

Figurations of Violence and Belonging

*Queerness, Migrant-hood and Nationalism
in Cyberspace and Beyond*



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Preface

[T]he seemingly not there [...] is a seething presence. Seething, it makes a striking impression; seething, it makes everything we do see just as it is, charged with the occluded and forgotten past.

—Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 1997: 195.

This book was written in the seething presence of violent pasts: some extensively commemorated, like Jewish persecution during the Nazi regime; some remembered only selectively, like the Stalinist political terror; some forgotten, like same-sex relations in the Soviet labour camps. At the same time, writing the book was charged with the violent present: daily homophobia and racism, the on-going colonial enterprise; raging military warfare in Israel/Palestine, simultaneously localised as a national issue and globalised as part of the ‘war on terror’. Legitimised, glorified or normalised into the mundane, violence often becomes invisible, especially to those untouched by it or to those who benefit from its fruits. Theoretically and politically, this book is committed precisely to the invisible – to the ‘occluded and forgotten’, as Avery Gordon puts it. I follow Gordon’s powerful insight that what is seemingly not there often has a seething presence and demands our attention – be it the seductive embrace of colonial nationalism; the queer sexiness of war; the unnoticed death and destruction just beyond our doorsteps; the shadows of the past; or what Jasbir Puar in her reflection on Gordon’s work calls ‘the ghosts of the future that we can already sniff’ (2007: xx).¹

- 1 In her discussion of ‘future that is already here [...] yet unknown but for a split second’, Puar puts forward the notion of ‘antecedent temporality’ – ‘ghost [...] that we can already sniff’. She elaborates: ‘Haunting in this sense defuses a binary between past and present – because indeed the becoming-future in haunting us – while its ontological debt to that which once was cautions against an easy privileging of the fetish of innovation, of what might otherwise be demeaned as an unthinking reach for that which is trendy or cutting edge’ (Puar 2007: xx).

The analysis, presented here, is a form of situated knowledge (Castañeda 2002; Haraway 1991, 1997); it comes from the particular, and in a way, also very personal, perspective of someone writing from both within and outside, someone, simultaneously entangled in the existing regime, privileged by it, and committed to challenging it. Like those queer immigrants who are at the centre of this book, I was born and raised in the former Soviet Union. Like them, I left as part of the large wave of late-Soviet and post-Soviet emigration that began in the end of 1980s, following *perestrojka* and democratisation. Like them, I arrived in Israel, together with many other Soviet Jews and their family members, welcomed by the national project of Jewish repatriation. Like them, I was also part of the emerging 'Russian' queer scene that has developed in Israel and in cyberspace since the late 1990s and continues to thrive to this day.

My generation of post-Soviet queers witnesses both the tremendous changes in the acceptance of queer sexualities, and the stubborn persistence of poisonous homophobia. My life, like the lives of other queer immigrants, goes against what is seen as normal and culturally acceptable by many post-Soviet subjects in both Russia and the émigré diaspora; our public visibility causes rage and violence, verbal and physical, within and outside our émigré communities. At the same time, our queerness hardly prevents us from settling in or moving around what Eyal Weizman (2007) poignantly calls the 'hollow land' of Israel/Palestine, whose 'elastic geography'² is about a complex and sophisticated system of land grabbing,³ settlements, borders

2 '[T]he frontiers of the Occupied Territories are not rigid and fixed at all; rather, they are elastic, and in constant transformation. The linear border, a cartographic imaginary inherited from the military and political spatiality of the nation state has splintered into a multitude of temporary, transportable, deployable and removable border-synonyms [...] that shrink and expand the territory at will. These borders are dynamic, constantly shifting, ebbing and flowing; they creep along, stealthily surrounding Palestinian villages and roads. They may even erupt into Palestinian living rooms, bursting in through the house walls. [...] Elastic territories could thus not be understood as benign environments: highly elastic political space is often more dangerous and deadly than a static, rigid one' (Weizman 2007: 6–7).

3 Which, contrary to the popular view, did not stop but rather intensified after the 1993 Oslo agreement.

and checkpoints, all of which constitute the 'colonial present' (Gregory 2004b) of geographical and political control over Palestinian life, while building the national home for Jewish Israelis.

