

Narratives of Queer Migration

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The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality

Edited by Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett

Subject: Linguistics, Sociolinguistics Online Publication Date: Jul 2020

DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190212926.013.55

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter considers the phenomenon of queer migration from a linguistic perspective, paying particular attention to the constitutive role of spatial mobility in narrative and its role in the construction of queer migrant identities. The chapter begins by looking at the way in which queer migration has been discussed in the literature and then moves on to address three different types of queer migration in greater depth: migration within national borders from the village/countryside to the city; migration between cities in member states within the context of the European Union; and finally, asylum-seeking within the context of migration from the Global South to the Global North. The chapter concludes by suggesting that queer migration is a complex phenomenon in which the intersection of sexuality, gender identity, desire, affect, abjection, economic necessity, class, politics, and fear for one's life combine in ways that are unique in the lives of individual migrants.

Keywords: asylum-seeking, narrative, queer migration, spatial mobility, the city

Introduction

In his study of queer London, the historian Matt Houlbrook (2005) begins with the story of a gay man named Cyril. Having moved to London in 1932 as a privileged youth of independent means, Cyril encountered a world of bars, restaurants, and theaters in which men could meet in relative freedom, make friends, and form romantic attachments. Although Cyril was married and already the father of a child, it was the experience of moving to the city that made same-sex activity and homoerotic relationships not only thinkable but also a possibility. As Cyril put it in a letter he wrote to a friend in 1934, "I have only been queer since I came to London about two years ago, before then I knew nothing about it" (Houlbrook 2005: 3). Commenting on this, Houlbrook writes:

In many ways Cyril's story is all "our" stories. In mapping his own changing sense of self and sexual practices onto his encounter with London, he established a productive relationship between space, the social, and subjectivity. Geographical,

temporal, and subjective movements blend together. “Being queer” is associated with the cultural experience of urban life [...] London is both a symbolic and experiential rupture, a productive space that generates and stabilizes a new form of selfhood and way of life. Cyril’s story pivots upon an implicit opposition between silence and speaking out, repression and fulfilment, nonbeing and being. This can easily be a recognizable tale of the big city as a space of affirmation, liberation, and citizenship—the city as a queer space.

(Houlbrook 2005: 3)

Houlbrook’s point is one about the queer affordances of the city, and it is a point that is echoed throughout the literature on queer migration (e.g., Chauncey 1994; Eribon 2004; Weston 1995; Zheng 2015). But while the encounter with the city might be crucial for many queer migrants, not all migrants embark on their journey in the same way as Cyril, who came from a background of provincial comfort. For other queer migrants, as underlined elsewhere in the literature, migration is as much a perilous flight *from* poverty, oppression, suffering, and abjection across heavily patrolled borders as it is a journey *to* the productive space of the metropolis.

The topic of queer migration is a relatively new one from a linguistic perspective, though it resonates with the recent turn in sociolinguistics away from the study of settled “communities of speakers” toward a foregrounding of mobility (Blommaert 2010; Theodoropoulou 2015). It also resonates with the increasing emphasis on the spatialization of language practices in sociolinguistics and linguistic ethnography (cf., for example, Baynham 2012) as well as narrative analysis, where spatial mobility is shown to be just as constitutive of narrative discourse as temporality (Baynham 2003; de Fina 2003; Baynham and de Fina 2005). As the quotation from Houlbrook suggests, migration and spatial mobility are somehow wired into the experience of queer becoming, though we might want to say that instead of one story that is “ours” there are many such stories. Some of these stories, as we will exemplify in this chapter, entail migration from the village to the city, from nation-state to nation-state, and from the Global South to the Global North. Often such migrations are also—as the sociologist Didier Eribon (2013) shows in his memoir *Returning to Reims*—journeys across metaphorical but nonetheless very real borders. In his account of his own move as a young gay working-class man from provincial Reims to cosmopolitan Paris, Eribon comes to understand his flight as a move toward a more open life, away from an intolerable homophobia, as well as a migration away from his original class location, which he starts to rediscover and reconnect with in middle age after his father’s death.

