Queer Political Geographies of Migration and Diaspora

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Recent approaches to the study of queer migration politics and diaspora, while appearing to serve only a select set of research interests within geography, have tremendous potential in advancing the study of geographies of migration at large. Most notably, they can illuminate the impossible positions migrants often occupy; challenge diasporic norms over authenticity; destabilize conventional understandings of gender, nation, and home; bring a coalitional understanding of politics to the fore of migration analysis; and situate diasporic experiences within present and future possibilities for new ways of expressing intimacy and kinship beyond the limited scope of nationality and citizenship. Unfortunately, while feminist gender-sensitive approaches to migration now occupy a central place in the geographic study of migration, the often interrelated and overlapping queer approaches to migration continue to be underrepresented. An example is in Michael Samers' *Migration,* from the Routledge Key Ideas in Geography series, a key recent textbook on migration geographies that includes extensive discussions of gender and feminist approaches but hardly a mention of sexuality and queer approaches. Similar omissions exist in a broad set of texts and conference sessions on migration that reveal a critical integration of feminism but not of queer theory.

In this paper, I argue for a queer intervention on migration studies that critically expands geographic approaches to migration by denaturalizing and complicating approaches to understanding family, nation, and nostalgia within the diaspora and bringing a sensitive, nuanced attention to space and place that non-geographic queer migration and diaspora approaches need.

In addition to asserting the vital contributions that queer approaches make to explaining the geographies of migration, I will argue for the usefulness of such approaches in my own ongoing research on debates concerning Iranian and queer Muslim diasporic communities. Ultimately, I see queer approaches to migration politics and diaspora as having significant creative, critical, and positive potential to understanding how migrants placed in impossible situations seek to improve their lives.

Sexuality, Migration, and Geography

For most of its twentieth-century history, the study of migration has concerned the experiences of men, foregrounded by the notion that most migrants were males traveling for work opportunities or to flee persecution, often without reference to gender. Increasingly, though, especially starting in the 1980s, feminist scholars began to focus on the complex and differentiated challenges that women face as mothers, laborers, and asylum seekers (see Manalansan 2006 and Chavez 2013 for reviews). These studies indicated the need for migration research to become much more sensitive to the situated and differentiated ways in which migrants adapt and survive. Chavez explains, however, that as this feminist body of research grew, "it became increasingly clear that with rare exception, even within feminist scholarship, women were assumed to be biologically female and all migrants were assumed to be heterosexual." (Chavez 2013, p. 10) As a result, starting in the late 1990s, a number of scholars such as Eithne Lubheid, Martin Manalansan, Adi Kuntsman, and Lionel Cantu began to examine the ways in which sexuality structures all aspects of migrant life, from the construction of diasporic identities to the ways in which sexuality, like race, gender, and other identity aspects, structures national migration policies and procedures.

Similarly, within geography, research on sexuality and migration has built upon advances made by feminist geographers. Rachel Silvey shows how feminist geographers have brought politicized understandings of mobility, complex questions of subjectivity and identity, and critical theorizations of space and place to the study of migration geographies, and calls for the incorporation of approaches to sex and sexuality that can more fully examine how heteronormativity organizes migration patterns and processes (Silvey 2004). The geographic research on sexuality and migration, building upon these ideas, has led to at least three important contributions to the study of migration. First, it has argued that the globalizing intersections of love, sexuality, and migration impact practices of movement and settlement in profound ways, urging migration scholars to stop ignoring emotion and sexuality in their research (Mai and King 2009). Along these lines, Andrew Gorman-Murray brings together new mobilities work and research on emotional embodiment to examine feelings of displacement and re-placement among sexual minority Australian migrants, ultimately encouraging geographers and others to take emotion seriously in mobilities studies (Gorman-Murray 2009). Second, some scholars have approached the home outside a linear narrative of "homecoming" and instead delve into the multiple negotiations with the past and future that queer migrants face within home spaces. In particular, Anne-Marie Fortier's important work removes a fixed connection among family, comfort, and home, thus building upon feminist geographers' criticism of home as refuge, and reveals the complications of home as a fleeting space of disorientation in its connections to migration origins and destinations (Fortier 2001). As such, these scholars suggest that any simple migration narrative based around nostalgia for the homeland or permanence in the destination home needs to be questioned and probed. And third, sexuality and migration scholarship has complicated rural-urban coming-out narratives in ways that impact any preconceived ideas about

particular kinds of origins and destinations, no matter what the migrant's sexual orientation may be (Weston 1995; Brown 2000; Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2011). Nathaniel Lewis, for example, argues that depending on gay migrants' life course circumstances and given the changing, uneven landscape of protections for sexual minorities, migration decisions need to be understood in a highly variegated, differentiated way (Lewis 2014). This insight suggests the need for migration scholars to critically consider changes in the political and economic landscape of opportunities for migrants, as well as life course needs, in understanding migration processes.

