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DEBUNKING THE LIBERATION NARRATIVE: RETHINKING QUEER MIGRATION AND ASYLUM TO FRANCE

Florent Chossière

In the late 1990s, France – along with other Global North jurisdictions – began to consider asylum claims involving persecution based on sexual orientation and/ or gender identity (SOGI). It increasingly came to recognize sexual and gender minorities as constituting a ‘particular social group’,¹ thereby opening up the possibility for the granting of refugee status.² In the decades since, queer migration scholars have critiqued discourses that explain the movement of queer³ people from the Global South to the Global North as a form of ‘liberation’. More precisely, they have questioned the framing of queer migration as a journey from absolute repression to total freedom, whereby individuals who reach the Global North are suddenly able to live openly, freely and safely. Although some individuals might describe their experiences along these lines, the migration-as-liberation framing remains problematic, especially when it serves as the primary discourse for understanding queer mobility. Such narratives oversimplify the experiences of queer migrants by erasing new forms of marginalization that they may face (Cantu 2009; Manalansan 2003). These narratives can also fuel neo-imperialist practices by positioning the Global North as the ‘protector’ of sexual and gender minorities (Luibheid 2005).

Within the migration-as-liberation framing, queer refugees are positioned as ‘mediating agents’ whose experiences of persecution not only affirm the supposed superiority of the Global North but also reinforce geopolitical hierarchies (Jenicek, Wong and Lee 2009). This culturalization and externalization of homo/ transphobia often justifies interventionist practices by states in the Global North. This is perhaps best illustrated in Jasbir Puar’s (2007) conceptual framework of ‘homonationalism’ and ‘sexual exceptionalism’. Puar highlights how, after the 9/11 attacks, a particular form of queerness was integrated into the United States’ nation-making project and imperialist interventions. In the European context, Eric Fassin (2006) underlines how the rhetoric of ‘sexual democracy’ is used to legitimize xenophobic, racist and Islamophobic immigration policies and practices. Furthermore, the geopolitics of sexual nationalisms obscure the colonial legacies and post-colonial tensions that shape contestations over sexual and gender rights in many Global South countries. Numerous scholars show how

¹ According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a ‘well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, *membership of a particular social group* or political opinion’ (emphasis added).

² I use the term ‘refugee’ to refer to individuals who have been recognized as such by a state and ‘asylum seeker’ for individuals who have lodged an application for protection but are still awaiting an official determination. ‘Migrant’ is used as a generic term, independently of administrative situations.

³ Not everyone may recognize themselves in the categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). I use the term ‘queer’ to cover the variety of gender and sexual identities and/or practices that may not conform to cis-heteronormativity. However, none of my interlocutors self-identified using the label ‘queer’.

hetero-patriarchal discourses inform post-colonial nation-building processes on the African continent, noting that some states continue to frame homosexuality as ‘unAfrican’ even though laws criminalizing same-sex sexuality were inherited from colonial powers (Awondo 2017; Matebeni and Pereira 2014; M’Baye 2013; Msibi 2011).

Writing in the context of Canada, David Murray (2014) unpacks the dangers of the migration-as-liberation framing, noting how it reduces queer migration to a set narrative arc: *[F]rom closeted in their country of origin to ‘out’ in Canada that coincides with unidirectional spatial migration towards the nation of refuge, culminating in the liberating moment of the refugee hearing where the claimant can officially ‘come out’ to the state who will protect her and allow her the freedom to be openly ‘gay’ ‘lesbian’ ‘bisexual’ or ‘transgendered’ [sic] and expect passive, docile citizenship in return* (453).

As Murray suggests, the lived experiences of queer migrants tell a different story about countries of reception, suggesting that these locations are far from the ‘liberating’ sanctuaries they market themselves as. First, SOGI asylum procedures – as with other asylum adjudications – operate as a filtering device, excluding those whose credibility appears questionable (Tschalaer 2019; Dustin and Held 2018; Akin 2017; Giametta 2017; Kobelinsky 2012). Second, the depiction of queer migration as a moment of emancipation and ontological becoming obscures the precariousness that shapes people’s everyday lives (Chossiere, 2021, 2020; Wimark 2021; Lee 2019). Put another way, queer migrants and asylum seekers can be exposed to new power relations that leave them socially, economically and politically marginalized.