This introductory section makes two points that will be important for this chapter. The first is that linguistic work on queer migration, with certain notable exceptions, is an emergent area, so in exploring it we draw on work we consider to be relevant from related fields such as sociology (e.g., Cantú 2009; Manalansan 2006; Mole 2018), history (Houlbrook 2005), and anthropology (e.g., Zheng 2015; Gaudio 2009). We do so in order to ask: what can linguistic analysis of various sorts—but particularly sociolinguistics and

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linguistic ethnography—contribute to an interdisciplinary project of studying queer migration? Secondly, as suggested, we take the view that autobiographical accounts are significant in the making visible of queer subjectivities linked to migration and mobility, cutting across the disciplines already mentioned and others as well. As such, narrative analysis is an important dimension in the approach we present here. Narrative analysis has more recently been productively complemented by linguistic ethnographic work such as that undertaken by Holly Cashman in the queer Latinx community in Phoenix (Cashman 2017, this volume).

A further driver is the argument—made by Nicola Mai and Russell King (2009) and later taken up by one of the authors of this chapter (Baynham 2017)—that the field of migration studies has focused primarily on economic and political impulses for migration and has largely ignored the contribution of subjectivity, affect, and sexuality in migration processes (see also Provencher and Peterson, this volume). The identification of this gap is clearly of great importance in understanding queer migration as migration driven completely or in part by a desire for greater freedom to express sexuality, gender, and subjectivity—that is, for a space that allows for queer becoming. Researched by Héctor Carrillo (2004, 2017) under the heading *sexual migration*, such migration has typically been understood as a pull toward the metropolis (see also Houlbrook 2005 and Eribon 2004).

In this chapter, we have chosen to use the term *queer migration*—first, because it allows us to include those non-normative subjects whose migratory trajectories appear to go beyond the sexual (e.g., trans subjects whose gender identity appears to be most significant in their stories); and second, because we want to suggest that queer migration is concerned not just with the migration of queer subjects but also with queering the migration story. By this we mean the pulling away of the migration story from neoliberal accounts that see migration and mobility as simply the circulation of so-called human capital or the unproblematized relocation of highly agentic subjects who are unencumbered by ties to place. Hence also the need to be careful to avoid what has been termed a “metronormative” perspective (Halberstam 2005)—in this case, a simplistic interpretation of narratives of migration from supposedly rural/provincial backwaters to metropolitan centers in which repression gives way to freedom, isolation is replaced by community, and misery is transformed into fulfillment.

Indeed, counter cases are well documented (e.g. Gray 2009; Herring 2007, 2010). With regard to our own research, there is the case of Javi (reported in Baynham 2017), who came out to family and friends in Spain, and whose big move was from metropolitan Madrid to provincial Malaga, a city in which he felt quite at home, where you might say his heart is. His subsequent move to London was driven purely by economic necessity, a response to Spain’s economic crisis post-2008:

JAVI: No, to be honest I don’t like this city. I was crying before I came here. My last three days in Spain I was crying. Not because of my family. For me the main reason to choose a place to live is the weather and this is not the best place. I don’t like Madrid as well. I don’t like these cities.

INTERVIEWER: You like the South?

JAVI: Yes, more like Malaga. I hate Madrid, I don't like London. I don't like big cities, because I am spending a lot of time in [unintelligible]. And if I want to visit my friends, they live one hour away or more than one hour from me. So, now I'm alone at home and this weekend I'm speaking to my friends. Now I have to work, we can meet in the town centre. And from this I feel a bit lazy maybe, but in Malaga I wasn't like that. I liked to spend every moment with my friends, to go for a walk through the promenade, many things. I lived fifteen–twenty minutes from my friends, from my work, everything. So for me this is the quality of life. (Baynham 2017: 437)¹

We see in this data extract that the drivers for migration in Javi's case are a complex mix of the subjective and the economic (although other migrants, as we shall see, have other very different motivations). Javi is happiest in a medium-sized Spanish provincial city rather than in Madrid or London, a fact that somewhat reverses the directionality of the narrative presented by Houlbrook. This perhaps points to one distinctive contribution linguistic analysis can make to the interdisciplinary project of researching queer migrations: its close attention to the materiality of talk, to questions of voice, and to the construction of subjectivity and identity positions through language that is characteristic of, for example, the sociolinguistic tradition in narrative analysis (Baynham and de Fina 2005).

