10 Reframing the subject

Affective knowledge in the urgency of refuge

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Introduction

In this text, I discuss how the exiled subject's sense and embodiment of precariousness, make it, or fail to make it, into the frames of noteworthy/grievable knowledge – official policy-making and academic registers of knowledge. I centre exile subjects' work with notions of (in)significance, (un)viability and (un)voiceability of their grievances and matters of affective concern, whether to the reproduction of othering/exclusion or to problematizing these. My main concern here is the narratives that circulate in the lives of queer exiles in Finland, and how these could halt referencing, voicing, let alone politicizing their plight and grievances. Affective knowledge risks being eclipsed, or cut out of the frame, in terms of academic and policy-making concerns. In referencing my fieldwork and the work of others, I am trying to do some of the justice due to that knowledge.

Pascucci and Hassouneh show what could happen to affective knowledge in the experience of refugees employed by international aid organizations; refugee subjectivity is often reduced to an instance of technical mediation between humanitarian and aid organizations and those in need.¹ Understandably, humanitarian and aid workers who themselves have been subject to humanitarian crises, revisit traumas and grievances in the course of their work. They balance that with the composure required for performing their job. This work involves “intense emotional work [that sometimes requires] physical presence in an often dangerous, uncomfortable ‘field’.”² This first-hand (trauma-related) knowledge, and affective proximity to the loss of fellow nationals makes the refugee/traumatized humanitarian worker familiar both with the situation and with the needs of those targeted by humanitarian work.³ This experiential knowledge is, according to the authors, “emotional, [e]mbodied [and] disqualified.”, which is reflected in the salary and security enjoyed: “The tasks assigned to refugee workers are often the most labour intensive and least prestigious.”⁴

In the following reference to my own fieldwork, I also tackle such knowledge: embodied and affectual (two aspects why this knowledge is being disqualified). But more specifically, I dwell on (1) the subject's sense of grief and grievability of their embodied/affective knowledge, (2) and how that informs the terms of making claims in the field of queer refugeehood. My question is

how (if at all) matters of loss and grief in the lived experience pass their audition into collective, communal and official visibility in the negotiation of rights and claims-making. Beyond discussing how matters of grief and grievance could be silenced or eclipsed, I tackle how that erasure itself goes ungrieved, and, most importantly, what it takes, and gives, to reframe it (and reframe the knowledge about it) as grievable. This text tackles losses experienced in exile; loss of home, hope and sense of belonging and/or the imaginability of any or all of these. Most specifically, it centres on the collective aspects of that loss. The aim is to question notions of grief seen as a private matter compartmentalized and individualized in discrete subjectivities, in the hope of rethinking collective terms in which we view and (mis)recognize, condone or normalize loss and grief as a side story to the functioning of an otherwise just and sound collectivity, sociality and politics.

A field-ful of loss and grief

Narratives and embodiments of grief and grievances come up occasionally in the intimacy of ethnographic fieldwork. Traditionally, ethnography values and requires: “a deeper *immersion* in others’ worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important [, and experience] the ordinary routines and conditions under which people conduct their lives[.]”⁵ In their text on exiled scholars (this book), Kmak and Farzamfar show that grief, resentment and grievance are recurrent themes in the experience of exile; the sense of impossibility of returning to one’s country of departure evokes a sense of irrevocable loss. The following discussion on narratives of loss touches upon the (imagin)ability of returning “home”. But it also tackles what “home” denotes in terms of belonging/community, settlement and security. This is a question of the imaginability of home in exile. And how that (imagin/dis/-)ability, and its affective structure, is experienced and deployed in home-making.

I will speak about how (during my fieldwork) matters of loss of “home”, belonging, settlement and/or imaginability of these, are approached. The main field I write from/about is a self-proclaimed LGBTQI+ non-governmental organization, where I chose to *initiate* my relationship with the fieldwork and the “subjects” of research. I choose the word *initiate*, to point out that a shared life with other *participants*⁶ (and the field) went beyond the premises of that organization. Therefore, this text is informed by other fields (or extensions of the initial field): the national Pride and other events, and even planned and accidental walks and talks with other participants.

At the organization, employees and volunteers (who were Finnish or persons with a state-recognized residence permit), asylum seekers and state-recognized refugees met occasionally. Nationality and state recognition was a decisive factor. This meant not only an official permit to settle, work and volunteer. Recognition of the right to settlement also entailed the sense of peace and mooring necessary to imagine social functionality.

