

# Queer migration politics: activist rhetoric and coalitional possibilities, by Karma R. Chávez<sup>1</sup>

## ***Book Review***

*Daniel Braga Nascimento*<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Summary

*“Queer migration politics: activist rhetoric and coalitional possibilities”* is a book written by Karma R. Chávez, published by the University of Illinois Press in 2013, ISBN 9780252038105, 232p. The author is a Mexican *chicana* living in Arizona and that identifies herself as an activist and a scholar reflects on the work and action made by queer activists in order to change or stress migration queer politics. She argues that there is a lack of studies on the activist’s rhetoric and she also states that being an activist does not mean you are a hero or that you do not commit mistakes.

The book is divided in four chapters where the first two focuses on the creation of political visions and the second two of the use of strategies. In the first chapter the author analyses the manifestos pro-migration in 2006 in United States which connects queer migration and migration politics. She explores what she calls differential vision, a way of doing politics in a coalitional perspective. It has an original approach due the fact the author engages the reader into queer politics, immigration rights and social justice.

The second chapter raises the voice of Yasmin Nair, an Indian immigrant and queer migration activist. The text acknowledges the opposition the mainstream LGBT immigration rights community due the fact

---

<sup>1</sup> We thank Gabriel Damasceno, PhD candidate in Law at UNISINOS/RS – Brazil, for his active participation in editing this text.

<sup>2</sup> Masters in migration and intercultural relation studies at the University of Oldenburg (Germany). Master in Law from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul - UFRGS. Graduated in Social and Legal Sciences from the Cenecista Institute of Higher Education of Santo Ângelo. ORCID n. 0000-0002-3316-0719

this community leaves some migrants out when tries to embrace only “good people”. The idea of this rhetorical is named *radical interactionality*, where power and oppression are stressed to show how are produced the subjects, institutions and ideologies.

Chapter three focuses in migrant youth activism, pointing the coming out as a way to feel part of the migrant community. It studies DREAM activism (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act, which emphasizes the way this policy was a pathway to citizenship for youth without documents in US. The last chapter, chapter four, moves to coalitional politics, using as case-study two Tucson organizations, Wingspan and CDH (*Coalición de Derechos Humanos*), groups that gather together in order to fight migration oppression, educate local groups and change the local perception. The book concludes with reflections of the importance of queer migration politics and goes back to the initial question related to coalition as an effective strategy of doing politics.

## 2. Development of the argument

United States of America had a ban to immigrants who were gay until 1990. This was over only with the Immigration Act of 1990. Not only that, until 2010, HIV-positive people were excluded to migrate to USA. These two removals were done by activism from LGBTI groups that worked with immigration (LGIRTF – Lesbian and Gay Immigration Rights Task Force).

These acts led to a certain kind of activism made by queer politicians against migration policies, which the book analyses. The book uses a methodology of analysis of activist rhetoric in the public space and the role played by the activists on the construction of queer migration politics. As a

rhetorician and embedded with activism at the Wingspan<sup>3</sup> and the CDH, she invites the readers to dig in *coalition moments*.

Nair, the Indian queer woman and immigrant, is the focus of chapter two. She represents a strong critique on the internet against neoliberalism. Having this perspective is quite different from the mainstream LGBTI immigration rights community, where the focus goes to binational same-sex couples. Although she is able to support the same-sex marriage to immigrants, she also states that “marriage (or permanent partnership) is not a magical fix for anyone’s immigration status problem (CHÁVEZ, 2013, p. 50)”. This chapter also presents the idea of *Radical Interactionality*. Radical stays with the idea of addressing the problem on its roots. Interactionality comes from intersectionality, the idea of understanding multiple oppressions, which has been used in academia to stress the relations between power, oppression and identity.

For many years there are a shift at academia and activism on the euphemism of calling “undocumented” in spite of “illegal”. The author says “it is not radical to claim that the undocumented are not illegal. In fact, that is a deeply conservative point. It is far more radical to think about all of us taking on the onus of interrogating the notion of the illegal. Do we, as people who believe in justice and fairness, want to leave anyone behind? (CHÁVEZ, 2013, 59). This called my attention due the fact many years I, as a migration scholar, have ensured that everyone who worked with me and the lecturers I have been, used the correct term “undocumented”. There was a certain sureness that this is the correct and there is no other way to define people who violate the immigration law. The reflection of the author urges us to reflect more than just being documented or undocumented, but to go further in addressing borders regime, policies and the current legislation.

The book presents the idea of coalition as an alternative for the mainstream LGBT immigration movements and to the utopian politics of

---

<sup>3</sup> Arizona’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community center.

some queer theories. When it states as an alternative, it does not mean that exclude these approaches, but put them in a coalition that focus on the here and now of these communities. The author exposes that coalition is a “horizon” (CHAVEZ, 2013, p. 146), a place to join forces and make political change at the present time and not utopian politics. In the third moment of the book, at chapter 3, the movement called *coming out*, an action taken in 2010 by young activism to press the government showing that they were undocumented and unafraid which lead to the DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) and a huge coalition-building of queer as leaders in migration activism.

For the last chapter, she shows through data collection how the coalition of group of activists from the LGBTI and Immigration fields helped to build a new rhetorical in United States. She also addresses the challenges and difficulties found on these coalition due the fact of some clashes between, for example, the CDH and the Catholic Church when talking about “family values”.

The book provides an import insight related to groups that advocate for migration and groups that advocate for LGBT rights. Usually the two different groups have agendas that are focused on same-sex reunion, but when the two gather in a coalition it can produce a strong and powerful toll to change the situation of not only one couple but all the queer migrants. For the ones who also think the only activism possible is the one supporting same-sex reunion, as Immigration Equality<sup>4</sup> does, the book provides new ways of thinking and performing the migration politics.