In the sections that follow, we look at three different types of queer migration in greater depth—namely, migration within national borders from the village or the countryside to the city; migration between cities in member states within the context of the European Union; and finally, asylum-seeking within the context of migration from the Global South to the Global North. We do this with reference to the literature as well as our own ongoing research on varieties of queer migration (e.g., Baynham 2017; Gray 2018). The chapter concludes with a reflection on the issues raised.

Migration and Mobility within National Borders

Migration and mobility occur not just across but also within borders, typically (though not exclusively) following a provincial to metropolitan trajectory. Kath Weston (1995) famously wrote about the “great gay migration” of the 1970s and early 1980s in the United States, which saw tens of thousands of lesbians and gay men move into major urban centers, drawn there in part by the quest for community:

Sexuality as well as ethnicity or nationality can be harnessed to a search for “roots” and shaped through a symbolics of place. [...] In its guise as the gay capital of the United States [...], San Francisco became the focal point of an imagined rather than a spatially determinate community. For many lesbians and gay men in the 1970s San Francisco—or, in its stead, the nearest big city—represented a

homeland that could enlist the nostalgia of people who had never seen the Golden Gate. In relation to an urban homeland (and, by inference, rural areas left behind), individuals constructed themselves as “gay people”: sexual subjects in search of others like themselves

(Weston 1995: 269).

Such imagined urban communities are not unique to the United States—across the Global North, cities such as London, Berlin, Amsterdam, Sydney, and Tel Aviv (to name but a few) act as powerful magnets for queer migrants from the surrounding hinterland. Of course, such in-country migrations can be far from straightforward, and indeed some of Weston’s informants reported their disappointment at what they found on arrival in the metropolitan gay scenes of North America (see also Cashman 2018).

The same is also true of queer migration in other parts of the world. In modern China, the kind of rejection that some queer migrants endure is made painfully clear in the work of scholars such as Tiantian Zheng (2015), who draws attention to the class differences between rural and urban *tongzhi* (literally “comrades,” the term used to denote an indigenous Chinese same-sex orientation as distinct from a Westernized gay one). Rural migrants, some of whom make a living as sex workers (so-called money boys), tend to be viewed negatively by urban *tongzhi*, who describe them as dirty, uneducated, unfashionable, and dishonest (see also Kong 2010). Zheng notes the cruel discriminatory scorn expressed by more sophisticated urban middle-class *tongzhi* for the awkward rural incomers in venues such as saunas. One of her informants described a scene he had witnessed in terms saturated with metronormative class prejudice:

I ran into two rural migrant guys at the bathhouse yesterday. They looked very dark and very dirty—none of that dirt could be washed off no matter how hard they washed themselves. While they were doing each other we all laughed loudly and commented that they needed to rinse their mouths and purge their intestines first.

(Zheng 2015: 110)

Clearly, the story of the move from the provinces to the metropolis is not always necessarily one of liberation, affirmation, and citizenship. Indeed, Weston (1995), in the light of her informants’ stories with regard to the situation in the United States, concluded: “Not all migrants who traveled to the big city during the 1970s came upon the sort of gay community that allowed them to feel part of a people, but they did discover one thing. Homelands can be easier to desire from a distance than once you arrive on their figurative shores” (275).

But even so, for all the disappointment migrants may feel and the disparagement they can encounter, the allure of the city remains, offering spaces for sexuality and gender nonconforming migrants to try and create lives that are both livable and economically viable. In this respect, Rudolf Gaudio’s (2009, this volume) ethnography of young cross-dressing

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Muslim men who have sex with men in the northern Nigerian city of Kano provides an interesting example. Known as *'yan daudu*, these men are in many cases migrants from the provinces who work in bars, clubs, and restaurants. They engage in so-called women's work, such as cooking and serving food, as well as sex work and relationships with each other, all the while keeping a foot in the heteronormative lifeworld by maintaining families elsewhere. The city provides *'yan daudu* opportunities for work (and there is an economic imperative to their migration), but it also allows them to "more easily 'come out in the open,' that is act 'like a woman' in public without having to face the judgments of [their] family and wider community, or the social and psychological consequences of those judgments" (Gaudio 2009: 67). The city also provides a community of older *'yan daudu* who may act as "mothers" to the recently arrived, as well as "girlfriends" (other men like themselves) and "boyfriends" (men with whom they form romantic attachments). Gaudio's picture of the *'yan daudu* is a reminder of the complexity of queer migration when viewed globally—on the one hand, there is the familiar flight to the city in pursuit of work and the freedom to experiment with non-normative ways of sexual and gendered being, and on the other, there is the less familiar (and frequent) maintenance of wives and children at home. His picture is also a reminder (if one were needed) that the sexuality and gender categories of the Global North do not correspond neatly with those of the Global South.