This chapter extends the above critiques by interrogating the complex migration trajectories of queer people from Africa – specifically Algeria, Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Senegal, Tunisia and Uganda – who have applied for, or are attempting to apply for, SOGI asylum in France. Their experiences disrupt categories and discourses commonly associated with queer migration, most notably the assumption that the granting of refugee status is a necessarily liberating moment. They also show how France’s increasingly restrictive migration policies can block vulnerable individuals from receiving state protection, even though these policies have been justified in part as a necessary defence against ‘fake’ asylum seekers (Akoka 2020). In other words, policies nominally designed to preserve the asylum system actually work to limit access for those who may need it most.

Literature on SOGI asylum has focused largely on administrative procedures (usually refugee status adjudications), experiences of exclusion/marginalization and, most recently, the role of organizations or support services (Cesaro 2021). Driving this focus is the conceptualization of asylum as a linear spatio-temporal process – what Murray (2014) refers to as a ‘unidirectional spatial migration ... culminating in the liberating moment of the refugee hearing’ (453). The dominance of this view means that little attention is paid to what happens in the time and space between a queer person’s departure from their country of origin and the lodging of an asylum claim in a reception country. This overlooks how Global North bordering regimes obstruct the movement of the very people that homonationalist rhetoric purports to care about. By examining the lived experiences of African queer migrants before they apply for state protection, I argue that asylum and migration policies represent a continuum of exclusionary practices. Thus, I add to scholarship that views queer asylum as a transnational migration issue (Lee 2019; Murray 2014; Randazzo 2005).

My analysis is carried out in three steps. First, I highlight the disjuncture between political/administrative categories and actual lived experiences by taking into consideration the multiplicity of factors leading queer people to migrate. In doing so I problematize discourses

that position ‘refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’ as discrete, dichotomous categories. I then focus on my informants’ migration trajectories and how they came to apply for SOGI asylum in France, thus emphasizing the non-linearity of these processes. Finally, I examine the ways in which asylum can be mobilized by individuals to build practices of transnational queer solidarity. Embedded within the migration-as-liberation framing is an assumption that, once refugee status is granted, queer persons cut all ties with their country of origin (Murray 2014). Tracing my informants’ transnational ties reveals this belief to be false, while also offering a counterpoint to representations of asylum seekers as passive victims waiting for help (Ehrkamp 2016).

Methodology

This chapter draws on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between February 2017 and January 2020 at a Paris-based organization supporting queer asylum seekers and refugees. The organization mainly provides guidance on navigating the French asylum system, but also runs language classes and community-building activities. As a volunteer, I provided assistance to individual SOGI asylum seekers regarding their claims, taught French classes, conducted initial assessments with new clients and took part in social activities.

Volunteering allowed me to meet a large number of queer asylum seekers and refugees, seventy-six of whom became the focus of my study. These were people with whom I had at least three discussions about their life, their migration journey and/or the asylum procedure. The vast majority – sixty individuals – came from African countries, and it is these cases that I draw on in this chapter. This high proportion reflects both the characteristics of the people assisted by the organization and the general demographic of SOGI asylum in France⁴. In addition to this ethnographic and observational data, I conducted interviews with twenty-three queer asylum seekers and refugees (nineteen cisgender men and four cisgender women) between the ages of twenty-one and sixty-three⁵.

Blurring the boundaries of political categories

Since the ‘migrant crisis’⁶ of 2015, European political and media discourses have propagated a simplistic understanding of migratory phenomena, primarily by reinforcing a hard distinction between ‘refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’. Refugees are presented as individuals who flee persecution and war and are therefore deserving of protection. Indeed, European countries present themselves as having a moral and political duty to welcome such individuals. By contrast, economic migrants are portrayed and treated as undesirable; they are depicted as

⁴ French Office for Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) does not provide statistics on the grounds/reasons for asylum applications. However, OFPRA does indicate that most SOGI applications originate from the African continent. Overall, most of the asylum seekers applying for SOGI are men. Transgender and intersex people remain a small minority among applicants (Pegliasco 2019).

⁵ Women are under-represented in the general population assisted by the organization (only 20 per cent in 2019). Transgender people are largely a minority. My selfidentification as a man also played a role in the dominance of men in my sample. A Ugandan woman explicitly mentioned it as a reason she did not want to be interviewed by me.