This body of research has been brought a sexuality focus to migration studies in geography, by revealing the ways in which sexuality and emotion matter to migration research and to the lives of migrants in profound ways. While this research has engaged with queer theory to an extent, there is much room for queer theory to more deeply and critically inspire migration research in geography, in ways that more overtly politicize migration processes and that breathe critical, creative, and constructive life into geographic migration research at large. I will argue that a deeper engagement with queer theory helps us to advocate for the improvement of migrants' life conditions in the present and the future.

Queering migration: Terms, Intersections, Methodology

To begin, it is important to clarify what I mean by "queer" in the context of this chapter. I follow the lead of Samuel Chambers and Nicholas De Genova in criticizing the extent to which "queer" has become a catch-all inclusive term to refer to all who are now or will someday be nonheterosexual and instead reaffirm the idea of queer politics as a commitment to the impossibility of inclusivity (Chambers 2009; De Genova 2010). Queerness, in this sense, refers to all that is opposed to what is considered normal, legitimate, and dominant, describing an anti-normative, anti-hierarchical positionality whose extent and possibility cannot be predetermined.

This means that, while in much migration literature queerness has become synonymous with research on sexual minorities, it needs to be understood as not limited to sexual orientation, but with much larger and potentially powerful applications.

De Genova articulates such an evocation of queerness in his essay on the affinity between the open-ended politics of migrant presence during the 2006 migrant mobilizations in the United States and the similarly destabilizing politics of queer presence (De Genova 2010). He draws a dynamic comparison, for example, between the chants of "Here we are, we're not leaving" and "and if they throw us out, we'll come right back" (in Spanish) with the slogan, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!", arguing that they share an "irreducible spirit of irreverence and dissatisfaction for state power" and "the intractable challenge of their own intrinsic incorrigibility." (De Genvoa 2010, p. 101) This politics of migrant labor thus became a form of queer migration politics through its defiant visibility, refusal to fit in sanctioned state discourse, and denunciation of the abjection of migrants. Bringing queer theory to an examination of the 2006 demonstrations allows De Genova to understand them in a more critical and radical way as opening up the realm of political possibility and visibility. At the same time, it allows him to differentiate between such a queer stance and the compromised stance of other moments in the movement that sought to argue that immigrants are not terrorists or criminals, thus capitulating to the dominant state discursive terrain. De Genova's analysis, as such, expands the uses of queer theory in ways that can inspire any migration research that seeks to advocate for and expand the realm of anti-normative political possibility.

A queer perspective on migration, in this sense, works "as a methodology, an oppositional mode of reading, interpretive strategy, or critical lens through which to question dominant ideologies of gender, sex, and nation." (Parker 2011, p. 640) With possible

applications to a wide array of discursive realms, this methodology provides a way critically perceiving dominant and normative understandings, wherever they appear. Moreover, a queer methodology can help to "foreground the resistant potential of what may initially appear as capitulations to, and collusions with, the dominant." (Gopinath 2011, p. 636) It acts to highlight the liberatory, transformative potential of what are impossible spaces that immigrants occupy. Two queer perspectives that can be particularly inspirational for geographers studying migration are queer diaspora studies, influenced particularly by the work of Gayatri Gopinath, and Karma Chavez's recent work on queer migration politics. I will now examine each in depth.

Queer Diaspora Studies

The growth of queer diaspora studies over the past several years has revitalized both queer and diaspora studies. As Gayatri Gopinath posits, "The concept of a queer diaspora enables a simultaneous critique of heterosexuality and the nation form while exploding the binary oppositions between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy." (Gopinath 2006, p. 11) Queer studies, like diaspora studies, concern disorientation, dislocation, and unsettling (Ahmed 2006). In this way, diaspora studies and queer studies have much to learn from one another when synthesized. A focus on queerness helps to dislocate diaspora studies from a simplified, nostalgic, depoliticized relationship to the family, nation, and home, while a focus on diaspora helps to bring questions of race, colonization, and globalization to the center of queer studies. The combined perspective, then, serves as an interpretive framework at the intersection of the two research streams.

