s, the interdisciplinary field of queer migration studies has challenged the heteronormative assumptions that have traditionally circumscribed academic, activist, and policy discourses on international migration.¹ Building on theoretical and methodological insights from across the social sciences and humanities, this body of work rigorously interrogates how gender and sexuality, in their intersections with race, class, colonialism, and political economy, structure processes of international migration and border-crossing. Examining issues from the challenges facing binational same-sex couples and LGBTQ refugees to queer diasporic cultural production, transgender migrant activisms, and queer migrant labor organizing, queer migration studies seeks to center the experiences of queer and nonheteronormative migrants while attending to the ways in which sexuality as a regime of power shapes all migration processes.²

Since the publication of the inaugural special issue of *GLQ* on queer migration in 2008, the connections between queer migration studies and debates about homonationalism have garnered increasing attention. Initially coined by Jasbir Puar (2007) as an analytic category to illustrate how the US government used a homonormative conceptualization of sexuality to legitimize the global war on terror and increasingly restrictionist immigration policies post-9/11, the term *homonationalism* has subsequently been used to account for the exclusionary and normalizing effects of queer migration and asylum policies in the global North. Recent queer migration studies scholarship has shown how nation-states seek to incorporate queer migrants as a measure of their exceptionalism within neoliberal narratives of modernity.³ While some queer migrants are granted immigration status, however, the majority—especially those who are poor, of color, gender nonnormative, and female—are subject to state violence in the form of the global detention and deportation regime.

Each of the three monographs under review here encourages us to critically examine the kinds of questions that get opened up when we center queer migration issues as a way to think through homonationalist ideologies. In *Real Queer? Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Refugees in the Canadian Refugee Apparatus*, David A. B. Murray examines the connections between state discourses of homonationalism and the Canadian refugee apparatus. Murray's study contains rich ethnographic data on the experiences of sexual and gender minority refugees from Nigeria and Jamaica, as well as Latin America, the Middle East, and Europe, as they navigate the homonationalist discourses at the heart of the Canadian refugee system. Through a nuanced intersectional analysis of the multiple sites through which homonationalism gets perpetuated (including refugee support groups run primarily by white gay men, as well as state immigration controls), Murray explores how sexual and gender minority refugees are compelled to reproduce the homonationalist "queer-migration-to-liberation narrative" (3) in their asylum hearings despite the xenophobic racism and structural vulnerabilities they experience postmigration. As Murray rightly argues, such a narrative reinscribes the homonationalist assumption that all queer refugees are fleeing oppressive states in the global South in order to find emancipation and enlightenment in a liberal and "gay-friendly" West.

A particularly fascinating moment within Murray's analysis of homonationalism in the Canadian refugee system is his discussion of a short fictional play written and performed by queer refugees. In chapter 3, "How to Be Gay (Refugee Version)," Murray reflects on the ways in which black queer men from the Caribbean critically engage with the racialized stereotypes of white gay male identity that they are expected to reproduce in order to qualify for political asylum in Can-

ada. As Murray argues, such homonormative identity construction privileges white, Western gay male identities and politics, erasing the subjectivities of men who identify as both black and queer. In the context of queer migration, these homonationalist discourses have the effect of “westernizing” homosexual identity and heterosexualizing blackness, producing a myriad of racial, gendered, and class-based exclusions from accessing citizenship and rights in Canada. Building on existing scholarship on the politics of refugee performance, this chapter offers compelling insights into the ways in which theatrical performances can provide an alternative site for the articulation of queer migration narratives in light of the limitations produced by the demands of bureaucratic performance in the context of the asylum process.⁴ As Murray writes, “The play’s rehearsals presented an opportunity to observe elements of a ‘resistive performativity’ as characters and scenes were formed and reformed, and group members debated among themselves and with the director about the content and meaning of the narrative and characters” (79).

While *Real Queer* includes queer migration narratives from lesbian and bisexual women seeking political asylum in Canada, Murray does not address the extent to which the homonationalist ideologies at the heart of the Canadian refugee system privilege masculinist conceptions of sexuality. And yet, the persistence of homonationalist rhetorics within the Canadian refugee process has serious implications for queer, bisexual, and transgendered female migrants of color. Research has shown how the racialized, classed, and gendered stereotypes of male homosexuality invoked by asylum adjudicators pose particular challenges to queer female migrants of color. Indeed, lesbian refugees and asylum seekers are frequently declared to be insufficiently “credible,” as measured by expectations based on white gay male norms.⁵ Future work in queer migration studies exploring the intersections between homonationalism and state immigration controls could further address the unique experiences and challenges faced by queer female migrants of color.