The organization was committed to assisting LGBTQI+ asylum seekers in the painstaking bureaucracy of asylum seeking. In addition, it hosted regular

gatherings, discussions and art- and culture-related activities focused on issues of sexuality and asylum. On my first meeting with the “gate-keeper” of my field-work (a Finnish citizen employed as a community worker at the organization), she told me that some people I was going to meet and speak to were “in very bad shape” – people who had been “in the asylum process for years”. This, according to her, required that I should be in a “stable [financial and legal/documented] situation”. Otherwise, she said, I would not be able to stand the cases. What she said made me uneasy: another reminder of the contingency of my work, research and life on state recognition, which is premised on the duration of my working contract with the university. However, I appreciated how she recognized what state recognition meant to us all, and how she made sure that one is aware of what constantly troubles most of the participants’ minds. Beyond this and that, she recognized the role of the state in our capacity to deploy our work/volunteering/research and life in the very intimacy of each other.

Later, I would notice that state recognition would even affect who is present at meetings. Participants whose asylum claim has been recognized were in less need of the (bureaucratic and emotional) support of the organization and the sense of community it created. Inversely, a negative decision issued by the state, or complications in the process of asylum application, could overwhelm a participant and make them too grief-stricken to show up. Being grief-stricken can curb or paralyze one’s sociality. But there is another aspect of the story: the privatization of grief: the participants’ very (un)imaginability of their plight and grief as a collectively urgent and emergent matter of concern, namely, more than a side note to the functioning of the organization, or – in a broader sense – to society and the state in Finland/Europe (and modern democracy imagined as such).

A note on grief

My use of the notions of “grief” and “mourning” is not secondary (metaphorical) to the loss of a loved person. It foregrounds the affective gravity and loss that may accompany the state of exile. This branches into several senses of loss: loss of home, language, or trust in liveability in the very places one pinned one’s sense of safety on; and, as importantly, loss of trust in the safety narratives that were once too promising not to (wholeheartedly) invest in (and therefore venture into exile).

Grief, in Thomas Attig’s words, requires “mak[ing] sense of [a] new reality and find[ing] meaning in life”.⁷ Asylum seekers persist/live through protracted loss and a tenuous process of (sometimes) recurrent losses and rejections and (re-)appeals to the court and state authorities. Making sense of that reality seems to require remarkable mourning capacities, not only towards state assurances of protection, but also towards the very sense of entitlement and (belonging) that is lost to narratives of criminalization and othering. It is the grief of ditched hope (in finding peace and protection from one’s trouble) raised to the power of being condemned as trouble (and cause of grief) itself. Ironically, the gravity of the situation of people in exile, especially for those

denied state recognition, rather than being the premises and momentum for socio-political change that recognizes their vulnerability, is often politicized and administered to their further disfavour and discredit. As Kmak (2020) argues, the same approach that “produces” undocumented migrants, forces them to travel, work and live illegally, which, in turn, produces the very narratives of “unassimilable difference” assuming inherent inability to adhere to national norms and values.⁸

Attig foregrounds the point of choice and active grieving. For him, bereavement can be choiceless, but grieving is *active* and puts one before a wide array of choices. Reconfiguring life under loss involves creating alternatives for survival that one never imagined before, and never could have. This overwhelming array of choices, according to Attig, might be a reason why one chooses to settle on longing for who (or what) we have lost, rather than opting for the “unsettling alternative of facing an overwhelming array of choices.”⁹ This array of choices might destabilize what it means to be oneself and how to make sense of that self within grievable circumstances. For Butler, grief is overwhelming because of the self dis-/re-orientation it entails:

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, [we] not only mourn the loss, but [we] become inscrutable to [ourselves]. On one level, I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well.¹⁰

In what follows, I will discuss how stories and embodiments of grief were present in participants’ lives. But beyond that, I discuss how loss, grief and grievance make or fail to make a noteworthy apparition into media and political registers, and what this entails in terms of narratives of selfhood and collectivity.

Meeting the subjects

I will start with Sami, who was one of the participants favoured by the state. His right to reside in Finland was recognized four years before our first encounter. He looked/acted confused when he knew that I was researching and writing about queer migrants in exile. “What exactly are you expecting to find out?” He asked. I answered: “How people change when they are in exile”. Sami said that he had been in Finland for four years and he had never changed. He had always had the same “way of thinking”. I asked him, trying to tease out nuances in his argument, “but don’t you change your clothes?” He said that he had always dressed in black, “even back in Iraq”.

Ridiculing change does not reflect denial of change per se, but of its research significance. Sami knew that changes happen in exile. He himself, a few minutes after his comment about (non-)change, asked me to translate English words he could no longer remember the equivalent of in Arabic. He said that he “stutter[s] when speaking to [his] mother” because he had “lost touch with Arabic”.

