

Queerness as Europeanness: Immigration, Orientalist Visions and Racialized Encounters in Israel/Palestine

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Over the last 15 years more than a million people have immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union, welcomed by the Israeli 'Law of Return' that grants immediate citizenship and financial support to all Jews and their family members. My last research¹ focused on the queers among them, looking at the ways sexuality and nationhood intertwine in queer immigrants' sense of belonging to the country that is officially defined by state policy – and indeed perceived by many immigrants themselves – as their home.

The migration and settlement of Russian-speaking immigrants – queer and straight alike – to Israel is inseparable from the Eurocentric and colonial visions of the Zionist project. The very 'Law of Return', for example, aims to provide Jews from all over the world a safe home. But at the same time it makes Israel into an apartheid state, where the non-Jewish, Palestinian refugees who were driven out of the land in 1948 and not allowed to return. The Palestinian citizens of Israel are discriminated against in all spheres of life, and in particular in the right to land and political organizing. But the Zionist project is not simply Jewish, it is also Eurocentric. From the early days of Jewish settlement in Palestine, and then from the first days of the state of Israel, Jews of non-European origin have been subordinated economically and colonized culturally. The country's elite were the *Ashkenazim* – Jews from Europe. The *Mizrachim* – meaning in Hebrew 'the Orientals', from North Africa and Asia – many of whom arrived in Israel in the 1950s, were robbed of their cultural heritage and language and became second-class citizens.²

The arrival of Jews from the former Soviet Union – and in particular, its *Ashkenazi* majority, those who lived in the 'European' parts of the country, was supposed to strengthen Eurocentric colonial domination. As Jews, the newcomers were expected to 'contribute' to Israel's demographic war over the Palestinians, that is, ensure the Jewish majority. As light-skinned Europeans, many of whom had higher education, the 'Russians', as they were called in Israel, were desirable for the Zionist project of Israeliness as white middle-classness and Europeanness. At the same time the attitude to Russians was ambivalent: as immigrants from the Eastern/communist block, they were seen as not the right kind of Europeans (and as not Western enough)³ and had to be re-educated into proper Westernness and Israeliness.

In the past decade a large body of research has been written on immigrants from the former Soviet Union, including the analysis of immigrants' perception of the *Mizrachim* and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many studies have also explored gender and sexuality and the ways they condition and shape immigrants' belonging. None of these studies, however, deal with non-heterosexual immigrants, thus approaching nationhood and gender relations as exclusively heterosexual.

In my work I am interested precisely in the relations between immigration, queer sexuality and national identity. Analysis of the relations between queer sexuality and the nation have predominantly focused on the ways in which gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders have been excluded from citizenship and national belonging. Or else they focus on the ways they could 'queer' the nation, for example through various practices of citizenship such as marriage, military service, or consumption. Theoretical debates on these new forms of sexual citizenship have mostly focused on whether – and to what extent – queering the nation is transgressive or mainstreaming. 'Queer' in these theories is used to designate non-normative bodies, sexualities and identities that are by definition transgressive and dissenting; while 'queering' is often seen as a transgressive practise of denaturalising and challenging the heterosexual order. Recent developments in queer theory, however, have questioned this idea of 'queering' as necessarily transgressive. Jasbir Puar, for example, in her analysis of queerness and the post 9-11 'war on terror', suggests that 'instead of retaining queerness exclusively as dissenting, resistant, and alternative (all of which queerness importantly is and does)', we need to 'underscore contingency and complicity [of queerness] with dominant formations'.⁴

It is the contingency and complicity of queerness within dominant racial and nationalist formations of Israel/Palestine that I want to address in this paper. I will do so through two ethnographic stories. Both stories describe queer ‘Russians’ visions of belonging – to the local night scene, and to the Israeli nation. In both, as I will show, their belonging is narrated through rejection and/or demonization of Israel’s colonized Others: the *Mizrachim* and the Palestinians. The stories are based on my ethnographic study of Russian-speaking queer organising in Israel. In particular, I conducted participant observations and archival work on the website aguda.org.⁵ The website, created in 2001, served as a vibrant meeting place in cyberspace. It hosted a discussion forum, structured as a bulletin board that was visited by hundreds of immigrants.