Let us now look in greater detail at one in-country migration story from our own data—that of Lukas (a pseudonym), a Spanish trans man who was born in 1960 and whose initial migration was from a Catalan village to a large Catalan city in the 1980s. In some cases, in-country migration can be a prelude to subsequent cross-border migration (see Cashman 2018 for a good example), and this was very much the case for Lukas, whose second migration we look at later in this chapter.

The data we draw on here are part of a corpus of life story narrative interviews (Linde 1993) collected by one of the authors (John) on Lukas's experience of transitioning in middle age (see Gray 2018). The interviews, which are conducted mainly in Spanish, began in late 2015, eighteen months after Lukas first self-identified as trans. Previously, Lukas had been ascribed the identity of butch lesbian, a category he had lived with for most of his adult life. Here we draw on extracts from the first few interviews in which Lukas narrates some of the key events in his life. At the time of these interviews (2015 to early 2016), he was still known to most people as María (a pseudonym) and had not begun hormone treatment, nor had he had any surgical interventions. Close friends, however, were aware of his recent self-identification as trans. His speech is characterized by a noticeable "undecidability" (Derrida 1977) with regard to his choice of masculine or feminine forms to refer to himself—although when speaking of matters that touched directly on his sense of himself as a man he tended to opt for masculine forms (see Gray 2018 for a fuller account).

In common with many trans people (see, e.g., Morris 1974), Lukas states that he felt from an early age that his body did not correspond to his sense of his own gender. His claims to being a boy were initially met with laughter on the part of adults in the family, but as

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he approached puberty he sensed that these claims were becoming a source of social embarrassment to his parents. As is often the case, puberty proved to be a turning point, as Example 1 shows. (Transcription conventions for this excerpt are listed in Appendix 1).

Example 1: Puberty, alcohol, and drug abuse

Spanish

L: yo yo cuando me (.) me vino la regla y y empezó a crecer las tetas y todo esto al-
lí para mí ya fue como una desgracia [J: sí] yo creo que empecé a beber alcohol ya
en esta época [J: hmm] porque no lo soportaba

[some lines omitted]

J: y cuando empezaste a beber ↑

[some lines omitted]

L: pues des- mira empecé a beber (.) con trece más o menos ↑ [J: hmm] y luego
pues todo fue como poco a poco fui tomando más cosas y empecé a lo mejor a fu-
mar los porros antes y acabé con con diez-y-siete años me estaba inyectando (.) [J:
hmm] entonces fue todo un infierno esto para mi familia para todos porque estaba
totalmente=

J: =pero se dieron cuenta ellos (inaudible)

L: claro que SABÍAN pues me metieron me acuerdo una semana en la cárcel
porque (.) estábamos con otro chico robando un coche no sé que (.) [J: hmm] erm
claro que lo sabían estaba en el pueblo todos los días inconsciente en el suelo

English translation

L: I I when (.) when my period arrived and and when my boobs and all that there
began to develop for me it was already like a misfortune [J: yes] I think I started to
drink alcohol at that time [J: hmm] because I couldn't bear it

[some lines omitted]

J: when did you begin drinking ↑

[some lines omitted]

L: well fr- look I began to drink (.) at thirteen more or less ↑ [J: hmm] and then it
was all like little by little I started taking more things and I probably started smok-
ing joints before that and I ended up at at seventeen I was injecting (.) [J: hmm]
then this was complete hell for my family for everybody because I was complete-
ly=

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J: =but were they aware of this (inaudible)

L: of course they KNEW well I remember I was put in jail for a week because we were (.) me and another guy stealing a car I don't know (.) [J: hmm] erm of course they knew I was in the village every day unconscious on the street

Here we see a painful example of the abjection (Kristeva 1982) characterizing the plight of so many trans people—described (not specifically with regard to transgender experience) by Judith Butler (1990: 181–182) as “the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of an identity into a defiling otherness.” Lukas’s emerging adult female body (now menstruating and accompanied by breasts) cannot yet be changed (hormonally and surgically) but it also cannot be borne. Its existence is blotted out by substance abuse—an endeavor that results in his lying each day unconscious on the street. The spectacle is emblematic of his own self-induced expulsion from the life of the village, in which his sense of otherness had become a source of personal pain and social embarrassment for his family.