The author has strong arguments and uses them in a coordinate way to understand the roots of activism and the critique to neoliberalism. The strong argument is that it is not easy to combine different groups in order to

---

<sup>4</sup> Immigration Equality is an United States’s leading LGBTQ immigrant rights organization. They represent and advocate for people from around the world fleeing violence, abuse, and persecution because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status. <https://www.immigrationequality.org>

produce change in the daily and current live of migrants. The authors also catch the attention of the reader since the beginning and probably intends to make the audience feel somehow uncomfortable to their activism. For a LGBT who reads the book and see the argument that not everything is fine with supporting the policy that support queers to join the United States army (Policy *Don't Ask Don't Tell*<sup>5</sup>), makes you think about the fact you are supporting militarism when you are supporting the end of this policy and the fact it is fair everyone (queer also) to join the US army. Not only this example, but the agenda of some lesbian and gay groups focusing in creation of hate crimes legislation is something criticized by the queer activists who reflect on the consequently rise of prison industrial complex.

Concerning some aspects the book arises, it is impossible to not think about the reports of Chechenia's persecution in 2017 (KRAMER, 2017), where many countries criticized the called concentration camps for LGBTI and the politics done all over the world to give asylum for those fleeing persecution. That was also a coalition moment where the LGBTI groups entered the migration field in order to produce a possible change in the now of those who were being persecuted. As the book was written in 2013, it shows how atemporal the ideas brought by the author can be used in different situations.

For those who already worked with LGBT Refugees it is a bright lecture on how to engage in coalition groups and not stay focused only on the queer studies but also in the migration queer politics. It contributes to the field of migration as an important way to stress a critical approach on activism and the way it is done. Its coherency is well addressed in the sense there is support from queer and decolonial authors as reference for the author's reflections. The author challenges the structured groups which advocate for LGBT rights and migration in order to give floor for the inclusion

---

<sup>5</sup> Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) was the official United States policy on military service to gays, bisexuals and lesbians, imposed by Clinton Administration on February 28, 1994. For 17 years, the law prohibited gays and lesbians from United States serving in the armed forces. (<https://www.hrc.org/resources/the-repeal-of-dont-ask-dont-tell>)

of those who are considered not “good gays” or “undocumented”. One weakness that could be pointed is the fact many references on the book are not well explained and it demands from the reader a certain time to research about the context it was written (United States).

An interesting start or end to the book is a visit through the many websites provided on the book. As the author also defines herself as a *cyberactivist*, checking the Nair’s post at <[www.againstequality.org](http://www.againstequality.org)>. Explore the work of Maria Lugones’, an Argentinian feminist and decolonial writer who is cited on the book many times also helps to understand the demands from a book that goes the mainstream agenda and reflects about coalition.

One example of coalition moments in Germany is the group Queer Refugees for Pride, a group exclusively of refugees and migrants from different countries of origin who are living in Germany. The group develop alliances with other LGBTQ rights organizations and supporters to be able to count on them and create coalition. On their website, they present themselves as coalitional politics (FELLNER, 2018).

When talking about queer politics and migration it is also possible to remember the concept of *homonationalism*, brought up by Jasbin Puar (2013), who reflected the idea of states that promote LGBT rights to reinforce a feeling of belonging of their LGBT individuals but promotes violence against other population and reinforcing a strong sense of Islamophobia. The classical example of Israel, as a homonationalist state also stress the *Pinkwashing*<sup>6</sup> accusation that Israel and some European countries practice it.

### 3. Evaluation

To conclude, one of the most interesting metaphor the book does is a sentence from the trans activist Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, when the

---

<sup>6</sup> Pinkwashing is the promotion of LGBT rights in order to hide other practices of a state. Nation-state vests with a status of “gay-friendly” against “homophobia” in order to be at the democratic/liberal states side (PUAR, 2013).

author reflects on the small actions that coalition moments can impact in daily life: our dreams have become so small (Chavez, 2013, p. 150). In spite of dreaming big to make a real change, the queer migration politics has focused in small dreams. The example given is the case of United States approved the family reunion for LGBTI families, a small dream that has to be celebrated, but again, does not focus on the big realms of oppression and exclusion that neoliberalism produces. The book leaves the question whether queer migration politics will help to transform the nation-state policies in a way that cover more people and their diversities.

## References

CHÁVEZ, Karma. **Queer Migration Politics. Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities**. University of Illinois, 2013.

FELLNER, Astrid M.; NOSSEN, Eva K. **The politics of (dis)location: queer migration, activism and coalitional possibilities**. *GRAMMA: Journal of Theory and Criticism*: Vol.25, 2018; eISSN: 2529-1793. Available on: <http://ejournals.lib.auth.gr/gramma/article/view/6591/6330> Access on: 17/12/2018

KRAMER, Andrew E. 'They Starve You. They Shock You': Inside the Anti-Gay Pogrom in Chechnya. *The New York Times*, 21 apr. 2017. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/world/europe/chechnya-russia-attacks-gays.html>. Accessed on: 1 dec. 2019.

PUAR, Jasbir. **Rethinking homonationalism**. *Int. J. Middle East Stud.* 45 (2013) Available on: [http://sites.middlebury.edu/sexandsociety/files/2015/01/Puar\\_Rethinking-Homonationalism.pdf](http://sites.middlebury.edu/sexandsociety/files/2015/01/Puar_Rethinking-Homonationalism.pdf). Access on: 17/12/2018.

Artigo recebido em: 17/09/2019.

Aceito para publicação em: 30/04/2020.