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Warming up narratives of community: Queer kinship and emotional exile

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Abstract

This text tackles questions of what makes a community and belonging possible and sensible. Rather than focusing on a specific community, it centers the ongoing collective living and communality at work in constructing and deconstructing narratives of belonging. The text is based on a year-long ethnographic fieldwork in gender-political communities in Helsinki, among people whose state-authorized residence in Finland is (sought to be) recognized based on the need for protection from sexuality- and gender-based violence in communities of origin/departure.[1] I begin with narratives that participants mobilize to make sense of belonging to a given community or collective (queer, multicultural, Finnish/European) and non-belonging to another (community of origin). Then, I discuss possibilities of affinity, alliance and politics that rethink normative/restrictive structures of identification and othering/exclusion. I foreground queerhood for 1) its praxis of problematizing normative boundaries of communities, 2) its juxtaposition of the intimate and the communal to mobilize vulnerability as transformative to violent structures. I argue that the precarity of queer racialized exiles might entail strategic, but possibly complacent, investment in racializing norms. This precludes consideration of unjust structures in the desired society of settlement. However, the realm of precarity opens to (re)consideration and contestations of the norms and terms of belonging to the idealized desired (Finnish/European/multicultural) community. Scholars have highlighted that experiencing racializing queer-political milieus induces shifts in racialized queers' narratives of belonging and affinity. My ethnography on mundane narratives in the uncertainty and unmooring of exile traces how abstracted and dichotomous/factionalist narratives of community open and warm up to a queerer sense of kinship that is more attuned to considerations of the lived-experience violence to difference (and the different) within and without these boundaries of belonging.

Keywords: alienation; exile and migration; narratives of community and belonging; queer kinship

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[1] I place a slash between the words 'origin' and 'departure' to problematize the meaning of 'origin.' It is paradoxical to assign the subject to a 'community of origin' as origin evokes essentialist assumptions of belonging. 'Departure' reflects a choice of departing both in the geographically conventional sense of departure, as well as the departure in consciousness that arguably happens much before the territorial displacement.

> Intending to make kin while not seeing both past and ongoing colonial and other policies for ex-
> termination and/or assimilation augurs for very dysfunctional 'families'. (Haraway, 2016, p. 207)

1 Introduction: Bad luck or politics?

Azzam is an asylum seeker who arrived in Helsinki in 2015. He was ostracized and threatened by kin/family in his country of departure/origin Iraq due to his sexuality (divorcing the woman he was married to and pursuing same-sex relations). Azzam's claim for protection was rejected repeatedly by Finnish authorities, who said that he could live safely in Iraq if he kept discreet about his sexuality and avoided his kin/family. He disagreed with that argu-ment and his recurrent appeals did not materialize in a much-desired residence permit that would mean settlement, safety and the possibility to study and work in Finland. Rather than assessing the viability of Azzam's claims and desires, I focus on the narratives he mobilized to make sense of his persistent desire for belonging in Finland. 'How distant is Finland from Iraq?' Azzam intrigued me with a question, and continued, 'For me, the borders between Fin-land and Iraq are as thin as those between the Netherlands and Belgium. And I live my life at these borders,' i.e. in almost no space, in limbo. Between a desired life in the image of Fin-land and a nightmare in the image of Iraq. 'At any moment, I could end up in Iraq,' he added. Azzam who condemned the 'backwardness/barbarity of Arabs,' did not find refuge from that in the desired collective/community. His stories were rife with resentment of how the de-sired refuge, 'The Finns,' rejected him. He felt 'like an intruder, who did not belong.' Azzam wished to 'have Finnish friends' but 'Finns are too distant/cold, they do not open up easily.' But he hoped that a legalized residence would help bridge that distance and warm up his cir-cumstance. 'Everything in modern democracies is available, even study can be done online,' he said. But, for him, the only problem is that he did not get that residence permit, *bad luck*: 'My papers fell into the wrong hands,' he said. Another one of his many poetically resentful metaphors was that '50 people go to a bar. At the door of the bar, it was written: "Everybody gets a beer." Forty-nine people get the beer and Azzam does not.' 'Who decides?' He asked. 'Bad luck,' he answered.

