

Home and Exile in Queer Experience

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It was when I moved from a small village from the “North” to the big city of Jerusalem. It was not a transition from a far disconnected space called “an Arab village” to the city of red lights, crimes and sex; but a transition from a place of familiarity to the city of impossible paradoxes, of radical religiosity and radical secularism, from institutionalized politics to anarchism, from Mosques, churches, and synagogues to bars and under grounded queer life. A city where borders between Arabs and Jews are marked by Israeli checkpoints and walls, but a city where Jews always meet Arabs, in different inevitable and sometimes violent encounters. In the city of paradoxes I found my desires, in its spirituality and its sins. The transition from the north to the center is a transition from my wishes to its accomplishments. I was “out” in Jerusalem, the city of conservativeness, and “in” the closet in my own village: “out” where no one knows me and “in” where everyone claims to know everything about me.

In East Jerusalem, the Palestinian side, I was confused by either being a boy, or a Spanish tourist, and in West Jerusalem, the Israeli side, I was sometimes mistaken by a suspected Arab terrorist, thus stopped once in a while for ID checks. My in-between look, not a typical Arab religious woman, confused both sides differently. And I continued to move and to transfer myself from one socio-political space to another. Rauda Morcos (2003) describes these transitions in her poem:

*Departing a city, a house, a bed, a roof
Departing I am, a place or even a life
Displaced I am inside my country, my land
A prisoner I am inside my home, my country, my land
Departing a city, a place
For the first time in my life, departure
Mourning you Tel-Aviv... the city of my maturation
A child, a girl, a woman I was in a village
Violence, aggression all that my body knew
A girl, a student, a woman I was here
Lesbian, feminist and a victim I remember
In Tel-Aviv suicide
Lesbian, Palestinian, poet and a lover
The city of my presence I am leaving you
I am displaced in my land, and my home
Illegal in every place
Even my identity does not exist
Without “status” or poems*

In her poem *Rauda Morcos* a Palestinian Lesbian activist marks this transition from her village to the city of Tel-Aviv, an Israeli-Jewish city. She marks her transforming identifications from a victimized woman in the village who experienced violence and aggression, to a Lesbian, feminist, Palestinian and a victim of depression. Her transition to a strange space enables her politics to flourish and her queer identity to be marked and traced, while in the village, her space of familiarity but also violence become an imprisoning experience. In the city she was emancipated but lonely in her own strangeness, till the moment of suicide. Rauda then leaves the city and moves to be a nomad who is illegal everywhere, with an identity that does not exist.

The idea of movement: the travel between my family's village to the city of my desires, became significant. The way between the two spaces was a long thoughts about what identity and what role should I take when I arrive: the good student who comes home or the troubled feminist who talks only about oppressions. I definitely was in drag in both spaces, at least in my eyes. I was never my self, if such a thing exists. Movements and identity inevitably became a large part of my life, a sort of important element for my survival. I move to get education, but I also move to escape a bordered city. So why do people move? And does their movement always imply freedom and emancipation? Why queer people seek their sexuality somewhere else than their original "home", at least those who live in extremely heteronormative societies? What happens to queers who move? Do they feel like me "imprisoned in my emancipation"? Or do they find their authentic emancipation by being strangers and lonely, but "out" somewhere far.

Theorizing Home and Exile

Structural notion confines 'home' as conditioned to originality, familiarity and materialism. Quoting: Oxford English Dictionary: home is "a place, region or state to which one property belongs, on which one's affections centre, or where one finds refuge, rest, or satisfaction." This definition, which confuses or blurs the borders between home and house, is described by David Morely to be a Western understanding of the concept that assumes home to be only inscribed and located in the physical structure of the house (2000: 19). Home, thus, is territorialized in locations. For nomads, John Durham Peters (1999) argues, home is always mobile, hence there is a subtle doubleness: being at home everywhere but lacking a fixed ground. In nomadism, home is always already there, without any hope or dream of homeland (ibid 21). Therefore, nomadism subverts the notion of home by detaching it from a specific site or territory.

In nomadism, home is not de-territorialized but constantly re-territorialized. Theoretically, one can wonder if constant re-territorialization leads to de-territorialization (one can also argue that there is no de-territorialization without re-territorialization). Nomads' home is already located and dislocated, and thus relocated, yet without an imagined or desired home(land) (ibid: 21). The lack of desires for attachment is central in the definition of nomads. Exile is argued to be a material uprooting that is a product of violence, wars or poverty in which one is denied access to home or homeland.

For Edward Said, exile is a product of material spatial uprooting. He argues that exile "is the 'unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home' (ibid: 173). Exiles are cut off their geographical roots and their past, therefore, they find themselves in an urgent reconstitution of their lost past and rootedless present by a desire to belong to restored people.

In his introduction to the book *Home, Exile, Homeland*, Hamid Naficy (1999) deconstructs some of the material uprooting conditions to exile. Naficy argues that although it is inevitably bound to

homeland and the possibility of return, exile can also be at home, when the displacement is social and not geographical or material¹. It is possible to be forced into exile and not to wish to a return, or to return to find home not a home anymore: “to return home but not fully arrive, to be nomad and yet in exile” (ibid: 3).

Home in Exile and Exile at Home

Can we theoretically talk about two experiences as separate? Is home distinguishable from exile as the mentioned literature implied?

