

GAY ENOUGH?

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ABSTRACT:

Taking an inspiration in Khosravi's auto-ethnographic work, "Illegal Traveler" (2010), the aim of this paper is to explore and problematize the inexorably gendered, sexualized and racialized border discourse on migration and asylum processes and policies within a larger Euro-centric context, and in Sweden particularly. It is only spoken of young boys and young men, whether in the context of number of asylum seekers, irregular/illegal travelers and undocumented migrants or demonstrations protesting deportations. Simply based on discursive realities, young, "unaccompanied" male asylum seekers outnumber that of female asylum seekers, which in itself is rather problematic and stems from and within the hegemonic heteronormative structures. However, these marginalized gender and sexualities cannot be entirely "nonexistent" within the asylum processes. Therefore, this paper maps a framework for shading light on a certain invisibility of non-normative representations of gender or marginalized gender representations etc. in relation to the supposed burgeoning flow of asylum seekers in Sweden.

Key words: gender, migration, asylum seeker, LGBTQ

The mainstream scholarship on queer migration is often few and far between, there is however an increasing focus on some of the complexities embodied in relations to LGBTQ asylum processes, discourses and practices.

Previous studies, such as Luibheid's, on the construction of illegal bodies, on queer migration and American same sex couple's struggles to have their relationships recognized as a ground for "legal immigration." Miller's "Gay Enough?" similarly takes up the much-debated issue of validating one's sexuality and how "problematic regimes of knowledge are deployed to generate legible models of identity" (Miller 2005 in Epps et al). Khosravi (2011) as well, though sporadically, refers to the Swedish Migration Office's certain implicit obliviousness towards queer asylum seekers. Sager's "Everyday Clandestinity" (2011) whom I have cited quite frequently, discusses the gendered and sexualized, albeit fleetingly, processes of asylum seekers who live "hidden" as an aftermath of numerous rejected asylum applications.

Luibheid (2008) writes about a positive increase in the significance of sexuality within the studies of migration. She writes, sexuality scholarship has begun to explore that, "sexuality... is centrally implicated in construction, regulation, and reworking of sexual identities, communities, politics and cultures (Luibheid, 2008 p.169). Luibheid citing Mansalan (2006) argues for a standpoint in contesting binary assumptions on "queer migrations" as a mere journey of "from oppression to liberation" (Luibheid, 2008 p.169). Mansalan's account of queer migration as a complex set of intersecting aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity and class is one of the more profound works on the topic.

Among the abovementioned scholars, the common link insofar as contesting the homohetero binary rationalities, profoundly grounded in heteronormative structures prevalent in much of migration discourses, particularly, in "progressive societies," such as Sweden. Accordingly, by situating heteronormative discourses and discursive practices of "migration" in the center, it enables scholars to "negotiate complicated and competing theoretical and political mandates" (Luibheid, 2008 p.171). In addition, much of the scholarship aims at an extra emphasis on the significance of the temporality, spatiality and geographical relocations processes of queer migration. In particular, to also be cautious of the vocal but highly west-centric, "saving their gays" discourse as well. Scholars such as Puar and Appadurai have warned for the politically prevailing and motivated "homonationalist" discourses present in much of the neo-imperialist, neo-colonial political rhetoric. Although, the space of this paper does not allow for more discussion on the burgeoning homonationalist doctrines, Luibheid points that there seems to be certain renegotiations, albeit contradictory and shifting, in many western nation-states' political agenda in regards to e.g. queer asylum seekers. There seems to be a conscious effort to be perceived as "progressive, humane or humanitarian" whilst, all the while, (re)appropriating identities within a reckoned normalized paradigm and language.

In addition to a critical analysis of the discourses and the discursive processes in terms of representation, I would as well like to discuss a certain normalizing, bordering, fetishism of "bodily wounds" within migratory and asylum processes. Although, not regarded officially a criterion, there seem to be an implicit fixation on suffering, and bodily wounds. As Khosravi citing Malkki states, "Bodily wounds are accepted as objective evidence of