Sami worked for a business that, he said, “makes bargains in thousands and millions of euros”. Then he added, “it matters a great deal at which angle the window shades are open, and how the furniture, the glasses and the drinks are set and organized”. For him, “these trivial details could affect big things”. In such intricate matters, “you are speaking in thousands and millions of euros here”, he repeated. I did not disagree. To the contrary, in this text, I want to invoke how trivialized things count; that Sami’s forgetting some Arabic words, having always dressed in black and having had (or rather having claimed to have had) “the same way of thinking” counted, even though, or *especially because*, he presented these as side stories; to how other details mattered in mass trade.

Comments on change and its (in)significance came up occasionally in the field. At a Christmas dinner at the organization, I had a conversation with Mani, an old participant whom I met at the beginning of my research, and who introduced me to the group and the gatekeepers. I asked why he would not show up more often at the meetings. It was only at that event that I had seen Mani at the organization. In fact, it was thanks to him, and his previous involvement and familiarity with the group, that I managed to find my way into the organization as a participant and researcher.

Mani answered in a cynical, but solemn manner: “believe me, nothing changes here”. He presented that thinking as an insider’s knowledge, from his long experience and involvement. His very long experience was what made the comment more alarming. The change that Mani seemed to mean was the change in the legal status of the participants. Non-change meant a protracted state of limbo and uncertain hope in recognised/legalised status on the part of undocumented participants. Most of these, as mentioned before, frequented meetings in their state of alienation from the country and society during their first months after arrival or after years of protracted legal limbo and depleted hopes of settlement. The latter needed community and consolation when rejection of their asylum claim curbed most other alternatives, or imaginations of them. Participants whose status was legalized (as in the case of Mani) tended to appear less often, mostly due to their engagement in other projects (work and study) that their legalized status opened up for them.

I will disagree with Mani: that nothing seemed to change in the registers of state recognition necessitated more presence and more talk about what changes in the affective registers of those who were involved: Why and how this façade of non-change overshadowed change and turbulence in their lives.

At another instance, the issue of change and its significance came up again with Sana (back then a new participant who had just arrived in Finland). She asked, “What do you expect to find here?”, pointing her hands scornfully around the room where we meet weekly. She said she could not understand how my “participation in the *art therapy* session at the organization would be of any research interest”. I said I wanted to know how “people survive their insecurity and sense of alienation in exile”. Sana looked more puzzled and cynical than she had been before my answer, “You escaped insecurity and alienation! What insecurity and what alienation are you speaking about here?

You'd better go and commit suicide if you feel insecure here!" Sana's short stay in the country might have been a factor in how mindful she was of issues of alienation. She might not have recognized yet that suicide and self-hurt was a possible, even recurrent, theme in the narratives and bodies of many participants. But there is more to this story.

Sana "admit[ed] how serious" it was that Jamil and Gabi, two other participants, had been recurrently rejected as asylum seekers and had been undocumented for five years. However, what seemed to make the issue of less academic significance for her was that they were "not dying of hunger", and nor were they "homeless". Sana said that their sense of insecurity was because they "look[ed] at the empty half of the glass". Then she switched from her Iraqi dialect to Syrian (my dialect) and articulated another expression: "hne 'am ynakdu 'ala halon", meaning "It is because of their own ill-temper/pessimism/self-victimization [that they make it harder for themselves to cope with the situation]." As if she would capture the situation by pointing out linguistic tropes that I was more familiar with; as if familiarity and normativity were to refute the existence of a problem rather than they themselves being the problem.

In fact, Sana herself was not in an easy situation. Having to speak and think about the issue must have been strenuous when she was waiting for a decision from the Finnish authorities on her asylum claim. Sana herself insisted that she could "not afford not to be strong" – and if she felt disempowered or insecure in Finland "aḥsanli ruḥ antaḥer", "*I am better off committing suicide*". (Another expression that is normalized in everyday Arabic meaning: one's life would stop making sense; death would make more sense.) And with that, Sana repeated her allocation of the problem to individual responsibility rather than structural emergencies; an individualized trauma in an otherwise well-functioning totality.

I want to challenge this normative individualization of trauma and grief: privatizing grief into a tacit side story to the inertia of politics and social structure. Grief, according to Judith Butler, can be made into a "resource for politics". It is not "privatizing", "depoliticizing" or "return[ing] us to a solitary situation", but "furnishes a sense of political community [...] by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility".¹¹

Sami's, Mani's and Sana's narratives privatized exile-related grief and denied its research-deservability as a collective or political emergency. I want to bring to the fore that these narratives circulated in the very premises where our meetings took place, that is, within the very *community* that Sana and other asylum seekers always referred to as "a family". That community/family was premised on honouring the participants' issues of asylum mundanity and affectuality. But that erasure was set against another common narrative that confines the problem to the subjectivities of asylum seekers. This manifested in Sana's statement, directed to Gabi and Jamil at the end of the conversation: "you must have done something wrong! You must have made a mistake in your applications[.] Otherwise, why all this delay in getting a residence permit?"