Héctor Carrillo’s study *Pathways of Desire: The Sexual Migration of Mexican Gay Men* likewise explores how queer male migrants encounter homonormative and homonationalist norms in the context of migration and border crossing. Containing extensive data on the sexual migration experiences of gay and bisexual Mexican men living in San Diego, *Pathways of Desire* demonstrates the power of a queer migration framework for revealing the complex interplay of sexuality, gender, race, politics, economics, and culture in shaping the mobility and desires of Mexican gay men. Drawing on Lionel Cantú Jr.’s notion of a “queer political economy of migration,”⁶ Carrillo begins his ethnographic study by discussing the importance of social class and geographic origin in Mexican gay men’s experiences of

sexuality, along with the various reasons, including economic, work, partner, and health-related factors, that lead gay and bisexual Mexican men to choose to travel to the United States. Carrillo's interviews highlight the diversity of Mexican gay and bisexual men's sexual practices both pre- and postmigration. A crucial argument concerns the ways in which migration and border crossing alter their understanding and experience of same-sex desire.

In *Pathways of Desire*, two key themes characterize Carrillo's discussion of what he refers to as sexual migration, or international migration processes that are "motivated, fully or partially, by the sexuality of those who migrate" (4): the political economy of border crossing and the dynamics of power that structure cross-racial relationships between Mexican gay men and white US men. As Carrillo observes, Mexican gay men of a higher social class are able to enter the United States with much greater ease than poor and working-class men, whether by acquiring travel visas or through their ability to "pass" as US citizens when they cross the border. According to Carrillo, they are also less likely to encounter xenophobia and racism as well as racial fetishization and exoticization in the gay neighborhood of Hillcrest in San Diego than Mexican men of a lower socioeconomic class.

In the book's final three chapters, Carrillo offers a detailed account of how Mexican gay and bisexual men who confront racism within white gay male spaces use the stereotypical racial and sexual scripts assigned to them as tools of erotic empowerment and resistance. As Carrillo notes, many of the men he interviewed learned how to "invoke the notion of [Latino] sexual passion as a badge of honor and as a discursive tool to launch a broader critique of mainstream American society" (18). By examining how Mexican gay men mobilize discourses of Latino sexual passion as a response to their structural vulnerability as Mexican immigrants within US society, Carrillo's study contributes to rich discussions within queer of color critique on how racialized erotic vulnerability can be used as a tool of political survival.⁷

How queer migrants resist state ideologies of homonationalism constitutes the central focus of Hila Amit's engaging analysis of queer Israeli emigration to London, New York, and Berlin. In *A Queer Way Out: The Politics of Queer Emigration from Israel*, Amit examines how the practice of queer Israeli migration undermines traditional Zionist ideology predicated on the strength of its citizens and the inclusiveness of the Israeli nation-state. Specifically, her study seeks to challenge the "nostalgia for return" narrative (62) that characterizes popular and academic approaches to Israeli emigration alike. Based on interviews with forty-two middle- to upper-class queer Israelis who left Israel after 2000 as a result of

the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, Amit discusses how queer Israeli citizens attempt to resist Israeli militarism and state homonationalist practices of “pinkwashing” by engaging in left-wing activism with Palestinians. Her study importantly shows how queer Israeli citizens have attempted to use their privilege as Israeli migrants to maintain solidarity with Palestinians through forming anti-occupation communities in the diaspora.