suffering and regarded as more reliable than words” (Malkki 1997 in Khosravi, 2011 p.113). McClintock outlines fetishism within a broader Marxist inspired psychoanalytical parameter as, “the displacement onto an object or a person of contradictions that cannot be resolved on a personal level” (McClintock, 2005 p.184). McClintock demonstrates that fetishes entail multiple genealogies and mark “a crisis in social meaning as the embodiment of an impossible irresolution” (McClintock, 2005 p.184). Accordingly, that there is a need for a triangulated analysis of race, gender and class to explore Imperialist genealogies that still occupy certain imageries, narratives and discursive practices, for example, in relation to contemporary migration discourses. Ours is a time of border fetishism and a fetishistic guarding of these physical borders, hence by signifying and demarcating certain bodies, both as a way to confine them and also gain a certain “symbolic control over”, what McClintock calls, “terrifying ambiguities” and “undesirable strangers” of the social body. Similarly, on a related note, on the rejection and certain appropriation of identities, such as the queer, the “strange-r” deviant from the acceptable norm, Phelan claims, is based on the notion that, “strangers threaten because of their ambiguity rather than simply their difference” (Phelan, 2001 p.115).

As this paper is rather limited both spatially and temporarily, I would like to mention that methodologically it is based on secondary sources, that is, studies and literature previously researched and written. The analysis is based on a broad discussion by applying and relating theories and feminist literature and hence to establish a discussion therein. Furthermore, supporting Maja Sager’s “healthy disrespect” notion, I am taking a similar distance from the more traditional forms of methodological approaches. I hope to put forward discussions and analyses that might not be traditionally bound yet comprehensible (Sager, 2011 p.26). Theoretically, the aim is to situate the paper within a broader feminist and post-colonial critique of the mainstream hypotheses, representations and practices on migratory and asylum seeking processes, in particular, on the doubly invisible bodies and subjects such as, the marginalized (non-normative gender identities and sexualities) and LGBTQ asylum seekers. I believe that Khosravi’s method of auto-ethnographic study on migratory processes concerning LGBTQ persons may spur desires of scholar to expand on the theme within a more comprehensive framework. Ultimately, the discussion taken up in this paper will pave the way for a potential research plan as an extension on Khosravi and Sager’s works, in mapping the progress or lack thereof, and the current milieu in regards to the Swedish asylum rights, movements and policies.

The primary aim of this paper, however, is to critically assess the current milieu concerning the discourses and processes of asylum rights and movements, and to situate it in a greater post/neocolonial framework. In a sense, to what extend the ongoing hegemonic discourses on asylum processes affect and stagnant certain marginalized gender and sexual identities’ mobility, and in the process invisibilize certain agencies and subjectivities? How does the burgeoning institutional culture of disbelief, in regards to who deserves to be an asylum seeker aid in producing and maintaining the dominant heteronormative structures? How does one prove one is oppressed, wounded, persecuted, gay, Trans enough?

There might be a certain inconsistency in terms of vocabulary and choice of words that may seem confusing. Most of the literature I refer to, have in many ways used, “queer and LGBTQ” rather interchangeably as a result I may have used it in a similar fashion.

Although, much of the literature within current migration scholarship associated more or less with traditional conceptualizations of nation-states and citizenship, covered rather expansively, often omit a certain gendered and sexualized nature of such concepts. Migratory processes, policies, and movements are, nonetheless, consistently taking place in shifting and complex backdrops (Sager, 2011 p.34).

Contemporary migration and asylum policies is often linked to and is based on a “security-migration nexus” is said to have emerged post the Cold War and intensified as an aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (Khosravi, 2010 p.100; Sager, 2011 p.34). Similarly, the stringent and the radicalized migration policies have entailed a certain criminalization discourse of the illegal (Khosravi, 2010 p.100). Khosravi claims, illegal border crossing is not only considered judicially wrong but is seen as a moral offence to the “ethical and moral” veins of true civilized societies. The illegal stranger not only criminally breaks physical borders, but is suspected to disrupt and threaten moral cores of the social body. Hence, according to the technologies of citizenship, it is not only the illegal/irregular/undocumented that is trouble, but those who help or aid such endeavors as well. The ethical citizen is consistently produced and contrasted with these “leftovers/illegals”- the anti-citizens (Khosravi, 2010 p.115-116).

Coincidentally these very anti-citizens tend to be the most law-abiding “citizens”. Khosravi mentions of a Bangladeshi undocumented migrant humorously talking of being cautious of, as minor a thing as, “jay walking” while crossing the street. He writes, “Ironically, the undocumented citizen exemplifies the impeccable citizen” (Khosravi, 2010 p.91). At the same time, there is a conflicting and shifting relationship between how the anticitizen other is constructed, represented and their (the anti-citizen’s) own self-presentation. Similarly, how one identifies and the way one becomes identified by others is complexly both a cause and effect of the very

construction of binary dichotomies. Within the current Swedish migratory and asylum rights processes not only representation, could be argued to be a problem but issues concerning validation vis-à-vis increasing culture of disbelief in the validity of those very appeal, that is, one has to continuously prove that one is oppressed, persecuted and actually queer enough to be a deserving asylum seeker, is as common.