Lukas went on to explain how—through the intervention of a friend—he went to a hospital in the nearest large town because he was feeling “desperate” (“desesperada”) and “already fed up with suffering” (“harta ya de sufrir”). There he managed to give up taking drugs (significantly indexing Lukas pre-transition, we see here the use of the feminine form of “desperate” and “fed up” to refer to his plight). However, on leaving the hospital, he again fell into addiction, and at the age of twenty-four, having hit rock bottom, he admitted himself once more to the hospital’s drug unit. This was to prove significant in several ways, as it provided Lukas with an unexpected means of escape from the village—although it was one he would later come to repudiate.

Example 2: Lesbianism, escape, and the city

Spanish

L en el hospital conocí a una chica que era alcohólica que estaba en el hospital y ella me empezaba a contar que era lesbiana que tenía una novia que (.) y que cuando saliera de allí les fuera a ver a visitar y todo esto no ↑ [J: hmm] entonces cuando salí del hospital las fui a visitar pensé oy esto me interesa [J: hmm] y fui ellas tenían una amiga y bueno me lié con la amiga (.) me lié con la amiga para poder irme del fucking pueblo [

J: sí} porque pensé si vuelvo al pueblo estaré jodida (FEM) (both laugh)

English translation

L: in the hospital I met a girl who was alcoholic who was in the hospital and she began to tell me she was a lesbian that she had a girlfriend that (.) and that when I left there I should go and see them visit and all that no ↑ [J: hmm] so when I left

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the hospital I visited them I thought hey this interests me [J: hmm] I went they had a friend and well I got off with the friend (.) I got off with the friend so that I could get out of the fucking village [J: yes] because I thought if I go back to the village I'll be fucked [FEM] (both laugh)

Lukas's narrative is not a clear-cut example of sexual migration as understood by Carrillo (2004, 2017), although it evidently involves sex. His comment "this interests me" appears to refer to the fact that women such as the one he met in the hospital and her girlfriend could live together in the city. This might offer the possibility for someone such as himself to become culturally intelligible through being taken for a lesbian and thus legitimately interested in women. However, getting off with the friend is not presented as having to do with desire (or at least not directly), but rather as a means of escape from the village, where his abjection is unavoidable.

In fact, Lukas repeatedly points out that his attraction to women was not lesbian in origin and that his "becoming" a lesbian can be accounted for by what was then discursively and culturally available. This is evident in Example 3:

Example 3: Becoming a lesbian

Spanish

L entonces decidí que bueno que lesbiana pues sería lesbiana (.) [J: hmm] y me puse esto ↓ [...] mira lo más cercano a lo que yo debo ser es que no sabía lo que era [...] pero nunca me sentí integrada ↑ (FEM) con las lesbianas ↑ [...] luego llegaron las inglesas y decían tú eres una lesbiana butch y yo pensaba una mierda (pulling a face) [J: laughing] yo no soy una lesbiana butch pero bueno parece que es lo que había no ↑ [J: hmm] entonces me quedé con esto lesbiana butch

English translation

L so I decided that ok lesbian then I'd be a lesbian (.) [J: hmm] and I called myself that ↓ [...] look the nearest thing to what I must be I didn't know what I was [...] but I never felt integrated ↑ (FEM) with lesbians ↑ [...] then the English women arrived and they said you're a butch lesbian and I thought bullshit (pulling a face) [J: laughing] I'm not a butch lesbian but ok it seems that's what there was no ↑ [hmm] so I stuck with that butch lesbian

In this middle-aged account, Lukas's youthful lesbianism is contingent on the time and place in which he lived and has little to do with any ontological sense of "self." That said, it is clear that the migration was indeed a productive encounter with the affordances of the city. Although Lukas claims never to have been comfortable as a lesbian and to have felt a lack of identification with lesbians, the emplotment structuring his narrative (Polkinghorne 1991; Ricoeur 1983–84) suggests that it was only through "becoming" a lesbian that Lukas was able to give up taking drugs and live more happily in his skin, with the

women he loved, in the city to which he had migrated (see Gray 2018 for a fuller account). It is also worth noting that Lukas does not include any economic motivation in this account of his first migration. The overwhelming impression he seeks to create is one of migration *from* the abjection of his life in the village and the ontological denial his being there presupposed, rather than one of an explicit journey *to* the lesbian community or the freedoms and affordances of the city.