More elaboration on the hazy concept of 'bad luck' suggested that having been born in Iraq *was* bad luck. 'My own country abandoned me. Whatever can I expect from Finland?' he would say bitterly, on different occasions. Azzam admired what he called, 'the Finnish men-tality.' I could not reach a comprehensive or unitary conceptualization of what 'Finnish men-tality' was like, but the fragments I could gather of his conceptualization of Finnishness came at different moments on different occasions. In a festive ambience, he would appreciate how 'the *Finnish nation* knows how to savor life,' and when he would be charmed by techno-logical installments or sophisticated architecture we happened to walk by, he would praise 'how Finns are constructive/builders.' None of these conceptualizations involved the resent-ment of his exclusion, which had more to do with Azzam's 'bad luck/origin/belonging' than with 'Finnish mentality.' In fact, his celebration of the Finnish/European mentality was strictly/permanently set against the contrast to a lurking specter of Arabs and *their mentality*: 'In Arab countries, presidency is misunderstood as being tyrannical to the nation, unlike in Europe, where presidency means being at the service of the nation,' he asserted. 'To you?' I teased. 'To their people. I wish I belonged to their people,' he answered with a confused frown, implying that my comment was unnecessary or out of place. Azzam saw that he

'arrived at the wrong time' (bad luck) coinciding with 'much talk about terrorism, and high number of refugees arriving from Muslim countries,' which made him the one out of fifty who did not get the *beer*. As Sara Ahmed suggests in matters of unrequited love: 'The failure of return is "explained" by the presence of others, whose presence is required for the investment to be sustained' (Ahmed, 2004 [2014], p. 131). The other(ed) Arab was accountable for that failure to return.

This text is about the sense of belonging and affinity that is at stake in the quest for survival and thriving in exile, in alienation from what used to be home as well as what is becoming or desired as such. I focus on the desire for livability, survivability and thriving that is premised on the plea for admittance and/or belonging to a desired community that stops short of questioning the very injurious terms of that plea, belonging and admittance. I do not limit 'exile' to a state of acute precarity and limbo of being undocumented, like in Azzam's case. Asli Vatasever sees exile as a state of 'everlasting mode of nomadic discontent [when] even after years in the receiving country, one may never really feel "settled in"' (2020, p. 7). I see exile as a state of discontent with the thwarted sense of settlement and belonging. Even with legal settlement and admittance, the sense of belonging is unsettled due to violent and injurious political and community narratives, what Miranda Joseph calls 'oppressive communal discourses' (Joseph, 2002, p. xxi).

My focus is not on any homogeneous and unitary identity, or internal politics of a specific community. Following Joseph (2002), I look into the discourse of communit[ies] 'in the social processes in which they are constituted and that they help to constitute' (p. viii). Politics of belonging risk making the quest for communal life more tenuous and sometimes impossible when they subscribe to oppressive and parochial community narratives. This is especially urgent and emergent in queer politics. The term *queer* for Judith Butler is 'never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, [i]n the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes' without domesticating it (1993, p. 19).

In their analysis of the movie *A Touch of Pink*, DasGupta and Dasgupta redeploy the term *queer* to challenge not only domestic kinship but also the domestication of kinship/community. Alim, the self-identifying homosexual sees his mother as a Muslim/Third-World woman who 'will not understand homosexuality' (2018, p. 33). By mobilizing racializing norms, Alim's ideas of relatability reinstate constricting understandings of kinship and affinity. Alim is unattuned to the queer circumstance of his mother who struggles under the norms of Muslim/Third-World womanhood, an identity premised on a heteronormative family life of her child (ibid.).

Donna Haraway sees that kin is a wild category that is always at risk of being domesticated (2016, p. 2), but queer kin(ship) minds the pitfalls of domestication in the way of its mobilization. My ethnography in queer political gatherings and meetings traces narratives of community to show how queer affects warm up community politics to alternative political persuasions and imagination of sociality and social life.

I juxtapose the affectual/emotional, embodied/lived-experience and the rational(ized), to trace the co-constitutive relation between these. Following Lauren Berlant's claim that '[w]hat we call "political persuasion" must entail shaping political affections' (2011, p. 243), I see that questions of affinity, belonging and allegiance/alliance entail political/communal narratives that are charged with and propelled by emotions. Ahmed suggests that emotions like fear, love and hate are constitutive to narratives of belonging. 'How we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective, which paradoxically "takes shape" only as an effect of

such alignments' (2004 [2014], p. 54). One structures one's relations to the world to create a sustaining imagination of where one belongs (the loved), and where one does not (the feared, the hated and the shameful). In that sense, as Butler puts it, '[I]t may be that certain identifications and affiliations are made [i]n order to institute a *dis*identification with a position that seems too saturated with injury[, that is] occupiable only through imagining the loss of viable identity altogether' (1993 [2011], p. 64).

That brings a more urgent question: how, rather than to whom one belongs; how one is exiled from norms of not only belonging but also recognizability. Here, it is timely to borrow from Butler's 'body' and her recurring problematization of body boundaries, along with boundaries between the material and the discursive. This is to foreground a main argument in this text: how a seemingly reflective factor, namely an emotion, turns out to be constitutive to the very understanding of where the self belongs, where it ends and begins, its demarcation.