“Fake cases”

Speaking of the wrongs committed by those wronged/disfavoured by the authorities, rather than valuing their capacity to cope, is common in official and mundane narratives of asylum. Deniz Akin argues that queer asylum seekers strategically narrate their sexuality as a “loud and proud sexual identity[,] readable [as] worthy of protection”. In that, the seeker not only invests in the narrative to qualify for protection, but transcends that into “policing sexualities” and deeming certain asylum seekers as *fake*.¹²

What I experienced in the field was that official rejection of an asylum claim was deemed a “fake case” (discrediting a rejected seeker) by fellow seekers. At this point, it is crucial to mention that the authorities’ rejection of applicants’ claims is often premised on the person’s *assessed* ability to live their (homo) sexuality discreetly. And that assessment, in itself, could enact a serious disregard of the seeker’s need for protection. Paradoxically, a negative state decision was viewed by most fellow participants as a condemnation and discredit to the disfavoured/rejected asylum seeker. This thwarted the need further, and tightened the space for grievability for the disfavoured. It also led to tacit and reciprocated stigmatization – that was often “confided” to me and “real” asylum seekers. This made several participants apprehensive and uncomfortable in each other’s presence, as indeed happened within the “safe space” that the organization and the participants claimed, or were supposed, to create.

Those “rejected” were often abbreviated in narratives of (un)deservability and rivalry that verged on hostility to “fake cases”. The subject/story of exile/asylum was narrated as a plea to the government being unjustly unfairly misused and depleted by some (the undeserving), and only therefore unjust to others. As Koçak highlights, in matters of claims for resettlement to the UNHCR authorities in Turkey, “fake LGBT refugees” are seen as abusing a “scarce resource” of “golden cases”. In that, Koçak argues:

Queer refugees are asked to turn their complicated experiences of political, social and economic displacement into coherent stories of “well-founded fear” of strictly political persecution as a result of their sexuality and gender identities.¹³

This makes the right to protection – a collective matter of concern grieved, sought and premised on its very collectivity: human rights – into a scarce resource that needs to be bargained for. This not only privatizes grief and precludes its political momentum. It also turns grief into a source of shame and stigma in the very milieus where that grief is most likely to be empathized with, that is, among fellow exiles tackling the same political and social disenfranchisement.

“Son of tribes”

I discussed above how narratives of unassimilable difference, othering and stigmatization invade the mundane encounters of the disfavoured (read as

fake and fraudulent). With this tightening of recognition (even to the grievability of non-recognition), the grief and grievance of that seeker starts to assume the coordinates of their bodies and/or their national and cultural belongings. There seemed to be a recurrent and self-evident, therefore undwelled-upon, vilification of “*countries of origin*” in the field (of LGBT/queer asylum) in Finland. At a Helsinki Pride debate (2019), a participant from an “Arab country” was asked “What challenges have asylum seekers faced in their own peer groups?” He replied that the question answered itself and then added with a cynical, but conclusive and defeatist tone, “the bleak sides of our culture”. The speaker used “our culture” and “Arab culture” interchangeably. In that, “our culture” was crammed into a dismissive remark to span tens of nation-states, and who knows how many cultures. This is ironic, knowing that finding safe and just terms to share a “home” (a place of shared intimacy) with someone is not an easy matter, no matter what the culture is, let alone in an asylum camp, where one does not usually have a say in choosing one’s intimates, or fellow inmates.

As the debate continued, a speaker from “another Arab country” spoke (also on behalf of many, if not most or all other Arabs) about how proving one’s sexual identity is difficult when “Western standards are different”. The paradox, according to him, was that “gender sensitivity is something made for white Europeans with a good education”. He added that intercultural differences make it harder for asylum seekers to speak “the language of the authorities”, and prove their claim of sexual identity. It is necessary to disclose that “the language of authorities” disfavours asylum seekers who, in their negotiation for asylum, are read as unworthy of (or not in need of) protection. Still, speaking of unbridgeable differences, and allocating “gender sensitivity” according to that difference (short of evoking the shared responsibility and ability on the part of those on both sides of the gap/difference to bridge that gap), echoes that injury and essentialises the boundaries.