⁶ The term ‘migrant crisis’ emerged in the public sphere in reference to the influx of newcomers to Europe and to a series of shipwrecks in the Mediterranean in 2015. Migration scholars have been particularly critical of this language, noting the way both data and the media have been used to frame it as a ‘crisis’ (see Leconte, Toureille and Grasland 2019; Migreurop 2017). Some scholars argue that if there is indeed a crisis, it is a ‘crisis of response’ rather than a ‘crisis of migration’ (Lendaro, Rodier and Vertongen 2019).

the world's poor and unemployed, desperately trying to access Europe in order to exploit national welfare systems and access economic opportunities. In such a political context, asylum procedures are intrinsically tied to suspicions about migrants. According to dominant rhetoric, refugee status is reserved for those who 'truly' need protection and must be vigilantly defended from misuse by economic migrants (Fassin and Kobelinsky 2012).

This is only the most recent configuration in a long history of distrust towards migration and asylum. In France, the majority of asylum applications have been rejected since the mid-1980s, following the introduction of increasingly restrictive immigration policies in the 1970s (Fassin and Kobelinsky 2012). The anti-migrant discourses underpinning recent policy shifts have been convincingly critiqued by scholars and activists. Many point to the inadequacies of existing migration categories, highlighting a disconnect between the lived experiences of individuals/groups on the move and the language used to describe them. Rather than being neutral descriptors, these categories have been transformed into political tools that exclude and regulate (Lendaro, Rodier and Vertongen 2019; Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Migreurop 2017). Furthermore, scholars have questioned the notion of an absolute definition for who or what constitutes a 'refugee'. They emphasize the historical, spatial, political and social fluctuations that determine who is worthy of state protection (Akoka 2020; Agier and Madeira 2017; Fassin 2013).

Following these contributions, I intend to blur the boundaries of existing political categories by tracing the complex experiences, identities and trajectories of queer African migrants. In particular, I trouble the notion of singular causality by emphasizing the multiple factors that compel queer Africans to migrate. Hector Carrillo's (2004) definition of 'sexual migration' provides a helpful framing for this discussion:

[Sexual migration describes] international migration that is motivated, fully or partially, by the sexuality of those who migrate, including motivations connected to sexual desires and pleasures, the pursuit of romantic relations with foreign partners, the exploration of new self-definitions of sexual identity, the need to distance oneself from experiences of discrimination or oppression caused by sexual difference, or the search for greater sexual equality and rights. (59)

Carrillo rightly points out that sexuality may be one among many factors that trigger migration. His definition resonates with the experiences of my interlocutors. Amir⁷ is a gay man from Morocco who has now been granted refugee status in France. His trajectory illustrates the difficulty of assigning causality – that is, the danger of reducing queer migration to a single factor. When Amir arrived in France, he was living with his boyfriend, Yanis, who is also from Morocco. They met in Turkey when they were both students: Amir in Morocco and Yanis in France. Before meeting Yanis, Amir tried to go to Canada to find work, but was unable to secure the required visa. Reflecting on his decision to move to Canada, Amir explained: 'It had nothing to do with my homosexuality, but it was already to escape Morocco, because I knew that those problems with my family would one day happen.' After he met Yanis, Amir regularly visited him in France. One day, Amir's brother found out about his homosexuality and started an argument that culminated in Amir being injured. Amir then decided to move to France and apply for asylum. How should we classify Amir – as a refugee, an economic migrant or simply a romantic partner seeking to be reunited? Amir's trajectory does not lend itself to being defined by existing classificatory structures.

Migration trajectories are deeply connected to the socio-economic status of individuals – not all people facing persecution can afford to pay for a trip to France, whether direct or not. In the case of queer Africans, differences in socioeconomic status enable competing

⁷ All names are pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted in French and translated into English by the author.

engagements with heteronormativity. In studying the migrations of gay and lesbian Cameroonians to France, Fred Eboko and Patrick Awondo (2013) identify a form of ‘sexual nomadism’. This refers to frequent travel by individuals engaged in same-sex relationships in France, while they simultaneously maintain a heterosexual relationship – and everything that comes along with it (marriage, children, social status, etc.) – in Cameroon. Such an arrangement is inevitably elitist, given that it is only open to those who can afford regular transcontinental mobility. However, this articulation of queer mobility – which foregrounds the interplay between socio-economic status, sexuality and migration – disrupts the perception that queer Africans by default do not have the means to negotiate migration. In truth, some may opt for a circulatory mobility pattern, or even choose to stay permanently on the continent.