I

The first story is about the queer immigrants club, ‘At Roby’s’, that was established in Tel-Aviv at the same time as the website, in the early 2000s. The club was often discussed on the website, and many of its visitors saw it as a unique place of hospitality without obligations, kinship without blood. ‘Being among friends’, ‘being oneself’ and ‘feeling among the kin’ were frequent metaphors used to describe the club. Someone wrote that the club exists because it ‘warms up our [Russian] soul’.

The notion of warming up the soul constitutes the club as a site of what Svetlana Boym calls ‘diasporic intimacy’: a form of connectedness between immigrants, ‘a precarious cosiness of a foreign home’.⁶ Describing the club as a place with / and for the soul, and as a site of immigrants’ belonging works hand in hand with depicting other places as less welcoming. The Israeli clubs are juxtaposed to ‘At Roby’s’ when they are described as cold, soul-less, unwelcoming and in some extreme cases, even horrible. One woman wrote about her visit to one of the biggest Tel Aviv dancing clubs, ‘Shadow’: ‘what a horror...I will never set foot there ever again...haven’t been so horrified for a long while...we fled...went to Roby’s.... to rest our souls...’. When asked by another participant why was she horrified, she elaborated:

I didn’t get a chance to see or hear.... Because of the cacophony of something that pretends to be music... and a DJ... of Moroccan appearance...eeuwww... in short, horrid. Had to leave the place pronto... my health is more important to me.

Here the speaker’s soul is narrated as a victim of the surroundings: the music is a cacophony and the DJ is a monster. In a typical manner for racist speech the dark other, the ‘Moroccan’, is presented as a horrid and disgusting figure – ‘eeuuuw’, ‘horrid’, ‘I haven’t been so horrified for a long time’, ‘fled’, while the speaker becomes a sufferer whose soul needs protection. Disgust, as several feminist scholars point out,⁷ works to produce distance between some bodies and closeness to others. Here, importantly, the emphasis is not just on bodies but also on spaces and on bodies that *become* spaces. The speaker is not simply disgusted or horrified by the Moroccan-looking DJ: the whole space appears as disgusting to her through the sounds that the DJ produces.

The DJ of ‘Moroccan appearance’ is a figure that requires some closer examination. In the Orientalist discourse of many Russian immigrants ‘the Moroccan’ comes to stand for all Jews of Asian and North-African descent, the *Mizrachim*. Moroccans are a frequent figure of Russian-speaking immigrants racist lamenting on their life ‘in the Orient’ – the Middle East, lamenting that works to constitute Russian immigrants’ own cultural and racial superiority as ‘Europeans’. Reference to ‘the Moroccans’, ‘these Moroccans’, ‘there are only Moroccans there’ is often expressed in a derogatory tone, often accompanied with other expressions of disgust. The ‘Moroccan-looking’ DJ is therefore not necessarily of Moroccan and even *Mizrachi* descent, but he is figured as non-European. His Oriental appearance is metonymically linked to the sounds – a cacophony that pretends to be music. The DJ and his music make the place repelling and horrid. The ‘Russian’s club and its welcoming the soul is constituted in racialized opposition to the horrors of the Orient.

II

The second story is about images of Palestinian queers on the website. In general, Palestinians were tellingly absent in the many narrations of Israel as place, country and society. In discussions on politics Palestinians were often depicted as patriarchal, heteronormative and homophobic, and of course, as terrorists. Heterosexualising – and demonising – the Palestinians and queering Israel (for example, when immigrants describe their arrival in Israel as a discovery of queer sexuality or as finding a GLBT community) worked in tandem to mark ‘Palestinian queer’ as an impossible subject. There were two occasions in my fieldwork where such subjects appeared, causing waves of anxiety, hostility and hatred.

Their arrival – in Israel and into cyberspace – was figured as a threat.

The first occasion was a case of a Palestinian gay man, fearing persecution in the West Bank and seeking asylum in Israel. The case was widely discussed in the Israeli media, and was also debated on the immigrants' website. Most participants said that the man was not really gay, but was probably pretending to be so in order to sneak into Israel. 'And what if he is a terrorist', wrote one person. 'And even if he is not lying about his sexuality, what are the chances that he will be forced to become a terrorist to ransom the family's shame, if his sexuality is discovered?' wrote another. The debate about the queer asylum seeker soon turned into a performance of Orientalist knowledge about the Arabs and Muslims. One person, the community's self-proclaimed intellectual, cited Freud's theory of the death drive and declared Islam as a deadly force that destroys world civilisation. Another one wrote that the Palestinian gay man should not be expelled because Arabs are 'cute boys with almond asses'.