> The body in the mirror does not represent a body that is, as it were, before the mirror: the mirror, even as it is instigated by that unrepresentable body 'before' the mirror, produces that body as its delirious effect—a delirium [w]hich we are compelled to live. (Butler, 1993 [2011], p. 57)

Emotion, like the mirror, delineates body boundaries. In the ethnographic mundane, narratives of the self and belonging unfold. And like in mirrors, the subject reflects (or constitutes) oneself in affect-charged political narratives of the ideal and the othered, to resonate/reiterate and/or shift matters of community and deservingness. Here Butler's 'delirium' does justice to the political narrative. Delirium is not necessarily untruth, but rather a situated narrative of matters of concern (politics) and the collective endeavor to uphold what matters in the tenuous work of livability in exile.

I tune into stories/narratives of livability, survivability and/through collectivity (solidarity) within *intimate publics,* spheres of intersubjectivity that 'work in proximity to normative modes of love and the law' (Berlant, 2011, p. 3). Berlant's 'intimate public' refers to how intimacy is publicized in the media. I see this text, and ethnographic writing in general, as making public of the intimate. This is in two entangled senses: 1) by mediatizing the mundanity of the participants' lives by publishing/publicizing their lived stories and intimate feelings, and 2) by making the private political. The contingency between 'love'/affect and 'law'/collectivity/community in an intimate public is what makes it a significant sphere of political happenings. It is the place where one 'circulate[s] scenarios of economic and intimate contingency and trade[s] paradigms for how best to live on' (Berlant, 2011, p. 3).

2 Contextualizing the intimate publics of my ethnography

Azzam's story reduces the violent narratives of community into an instance of *bad luck* that is equivalent to an abjection of being an Arab/Iraqi. The exclusion that is encountered in the social and governmental milieus figures as bad luck in an otherwise desirable/idealized community and communality. Azzam's narrative reflects a norm of queer communality in Finland. As Salla Peltonen and Katarina Jungar (2018) show, queer and asylum activism in Finland is rife with a *politics of difference* that reduces the issue of queer exile into an injurious/homophobic country/community of departure/origin (or even fellow exiles) versus a liberational West/Finland. This politics of reductive difference frames queer precarity as a matter of a

constitutive outside/other to Europe. What seems to be direly missing is a questioning of the terms in which the community or country of desire makes it (im)possible for the exile to belong, and therefore escape the violent outside. The terms of belonging to the desired country and community is as alarming as the situation of the violent outside of that belonging. In the context of Sweden, Maja Sager sees that the othered figure of the asylum seeker is at the heart of constituting citizenship norms through the seekers' ongoing negotiations for recognition within the sociopolitical realm. Sager sees that looking into the case of asylum seekers holds knowledge on the state of things of the Swedish welfare state (2011). I see that the experience of queer exiles in Finland holds knowledge about the state of queer politics in Finland.

My question is: how can the precarity of exile challenge the reduction of the queer trauma to dichotomous and sterile notions of West versus the rest? How can the experience of queer exile be mobilized politically in the host-country and in global queer politics? Sarah Singer suggests that queer exile's loss of connection with kin in countries of departure induces feelings of alienation, that in the case of the limbo of being undocumented in the destination country, spiral into acute feelings of alienation and guilt that justify discrimination as punishment (2021). Asli Vatansever tackles the same issue in the case of Turkish academic exiles to show a reverse aspect. Political engagement with fellow exiles who shared the same experience entailed mooring and solace in the state of exile and limbo (Vatansever, 2020).

Juxtaposing the two cases gives hints on what makes alliances with fellow exiles more perilous and fragile in queer politics. Queerhood and sexual non-normativity are assumed to be Western tenets. This makes the dichotomy between a liberating West versus a dehumanizing rest a trope to trump all other considerations. For example, as McNeal and French Brennan argue 'The Muslim Other – [is pitted] against the ostensibly progressive values of European civilization that now equate women's and gay rights with democracy and freedom' (2021, p. 164). This paradoxically leaves the queer subject tackling terms of 'family,' 'kin' and 'belonging' that are saturated with racialized and racist conceptualizations of kin. That does not only reduce narratives of kin and community into nationalist celebrations and xenophobic repudiations, but also trumps identities and subjectivities that might challenge these dichotomies.

In the Norwegian context, Akin and Bang Svendsen (2017) show how the possibility of queer kin(ning) is burdened with the domestics and domestication, the heritage of heteronormative kinship. Queer asylum in Norway is conditioned on 'assimilability into, the local gay and lesbian community' (p. 45), which entails 'conforming to particular styles of queerness' (p. 46). That style of queerness resonates with feminized subjects of migration, that is witnessed in marriage laws. Racialized male spouses are seen as threatening to the values and integrity of the Norwegian nation, while female spouses are imagined as dependent on that admission for protection from that racialized masculinity. In that sense, the queer subject admission into the country is conditioned on static domestic(ation of) values of kinship.