Paying close attention to the ways in which socio-economic status and sexuality intertwine destabilizes rigid distinctions between refugees and economic migrants. It shows that persecution and the strategies developed to cope with it often impact considerably on the targeted individual’s economic situation. In Arsene’s case, homophobic persecution brought economic precarity, which in turn shaped his migration trajectory:

When the situation [in Cote d’Ivoire] became unbearable for me, I stayed there and faced the threats for eight months. But then it came to a point where I was really struggling financially, because I was always having to move – if people knew I was in a certain place, I had to move to live in another one. The hunt was still going on.

Discrimination can be experienced very differently depending on a person’s social position and available capital. Applying an intersectional lens uncovers the complex interplay of factors that can trigger and potentially constrain movement. I heard multiple accounts of queer migration being precipitated by the discovery of a romantic relationship. In cases involving couples from different socio-economic backgrounds, it was usually the partner in a lower class position who left, as the following example attests:

Moussa: He [in reference to former partner] is still in Mali, but it’s over between us.

Florent: And he didn’t face any problem?

Moussa: But this guy, he’s a rich guy. He lives in his villa. Who will come to say something to him? If you open your mouth, he gives you money and then you keep quiet. That’s the way it works in Mali.

A similar dynamic is present in David’s story. When his family discovered he was gay, David left for another town in DRC. He was recognized by someone from his former neighbourhood, who then informed David’s father of his whereabouts, leading to a confrontation. At the time David was in a relationship with a local businessman, whom he called Mr John:

I called Mr John. We met; I explained the problem. The first thing he said, ‘Did [your father] mention me?’ ‘No.’ ... One week later, my father came to intimidate my landlady. He came with a police car. But actually he wanted to know the guy I was in a relationship with to prosecute him. I warned Mr John and he told me, ‘David, I will think about this. I think the best solution is for you to leave this country so it doesn’t impact my position. I’m also scared. A lot of politicians here are homosexuals. But they hide it. If people know I’m homosexual, it will make a lot of problems. So you have to go abroad.’ He asked me to go live with him in South Africa where he had his business activities. But I said no; I knew that it’s tough [in South Africa]. And I knew that for him it was a way of getting rid of me. I said I wanted to go to Europe. A few days later, Mr John said, ‘Okay, David, you have to go to Europe to erase all traces.’

In the end, Mr John funded David’s trip to France.

As these examples demonstrate, the link between persecution and migration cannot be divorced from larger socio-economic factors. For example, low socioeconomic status may explain unwanted immobility for some individuals (wanting to leave but not having the means to do so), whereas for others it may cause unwanted mobility (wanting to stay but not having

the socio-economic capital to protect themselves). Those with a high socio-economic status, such as Mr John, may have the option of chosen immobility based on their social status and available resources. Recognizing the nuanced nature of persecution, and the varying tactics used to survive it, helps to avoid geographical essentialism. Indeed, obscuring the impact of socio-economic factors on individual experiences of persecution allows for African countries to be portrayed as intrinsically and uniformly hostile towards queer people, in line with culturalist and homonationalist discourses.

Lastly, the pretext for migration can, in and of itself, be an issue for queer people who find themselves having to navigate both European border regimes and heteronormative social systems. Cross-border movement can generate new configurations of disclosure, in that potential asylum applicants are expected to indicate their belonging to and identification with sexual or gender minorities in their home country. To get around this, people may try to fit into limited migration categories that will allow them to reach France, thus bypassing the asylum system altogether and avoiding a forced break with family. Abdel and Mustafa started their relationship in Algeria. After experiencing persecution, Mustafa moved to France, where he was granted refugee status. Abdel sometimes visits Mustafa in France. Abdel's parents, who found out about their relationship, do not know that Mustafa now lives in France.