Migration and Mobility within the European Union

The account analyzed in the preceding section reveals something of the complexity of factors in play in queer migration and the ways in which it may differ from other forms of migration. In this section, we turn our attention to city-to-city migration across country borders within the context of the European Union, focusing on Lukas's narrative of his second migration. One of the features of the European Union (EU) is that citizens from member states are free to travel and work in other member states—something that at the time made Lukas's move to the UK in the mid-1990s relatively straightforward, at least in terms of border crossing. Having met and fallen in love with an English woman, Lukas moved with her to the UK when she decided to leave Spain. Despite EU freedom of movement, the relocation proved difficult, as Lukas was initially unemployed and did not speak English. Eventually, the relationship ended, but Lukas stayed on. He studied to become a psychotherapist, and in the years that followed, built up a successful client base. When asked how significant this city was in his trajectory, he framed his answer in terms of professional success and the affordances it now offered for his recent self-identification as trans.

Example 4: Second migration and gender transitioning

Spanish

L: entonces yo estoy contento (MASC) que he elegido quedarme

J: sí

L: porque ahora sí mi trabajo me va muy bien erm he podido tratar todo este tema trans que a lo mejor si me hubiera quedado allí nunca hubiera salido [J: hmm] hubiera seguido enterrado

English translation

L: so I'm happy (MASC) that I chose to stay

J: yes

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L: because now yes my work is going well erm I've been able to deal with all this trans thing which if I'd stayed there might never have come out [J: hmm] it would have stayed buried

For reasons of space, we cannot enter into much detail with regard to the importance of the economic in Lukas's second migration. However, it is significant that he begins his answer by referring to his work. While in postrecovery from drugs and alcohol in Spain, Lukas had worked as a lorry- and taxi driver. The UK city in which he settled offered him the possibility of developing a hard-won and much valued sense of professionalism as a psychotherapist. Thus, it could be argued, economic factors were less a driver *for* migration than a consequence *of* migration, given that his decision to stay in the UK was partly work-related.

Although Lukas does not suggest that transitioning would have been impossible had he stayed in Spain, it is clear that remaining in the UK has provided a space allowing him to "deal with all this trans thing." Across his conversations, Lukas claims to have been unaware of the concept of trans man until eighteen months prior to the first interview. He did know about trans women, however, having seen them in the Spanish city where he had previously lived. Yet according to his narrative, it was only when he saw a film about a young trans man that he realized that female-to-male (FTM) transitioning existed and that he was in fact trans himself (see Gray 2018). This realization led him to explore FTM communities online and eventually to join a local FTM support group in his adopted city. His final comment about a part of him remaining "buried" is a reference to what Lukas calls his "inner boy" ("niño interior"). Silenced in the Catalan village where he grew up, Lukas frequently recalls the figure of this child throughout his narrative. It is only now, over forty years after the inner boy was silenced, that he is able to contemplate some kind of ontological wholeness as a possibility in this second adopted city.

In this second migration narrative, we see a clearer example of the kind of sexual migration discussed by Carrillo (2004, 2017). Lukas's move to the UK was provoked by the desire to remain in a relationship with his then girlfriend. The economic aspect of this is only foregrounded in his decision to stay post break-up. However, in a way similar to Cyril, whom we quoted in our introduction, it is only through this migration that Lukas became aware of FTM transitioning and met other trans men, making his own transitioning thinkable.

Our discussion so far has considered the interactions of subjectivity, identity, desire, and economic factors that drive queer migration stories. In the following section, we consider moves that are driven by persecution, violence, and the well-founded fear of harm, leading to applications for asylum.