In such milieus, arguments weighted with stiff notions of culture seem to have become axiomized. Jungar and Peltonen mention a statement made at Turku Pride, “[T]hese people come from a different culture. They are taught to hide their sexuality, the culture of honour is so strong there.” The statement was voiced as supportive of disfavoured (rejected) asylum seekers; as calling attention to issues of *culture* and their impact on the ability to narrate one’s sexuality.¹⁴ Interestingly, the claim was made at a Pride event: I suggest that “honour” in hiding one’s sexuality and “pride” in flaunting it, imply similarity rather than difference between *cultures*.

Beyond the experience of exile and asylum, notions of culture were at play in the early formation of so-called Arab nationalism. Arab nationalism accompanied the cultural change that happened in the late 19th–early 20th century, referred to in contemporary literature and school curricula as ‘Asr al-Nahdah “age of ascendance/resurrection” but translated into English as ‘Renaissance’, referencing or echoing an authentic European Renaissance. That nationalism was premised on colonizing narratives that seized the intimate and sexual. Massad argues:

The new renaissance of Arab knowledge production involved an increased acquaintance with European Orientalist thought and the construction of the Arab within it. [The] Arab nationalist project informed by European notions of progress and modernization and a Victorian sexual ethic [required colonial concepts like] *thaqafah* (culture), *inhilal* (degeneration), *inhitat* (decadence or degradation), *taqaddum* (progress), *ta'akhhur* (backwardness), *jins* (sex), and *shudhudh* (deviance), among others. [T]he use of European notions on which to base these efforts at excavating Arab-Islamic national heritage did not seem contradictory or problematic to our authors.¹⁵

The (*Arab*) nationalist project required excavation of *a national heritage*. That heritage, when reassembled and introduced by nationalist and nationalist intellectuals, would follow Victorian/colonial norms of decency and sexual mores that accompanied modernization. This back then (ironically) required censoring literature on same-sex love, which inspired agents of cultural production of the period to omit these accounts.¹⁶ These acts of omission were neither mourned nor seen as losses. Norms of authentication were themselves alienating and shaming, defining what is perversion or fake to a monolithic authenticity. Authentication required shedding reference to same-sex love, a theme that was not uncommon in medieval and pre-colonial Arabic-speaking literature.¹⁷ Arguably, these references could (have) be(en) precious to people who need(ed) to find solace and mooring in their “authentic” heritage or culture, so to speak. Instead, many Arab *queers* after centuries of Victorian morality-inspired censorship might have (had) to find mooring and authenticity only in the “loud and proud” rainbow identity; the only (or rather the loudest) one. Therefore, I chose to use the term *queer* in my study.

This means that “culture” can be partly shaped by ungrieved omissions of what used to be culture: the erasure or overshadowing of the non-heteronormative self from the national. Massad sees that what is being universalized in the encounter (or what he calls *collusion*) between Western human rights groups/organizations and diasporic members is not only a “Eurocentric culture”, but a “culture that has important class attributes and therefore serious consequences for those unfit to defend themselves”.¹⁸

Recurrent recourse to notions of “our/their culture” for an argument necessitates further consideration of their embodiment by the people of a given “culture”. Many participants, in my study, often expressed or shared a sense of incapacity to negotiate with the authorities due to taking cultural difference for granted; i.e. as a final/central, rather than transitory argument, in the plea for rights and protection. One’s culture/origin, in some instances, was a condemnatory aspect that asylum seekers bore the brunt of and shame for, rather than an issue to be worked through by different parties in enacting a world where the right to protection matters, no matter what. “I am a son of tribes – I do not know how to speak with judges.” said Ido, with an air of panic, a few weeks before the court hearing regarding his appeal against the state’s rejection of his asylum claim. He added anxiously, “I do

not have the education for that.” I asked Ido if speaking about waiting in permanent anxiety for recognition of his need to stay in Finland (and fear of being deported back to Iraq) required education. Ido did not even seem to dwell on my comment. He insisted that the main issue was to convince the judge that he was “gay”. He added that he was told that vulgar language was not an option at the court. Details like these are quite likely to be serious matters of concern to Ido (and others). “Culture” was a stigma they seemed to carry everywhere: to the weekly meetings at the organization, to Pride events, to the court and to the bone; their subjectivity almost reduced to that stigma. This seemed to deplete the seekers’ morale and their imagination of political possibilities beyond othering/exclusion.

Ido had a considerable (and mournful) sense of apprehension towards (and alienation from) the authorities whose protection he sought, and to whom he had to confide intimate issues and embodiments. Along with that process, he had to keep composure and decency, *and* bear responsibility for his “lack” of education, as if the right to protection is premised on the applicant’s (cultural and academic) credentials.