Abdel: I love Mustafa so much. I don't want to leave him alone, and I don't know what will happen to me in Algeria. I want to come here with him, but in a configuration where it doesn't get worse with my family. I want to find a solution that does not make my family think that I came to France because of what they discovered about me.

Florent: That's why you're trying to get a student visa?

Abdel: To hide behind it. That's the plain truth. ... I don't want to stay. It's not a question that I want to stay, but it's a question that I want my family, this image of me, I want my family to erase it.

Abdel's example shows that political categories of migration – which are ostensibly designed to track people's motives and thus regulate their access to and movement within states – often fail to reflect lived realities. The strategies people employ to regularize their presence in France may not be intrinsically linked to their reasons for migrating. Instead, they reflect how individuals negotiate multiple power relationships to adjust their movement in a restrictive context marked both by cis-heteronormativity in their home country and by an anti-migrant border regime in Europe.

Looking closely at the trajectories of queer Africans exposes how rigid migration categories are unable to apprehend and respond to complex motivations and needs. It also disrupts simplistic representations of queer African migrants within homonationalist frameworks, insofar as 'queer refugees' cannot be so simply distinguished from other 'migrants'. Europe's restrictive migration policies can also jeopardize the strategies deployed by queer Africans to manage expectations of cis-heteronormativity. This is evident in Abdel's case, where his failed attempts to get a student visa have placed him in an even more precarious position.

Non-direct paths

The migration-as-liberation narrative is predicated on a negative comparison between the country of origin and the country of reception, implying that asylum is an essential step towards securing freedom. What happens to a person in between these locations is rarely afforded the same attention. In this part of the chapter, I highlight obstacles that queer Africans

face before applying for, and potentially being granted, refugee status. The latter is usually considered the culmination of the liberation process, indicating a successful transition from oppression to emancipation.

However, when the complexities of a person's migration trajectory are considered, the migration-as-liberation narrative is shown to be reductive at best and misleading at worst. Examining the complex motivations, negotiations and movements that constitute a person's migration can paint a very different picture. For example, press coverage tends to suggest that any queer person 'deserving' of protection can easily reach an asylum destination and appeal for assistance (Jenicek, Wong and Lee 2009). This type of reporting obscures the ways in which Global North border regimes prevent the majority of queer people facing persecution from ever being granted access (Lee 2019; El-Hage and Lee 2016). The European asylum system presents 'migration exclusion [as] morally defensible' (Bhabha 2002: 161) by perpetuating the myth that targeted assistance is provided to those most in need, despite the fact that those who might be recognized as refugees are subjected to restrictive policies that block or constrain their movements. For example, African citizens wishing to come to Europe can apply for a Schengen visa, authorizing a stay up to ninety days in the common zone. In accordance with the Dublin III Regulation, however, only one EU member state can examine an asylum application. The responsibility for this lies with whichever state issued the Schengen visa. Managing and approving visas remains a competence of each EU member state through local consulates, with each state determining what supporting documentation is required. This harmonization of European visa policies relies on a shared concern about the control of movement, especially from countries considered poor and unstable, and effectively transforms visa applications into the first line of European migration control (Migreurop 2017). The Schengen visa can thus be understood as a strategy for policing movement from a distance (Guild and Bigo 2003). Queer Africans attempting to escape persecution are not exempt from visa systems; they, too, encounter this immediate barrier before entering France, or Europe more generally. This is evident in the two examples below, the first of which is taken from field notes and the second from an interview:

Moussa invites Mustafa and I to have some tea at his place this afternoon. ... He talks to us about a man he knows in Mali who faces serious problems right now. It's his first boyfriend, who managed to contact Moussa recently. As he has been [publicly] identified as gay, he's often beaten up by his older brother, encounters difficulties at his job, and no longer dares to go out. He recently applied for a visa to come to France, but it has been refused. He called Moussa in the middle of the night, panicked, to explain the situation. Moussa is thinking about sending him some money at the end of the month, as [his ex-boyfriend] has almost nothing left; he already sold his car and other stuff to pay the guy who was supposed to get him a visa, but it didn't work.

Florent: When you were in Cameroon, did you try to get a visa to come directly to France?