Of particular importance to geographers are the works of queer diaspora scholars who unsettle and disturb ideas of attachment, the so-called homing instincts or desires of migrants. Johanna Garvey, for example, uses the concept of "queer (un)belonging" to refer to spaces of

habitation that "undo belonging while not leading to the destructive behavior of not-belonging." (Garvey 2011, p. 757) This perspective begins with the impossibility of a queer diaspora, given that there is no such thing as a queer homeland, and instead works critically and creatively toward the building of a reimagined community. This community exists outside of a binary that would have migrants either "belong" in a way that compromises their identities to the demands of family, nation(s), citizenship, and nostalgia, or "not belong" in a totally disempowered, dislocated way. Instead, queer (un)belonging develops as an embrace of the reality of daily migrant life that does not conform to diasporic nostalgia and in the process highlights how migrants can and often do shape a different relationship to time and space. (Un)belonging, then, allows for both a detachment from the confines of existing demands placed on migrants and a reattachment that contains the conditions for renewed intimacy and community on new terms. It also advocates new methods of reading and identifying people that incorporate difference into community. What a queer diaspora approach does above all else is to show the constructive potential of residing within the uncomfortable spaces that disorient normative domestic arrangements. It is, in this way, both a way of seeing and a form of advocating more meaningful, livable conditions for migrants.

I have found this frame to be particularly useful in my ongoing research on representations of the Iranian diaspora in the West, particularly through the genre of Iranian women's exilic memoirs. In recent years, Iranian studies scholars have conceptualized the idea of an "Iranian diaspora" in terms of a set of issues that cohere around the complex emotions of nostalgia for Iran, political engagement with both Iran and the destination country, most prominently the US, and the liminal and syncretic practices of hybrid identity construction (see Elahi and Karim 2011 for a review). Shakhsari, in her work on queer Iranian subjects in

cyberspace, cautions us though against "the chic of diaspora," given the extent to which diaspora studies have become a popular academic realm in sometimes uncritical ways (Shakhsari 2012). Any evocation of diaspora, then, needs to be critically qualified within the context in which it is constructed and interpreted. Diaspora, in this sense, is just as constructed as Iranian-ness, and both require critical attention to avoid the simplifications associated with nostalgia and coherence.

The popular consumption of immigrant women's memoirs has been of particular concern and interest within this realm of diasporic Iranian studies. These memoirs include Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* series, Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad*, and Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi*, among many others, and they have become a successful genre unto their own within book publishing in North America and Europe since the late 1990s. Some of the main elements of the genre are emotional recounting of the experiences of expatriation and exile, vivid accounts of the in-betweenness of spaces of immigrant life, and the "homing devices" the authors employ to develop cosmopolitan, hybridized identities and communities (Whitlock 2008; Malek 2006). Given the high-profile nature of these memoirs as representations of an "Iranian diaspora," many prominent Iranian scholars within the diaspora have attacked these authors, particularly on the grounds that they misrepresent Iranian women to a global readership (see particularly Mottahedeh 2004; Dabashi 2006; Keshavarz 2007; Akhavan et. al. 2007). While valid in some of their criticisms, other scholars have responded with concern over the "vituperative" nature of the critiques and for the fact that they seek to replace one representation of what Iranian women are like with another (Motlagh 2011; Darznik 2008). The result is an unproductive, divisive struggle over authenticity and authority in the diaspora. Moreover, the critics have very little to say about the actual content of the memoirs or how

audiences interpret them. This is one place where the reading practices that queer diaspora scholars advocate are incredibly useful. How can the memoirs be read in an alternative way that, while critical of the disciplining and romanticizing influences of nationalism and nostalgia, works toward the building of new forms of intimacy, kinship, and community?