On this note, I would like to draw a discussion upon Butler's theorization of the subject and its inherent "incapability" to give a full account of itself outside the preceding structures. According to Butler, the subject, the "I" conditions and is conditioned by the societal norms and in relation to the structures. The subject formation is almost always grounded in its opacity to give or possess whole knowledge of itself. That is, human life is inherently incapable of giving a full account of itself (Butler, 2005 p.20). It can aim to achieve a certain understanding of itself by narrating what it considers it is. However, the narration in itself is and the "I" can only "tell its story...according to recognizable norms" (Butler, 2005 p.52). Therefore, the process of asylum seeking in itself is built on certain already formed and recognized stories and narrations. The migratory officers and institutions "perceive" what they recognize, and in the process, construct and (re)appropriate certain bodies, identities, experiences and stories in accordance with the preceding structures, and dismiss those that do not fit the familiar. Following Butler's argument, in a way, there is no definite mode of absolute authentic (self) narratives. Under such circumstances, many asylum seekers are, hence, indirectly forced to enact a certain exacerbated version of their victimized position. Sager for instance, writes, "one overarching experience from the asylum process, one that is shared by all the asylum seeking informants, is the feeling of not having been listened to or taken seriously" (Sager, 2011 p.179). Such an argument is even more ostensible if one assesses the evidently gendered and sexualized aspects of the asylum processes within the more general frames of asylum policies and gendered practices of those legislations.

In particular, when the institutional body embodies a particular gendered vocabulary which does not permit any space for individual experiences and narratives, particularly experiences related to sexualized and gender based violence. As such, for many it becomes impossible to express or give a self-narration considered absolutely adequate and acceptable. Not the least, because they are not authentic enough, but that, the institutions lack certain gender sensitive approach. According to Sager, "the perception and representation of the real "refugee" is often that of a man with a well-documented position in dissident movements" (Sager, 2011 p.159). Sager further claims this notion to be grounded in the hegemonic political discourses of the public/private dichotomy, wherein the political is often seen as public, while gender and sexuality related persecutions are often pushed into the 'private'. As a result, which then in turn marks certain persecutions as not only "not important enough" but also depicted as a form of a dangerous and "racist" understanding of cultural relativism, of "normal crimes" (Sager, 2011 p.160).

Sager citing Spijkerboer (2000) elaborates, "'real' torture is regarded as a political act built on technological and scientific knowledge and thereby as a political persecution, whilst other kinds of violence, especially sexualized violence against women, have a stronger connotation of being physical and bodily. These forms of violence... regarded as being private or as being "normal" crimes" (Spijkerboer cited in Sager p.160). It is particularly relevant when speaking of e.g. women fleeing from domestic abuse from home countries, such cases of violence are often signified to be part of "their culture" sort of characteristic (Sager, 2011 p.160).

Besides, the lack of an inclusive institutional language, many female and LGBTQ asylum seekers face and fear certain normalized judgments to fully express or share their "true-r" stories and narratives grounded in an omnipotent heteronormative nature of institutions and the stigmatized assumptions of marginalized "other" sexualities and gender identities and expressions. For instance, Khosravi refers to cases, wherein gay and lesbian asylum seekers, on many occasions, have not been able to openly discuss their sexual orientation and preferences. In some cases solely due to the mere presence of the 'interpreter'. The interpreter, often a male figure, connotes certain symbolic authority over the applicant for not only having the power to 'intentionally' misconstrue their cases. But also because of a certain fear of being judged and marginalized, once and if, the applicant is granted asylum and is required to live within the proximity of the diaspora. Besides, the perceived and feared judgments, some applicants may not even have the words to describe or to recall past traumatic experiences due to an internalized shame embodying certain sexualized violence. Sager claims, how women from Bosnia who had used a different, more implicit language to describe their war experiences, the migration officers had in those cases not deemed them to be "serious" enough. Because of using, "survived the war" instead of "rape", many such cases were dismissed and many of these applicants were forced to live in "clandestinity" (Sager, 2011 p.164). She writes, "The formalized demands and narrow definitions of violence and persecution in the asylum process clash brutally with Ardian's [Ana's husbands] way of trying to find a language to describe their experiences in the interstices between cultural taboos, traumatic memories and bodily pain [...] norms surrounding the assessment of asylum grounds tend to privilege certain modes of talking and representation of one's experiences" (Sager, 2011 p.164). The incapability of institutions to make space for an

inclusive and individual assessment leads then to a certain institutionalized culture of suspicion, especially, if the asylum seeker is not able to give a full account of its experiences and persecutions.