Maurice: Well, I told myself, when the problems started, I told myself that if I initiate a procedure to get a visa, because I saw a lot of people applying for a visa, it took such a long time and it didn't even work for most of them, it didn't work, most of the documents you are asked [to provide] by the embassy, you don't have them. Because they may ask you for an employment contract, you have to be a taxpayer, and show your payrolls, a bank account, all of this, there are a lot of things. And I didn't have [these documents].

Maurice's situation demonstrates how highly restrictive visa conditions are all the more difficult to meet for queer people facing persecution; the length of the administrative procedure and the number of supporting documents required are incompatible with an urgent need to leave. Furthermore, the economic precarity brought about by homo/transphobia increases the likelihood that a queer person cannot meet the minimum financial requirements. Miriam Ticktin

(2005) shows how asylum procedures are intrinsically linked to restrictive migration policies as they operate as humanitarian exceptions. Following her observation, I argue that this exception frame can be applied beyond asylum decision-making itself since migration policies actively exclude people from accessing asylum by constraining their movements in the first place.

Similarly, the claim that a quick and spontaneous application for asylum can be lodged once in France needs to be critically examined. The stories I collected point to the myriad obstacles that queer Africans face. Accessing asylum requires a certain amount of knowledge and information. Some people I met explained that when they first arrived in France, they had little to no understanding of the asylum procedure. Those who had heard about asylum associated it with political repression or escaping war, unaware of the possibility of being granted refuge due to SOGI persecution. The dual isolation experienced by queer migrants – many are excluded from or avoid country-of-origin networks, while also struggling to access queer support structures in the reception country – may further reduce their chance of learning about SOGI asylum (Randazzo 2005). However, this does not mean that queer Africans in France remain helpless victims. Rather, they deploy strategies to look for information while carefully avoiding dangerous encounters. In the quote below, Adama describes how he exploited language differences to access information while in presence of heterosexual migrants:

[In an informal migrant camp in Paris] there was a Somali. I borrowed his phone and I typed [in French] because he speaks and writes Arabic, so he doesn't understand. So I took his phone and looked for 'queer organisations in France'. Even in French, he doesn't know what it means. I found the organisation [for queer asylum seekers], noted the address and went there.

Even when they have such information, potential asylum seekers may be reluctant to initiate the procedure, as this means having to interact with the state. Making oneself known to the authorities can be a source of anxiety, particularly for those who entered France with false documents or with no documents. Fatima, a lesbian woman from Senegal, was hesitant to come forward even after learning about SOGI asylum:

I was scared. I was really scared because, I don't know, I've never done this. Is it a good or bad thing? Is it safe? Will they not bring me back to my country? To be honest with you, I was so scared. [My friends] talked to me about this in August. But I was [intentionally] slowing down the process. I was saying, 'You never know what can happen. I can't; I'm too scared.' Until September, when I decided, 'Okay, let's go, even if they take me back to Senegal, never mind.'

Fatima's fears provide another example of the impact of restrictive migration policies on access to asylum. Her reluctance to initiate the asylum process, produced by an acute sense of non-belonging, points to the murky relationship between asylum systems and restrictive migration policies. The insecurity engendered by France's border regime fuelled Fatima's hesitation; she anticipated being met with suspicion and hostility, despite France's endorsement of sexual and gender rights. When one looks closely at the lived experiences of people crossing borders, including potential SOGI refugees like Fatima, it is evident that the 'humanitarian' asylum system and 'regulated' migration system are not distinct, but rather work in tandem to limit access to space and rights (Ticktin 2005).

The prohibition on visiting one's country of origin once refugee status is granted emerged as another concern⁸. This prospect is all the more daunting for people involved in

⁸ People who have been granted refugee status are also provided with a travel document, which is not valid for the country of their nationality. Refugees can apply for French citizenship if they fulfil certain criteria. On obtaining citizenship, they are able to travel as any other French citizen.

advocacy work. Yves, an LGBT and HIV rights campaigner, used to travel between France and Cote d'Ivoire as part of his activism, but was forced to stop due to travel restrictions:

When I say I hesitated about asylum, [it is] because when you speak about asylum, you speak about not going back to your country. When you talk to me about this, I'm thinking maybe [I will apply], sooner or later, not now, not tomorrow, but, for an activist, staying here is like, well, you have to stop forever. But stopping forever is not my goal. And, at first, I didn't know that after you get the refugee status, you can apply for French citizenship and then go to Cote d'Ivoire. ... So first, for me, it was very hard to accept asylum, because when I started this process, I stopped everything.