Past experience of racialisation and non-belonging (as Jews), and ongoing instances of ethnic and sexual marginalisation (as newcomers and as queers) can make the promise of national homecoming particularly tempting. The transition from a racial and ethnic minority into a national majority, when migrating from the former Soviet Union to Israel, indeed has many appealing gains: economic, political and emotional. The intensity of longing to belong, and the pleasure of having *where* to belong, should not be underestimated. Like other immigrants, queer and straight alike, I sensed, on so many moving occasions, the seductive powers of the nation's hug that makes one feel at home in one's country. But belonging should come with responsibility. Rather than accepting the privileges of this given nationhood, it is imperative to ask, what are its costs. Who does it leave homeless? On whose continuous losses – of history, of land, of culture and identity – are the national gains based?

Thinking more specifically about Russian-Israeli queers, I want to face their – and my own – complicity in the Israeli colonial nationalism and its violences; an uneasy and painful, but, I believe, necessary, process. Among other things, this process means questioning the comforts of Israeli nationhood, conditionally offered to Russian-speaking queer 'repatriates', as long as they act as 'docile patriots' (Puar and Rai 2002) and as long as they 'loyally repeat the nation', to paraphrase Jin Haritaworn's (2008) eloquent words.⁴ This book aims to confront and interrogate the racism and militarism that make up this nationhood's daily reality within and outside the queer scene. In that sense, the book responds to Puar's call to 'underscore contingency and complicity [of queerness] with dominant

4 In his discussion of white gay sexuality and citizenship in Britain, and in particular, the much celebrated gay inclusion into the military, which happened at the time of military invasion in Afghanistan and Iraq, Haritaworn notes, that 'the performance of military masculinity, once a subversive, parodic repetition of a violently heterosexual masculinity from which gay men were excluded, has become a loyal repetition to the nation' (Haritaworn 2008: n.p.).

formations' (Puar 2005: 122) such as those of nationalism and colonialism. But I am also looking for a more nuanced analysis of queerness that emerges at the intersection of marginality and dominance, privilege and exclusion, production *and* reception of violence. This book is a journey into the profound ambivalences of lives and psyches of those who are simultaneously positioned at the centre and margins of the Israeli nation and of post-Soviet diaspora: as Jews, as Eastern European immigrants, and as queers. It looks into the multifarious webs of race, sexuality and nation; into unexpected twists of collective remembering and forgetting; into moments of connection and alienation; and into ambivalences and contradictions of both violence and belonging.

Writing this book away from Israel/Palestine, from what might appear to some as the 'safe heaven' of my current academic position in the UK,⁵ I am facing a double difficulty. On one hand, my critique of Israeli nationalism might be dismissed by people there because I currently live abroad as part of the idea that only those residing in the country have the right to criticise it. Of course, when such critique comes from a resident, other grounds for dismissal are quickly found. On the other hand, writing about issues related to Israel/Palestine for the English-speaking audience *outside* of it, I am often facing a simplistic and reductionist understanding of social, political and cultural life there, coming from both activists and some academics. Les Back in his discussion of the relations between injuries of class and the presence of racism in white working class life in south-east London, notes that 'it is the task of sociological listening to render this moral and political complexity without either becoming an apologist for racism or reducing such lives to a caricature of absolute evil and violent thuggery' (Back 2007: 84). So, too, this book aims to render the complexity of addressing the lives of queer immigrants who can be simultaneously embraced by the national home and symbolically erased from it; and who are both privileged and injured by Israeli colonial nationhood. My aim is precisely to move away from the reductionist and caricaturist understanding

5 I thank Claudia Castañeda for pointing out the importance to account for such a possible reading.

of life in Israel, while not being an apologist for its ongoing violence or for the complicity of those who embrace it. Responding to Back's call for attentive sociological listening, I hope to write critically, yet responsibly, about the community and the country of which I am, however ambivalently, a member. I hope to open up, rather than reproduce, the simplistic dichotomies of 'colonised and coloniser', and of victims and perpetrators, and suggest instead a more compound reading of social and psychic life at the intersection of queerness, migranhood and nationalism.

Listening to the occluded and forgotten, looking into the past and the future, this book is first and foremost about the contested, troubled and ambiguous *present*, in Israel/Palestine and beyond.