However, the experience of queer exile challenges domestication and the narratives of dichotomous differentiation between West and the rest. The racialization experienced induces reconsideration of narratives of queer exiles and a new narrativity of (non)belonging takes shape. DasGupta and Dasgupta (2018) highlight the shift in sensibilities to affiliations that were unexpected in exile. The racialized find issues of race more alienating than issues of sexuality: The gay-identifying Usman, mentioned in DasGupta and Dasgupta (2018), 'found a sense of safe place with his [orthodox Muslim] room-mates and felt that his body was out of

place in the gay bars of Central London [and among] gay men who he had thought of as his natural ally' (p. 35). In a parallel sense, Alessandro Boussalem's ethnography challenges the rigid narratives of dichotomous racialized homo/queerphobic zones in Brussels and calls for the 'deconstruction of rigid discourses of difference and division at work in the city' (2021, p. 1).

While Boussalem and DasGupta and Dasgupta tackle the more-or-less urban geographic sense of belonging and safety, I map the affective registers and narratives at work in the politics of belonging and difference. For Lauren Berlant belonging is 'a specific genre of affect' that 'cannot be presumed[,] a relation whose evidence and terms are always being contested' (2016, p. 395). This, for Berlant, calls for 'the study of sociality as proximity quite distinct from the possessive attachment languages of belonging' (ibid.). In my ethnographic proximity among queer exiles, I trace alternative narratives and embodiment that challenge injurious aspects of community politics. I show how affinity can form proximity of shared embodiments and experiences an attunement to vulnerability to others rather than (only) by abstracted notions of belonging. By that, I foreground what I do in my ethnography: look into how narratives and valuations of community and belonging shift from homogenous and abstracted community narratives into ones more tuned into a situated, embodied and in touch with the violence inflicted on the excluded and the different.

3 A note on research methodology in the intimate public of Organization A (and beyond).

Organization A (pseudonymized for privacy) is in Helsinki. It takes initiatives in support of queer asylum seekers through their process of asylum-seeking, appeal and legal settlement. Among its activities are free legal counseling, dinners and gatherings, art workshops and recreational activities like yoga and meditation. In the Autumn of 2018, I started my field work at A, which took the form of participant observation and as a volunteer. In the introduction round, at the beginning of the meetings, I introduced my name and 'roles, as a researcher and a volunteer' (interpreting between Arabic, French and English). After the introduction round, we would start the scheduled activities, where I would participate in the activities and interrupt for interpretation when needed. The multiplicity of 'roles' resonated the distance between the 'subjects' and the 'researcher' and the 'translator/interpreter.' However, ethnographic writing is in itself a process of transcribing and interpreting the mundane of the subject into the registers of academic knowledge. Interpretation and translation of words, feelings and narratives is inherent to ethnography and its desire for accessibility to the intimate/personal/mundane of the subject. The *subject* here expands in two senses: *subject* as a research participant and *subject* as a matter of concern. Sharing, interpreting and translating the daily lives reflects the dissolution of formalized encounter into shared intimacy that opens up a shared sense of subjectivity and matters of concern.

Moreover, the field(work) extends beyond the established meetings and events in the Helsinki-based gender-political group at Organization A in a second sense: The relation with the participants went beyond the premises of the fieldwork organization and the coded settings of a fieldwork. Soon after the start of the fieldwork at A, the field branched into the mundane lives of the participants elsewhere in various events and places around the city. I write from differently situated scenarios from lecture rooms and semi-official gatherings and in leisure time. The statements/acts that triggered my story-telling came at sporadic times, and in different situations.

My aim is to locate different narratives in the web of meaning of the collective, a web of meaning that (re)creates the collective itself. It seemed ironic to write of nuance and particularity when the narratives in the field drew on essentialized categories, *the Finns*, *the Europeans*, *the Arabs*, *the Iraqis*, *the gays*, *the straights*, *the asylum-seekers* (to name the most voiced ones). My strategy is not to freeze subjectivity in a totalizing identity, but to tune into the subject's investment in this very imagination of identity in the quest for bearable survival and thriving. Joseph (2002) sees that ethnographic materials in their 'particularity' mobilize 'resistances and contradictions to the totalizing tendencies' (p. xxxvi). In line with that, I highlight instances of contradictions between the very totalizing narratives as well as drives to reimagining (challenging) these narratives.