This culture of disbelief (Khosravi, 2011) and in Lewis's words "culture of suspicion" (Lewis, 2004) of certain perception and representation of the asylum seekers often, tend to, besides, the obviously prevalent complete lack of recognition produces a non-visibility. The lack of recognition prevailing much of the asylum seekers renders them as invisible bodies. An ethical assessment of this lack of recognition can be traced both to Butler's theory of the accountability in relation to agency and recognition and to the Foucauldian conception of the confession. Butler's notion of accountability and recognition manifests itself in the understanding that "The question of ethics emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed; where one is, as it were, at the limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgement" (Butler, 2005 p.22). In other words, in acknowledging that there is an inherent limit to our knowledge of oneself, based on "a coherent, cohesive narrative of [one] self" (Butler, 2005 p.22) while also "recognizing that others have similar limits" is when a certain humility is ensued.

Similarly, relevant to Butler's theory of the innate opaque self-narration, accountability, recognition and ethical responsibility, Foucault's conceptualization of "confession" holds a central and more pertinent space for understanding the workings of power related to asylum processes. Foucault draws upon the act of confession as profound ground for the production of a certain truth, he writes, "Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth" (Foucault, 1978 p.56). "Confession," sprung from theological, religious domains of confessing sins, to civil and interpersonal relationships of love, thoughts, desires, illnesses to dilemmas, as a technique and strategy to produce, (re)produce a type of normalcy is far and wide. As a mandatory societal norm, confession has become a pillar of our social obsession, by "[its] infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage" (Foucault, 1978 p.59). In Foucault's words, one confesses, or is coerced to confess" (Foucault, 1978 p.59). Under such circumstance, our society has become so over-obsessed with the act of confession, that mere beings, enacting and performing the ritual, have entirely forgotten its- the confession's- innate and imbued power relations. It is as well in such an complexity that the processes of asylum seeking is probed to make the seeker 'tell its inner truths', to re-tell, confess some of the inner most, traumatic experiences so it can be gain the credibility of coming into being a human.

Khosravi mentions of another incident, in which a certain asylum seeking person had consulted a certain lawyer, in regards to his case for applying asylum. This person due to some lack of knowledge in the Swedish asylum policies and a general misunderstanding, missed certain deadline, and had asked the lawyer if they could "tweak certain facts"? Khosravi writes, the lawyer had evidently become upset, upon such a suggestion, and said, "In this country we are Protestant, and we do not lie" (Khosravi, 2010 p.118).

In a similar vein, the "production of criminality", or the concept of criminalizing "illegal travelers" is as well grounded in a classic Foucauldian thinking. The production of criminality or considering certain bodies as criminal and illegal is related to in the way "the norm, the standard, and the acceptable" is created. It is perhaps one of the utmost basic forms of creating and maintaining a "unified conception of the national identity of citizens" (Khosravi, 2010 p.115). Thus, in its ambiguity, in its peculiarity, and its illegality, the undocumented migrant and the asylum seeker has to consistently (re)appropriate its language, its emotions, and its experiences according to what literally sells and maintain the fetishism or be reckoned a "criminal".

As discussed elsewhere, representation and confession in relation the criminalization of illegal and irregular migrants and the subsequent emergence of a culture of disbelief and suspicion, often associated to, economic migrants, that is, those who supposedly take advantage of the welfare state's subsidiaries and benefits (Sager, 2011 p.170). While this mode of suspicious mistrust is often linked to "family-oriented" asylum seekers; the younger, e.g. unaccompanied males, females, and LGBTQ asylum seekers are subjected to other different modes of suspicious examinations. For example, through elaborate, and at times, disturbingly intimate questions and interrogations, to prove their sexual preference, orientation and gender expressions. Reflecting back upon the discussion of deservingness to "stay" is both anticipated on the basis of a coherent narrative of the self, although, within a certain normalized vocabulary and language, but also through detailed descriptions of one's suffering. Khosravi writes how "deservingness" is often measured through human suffering. The culture of disbelief is built upon a fetishistic obsession over how much one has suffered. "To be granted asylum, one should deserve it by having suffered" (Khosravi, 2010 p.113). It is deemed even better if one can prove one's suffering through traces and evidence of bodily wounds. In current asylum seeking policies and processes, human suffering is "traceable to bodies" that is, "bodily wounds more reliable and valid than words" (Khosravi, 2010 p.113).