One of the most compelling aspects of Amit’s study of queer Israeli migration lies in her questioning of normative assumptions about what constitutes queer migrant resistance and political activity generally. Building on feminist and queer post-structuralist accounts of vulnerability as a form of political activism, Amit explores how queer Israelis’ “departure as vulnerable agents” (168) not only offers a powerful critique of the intersecting structures of militarism, racism, and heterosexism at the heart of the Israeli occupation of Palestine but undermines the Zionist demand that Israeli citizens perform as “strong and masculine” (xxiii). By conceptualizing queer Israeli citizens’ vulnerability not as an ontological condition but as the precondition for political mobilization and resistance, *A Queer Way Out* contributes powerfully to the study of queer migrant vulnerability as a critique of homonationalist forms of pinkwashing, as well as to emergent discussions within feminist and queer theory about vulnerability as a tool of political critique.⁸

In Amit’s study, a crucial component of queer migrant vulnerability as a vehicle of political resistance concerns the way in which queer Israeli emigrants situate themselves in relation to the narratives of heteronormative reproductive futurism at the heart of the Israeli nation-state. Amit asserts that through their decision to emigrate, queer Israeli citizens subvert the heteronormative Israeli timeline by choosing not to stay within Israel and Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. In this regard, *A Queer Way Out* importantly calls attention to the need for future work in queer migration studies to examine the temporal implications of homonationalist narratives. While the concept of future for queer migrants is frequently deemed impossible outside the global North, homonationalism produces a type of queer futurism for sexual citizens that goes hand in hand with imperialist and exceptionalist forms of liberal optimism.⁹ Concepts of time and temporality are thus far from neutral, but actively work to reinforce existing social and political inequalities. As Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian (2016: 2) have argued, unhinging time from its “presumed neutrality” is crucial to articulating an anti-racist, decolonial vision of world politics.

Each of these three monographs on queer migration offer rich insights into the gendered, racial, and classed dimensions of homonationalism as it affects the everyday lives and world-making practices of queer migrants. Future work in queer

migration studies needs to build on this research, as well as on newly emerging work addressing transgender migration, in order to further examine the specific challenges faced by lesbian and queer-identified women in navigating the homonationalist assumptions at the heart of Euro-American immigration controls.¹⁰ In addition to interrogating the gendered implications of homonationalist frameworks, more work is needed that attends to how the current restructuring of temporal relations in the context of the global detention and deportation regime is linked to the reproduction of neoliberal and homonationalist norms of sexual citizenship, norms that are simultaneously grounded in heteronormative reproductive futurism and able-normativity. Greater understanding of the gendered, temporal, and performative aspects of state homonationalism(s) may open up new theoretical and political possibilities for queer migration studies.

Notes

1. See Luibhéid 2004; Epps, Valens, and Gonzalez 2005; Luibhéid and Cantú 2005; and Manalansan 2006.
2. See Luibhéid 2008.
3. In Puar's (2013: 23–25) own words, homonationalism is “the use of ‘acceptance’ and ‘tolerance’ for gay and lesbian subjects as the barometer by which the legitimacy of and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated”; the “embracing of nationalist and often xenophobic and imperialist interests” by LGBT communities; and “a critique of how lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to cultural and legal forms of citizenship at the expense of the partial and full expulsion from those rights of other populations.” For a discussion of homonationalism in relation to queer migration studies, see White 2013 and Mole 2017.
4. For scholarship on refugee performance more generally, see Jeffers 2012 and Balfour 2013.
5. See Bennett 2013 and Lewis 2013.
6. See Cantú 2009.
7. See, e.g., Rodriquez 2014.
8. While scholars in feminist legal studies have theorized vulnerability as a foundation for political subjectivity and as an alternative to identity-based paradigms of justice and autonomy in the liberal rights tradition and feminist philosophers have explored the implications of ontological conceptions of vulnerability as the basis for making ethical claims on the state, queer studies scholars have turned to vulnerability and affiliated concepts, such as precarity and dispossession, as the basis for understanding human interdependencies, obligations, and ethical responsibilities. Feminist

scholarship on vulnerability in critical legal studies and philosophy includes work by Fineman 2010; Gilson 2014; MacKenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014; and Murphy 2013. Judith Butler (2014), for example, argues that feminists and queer theorists need to attend to the ways in which vulnerability can be mobilized as a form of political activism, as well as to the ways in which differently positioned bodies can perform resistance through the mobilization of vulnerability and precarity.

9. As Thibaut Raboin (2017: 665), for example, has argued, “Queer refugee temporalities are understood and conceived in relation to a teleology of sexual modernity central to homonationalism.”
10. See Aizura 2018 and Beauchamp 2019.

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