The transition between migration and asylum is by no means automatic, nor is it simple and quick. The granting of asylum is framed as a liberating moment in hegemonic narratives, yet Yves' experience shows that it is also synonymous with renunciation and abandonment. For Yves, being 'free' in France is contingent on giving up his direct activism and letting go of key ties with Cote d'Ivoire. Doing so comes at a great personal cost.

Abdel's case reveals similar tensions. Denied a student visa and facing new threats in Algeria, Abdel resigned himself to applying for asylum in France. This meant breaking ties with his family – precisely what he had hoped to avoid. Rather than providing queer people like Yves and Abdel with 'liberation', the asylum and migration systems undermine attempts to negotiate cis-heteronormativity in ways that work for specific individuals. In a context of restrictive migration policies, asylum applications by queer Africans can sometimes represent a last resort; it is an option they hope to avoid because of the potential disadvantages it brings.

Transnational queer solidarities

Writing in relation to Canada, Murray (2014) points out the performative nature of queer asylum claims:

[T]he hegemonic migration to liberation nation narrative usually ends with the LGBT refugee claimant making an emotional statement relating to their feelings of freedom, relief, happiness and desire to make Canada their new home ... In these final narrative moments, there is rarely any reference to the SOGI/LGBT refugee claimants' feelings about their country of origin and/or family or friends there. The implication is that they are starting anew, being reborn into the liberatory democratic nation-state. (465)

Yet, as the example of Yves shows, not all queer Africans wish to cut ties with their home country once in France. In this section, I extend this line of critique by drawing attention to transnational solidarity practices. These collective strategies undermine Global North states' self-portrayals as saviours and protectors, while also showing that queer Africans do not wait passively for 'rescue' (Ehrkamp 2016). SOGI asylum, along with the humanitarian apparatus associated with it, is just the latest manifestation of 'saving' queers from the Global South, the logic of which is firmly anchored in Global North sexual politics (Giametta and Havkin 2020). Thus, the formation and mobilization of informal transnational networks can be seen as 'acts of resistance' against restrictive migration policies (Lee 2019).

Following Camille Schmoll (2017), I use the notion of 'transnational social space' to describe 'migratory practices and identifications articulating distant places' (43)⁹. After arriving in France and becoming familiar with the asylum procedure, some queer Africans initiate

⁹ Quote translated from French by the author.

solidarity practices that extend into this transnational social space. These practices can consist of knowledge-sharing and even practical one-on-one support, such as circulating one's phone number through queer country-of-origin networks so as to support recent arrivals navigate administrative procedures. Another strategy is to introduce acquaintances to organizations that support queer asylum seekers. The organization where I volunteered held regular welcome sessions for potential clients. On a number of occasions, Adama brought along new people, providing them with both moral and practical support. He explained why he does this in our interview:

Adama: I help them to come to the meeting. I go with them, to make them registered, to put them in contact with volunteers. And, like this, I brought nine people to [the organisation]. ... But I always say to them, 'I cannot help you to get papers.' I tell them, '[the organisation] will not give you papers, but they can help you with your procedure. And they will help you in your life; they will help you to be self-confident.'

Florent: And do you give them, yourself, advice?

Adama: Yes, I do. I tell them, 'Start writing your story, explain why you left your country and why you cannot go back.' And I explain: 'Dates are important. Places also. When? Where?' I help them as I can, as I did for myself.

More general support can also be offered. Mamadou, a gay man from Cameroon who now has refugee status in France, posts informative videos on social media, using these platforms to share advice based on his personal experiences:

[O]ne guy said to me, 'If I come to France, what can I do? How can I apply for asylum?' [He contacted me] because, actually, I made a video on my Facebook page explaining to people what asylum is. So then they got in touch with me, gay people, that's it. But I don't recommend France to them, because the system is really not very good. Honestly, I was shocked when I saw asylum seekers sleeping on the street. ... Personally, to be honest, I don't recommend people to come to France ... The big problem in France is housing. ... If you have nobody to help you here, no [don't come]. I rather refer people to Belgium.