Ido’s statements reminded me of another case: A mother of a queer asylum seeker once asked me how to reply if she were asked how she reacted when she knew about her daughter’s sexuality. The mother and the daughter applied for asylum based on threats to both in their place of origin. “I cannot say I was shocked. Can I?” she asked, sceptically. The question sounded more of a resentful confession than something she could have voiced during the interview with/interrogation by state officials. I (and arguably the officials who were going to interview the mother) would find the story (the child’s homosexuality) more credible with the mother’s shock: a shock from learning something intimate about one’s child that one had never managed to know before; shock from long-lasting unknowability rather than (only) homophobia. The issue was to prove her child’s homosexuality as a “real case”. Other matters of grievance to the mother, even though necessary to credit the “realness” of the case, were unthinkable, especially if it is drilled into us that denouncing “our culture” is all that matters in one’s plea for protection and rights.

If the credibility of asylum claims matters, it also matters how some sought protection from authorities and state officials towards whom they felt resentment and a deep sense of alienation. This meant alienation from those to whom one exposes one’s utmost and innermost intimacy, while at the same time feeling a great deal of apprehension – it resonates of (self-inflicted) harassment, unwelcome but imposed/necessary/urgent intrusion into one’s intimacy. Malene Jacobsen sees that, for refugees in Denmark, this intrusion happened through integration policies and the biopolitics involved. In some cases, these policies suspended the right to family reunification (therefore keeping family members apart). The intrusion also involved living with the rhetoric of Danish state media and national TV (followed by several of Jacobsen’s interviewees) rich in talk, news and debates on whether and how to limit the number of “refugees”.¹⁹ That intrusion experienced in an intimate encounter with the state (representatives), for Jacobsen’s interviewees, merited the name of *ħarb*

nafsīa. The term can be roughly translated into “psychological war” but has more connotation of *nafs* (spirit, self and psyche), which makes it an attack on one’s self, spirit and morale. That is something intimate, personal and aimed at a specific person. Interestingly, the term *ḥarb nafsīa* was also used by one of the participants in my research also to denote a deliberate effort on the part of the state to “break the morale of the refugee and make them give up”. “They want us to kill ourselves”, the three-time rejected asylum seeker (and survivor of a suicide attempt) pointed out in one of our conversations. Jacobsen’s argument is to “challenge the idealized notion of [country of] refuge as a space beyond war and violence, [where] spaces of war and refuge stretch and fold into one another”. I want to build on that and argue how this intimacy of refuge/war is lived in paradoxical terms; where the refugee or the seeker’s grievances and losses, rather than being acknowledged and empathised, are suppressed, muffled, even sometimes reduced to shame and underservability.

Understandably, there is even more intimacy between the seeker and the state authorities in LGBT/queer claims (matters of sex(uality)). But – as Jacobsen argues – the issue goes beyond instances of interrogation and discrediting. That is, even in cases where the seeker is recognised and their status legalised, the very idea of integration (as assimilation) reflects a “history of locating the ‘problem’ of refugees within the bodies and minds of the refugees themselves”.²⁰ Here, the paradox is, as Jacobsen argues, how geopolitical conditions that produced a mass displacement in the first place, confine that war in the minds and bodies of refugees. How is it that bodies have to withstand injury and the grievance with composure, even the very injury that necessitated the appeal for protection in the first place? That precarity, grief, and sense of loss seem to become a side story to the “real case” even in the intimate lives of exiles.

Negotiating an authentic self in othering terms

The issue of “undocumented”, “rejected” and “fake” cases transcends technical and categorical disenfranchisement, to the construction of an undeserving subject/selfhood set against a monolithic/hegemonic authenticity. It is a creation of a fake/undeserving identity, and, to use Butler’s terms, an “abjection”, where the “the real [rather than being an essential identity] is the permanent structure that differentiates [between the abject and the recognized] [i]n relation to the temporal location of th[e] loss [the rejection]”.²¹

Building on that, I see another important issue at play in “abjection”: the issue of how to narrate that loss, and how to make sense (or preferably nonsense) of authentication that is conditioned on the alienation of one’s subjectivity and embodied narratives (of one’s reality).

Yasin, a five-year undocumented asylum seeker, spoke of his *imagination* of Europe before his experience in Finland, and how his view of Europe changed. “In our imagination [before exile], Finland did not wrong anybody. And here we realized that Finland does not wrong *its own people*”. I asked Yasin, “what about you?” He answered, frustrated, “I am not one of Finland’s

people!” Part of his frustration was that his statement was clear enough, and he was clearly not a Finnish citizen, which made my question sound more of an irrelevant teaser. But it was a teaser of another kind, of a kind that Yasin might or might have not recognized. What does Yasin’s situation say about Finland and its people? What about the excluded Yasin? And even if Yasin recognized this sense of the question, it could have been a reason why he replied in a frustrated/exasperated manner. My question plays on the sense of loss that Yasin had to deal with. Grieving exclusion from an idealized community entails grieving the loss of that very ideal along with the mooring, settlement and understanding of selfhood and alterity (otherness) (the other with whom one is enthralled).

