

An Exploration of Feelings in the Migration Process among Queer Partners

Ahlstedt, Sara *The Feeling of Migration: Narratives of Queer Intimacies and Partner Migration* (diss.). Linköping University: Linköping Studies in Arts and Science No. 686, 2016 (443 pages)

THIS THESIS MAKES a strong contribution to the growing body of research exploring the relationship between sexuality and migration. As the title suggests, it focuses on the emotions and feelings experienced by migrants and their geographically stationary partners in non-heterosexual relationships. Sara Ahlstedt starts by making a distinction between affect, emotion, and feeling, although the term affect is not used in the rest of the thesis. In her analysis, affect is the “physical reaction,” emotion is “structural, social and cultural” and feeling is the “individual, subjective experience” (Ahlstedt 2016, 80). Ahlstedt explores emotions and feelings through narrative analysis of fifteen interviews with (mostly) coupled queer people. While some have migrated, others have remained stationary and are partners of those who has migrated.

The thesis is divided into eight chapters. Each chapter introduces or discusses at least one of the couples interviewed. The initial four chapters introduce the research objectives, questions, and methods; discuss their relevance to theories of homonationalism, intimate citizenship, and entanglements; and situate the thesis within the field of queer mi-

gration, intimate migration, and privileged migration. Since even these preliminary chapters use quotations from participants, the reader arrives at the actual results chapters having already become acquainted with the interviewees (at the end of the thesis there are also a shorter, detailed description of each participant).

Each of the result chapters discusses an emotion: love, loss, and finally, belonging. In the chapter on love, Ahlstedt discusses normative narratives of love and relationships, and how different emotional entanglements affect one's ability to uphold those narratives. She finds that couples make life easier by aligning themselves with a romantic vision of fully committed and "equal" love, which could entail expressing signs of love, such as being spontaneous and impatient. She also discusses the struggle to fit into this narrative when one's body cannot conform to equal love because of mismatched race, age, or gender subjectivities. In the following chapter, she discusses the emotion of loss and losing what we sometimes never knew we had. Ahlstedt emphasises that all stories of migration are stories about leaving behind some freedoms and privileges that are attained through race, class, and nationality. For a less privileged partner, the process of migrating can be frightening even before any movement occurs, with ideas and fears of what it will be like at the new location. Taking the step of migrating means that bonds with the people left behind will never be the same and going back could feel impossible. Even in relationships that are seemingly equal in privilege at the start, the migrating partner experiences feelings of losing independence and becoming dependent. In the last chapter of results, Ahlstedt discusses the emotion of belonging, highlighting ways of feeling at home in the new country and the politics related to being included or excluded. This chapter also highlights the migration application process and the feelings relating to receiving a residence permit. Ahlstedt explains that the application process was perceived as unproblematic for most of the interviewees since being queer and in a monogamous relationship is in line with Swedish narratives of coupledom. Thus, the relationship is perceived as genuine by authorities. In the final concluding chapter, Ahlstedt highlights how the thesis contributes

to the three research fields identified in the introductory chapters. She clearly shows how homonationalism, intimate citizenship, and personal entanglements matter to the migration process. By emphasising the often non-normative nature of feelings within couples where one partner is migrating, she shows why migrations that seem easy from a distance can be emotionally challenging.

In virtually all theses, there are flaws and weaker spots. As should be clear in my introduction, this is neither just a thesis about migration of non-heterosexuals (and their emotions), nor is it simply about non-heterosexuals that have migrated for a partner. The question is whether it is about *queer partner* migration more generally. It is important to stress that the thesis generally covers *privileged* partner migration. Upon reviewing Ahlstedt's descriptions of her participants, one sees that all but two were highly educated. This distinction affects which feelings and emotions are discussed and how they are discussed. Given that Ahlstedt uses a sample of mainly coupled migrants and interviews them together, it is perhaps not surprising that the dominant narratives are ones of love, loss and belonging. She does acknowledge this but it should perhaps not be swept away so easily.

The provision of detailed information about interviewees also makes it easy to identify them. Partners and friends of the participants could certainly glean their identities and outsiders may also be able to do so. This circumstance means that the narratives most certainly have been "washed" in many steps of the research process, not only by the participants themselves but also by the researcher. Ahlstedt explains that she "left out certain sensitive discussions about participants' relationships" (127). The production of the narratives and the thesis itself leave the reader with a feeling that they are being told a distinctly neo-liberal, middle-class version of the migration process and the feelings associated with it. The feelings and emotions discussed would have been vastly different if she interviewed migrants from lower classes and granted them greater anonymity.

Ahlstedt claims that she does not wish to generalise. At the same time, the reader is given the impression that the emotions of love, loss,

and belonging are generalisable to queer partners where one has migrated. This becomes problematic when participants claim that the migration application process was not an issue. Stories from the interviewees Max and Luke, for example, indicate that the application process – not just the time between the actual interview and receiving residence but the time until *permanent* residence is granted – was tainted with other feelings, such as stress and fear, which are not easily conceptualised into the notion of love, loss, and belonging. This highlights that emotions structured by the migration application process are difficult to squeeze out from the white, middle-class narratives produced during couple interviews. In my view, this limitation is something that should be addressed in future studies.

That said, this thesis also makes notable contributions. First, few migration studies focus on both migrant and non-migrant partners. Ahlstedt manages to show how migration affects non-migrating partners, highlighting the emotional work they put into the process. Second, she highlights queer women in the migration process. Previous studies have highlighted queer cisgendered men but both cisgendered and non-cisgendered queer women remain a blank spot. Ahlstedt's attention to both of these gaps is worth commendation.

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