4 The overwhelming density of identity

My experience in the queer/gender-political milieus I associated with was heavy with static categorization that seemed stubborn to alternative socio-political imaginations and possibilities. I first met Basheer on the day of the Helsinki Pride Parade 2019. I went there with a group of participants from Organization A. One of those participants (who met him long before at the organization) introduced me to Basheer at Kaivopuisto south of Helsinki. The pride march ended there and the parade marchers spread around the sunny park having a picnic-like day. Basheer came from Syria in his mid-twenties and had lived in Helsinki for over four years. He said in our first conversation 'Iraqis are overtly dramatic.' I told him that 'drama queen' was stereotypical to Syrians. 'Yeah, Syrians are indeed *drama queens* but Iraqis are drama queens with a twist of dishonesty,' he explained. Then he added with a twist of advising solemnity, 'Take my word and keep away from both.' The ease in which Basheer threw these injurious comments reflected how commonsensical these have become in the milieus where he and I socialized. Apparently, Basheer himself managed to keep away from neither. He was speaking to a 'Syrian' me at that moment, and I met him through Iraqi friends. In any case, he managed not to be that close or intimate with *us*. He was 'in a relation with a Finn.' Finns, according to Basheer, were cold/distant and they did not 'take initiatives.' His partner, argued Basheer, 'changed' through his long stay in Mexico when he was younger. I got curious about how Basheer's partner changed through his migration experience, while Syrians and Iraqis do not seem to enjoy that mobility in Basheer's view.

Exceptionally to other 'Finns,' his partner, 'took initiative.' I told Basheer that I would also take initiative, and playfully touched his shoulder. He reacted apologetically confused and said that he was not interested. He then added, 'you need someone from the country, someone who knows his way around the country.' By 'you' Basheer seemed to have meant *us – Iraqis and Syrians*. I could not tell if that was Basheer's polite way of turning me down. But the sense of certainty in his argument cut across aspects of moralization and rationalization, affect and strategy. All of these aspects in the case of many participants in my study were mainly shaped by one aspect: the fear and stigma of one's origin or country of departure.

Although many participants lamented the lack of 'social warmth' in Helsinki, Finnish coldness figured as a static and essential characteristic of a 'Finn' rather than a social and political aspect that could reflect xenophobia or racism. More paradoxically, for the participant I mention next, Karol, 'coldness' seemed like a valued aspect if it comes in the package of becoming 'a Finn.' Karol also seemed to call upon disidentification to secure distance from

the homophobia he experienced in his small home town in Russia. I met him two months after his arrival in Finland. He said back then he wanted to be 'as far from [fellow] Russians as possible.' For Karol, 'Russians' were 'narrow-minded' and 'Finns' were 'weird.' But he elaborated, 'the Russian friends I have met here are not homophobic' though it was only in Finland that they became so, Karol was convinced. 'Did they say that?' I asked. 'No, but I know it. I do not know how to explain it to you,' he replied. But he was less sure about why Finns were weird. He had heard before from 'a friend' that a specific kind of rocks in Finland humidify the atmosphere allowing certain mold to grow and produce gasses that affect the brain. These gasses 'change the way one thinks,' said Karol with a laugh. It was unclear how seriously Karol took that story, but his tone grew serious when he confided his wish to become like the Finns, *weird and cold*. 'Maybe then, I could understand them better and not find them weird anymore,' he added. Karol's narratives were more generous than Basheer's. If the latter's narratives did not validate that *Iraqis* and *Syrians* could break with the stigma of being deceitful and undesirably dramatic, Karol saw a possibility of fellow-Russians becoming *non-homophobic* (less Russian), or himself becoming outright *Finnish*, which is disregarding the *cold weirdness* of it, was desired/positively-framed.

Daria Krivonos (2018) sees that people racialized as white Russians mobilize whiteness 'through the use of transnational racialising discourses' (p. 1150) to 'generate alternative value as deserving citizens' (p. 1145). Karol appreciated that he is thought to be Finnish, but what he desired was to become a Finnish citizen. He once said that he had dreamt that he died. This for him happily predicted a new identity: 'the death of a Russian, the birth of a Finn.' I asked whether that could have meant a self whose desire and rebirth does not only/predominantly mean 'becoming a Finn.' But Karol and I understand how unimaginable that birth might be when our selves have pinned their sense of safety and mooring on security endowed or deferred by the state.

In this text, I discuss the rebirth of affiliations and affective mooring that is not coterminous with fixed identities and identifications. Disagreeing with Azzam, Basheer, and Karol, I am optimistic about the birth of selfhood that is not reduced to morphing into politically complacent *cold weirdness,* facilitated by proximity in skin color or paper documents.