For Yasin the loss was partly justified by the fact that his arrival and seeking asylum coincided with “happenings in the world”, the emergence of the Islamic State and increasing stigma against Arabs and Muslims. Yasin’s comments about Finland not wronging its own people was juxtaposed with, and almost if not fully explained by, the increased stigma of Arabs and Muslims. This, according to him, led the Finnish authorities to take stricter measures that affected his case. Here the loss is a loss of the self, a self with recognition and acknowledgement of the loss of the object. Sometimes it seems better, in Butler’s terms “to be enthralled with what is impoverished or abusive than not to be enthralled at all and so to lose the condition of one’s being and becoming”.²²

In Yasin’s case, grieving seems to necessitate repudiation of an enthrallment that sustained the imagination of how he made sense of his life and self. That imagination and enthrallment was once, and arguably is still, so significant that Yasin abandoned his country of departure to live in a limbo between the spectre of the idealized and the nightmare of deportation. It seems scary to come to terms with the now-swaggering certainty of that ideal. It can even be risky.

When grieving is feared, when it is not recognized or acknowledged, Butler argues:

our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly.²³

That desire to restore former order, and a “fantasy of the world formerly orderly”, manifested itself in short-circuiting the problem in the (national) self. Is it risky to think of loss in different terms? That is the loss of world politics where identity (or origin) does not oust people from entitlement and disappoint their hopes in belonging and security; the loss of a circumstance/world where security/safety/peace is unconditional, not conditioned on one’s belonging and identity.

Does fear of tackling this massive issue of world politics lead us to uphold a fantasy that the world had been orderly and was even becoming more orderly with intensification of that orderliness? Saifo, a three-time rejected

asylum seeker, critiqued Migri (the Finnish migration and asylum bureaucracy) for not investing in a “technology” that discovers who is a liar (“fake case”), as if technological progress could have solved the problem, rather than rethinking/resenting the terms on which that progress is premised.

Reworking choice and collectivity into the frame of grief/grieving

What norms does that progress rest upon – norms that seem to make progress proportional to its exclusion of the othered? What transcends the self and the other are the norms of recognition on which the self and the other are fundamentally dependent.²⁴ Voicing grievability is an act of *active grieving*. It changes the sense of one’s reality and orientation to one’s world and collective/communal conditions, and the norms and terms on which that reality rests. As Monica Varsanyi shows, in the US context, acts of claims-making (what I call acts of collective mobilization of resentment/grievance/grief) by undocumented migrants, created “alternate [also in Varsanyi’s terms, *urban*] models of belonging”.²⁵ This recalls what Nordling et al. call “spaces ‘in between’ [created by] encounters between citizens and non-citizens” (in the case of undocumented migrants in Sweden).²⁶ Grieving was embodied and voiced from the “very limited social space” available in the case of irregularity. That space was tightened by lack of legal status, the threat of deportation and increased surveillance.²⁷ This is a tightened space impacted by recurrent and spiralling loss: disenfranchisement from citizenship and inflicting further injury (stigma) that upholds that exclusion.

“[S]paces in between” and “alternate modes of belonging”, formed by collective acts of grieving, led, in the case of undocumented migrants in Sweden, to “an increase in the application of the concept of irregular migrants (*papperslösa*) in reports and social policies[,] media and parliamentary protocols”.²⁸ This was crucial in the Swedish context, where, as Sager argues, “[visibility and identity politics are] central for the distribution of welfare services and rights”.²⁹ A crucial point in these momentous acts of public grieving is that violence, injury and “crisis” were not confined to a subject or identity. This evokes Butler’s statement: “The act of violence enacts the social structure, and the social structure exceeds each of the acts of violence by which it is manifested and reproduced.”³⁰ Sager makes an empirical point of that, by reframing the issue of clandestineness in Sweden as an issue that touches upon the very state of Sweden and the meaning of citizenship:

Instead of asking only ‘what can we learn about the situations of asylum seekers?’ I want to add the question ‘what can we say about the state of things in the Swedish welfare state if we start out from the experiences of asylum seekers in Sweden?’³¹

Sager also argues that citizenship is not static, and the othered figure of the asylum seeker is at the heart of negotiations for recognition and rights. Citizenship is a manifestation of norms that shape understandings of a sense of belonging and entitlement. And these norms are being constantly negotiated.