These examples complicate the migration-as-liberation narrative in which queer Africans are reduced to passive victims awaiting 'rescue'. Adama's and Mamadou's experiences show how asylum often results from solidarity practices initiated by queer Africans, rather than being benevolently bestowed by Global North states. Queer Africans already settled in France actively share knowledge on how to navigate borders regimes and asylum systems. Disseminating information is a crucial component of solidarity, in that it allows queer Africans to produce new transnational social imaginaries:

[M]uch of what people actually do transnationally is foregrounded by imaging, planning and strategizing; these must be valued and factored into people's agency. Despite the many advances in the transnational migration framework to date, the contributions of the social imaginary or 'mindwork' are still largely ignored. (Pessar and Mahler 2003: 817)

We can thus frame the diffusion of information about SOGI asylum from people in France to people in African countries as a form of collective agency, one that builds a new social imaginary. This transmission of knowledge becomes an important factor in how migration plays out, as exemplified by Abubakar's experience:

In 2016, Dramane came back to Senegal and he called me. When I saw him, he explained that I should think about my life, about what I'm living here, my sexual orientation, [how] I can't live properly in Senegal, [how] I need to apply for asylum in another country and live my true nature. ... Later, he went back to France. And me, when he told me this, I kept thinking of this, and I started to do everything necessary to leave.

Abubakar's situation emphasizes once again that queer migration can rarely be reduced to or explained by a single factor. It often relies on the circulation of information and

imaginaries in order to make mobility a reality. The integration of SOGI asylum into transnational social imaginaries appears as a major form of collective agency deployed by African queer people to navigate normative systems and restrictive border regimes. SOGI asylum results as much from these transnational practices of solidarity as it does from direct homo/transphobic persecution. The potential for a collective dimension to SOGI asylum disrupts the neoliberal logic on which the whole system is predicated; refugee status is normally understood to result solely from individual experiences (Akoka 2020), yet the examples above underscore its collective and often transnational dimensions.

Conclusion: Africa, Europe and the queer migrants in between

The framing of queer migration from Africa to Europe – and to the Global North more generally – as a linear movement towards liberation contributes to a polarized and essentialist vision of the world, one that pits the ‘tolerant’ Global North against the ‘barbaric’ Global South. Within this worldview, queer refugees are positioned as the ultimate mediating figures. Yet, these narratives obscure how people move between these two supposed geopolitical monoliths, as well as what happens in the spaces and times in between. Literature on SOGI asylum has worked to trouble this narrative by emphasizing how Global North asylum policies operate as filters, excluding many queer applicants through restrictive understandings of gender and sexuality, and by foregrounding the social and economic challenges facing queer migrants in reception countries. However, there remains an urgent need to look at less obvious dynamics of queer migration.

Examining the various stages of people’s journeys reveals the complexities of queer migration trajectories and the obstacles individuals negotiate when trying to reach a ‘liberating’ destination. It also troubles the perception of a direct, linear path to ‘freedom’. Uncovering the complexities of queer migrants’ experiences highlights major discrepancies between liberation discourses and the constraining and often violent European border regime encountered by queer Africans. Whereas political discourses present asylum and migration as oppositional, in the process fostering a distinction between ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’, the stories of queer Africans in France demonstrate the continuum between restrictive migration policies and access to asylum, between policing and humanitarianism (Ticktin 2005).

By examining the processes that led queer Africans to leave their countries of origin, I have revealed the disconnect between political migration categories and people’s actual lived experiences. Reconceptualizing the movement of queer Africans is vital if we are to move beyond reductive and homogenizing rhetoric. Queer Africans face myriad challenges in seeking protection, ranging from being unable to leave their country in the first place, to having a limited understanding of bureaucratic procedures and/or a fear of state authorities. Claiming asylum is by no means a straightforward or self-evident process. Rather, it results from various strategies deployed to overcome restrictive border regimes. The narratives presented above disrupt the categorizations to which queer asylum seekers are subjected. Administrative classifications work to regulate their movements, while media discourses portray queer refugees as individuals who are reborn, free in a new country and willing to forget their pasts and socio-cultural roots. However, by focusing on what happens in between France and various African countries, one can uncover collective practices of solidarity. These transnational spaces offer opportunities to resist cis-heteronormativity and to navigate border regimes and restrictive migration policies.

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