It is also in accordance to such active constructions of the binary citizen and the anti-citizen, that the "illegal" once granted asylum is still not exempted from imaginary, other invisible borders of the new "host" country.

Khosravi speaks of a border gaze rather prevalent, which is “not an innocent act of seeing, but an episteme determining what/who is visible and invisible” (Khosravi, 2010 p.76). Furthermore, “the gaze is hierarchically interwoven of complex gender, race and class factors” (Khosravi, 2010 p.76). In some ways, this gaze marks the “new” member’s position not as an individual but as a type which is embodied not in only through the confession sort of asylum processes, but as well as a way to further control and contain the stranger. Fanon had spoken of this gaze in colonial context, of othering and objectifying of the colonized men and women both “racially and sexually” (McClintock, 1995). On a similar note, on how the gaze is experienced by the one being seen through the eyes of the other. Dubois had stated of a certain “double consciousness,” as an African American “Negro” and an American as discussed in a seminar. Khosravi sharing a similar point of view, mentions about writing short story about a young black man who always wore dark sunglasses, day and night, indoors and outdoors, as a way to protect himself from the “collective judgmental gaze, he could see without being seen” (Khosravi, 2010 p.71).

In contextualizing this obsession or fetishism over human suffering and bodily wounds, as McClintock had argued within the Imperial discourses, in some ways reveal certain anxieties displaced onto an object or a person of contradictions that cannot be resolved on a personal level” (McClintock, 1995 p.184). McClintock on fetishism, as more than mere acts of eroticism, wishes to explore, “fetishism as the historical enactment of ambiguity itself” (McClintock, 1995 p.184). In a similar vein, the over emphasis on “bodily wounds” to bring credibility to justify one’s deservingness for being granted asylum, could be argued to be based in certain distant fetishism of the unknown, the spatially distant barbarism and ambiguous, stranger others. Within the imperial context, McClintock had assessed how the narratives of the native land were always filled with overtly sexualized imageries and metaphors. The colonial imperials did not merely “discover” lands, but they also provided the natives representation, recognition- albeit negatively visibility, hence existence. In a similar way, as mentioned earlier, “ours is a time of border fetishism”. By examining the asylum processes, policies and movements, we can notice, how these very gendered, sexualized and racialized borders have their root in the imperial era, and in many ways still continue to do so.

In conclusion, as McClintock argues, the myriad of Imperial border constructions grounded in classist, gendered, sexualized and racialized still occupy various institutional discourses and discursive practices. These practices and processes become even more evident when assessed in relation to complex interwoven conceptualizations of representation, accountability, visibility and notions of “deservingness”. Luibheid encourages of understanding, “how migration regimes and settlement policies contribute to producing not only those who become variously defined as “queer,” “deviant,” or “abnormal” but also those who become defined as normative or “normal” within a binary structure intimately tied to racial, gender, class, cultural, and other hierarchies” (Luibheid, 2008 p.172). The discourses available and utilized by nation-states embedded in Universalist notions of the ethical and moral in regards to legality, citizenship, sexualized and gendered border constructions, as discussed earlier, as much embodies the structures as it does the subject. As Foucault’s concept of “subjectivation” theory, the very process and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means through which it becomes a self-conscious identity and agent (Foucault cited in Mahmood, 2005 p.29). Therefore, identities and processes are subject to change if contested. Lastly, Butler’s notion of ethical responsibility on becoming conscious of one’s own limitations in expressing and giving a “full” account of oneself and recognizing a similar “limitation” in others, could perhaps ensure more humane and ethical understandings of accountability and responsibility. Particularly, in relations to political modes and discourses, she concludes, “The subject comes always with limitations, is always made in part from something else that is not itself—a history, an unconscious, a set of structures, the history of reason—which gives the lie to its self-grounding pretentions” (Butler, 2005 p.116).

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