5 Stuck between coldness and bad luck

With his protracted paperless status, Azzam, mentioned in the beginning, did not have the convenience of imagining a community that was available to others who secured the authorities' recognition, or still expected that. When we exchanged phone numbers, and in a gesture characteristic of his daily lamentation of this situation, he suggested that I save his name in my phone under Azzam, 'the cornered.' He was cornered in the meager life-space between a community of origin (in Iraq) that othered and abandoned him and another (in Finland) that denied him recognition (a residence permit). If 'the passing by of the feared object also involves moving towards the loved object' (Ahmed, 2004 [2014], p. 68), Azzam's move towards the loved object (Finland) only kept him cornered/trapped at the border of both objects. And if shame, his apparent sociopolitical strategy, entails a strategy to 'expel' oneself from oneself (Ahmed, 2004 [2014] p. 104), his imagination of the desired reduced his political trauma to his belonging and himself. That happens and recurs as discussed above, when the narratives of injurious non-West are pitted against a salvific West condition the queer

subject's admission to the territory and communities of the country itself. But this falls back on a depoliticized subject that also falls back on parallel violence of silencing they experienced in their countries of departure/escape.

Fadi Saleh (2020) sees how in the case of exiled Syrian queers:

> Syrian queer and trans people become intelligible only [...] through the *suffering Syrian gay refugee figure*, whose very naming evokes very specific and now hegemonic narratives of suffering and death. (p. 51)

Of particular interest in Saleh's argument is how in countries of departure the lived discrimination to queerhood was 'less defined by sexuality than by the silence about politics.' In other words, queerphobia was most lived in the disenfranchisement in the public sphere. As Joseph Massad argues, discrete sexuality does not usually invoke the discriminatory experience, but 'legal and police persecution as well as heightened social denigration [arise when] sexual practice becomes a topic of public discourse that transforms it from a practice into an identity' (Massad, 2007, p. 198). This is akin to the pressure to live one's intimacy in one's privacy, the privatization of one's injury. That makes political disenfranchisement of one's intimate subjectivity into a common denominator of the experience of asylum-seekers in countries of escape and in the country of refuge as well.

How to work through that silence towards a political subjectivity that corresponds to community politics that is more aware of the injurious disenfranchisement and trivialization of one's injury and discrimination? This invokes notions of how 'queer' and queerhood as political notions are contestations of the terms of viability and legitimacy. At the same time, queerness reminds that for some the term 'present[s] an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics' (Butler, 1993, p. 19).

Narratives of exclusion or othering (racism) encountered in Finland are not comparable to 'violence we encountered, or may still encounter in Arab communities,' Haifa, one of the participants, once said in a hostile manner. She said that as a dismissive remark towards my research's attempt to tackle the fragility of queer exiles' situation. I do not try to dispute that. In fact, I might not be able to. Indeed, some forms of violence that one might encounter in 'our countries' are incomparable. However, this does not have to cool down or freeze our political imagination and rethinking of the values that made the communities desired (or even incomparable) vis-à-vis the places they escaped in the first place. Rather than resting on a *cold* but less violent understanding of community, my research nudges for recognition of the violence in the desired community, and mobilizes that recognition in (global/multicultural) politics.

6 Enthralled to abandonment

What resonated and echoed in the narratives I have cited so far was the idea that admittance into the desired community or its denial was *the* matter of concern. The state of affairs within the desired community, and the potentiality for reordering the norms to mind othered and silenced vulnerabilities, was subordinated or submerged by the monstrosity of the place the person escaped from.

> Not only is there always the possibility that a vulnerability will not be recognized and that it will be constituted as the 'unrecognizable,' but when a vulnerability *is* recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself. (Butler, 2004, p. 43)

But one does not always afford that change. Change might herald collapse, collapse into irreversible loss or (re)flourishing. Berlant points out the dilemma of how the 'life-organizing status [of an optimistic attachment] can trump interfering with the damage it provokes' (Berlant, 2011, p. 227). Optimism, even when cruel, and enthrallment, even to a violence, could sustain the subject's world and sense of mooring. But cruelty of optimism in an object of desire, for Berlant, is not a matter of mere attachment to, and the hope in that object. Instead, optimistic relations 'become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially' (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). If the aim that draws exiles to the desired community of refuge is safety, as in the sense of community and cherishing belonging that heeds one's vulnerability, is there cruelty in a community that is oblivious to that very vulnerability? I see cruelty in reiterating the 'cold' normative notions of how to survive through morphing into a multicultural or queer(-friendly) Finnish/European body that is hoped to be refuge from the place of origin *but* paradoxically stopping short of minding the myriad of vulnerabilities of a life in exile.