When trying to deconstruct both concepts, the first step is to identify the hierarchy within the two. Home is always seen as the positive and preferable experience, while exile, being viewed as the anti-thesis of home, thus the negative one. Derrida’s form of deconstruction would switch the order of the two and then asks if the two concepts would still be defined the same as in the original order. Concepts as well as experiences are always in relations to its others. So what happens when these relations are reversed, or what happens when the two experiences can not be distinguished or segregated?

In her article Smadar Lavie (1996) points to the state of paradoxes where being at home is also being in exile, where home is displacement. For Lavie home is not confined in a home(land) or in a space of originality or familiarity. Radically speaking, home, for her, is a state of belonging and identification to an imagined idea of ‘home’. In her study of Palestinian citizen of Israel and Mizrahi Jews citizen of Israel (descent of Arab countries), she points to the alienation that both communities feel while presumably ‘being at home’. For Mizrahi Jews, who construct Israel as (a historical and ideal) homeland, being under a hegemonic European Jewish (Ashkenazi) state-control, it is a state of exile or diaspora, where the wished-home is not home anymore. Similarly, for Palestinian citizen of Israel, living under Jewish European state in their indigenous home(lands), is a state of alienation and exile. Therefore, in such conditions there is no ‘home’ at ‘home’; home becomes impossible or becomes relocated and reimagined in the borderlines between ‘original home and desired ‘home’.

The Queer Experience: Home in Exile, Exile at home

In understanding home and exile I take example of queer. Queer is not only a position that is socially distinguished, but also as an identity or social positioning that is always in movement from the margins to the center and from the center to the margins. Queer people migrate and sometimes escape their home(land) in search for a place of visibility, belonging and comfort in being “out”. Drawing on Anne-Marie Fortier’s (2001, 2003) two articles, I argue that queer as an identity and a social positioning can not be fully at home or fully in a state of exile. For queer people, on the one hand, heteronormative and homophobic homes creates (moments of) exile. On the other hand, when escaping a homophobic ‘origins’, there is always a possibility of re-imagining and experiencing home in exile; home becomes where exile is. In this, exile and home are spaces of liminality or inbetweenness, a state of not fully here and never fully there.

Exile at home: Queer Displacement in ‘home-as-origin’

An experience that many queer people encounter is the demystification of home as a space of comfort or familiarity, identification and placement or rooting. For many queer people who live in heteronormative societies, where kinship, marriage, interactions or family structure is always already heterosexual, home is a space of denial of self identity that sometimes it is associated with being violently ‘closeted’. Instead of imagining home or homeland as a space of familiarity and security, for queer home is fear. Fear from exposing different desires, fear from outing and fear from loss of attachments and loss of familiarity. In such cases, home(lands) resembles exile in terms of

lacking security and feeling of belonging.

In heteronormative and homophobic societies queer's identity is denied of acknowledgment, and sometimes denied from existence². People who are queer are alienated from their homes and sometimes the desired 'home' is imagined 'out there' in other country (Fortier 2003: 2, 2001: 407-408); and their 'childhood' or 'familiar' home imagined as exile. Exile is denied from material and spatial being. Similarly, queers in heteronormative homes are metaphorically and in some cases materially denied from existing, they are "kicked out" if they are sexually "out". The formation of home in exile when exile-is-home(land) is a product of symbolic violence, not only of a physical one.

Home in Exile: Queer's Home is 'Out' there

When home-is-exile, migration is imagined as homecoming (Fortier 2003: 2): exile becomes home. Out there, in cities where the queer scene is visible (however, not necessarily accepted), queer migrants imagine and desire their queerness to be indistinguishable, in the meaning of not discriminatory, but a 'normative' one. In their wish they see themselves surrounded by familiarity, by emphasizing the familiar, as habitual environment they were used to, and familiar as reconstructing the queer community as family.

Exile is imagined as home since there is a possibility of re-locating, in the exile, a displaced and uprooted identification, at home. While at home identity and identification with difference is denied, exile becomes the imagined source of identity acknowledgment. For many of queer migrant, the reason to why they migrate is to find the possibility of being 'out' without fear of being denied (sexual/gender) identity. The experience of queer migrant is of relocating the object that caused the dislocation from childhood home, to the queer, sometimes Western, new home. Through relocating and re-placing the displaced, queers in exile, paradoxically, become at home.

On the Borderline: Not at Home and Not in Exile

While argued before queer's home can be located in exile and exile can come home, it is worth noting the impossibility of speaking about full arrival home and complete exile. While queers feel home is 'out', they never cease remembering 'home' that is left behind. Queer migrant are attached to their homes 'back home'. Although constantly rejecting the memories of violence identity- denial and isolation, they re-remember homes as romantic times where one is at his/her 'natural' surrounding. Some relate to this natural surrounding as the common language and others as the availability of familiar food, music and friendships. Home is not 'there' and it is not fully 'here'. When I asked some of them about the possibility of 'returning' home, they pointed the impossibility of being 'in' the closet there when they got used to being 'out' here.

Home back home is always re-remembered and re-constructed in the conscious and practice of queer migrants. Home is not only far there but it invades the new-homes produced here. Some queer migrant's notions of homes are wished and sometimes practiced to resemble homes in their country of 'origins'. Paradoxically, memories of homes become desired as home, where queers share culture, language ethics or moral with those who they left behind. For queers, home in exile is never fully 'home'; while, back home is not 'home'. Queers' home is located in the liminal spaces of in between new-homes and lost-homes; it is never achieved and never forgotten.

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P.S.

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