In my analysis of one of the recent books in this memoir genre, *The Good Daughter* by Jasmin Darznik, I argue that it is possible and desirable to engage in an alternative, queer reading practice that, in the context of the Iranian diaspora, challenges concerns for authenticity in representations of Iran and Iranian-ness, and instead looks critically to the past in a way that seeks out meaningful opportunities for building relationships into the future (Darznik 2011; Rouhani forthcoming). Such an analysis demands a critical reassessment of the roles of nation and home and seeks to unearth moments of uneasiness and destabilization as critical opportunities for relationship building into the diasporic future. It is entirely possible for Darznik's book to be read, through orientalist eyes, as a vilification of the violence of Iranian men, the victimization of Iranian women, and a linear narrative of immigrant loss, mourning, nostalgia, and fulfillment. But Darznik also provides many opportunities for an alternative reading of the multiple disorientations and dislocations of immigrant life, the impossibility of return in any meaningful kind of way, and the possibility for a new kind of critical intimacy and community, as represented through the unconventional, mutually meaningful relationship that unfolds between the author and her mother in the last few chapters of the book. While the book is not about sexual minority subjects, it is indeed queer, for example in its suggestion of a mother-daughter relationship, and not a reproductive nuclear family relationship, as the inspiration for diasporic community building and its refusal to capitulate to any pre-given understandings of Iranian-ness. Through a queer diasporic lens, it is possible to reveal

transformative moments that could be glossed over and advocates for the opening of such spaces within diasporic experiences.

Queer migration politics

Karma Chavez' recent work, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities,* provides another important, more overtly politicized lens from which to approach queer migration studies (Chavez 2013). She writes in the contemporary context of liberal LGBT advances being made in the United States, as organizations focus their attention on issues of rights and inclusion focused around marriage and, in terms of migration politics, on partner and family immigration rights. Perceiving the limits of this movement based on its normative demands and capitulations to state power, Chavez instead focuses on instances where queer politics and migration politics meet in ways that challenge the inclusionary politics of mainstream LGBT activism and shift attention to other sites of activism, which she identifies as being as much about the present as the future. While sensitive to the futurist approaches of people like Jose Esteban Munoz, who see the idea of queer futures as the primary way to approach the limits of the LGBT movement in the present, Chavez forcefully argues that such an aesthetic critique based on queer future is no substitute for addressing the activist present (Munoz 2009). Her approach advocates a revaluing of the queer present, grounded in even the smallest non-normative moments of community organizing in everyday life, as having much greater potential in advancing queer politics and improving people's life conditions. Instead of something to be hoped for or imagined in the future, an alternative to mainstream lesbian and gay politics is a present practice among activist groups that needs to be highlighted and supported.

She defines her approach, then, as "activism that seeks to challenge the normative, inclusionary perspectives at the intersections of queer rights and justice and immigration rights and justice." (Chavez 2013; 6) Inspired by queer and women of color feminist scholarship, she views these politics through the lens of a "coalitional moment," a queer space and time that enables opportunities to reenvision and reconstruct politics in the present. Her approach is particularly salient on a number of levels. It is important to note, as she does, that the queer migrant is "an inherently coalitional subject, one whose identities and relationships to power mandate managing multiplicity." (Chavez 2013; 9) This means that, because queer migrants live such complex lives in different realms, a coalitional approach is necessary to capture the complications of people's lived experiences on an existential level. Moreover, given the florescence of migration activism in the United States since 2006, a coalitional approach provides the essential means to examine how constructive relationships can be formed among the differential forms and ideologies of activism. These groups may have significant differences in political visions, but many share a common sense of resistance to hegemonic power structures, through which it is possible to construct moments of affinity and solidarity. These moments, she argues, may be temporary, or they may great stretched to longer periods of time. Lastly, Chavez's understanding of queer migration politics points out the limitations of state-sanctioned solutions, as those constrained by nationality and citizenship, and instead highlights the work of activists who point to political possibilities other than that those bounded by the limited imaginations of state politics.

In my own research on queer Muslim diasporic organizations, I have examined the salience of such coalitional politics, as uncertain and unpredictable as they may be at times, emphasizing the multiple forms of complicity and resistance that exist in the spaces that Muslim