Migration and mobility from the Global South to the Global North: Seeking Asylum

Valuable work has been done on asylum processes more generally by Amy Shuman and Carol Bohmer (2004, 2007) as well as by Katrijn Maryns (2006), who pinpoints the importance of the narrative in the asylum process (see also Blommaert 2009). The asylum seeker needs to demonstrate “‘a well founded fear of persecution’” in the country of origin. In the case of queer asylum seekers, as explored by Calogero Giametta (2017), this fear of persecution is based on their sexuality and gender identity. As Giametta explains, not all asylum stories are acceptable: “When the asylum seekers I spoke to told their stories to the Home Office asylum caseworkers, the lawyers, the judges or the asylum support workers, they had somehow to fit their narratives into a recognizable repertoire of asylum stories.” (2017: 1). If this is not the case, the asylum claim will fail.

In addition to mapping onto the criteria, the asylum story also has to be seen as plausible. As Shuman and Bohmer (2007) and many thereafter have pointed out, the asylum process is adversarial, based on disbelief. Not surprisingly, there is a paucity of empirical data that show exactly what happens in high-stakes interviews between government representatives and those seeking asylum. However, some artists who have been through this process have drawn on their own experience of these encounters, and it is for that reason that we draw on one such re-creation here. Adam Kashmiry, a young Egyptian trans man, worked with the playwright Frances Poet (2017) to write *Adam*—a play exploring his experience of asylum-seeking in the UK. In the following extract, taken from the play, we see Adam’s story being systematically disbelieved by the government interviewer, who also consistently refuses to address Adam by his adopted name since his transition:

Example 5: Adam is interrogated at the Home Office

HOME OFFICE REPRESENTATIVE: Did you report your alleged sexual assault to the Egyptian police, Miss Kashmiry?

GLASGOW ADAM: Alleged? I ...

HOME OFFICE REPRESENTATIVE: Did you report your attack to the Egyptian police?

GLASGOW ADAM gives a shake of the head.

HOME OFFICE REPRESENTATIVE: So you did not feel significantly threatened?

GLASGOW ADAM: I did.

HOME OFFICE REPRESENTATIVE: Why then did you not seek redress or protection?

GLASGOW ADAM: I, I don’t understand the question. From whom could I seek protection?

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HOME OFFICE REPRESENTATIVE: The police, of course.

GLASGOW ADAM: If I tell the police that a person on the street has hurt me, they hurt me twice as bad. I tell them I was sexually assaulted by a man. Three police assault me. Redress? Protection? There is none.

HOME OFFICE REPRESENTATIVE: So to clarify, Miss Kashmiry, there is no formal record of your attack? Nothing to prove it ever happened at all

(Poet 2017: 33–34).

This extract exemplifies the adversarial questioning strategy typical of the asylum hearing in the UK. Adam, who has already transitioned, is here systematically addressed by his birth gender, that is, “Miss Kashmiry.” As stated earlier, asylum stories have to map on to the categories of harm provided in the criteria for asylum. These are stories that are told and retold for different audiences. Intimate revelations, including traumatic experiences of violence and loss, have to be made public over and over again. In addition, research shows that migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees are also particularly vulnerable to sexual violence as they undertake their migratory journeys. However, they are frequently unable to offer acceptable proof that such violence has taken place (De Schrijver et al. 2018; cf. Ehrlich, this volume).

Another complicating factor in considering these stories is what Giametta (2017) and others term *homonationalism*—described by Jasbir Puar (2007: 2) as “a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects” (see also Lazar, this volume). Puar adds:

The fleeting sanctioning of a national homosexual subject is possible, not only through the proliferation of racial-sexual subjects who invariably fall out of its narrow terms of acceptability, as others have argued, but more significantly, through the simultaneous engendering and disavowal of *populations* of sexual-racial others who need not apply

(Puar 2007: 2).