The second occasion was a new female participant – or at least a person writing in the guise of female gender – who called herself 'Daughter of Palestine'. From the moment of her appearance on the website people questioned her identity. She is not a real Palestinian, said some; she pretends to be an Arab, wrote others. Some had tried to out her through questioning; others suggested possible explanations to her name and her appearance in the Russian-Israeli queer forum, in a 'lesbian' section. Some told her that her name was a provocation and she had to change it. Her appearance also brought up sexual fantasies about sex with an Arab woman. 'I would never lay an Arab [woman], that's for sure,' wrote one participant, 'they all wear *burkas* and pretend they are saints'. Another one responded:

Maybe they do what they can, but if you fondle them gently, and introduce a little tongue, you will discover what oriental passion is, and the *burka* will be forgotten at once; you just look at their suffering, at their fear of being different and you spit at their backs, but they are just a poor breed afraid of being cursed and rejected by everyone. You should have compassion for their miserable Arab fate.

This exchange was structured around two discourses of Arab female sexuality: on the one hand it is seen as repressed and therefore unattractive for a lesbian; on the other hand Arab women appear as passionate. Jaspir Puar in her discussion of discourses of Muslim sexuality around Abu-Ghraib notes the shift in the image of the Orient:

The Orient, once conceived in Foucault's *ars erotica* and Said's deconstructive work as the place of original release, unfettered sin, and acts with no attendant identities or consequences, now symbolizes the space of repression *and* perversion, and the site of freedom has been relocated to Western identity.⁸

In the Orientalized fantasies about the Palestinian gay man (the cute boy with the almond ass) and the Arab woman (always behind the *burka*) the two images are present at the same time. Oriental sexuality is *both* repressed (making queer desires impossible) *and* inherently passionate. But importantly, the depiction of 'Arab sexuality' is always structured within Orientalist knowledge, positioning the speakers – the Russian-speaking queer immigrants – as those who both *know* and *have the power over* the Oriental other. The discussions on Palestinians were always framed within the regime of suspicion (the asylum seeker lies about being gay; 'Daughter of Palestine' is a provocation), which contrasted with the unquestioned right of Jews to be in Israel, and with the self-positioning of the Russian immigrants as what Ghassan Hage calls 'worrying nationalists'⁹ who passionately guard the nation's boundaries and always worry about unwelcome intruders.

Concluding remarks

The stories presented here should be read within the context of the queer immigrants' own struggle to belong. In these stories, the queer immigrants' spaces of belonging (the community's club, the imagined national space and the space of the on-line forum) were constituted as 'our places' through Islamophobic and Orientalist images of demonized *Mizrachim* and Palestinians. There were significant differences, of course, in the way *Mizrachim* and Palestinians were presented. The anti-*Mizrachi* racism was strongly opposed by many participants on the website (some of the people protested against expressions of hatred towards the *Mizrachim* by saying 'but they are Jews, too!'). The anti-Palestinian hatred, on the other hand, was rarely challenged. What is more, those few who did try to do so were themselves attacked by other participants. The legitimacy of racist speech, in other words, resembled the national boundaries that divide between the internal colonized Other and the external enemy. But despite the

differences, the two forms of Orientalism have a lot in common. Both divide between what Ella Shohat calls the first world (the European *Ashkenazi* elite) and the third world, the *Mizrachi* Jews and Palestinians.¹⁰

But what is it about Orientalism and Islamophobia that is so appealing for immigrants? In a study about the Russian-language media in Israel, Dmitry Shumsky¹¹ noted that on their arrival in Israel Russian immigrants are marginalized by Israeli society, and in order to negotiate their place in the Israeli social hierarchy, immigrant writers and journalists employ an Orientalist perspective towards Arabs and Jews of Eastern origin. Immigrants' Orientalism has its own cultural roots: using Said's *Orientalism*, Shumsky points out the historically ambivalent position of Russia as 'Oriental' in the eyes of the West, and 'Western' and orientalizing towards its own others in the East. Arriving in Israel from the former Soviet Union, the immigrants also occupy an ambivalent position, as Europeans 'but not quite'. Orientalist discourse of the immigrants serves at the same time as a tool for reading the new society, and as symbolic capital in the struggle for location in the local classed, racial and ethnic hierarchy. Anti-*Mizrachi* and anti-Palestinian racism aims to locate the newcomers within the Jewish-*Ashkenazi* elite. An anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stand frequently displayed in Russian-Israeli media and literature also links the immigrants to the globalized 'West' fighting the 'evil of Muslim terrorism'.