diasporic identities inhabit (Rouhani 2009). Particularly because of the difficulty of discussing sexuality-based issues within the wider progressive diasporic Muslim movement, these organizations actively collaborate with those in other queer Muslim destinations, such as Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, and South Africa, as well as with mainstream liberal human rights organizations such as Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Campaign, and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (Grundy and Smith 2005) The complexities of such coalitions became dramatically evident in response to the July 19, 2005 reporting of two "gay" teenagers being hanged in Iran, disseminated by both exiled royalist, anti-Islamic Republic of Iran organizations like the National Council of Resistance of Iran and LGBT rights organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign and Outrage!, which called for sanctions against Iran because of the news. As the accusations, accompanied by the final images of teenagers before being hanged, were disseminated through the international gay media, it became increasingly unclear whether the boys were hanged for "being gay" or the officially-claimed charge of rape. Long shows how these Western-based organizations misinterpreted the violations in searching for universal gay identities and instances of homophobia, in ways that advanced their own liberal political causes in the West but with the result of exposing and endangering the lives of sexual minorities in Iran (Long 2009) In response to the fervor, the he US-based Muslim diasporic organization Al-Fatiha released a statement arguing that the accusations by these organizations "only fed to the growing Islamophobia and hatred toward Muslims and the Islamic world" and that organizations need to work on building stronger ties with on-the-ground activists working within countries like Iran to create new opportunities for social justice at home and asylum abroad (Alam 2005). As a burgeoning diasporic community, queer Muslims must deal with the question of how to support

sexual minorities in predominantly Muslim countries according to the ways that those minorities want to be supported.

While focused mostly at the intersection of queer and migration politics in the United States, Chavez's work has important implications for understanding and advocating for sexual and immigration rights in other contexts such as this as well. First is through the awareness that any effective form of coalitional politics cannot be simplified in the way that liberal, inclusionary LGBT politics often are. She writes, "Coalition features the messiness, the impurity, and the multiplicity of subjectivity, identity, and politics" that other approaches often ignore. (Chavez 2013, p. 147) In the context of the queer Muslim diasporic experiences and exchanges, this means the impossibility of any universal, simplified fixes, based on Western notions of gay rights and homophobia, and instead advocates approaches that take the identities and experiences of people in multiple and different situations seriously. Such a stance requires a move beyond existing national and transnational imaginaries of what is politically possible in the present. Moreover, a focus on how to improve people's lives in the present calls for the development of coalitions with other kinds of organizations, not specifically queer or LGBT-identified ones, working toward social, economic, and environmental justice goals at different scales. Thus, whether we are discussing victims of sexual oppression in whatever form, the focus needs to be foremost on how to improve people's living conditions, something that transnational LGBT human rights organizations often overlook as a result of their universalizing focus on gayness and homophobia.

Queering migration politics for geographers

While the queer diaspora and queer migration politics have some differences in how they approach the politics of migration, they cohere around a set of issues that capture the central

tenets of queer anarchism. These include support for autonomy and freedom, a critique of the paternalistic state and its impact on people's lives, a rejection of normative assumptions about sexuality, and a deep respect for pleasure and improving people's life conditions (Shepard, 2010; Kissack 2008; Brown 2009; Rouhani 2012). Though articulated in different ways, these approaches share a critique of the ways in which migration operates through existing hierarchical arrangements that suppress human expression and seek out ways to transform them. This latter component, in particular, is what that these approaches offer migration geographers, by channeling and supporting the multiple creative and critical ways in which migrants can engage in both a prefigurative politics of how to create new diasporic spaces, relationships, and communities on their own terms and an affinity politics of how to survive through coalitions that promote activist alternatives. It is the simultaneously critical, creative, and liberatory emphasis shared by these approaches from which migration geographers can gain significantly.

While migration studies in geography have been effective in explaining the economic, political, and cultural structures with which migrants must cope in order to survive, they have been much less effective in examining the ways in which migrants can and do improve their lives, and queer approaches to migration politics and diaspora studies can provide inspiration to that end. In the study of the geographies of labor migration, queer approaches can aid not just in expanding our existing understanding of labor segmentation and migrant survival tactics but also the ways in which it is possible to subvert and transform those existing structures of segmentation in ways that improve migrants' living and working conditions. Queering the geopolitics of migration can have significant impact on developing other, more imaginative, more just systems of migration management outside of the repressive transnational, national, and local state scales of migration control. And lastly, queer approaches compel us to think of issues

of identity and belonging beyond the strict associations with citizenship and nationality, in ways that liberate migrants from exclusionary nationalist spaces. Clearly, these are grand, general suggestions that need to be thought through much more carefully, but there is so much that migration scholars can do to both draw inspiration from and give support to "the ways in which those who occupy impossible spaces transform them into vibrant, livable spaces of possibility." (Gopinath 2005, p. 194) That is the difference that queer approach to migration and diaspora studies can make.

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