Queer asylum thus takes place within the context of the operation of a grand narrative of homonationalism that positions the asylum-seeking subject as coming from the benighted homophobic and persecuting South to the enlightened North. Giametta (2017) argues that such homonationalist perspectives can easily collude with racism. Drawing heavily on the work of Didier Fassin (2012), Giametta locates sexual orientation as the basis for asylum claims within a politics of humanitarianism—which, as Fassin suggests, is typified by appeals to compassion, emotion, and a common humanity in which the suffering body (whether the victim of natural disaster, hunger, or sexual violence) is the common denominator for all human experience. But such a politics, he argues, is also worth exploring and critiquing, given that, as has been seen (in Kosovo, Iraq, etc.), Western interventionism is often justified by the invocation of humanitarianism and the instrumental mobilization of pity among those who are being asked to support it (what Fassin calls its “ethical

disguise”). In the case of the queer asylum seeker, Giametta suggests that acceptable narratives are influenced by a politics of border control and stereotypical understandings of what it means to be gay. In this view, the narratives queer migrants are asked to produce as part of the asylum-seeking process can be understood as the “language games” of a humanitarian apparatus that also serve to create a hierarchy of suffering and to advantage some claimants more than others. Failure to produce a narrative that chimes with the homonationalist script can result in a denial of the queer asylum claim. It is for this reason that Giametta urges us to be suspicious of the uses to which such narratives can be put.

Conclusion

We started this chapter by problematizing the inclusive “we” in the quotation from Houlbrook. The notion that Cyril’s story is all of our stories appears not to hold up. That said, we have shown that there are certain commonalities in the literature and across the narratives we analyze. Yet these commonalities appear to be more in the way of overlapping circles in a Venn diagram rather than characteristics shared by all queer migrants. Whether within borders or across them, queer migration is clearly a complex phenomenon in which the intersection of sexuality, gender identity, desire, affect, abjection, economic necessity, social class, politics, and fear for one’s life (along with doubtlessly unnamed other aspects of human experience) combine in ways that are unique in the lives of individual migrants. The stories told by Cyril, Javi, Lukas, and Adam—as well as the story told in the Chinese bathhouse about rural migrants—collectively constitute a powerful reminder of how different and similar “we” all are (it should be additionally noted that these are all narratives told by men). Despite some counter-examples in the data, particularly from Javi, the pull to the city as a narrative theme seems fairly robust. We thus suggest that queering the migration story necessarily involves recognition of the complexity that exists at the heart of queer migration. We see this point as important, not only for understanding queer migration better but also as a useful corrective to homonationalist templates that continue to hold sway in queer asylum seeking.

We have also suggested that linguistic approaches can bring much to the interdisciplinary investigation of queer migration by providing close attention to the materiality of talk, to questions of voice, and to the construction of subjectivity and identity positions through language. The analytic focus on narrative brings a valuable linguistic perspective, as we saw in the account of Lukas’s migration and transition. In particular, Lukas’s story draws attention to the role of discourse in the construction of identities related to migration. Although never fully feeling himself to be a butch lesbian, Lukas “became” one after being named as such by the English women he met on first migrating to the city. His comments regarding his former positioning as a butch lesbian (“I’m not a butch lesbian but ok it seems that’s what there was no, so I stuck with that”) shows how identification can be both partial and provisional. Later, after his second migration, Lukas came to self-identify as a trans man, but only after encountering a new term that (upon reflection) served to explain himself to himself. As with the process of coming out and developing a queer

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identity, migration can itself be seen as an example of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls *ideological becoming*, the term he used (Bakhtin 1981: 341–342) to characterize the process of self-production, involving sharp struggle and conflict between authoritative (patriarchal) voices and heteroglossic voices. As Bakhtin puts it: “The ideological becoming of a human being ... is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others” (341). Whatever the causes, and clearly there are many, the narratives examined in this chapter show that queer migration is complex and suggest that LGBTQ individuals often undertake migration bravely in the knowledge that they have no other option.

Appendix 1: Transcription Conventions

- ↑ rising intonation
- ↓ falling intonation
- CAPITAL letters mean raised voice
- (.) very short pause
- (number) two or more second pause
- [] comments by interlocutor
- (FEM) feminine ending
- (MASC) masculine ending
- : elongated vowel sound (e.g., (esto:y / a:m)

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our informants Javi and Lukas for sharing their experiences with us. Thanks too to Mel Cooke, who read and commented on earlier versions of this chapter, and to the Handbook editors Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett for their helpful comments along the way.

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Notes:

(1.) On account of the data samples in this chapter coming from different sources, the representation of speech varies. The transcription conventions used in some extracts are listed at the end of the chapter.

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