Totalitarian normativity (as in essentialized categorizations and structuring assumptions) can curtail the possibility for alternative, or even parallel, genres or instances of affiliation and alliance; possibilities that do not reiterate the stigma of the stigmatized and invest in the precarity of belonging in hope for redemption. In what follows, I reflect on narratives that challenge the binding imagination of an ideal(ized) form of life that, at best, works strategically to find a sustaining sense of belonging and community while precluding reconsiderations of alternative/fairer norms of recognition and, at worst, keeps charm only in contrast to disastrous alternatives. Haraway (2016) sees that imaginations and embodiments of 'kin' arise from an ongoing and rethinking and considerations of how to live, survive and thrive in ongoing trouble:

> *Kin* is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters (p. 2).

If making oddkin entails 'unexpected collaborations and combinations' (Haraway, 2016, p. 4), I understand making Godkin as the institutionally sanctioned (expected) alliances to which survival has historically or normatively been connected (nation-state, family, and their hegemonic laws). *Oddkin* opens wilder potentialities and requires a rethinking of the ambience, gleaning for new genres of affiliation and recognition/recognizability, and not least, matters of concern. Within precarity, one may come into intense grips with how norms of recognition feel when

> [t]o be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders (Butler, 2004, p. XII).

Perhaps, from reflections on 'the dislocation from [p]rivilege [one is more likely] to start to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized' (Butler, 2004, p. XII) as well as affinities with whom else recognized by that minimization.

As DasGupta and Dasgupta's and Boussalem's ethnographies show, experiences of violence and racialization in exile nudges the narratives of queer racialized exile into reconsiderations and problematization of normative narratives of safety, belonging and community. These experiences agitate urgent questioning and questions to injurious terms of

queer belonging. In that sense, exile is not departure from a punitive territory to a salvific one, but a departure from the politically barren notion of the *West versus the rest*. In my field-work, I too came across such departures.

I met Alba at Organization A a few weeks after she had arrived in Finland. She had left her home in Cameroon after increasing stigmatization because of her sexuality. I kept meeting Alba at organization A. She seemed to grow pensive and silent during her process of application for asylum. In Finland, where she took refuge because she resented the infringement on her intimate life, she found herself in long and recurrent interrogations by state authorities to assess her claim for asylum. This entailed both intrusion on her intimacy and evocation of traumatic memories. What she fled from (intrusion and trauma) revisited in a different guise where she chose to take refuge.

For Alba, going through an interview with representatives of state authorities to assess her claim of asylum was a trauma, both anticipated and in retrospect. That showed in both her presence at and absence from the meetings at A. Alba's anxiety of each encounter with the authorities kept her at guard for a few weeks ahead, and resentful for weeks to follow. She started to be more absent from the meetings and the excuse was 'the asylum interview.' The interviews started to interfere with Alba's readability and enthusiasm for her mundane life. One of the administrators in the organization found it weird that Alba would be absent although the dates of the asylum interview did not clash with the dates of our meetings. He also found it weird that Alba's absence had been too long that it, for him, could not have been explained by the asylum interviews. The others, all of whom had to go through these encounters (including myself), found it strange that the administrator, who was quite updated about the members' lives, would underestimate the burden that these encounters with authorities constitute for queer asylum seekers: encounters where one is questioned about a traumatic past, in fragile hope and anticipation of a meaningful present and future.

'It is hard, I have to go through memories I can neither accurately remember, nor want to remember in the first place,' Alba said. 'Do Finnish LGBT people have to go through such interrogations?' she asked several times, resenting the demoralizing and alienating appeals for protection and community. The question implied that, for her, the issue transcends notions of sexuality into issues of race/nationality/citizenship. What she resented was that the right to protection from violence took different shapes for people according to their national/country of origin.

This is a traumatic aspect mentioned by Perego (2021) where one of her research participants described it as

> It is like opening a trunk [*como abrir un baúl*] and leaving everything there: your life, your traumas, your privacy. … Everything at the mercy of those who pass by. (W., Brazilian transgender woman quoted in Perego, 2021, p. 149)

What matters in Alba's statement, as well as in the participants' in Perego's study, was not only the mere questioning of norms of recognition in a desired refuge.

That desire did not make them acquiesce to the state of affairs in the ideal(ized) and desired community, not even to the inconceivability of comparison between a violent and repudiated origin and a less violent Europe/Finland. In other words, they brought the violence in alienating norms of citizenship into view, and question. Out of her sense of alienation, Alba referred to potentialities and/of affinities with others in similar precariousness

and fragility. 'I feel home here, among the others who understand my situation and know how it feels to be at my place (meetings at organization A) – I feel understood and related to – it is like a family.'