Shumsky's analysis reveals that the idea of Europeanness as superiority (and as colonial identity) can become symbolic capital in the Zionist economy of Europeanness (as well as in the global world order). But what about sexuality?

As many studies of Israeli GLBT organising show, the dominant Israeli queer culture is complicit with racial and colonial formations. The mainstream GLBT politics in Israel are almost exclusively Jewish-*Ashkenazi* and middle class; Israeli queer's claims of citizenship are based on patriotism and militarism;¹² and many gay night clubs apply racial(ized) selection at the entrance, a 'face control' of sorts where some *Mizrachi* men are denied entrance. The growing queer presence in Israel, and GLBTs claims to rights and visibility are undoubtedly important. But such a presence, often oriented to the 'West', and usually uncritical of its own racial and class privileges, figures the queer as white, European, and 'progressive', juxtaposing it to all those who are marked as 'traditional' and backward'.¹³ The Israeli queer scene, in other words, is saturated with the notion of European superiority; queerness *becomes* Europeanness. And just as in the case of the Russia-speaking media, immigrant queers seem to adopt Europeanness as symbolic capital in negotiating their place in Israeli society and the GLBT scene.

I want to return to Puar's call to explore the complicity of queerness within dominant formations. As my discussion has shown, establishing queer migrant places does not necessarily challenge Israel's racial and national order. On the contrary, racism and Orientalism become tools in immigrants' positioning; turning into a capital and an orienting point and into a tempting promise of belonging in the queer economies of Europeanness.

Notes

1. *Figurations of Violence and Belonging: Sexuality, Immigration and Nationalism in Israel/Palestine and in Cyberspace*, doctoral dissertation, Lancaster University, 2007 [↩]
2. Shohat, E. 1997 'Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims', in McClintock, A., Mufti, A. and Shohat, E. (eds.), *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 39-68 [↩]
3. For example, the 'Russian' immigrant community was seen as politically 'immature' due to years of living under Communist rule because their patterns of voting resembled those of lower-class *Mizrachim*, rather than the middle-class *Ashkenazim*. Similarly, the 'Russian' women were marked as 'reproductively irresponsible' because of their reliance on abortion rather than other contraceptive methods used by middle-class *Ashkenazi* Israeli women (see, for example, Amir, D. and Benjamin, O. (1997) 'Defining encounters: who are women entitled to join the Israeli collective?', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20 (5/6), 639-650). This, too, was explained by the 'backwardness' of life in the Soviet Union [↩]
4. Puar, J. 2005 'Queer Times, Queer Assemblages', What's Queer about Queer Studies Now? Special Issue of *Social text*, Vol. 23:3-4 84-85, pp. 121-2 [↩]
5. Since the completion of my fieldwork in 2004 the site has changed its name, target audience and domain location [↩]
6. Boym S.2001 'On Diasporic Intimacy', in *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, p. 254 [↩]

7. Ahmed, S. (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press [↵]
8. Puar 2005: 125 [↵]
9. Hage, G. 2003 *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for hope in a shrinking society*. Sydney: Pluto Press [↵]
10. Shohat, 1997 [↵]
11. Shumsky, D. 2004 'Post-Zionist Orientalism? Orientalist Discourse and Islamophobia among the Russian-Speaking Intelligentsia in Israel', *Social Identities*, 10:1, 83-99 [↵]
12. Kadish, R. (2001) 'My Zionism is Bigger than Your Zionism: Israeli Lesbians, Gay Men, Gay Rights and National Identity'. PhD Dissertation Chapter, University of Berkeley, California; Yosef, R. (2005) 'The National Closet: Gay Israel in Yossi and Jagger', *GLQ, A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 11 (2), 283-300 [↵]
13. Yosef, R. (2004) *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema*, Rutgers University Press [↵]

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