[C]itizenship is always differentiated and unfinished, and the differentiations and categorisations entailed in migration control have consequences in the lives and positions of not only migrants but also permanent residents and formal citizens. Parallel to this, the tension between visibility and invisibility is not only limited to irregular migrants but also at work in the positions of racialised groups in general, including citizens.³²

This blurs the boundary between matters of asylum concerns and matters of citizenship and reframes the othered as constitutive of the realm of the self. Sager shows that issues of citizenship do not stop at boundaries but involve different actors in serious issues that define what it is to be a citizen and what citizenship means in a state like Sweden.

Magalhães and Sumari³³ argue that specific categorizations (like nationalities) have come to be seen as essential lines of division that “ran[k] above all other individual and collective subjectivities”. These categories created tropes of strangers and strangeness that drowned out similarities and commonalities. Perhaps the hope is to re-centre the dimensions of a basic sameness by exposing the limitation of notions of nationality. In that concern, Paul Gilroy suggests that

We need to consider whether the scale upon which sameness and difference are calculated might be altered productively so that the strangeness of strangers goes out of focus and other dimensions of a basic sameness can be acknowledged and made significant.³⁴

Conclusion

This text is akin to an act of grieving for refugee knowledges and grievances, including my own, that may risk going extinct if it were not for acts and mentions of grieving and grievability by participants, friends, fellow-exiles, authors and others, many of whom I referenced in this text. In this, I am inspired by Thom van Dooren’s notion that writing about grief, grievability and mourning, can in itself be an act of mourning that challenges notions of exceptionalism: “[M]ourning undoes any pretense toward exceptionalism, instead drawing us into an awareness of [c]ontinuities and connectivities that make life possible for everyone.”³⁵ Van Dooren suggests that what should be mourned is lack of mourning itself. Perhaps, mourning breaks the vicious and unending cycle of rivalry for specialness. As Trinh Min-ha puts it, one is soothed with *soporific specialness*³⁶ when privilege and a sense of specialness “easily creates a distance – if not a division – between I-who-have-made-it [the real/authentic] and You-who-cannot-make-it [the fake].”³⁷ I suggest mourning as embracing the stigma: whether in grief or pride/honour, that the subject and the knowledge survives the political loss. It is grieving the loss of a world in which we can deal with loss, rather than leaving the issue for the private sphere and the private sector. That is, by politicising, rather than by privatising and compartmentalising grief in categories and bodies. Political

work should be healing, as Silvia Federici argues: “Being able to politicize our pain, turn it into a source of knowledge, into something that connects us to other people – all of this has a healing power.”³⁸

It is a matter of survival, and fitness – so to speak – to be able to politicize our pain and stigma and transform them into a source of strength and knowledge. Sylvia Wynter suggests that “human” is “meta-Darwinially [h]ybrid being, both bios and logos”,³⁹ biologically evolving but entangled with the myth that biology is embedded in: “simultaneously storytelling and biological being”.⁴⁰ In that sense, there could be possibilities of a more survivable story/narrative: living one’s agony and grief in a more survivable manner.

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Notes

- 1 Pascucci and Hassouneh, in this volume.
- 2 Pascucci and Hassouneh, in this volume.
- 3 Pascucci and Hassouneh, in this volume.
- 4 Pascucci and Hassouneh, in this volume.
- 5 Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011, 3.
- 6 I will use “subject” and “participant” interchangeably, to do justice to my experience as a participant(-observer) in the field.
- 7 Attig, 2011, 47.
- 8 Kmak, 2020.
- 9 Attig, 2011, 53.
- 10 Butler, 2003.
- 11 Butler, 2003.
- 12 Akin, 2017.
- 13 Koçak, 2020.
- 14 Peltonen and Jungar, 2018, 62.
- 15 Massad, 2007, 53.
- 16 Massad, 2007.
- 17 El-Rouayheb, 2005.
- 18 Massad, 2007, 39.
- 19 Jacobsen, Forthcoming.
- 20 Jacobsen, Forthcoming.
- 21 Butler, 2011 [1993], 154.
- 22 Butler, 2004, 45.
- 23 Butler, 2003.
- 24 Butler, 2004.
- 25 Varsanyi, 2006.
- 26 Nordling, Sager, and Söderman, 2017.
- 27 Sager, 2018.
- 28 Sager, 2018.

- 29 Sager, 2018.
- 30 Butler, 2020.
- 31 Sager, 2011, 19.
- 32 Sager, 2018.
- 33 Magalhães and Sumari, in this volume.
- 34 Gilroy, 2004, 3.
- 35 van Dooren, 2014, 126.
- 36 Minh-ha, 1989, 88.
- 37 Minh-ha, 1989, 86.
- 38 Federici, 2018, 126.
- 39 Wynter, 2015, 16–17.
- 40 Wynter, 2015, 29.

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