Like Alba, Billie, another participant, seemed to grow more appreciative of conceptions of kinship that were more attuned to the affective resonance among community members. Billie, who also frequented the meetings, grew disenchanted with the protracted process of asylum seeking. Meanwhile, he had to keep his balance among agonizing memories and stressful imaginations of the future: the uncertainty of his life in Finland and his worries about his family and friends in Cameroon in political unrest. 'I relate to Alba,' he said at our Christmas-preparation meeting. 'My mind is in different places. I see Christmas around, but I do not feel it inside. I am out of place.' Billie's place of mooring was among the people who were in touch with his experience, 'I can smile here, because I feel like myself. Here, I am among people who walked and are walking the same path and having the same thoughts.'

Viola took a similar path as Billie's and Alba's a few years before they did. She frequented the group meetings years after securing state recognition. She seemed to remember what sustainability and survival in situations of precarity could take. Viola seemed to be of help to the fellow members who missed and desired the settlement she secured. When Viola would see Alba withdrawn and pensive about her visits in the migration office, Viola would make a parody of the situation drawing on her immediate familiarity with the trouble of recurrent, prolonged and unsettling encounters with alienating state bureaucracies.

Viola's parody of the recurrence and protraction of interpellation and the dispiriting proceeding of the asylum bureaucracies was a tragicomedy that empowered and animated Alba from fears and tears to laughs and relief. This seemed to be what Alba needed more than (or as necessarily as) a reassurance in the security endowed by the Godkin. At the same time, Viola's parody seemed to 'revitalize political action, [not] by mapping out the better good life but by valuing political action as the action of not being worn out by politics' (Berlant, 2011, p. 262). Alba's sense of life as suspended and anticipation of hurt seemed to have paralyzed her socio-political subjectivity in grief (of ditched safety) and unexpectedly protracted pain and alienation. Viola seemed to nudge Alba's subjectivity back to animation and make possible, or even instantiate, what Alba was most desirous of, a sense of community to fall back on. For Federici (2020), a 'joyful politics is constructive already in the present' (p. 125), while 'sadness comes when we continually postpone what is to be achieved to a future that we never see coming, and as a result we are blind to what is possible in the present' (p. 126).

I see that Viola brought Alba to reclaim her present and recover, as a more-or-less mobilized social and political subject. Moreover, I see the significance of joy not only in the life sustaining (inter)corporeality, and not only as cited above by Berlant as 'not being worn out by politics' but also in recasting resistance and the momentum of non violence. That is nonviolence that is not acquiescent or necessarily emerging from 'a pacific or calm part of the soul' (p. 21) but 'militant pacifism' (p. 203), 'radical persistence' (p. 204) and affirmation of 'lives as valuable' (p. 28), and in this case livable despite their constriction (Butler, 2020).

Lisa Bhungalia (2020) shows how laughter and humor, especially in cases of subjugation, become a 'popular vehicle for social commentary and critique' (p. 392), as well as a 'refusal to normalize conditions of subjugation' (p. 389), where the subjugated refuse to recognize the repressive power's '*ultimate* authority over them' (p. 390). It was necessary to see such political commentary in the sphere of Organization A, taking into consideration the

ubiquity of subjugating narratives that drill hegemonic narratives to the point of jeopardizing any other narratives. This affective connection also met the emergent need for warming up narratives of belonging and community to questioning what it means to belong and what community is about.

7 Concluding remarks

In this text, I do not equate warmth with pure 'joy' or positivity. To the disagreement with Azzam, Basheer and Karol, I do not see that coldness and weirdness of Finnish people, if true at all, is *the* matter of concern. Rather, I see that narratives that ossify difference and justify and equate injurious politics and xenophobia with essentialized identity as the issue and the trouble. Warmth, as I see it, is the attunement to the troubling and troubled effects of community building and communal relations. In other words, I foreground notions of warming up our political sensorium to reconsider the injurious aspects of politics of belonging, and to mobilize that in the recreation rather than ossification of community boundaries.

That is collectivity and pluralism that rather than evades the 'negativity' of the social field, favors 'an affectively ambivalent engagement with the inherent politics of critique in a plural and uneven world' (Ruez & Cockayne, 2021, p. 88). Ruez and Cockayne (2021) argue for affirmation not as positivity but as 'a mode of thinking otherwise[,] accounting for difference in its myriad forms, and insisting that transformation is possible' (ibid, p. 94).

In the mundane of my ethnography, I foregrounded how hope in Godkin (institutionalized, normative and state-sanctioned forms for admittance and belonging) has become an instance of cruel optimism. But that is when striking the deal with Godkin can trump alternatives and potentialities of making oddkin. In this sense, *oddkin* keeps open to possibilities and potentiality of community that provides instantaneous and urgent belonging and affective resonance. Oddkin does not only see the political subject through fragile times but also holds (less cruel) promises of (less cruel) alternative political visions. It animates community matters from static narratives of liminality (narratives that often numb the excluded with a deferred promise of inclusion) to an instantaneous, ongoing and embodied work of community and kin.

Acknowledgments

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