"Coaching" Queer

Hospitality and the Categorical Imperative of LGBTQ Asylum Seeking in Lebanon and

Turkey

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Abstract: This article argues that Northern responses to and recognition of LGBTQ refugees bind queer organizations in Lebanon and Turkey that support such refugees in a state of contradiction. This contradiction is defined both by the failure of Northern LGBTQ rights discourses to account for Southern ways of being queer, but also by the categorical imperative of hospitality, which asks that the "right" refugee appears in line with the moral, political, raced, and gendered assumptions of Northern host states. In recognizing this imperative, this article observes how queer organizations in Lebanon and Turkey navigate this contradiction by simultaneously "coaching" their beneficiaries on how to appear "credible" in line with Northern assumptions about sexual difference, while working to accommodate the alterity of those they support.

Jacques Derrida asks, "How can we distinguish between a guest and a parasite? In principle, the difference is straightforward, but for that you need a law; hospitality . . . has to be submitted to a basic and limiting jurisdiction" (2000: 59). However, with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI)–based claims for asylum, this basic jurisdiction is highly contested. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) guidelines on "sexual minority"

asylum (2012) outlines that an individual can seek asylum from SOGI-based persecution if they "have a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of . . . membership of a particular social group." However, verifying the "credibility" of an individual's membership of said social group is difficult: What characteristics does the applicant share with their supposed group? Answering this question requires that both the characteristics of said social group are clearly defined, and that the stranger reflects such characteristics through their language, appearance, beliefs, attitudes, and other markers of "identity." In this way, how is "hospitality *rendered* [and] *given* to the Other before they are identified? (emphasis in original)" (Derrida 2000: 29). This, Derrida argues, is the "categorical imperative of hospitality" (ibid.: 81).

This categorical imperative—of appearing and distinguishing between the "credible" and the "bogus" SOGI refugee—has numerous consequences for refugee protection in Turkey and Lebanon. Such categories are themselves informed by a North-South directionality of knowledge about sexual difference, in which Northern lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer (LGBTQ) identity frameworks simultaneously shape Southern responses to queer refugees. Moreover, the assumed universality of such a framework renders the subjectivities of many queer refugees and established host communities in Southern contexts invisible to the protection systems designed to support them. Instead, the categorical imperative of hospitality ensures that LGBTQ asylum systems—including UNHCR's resettlement program—seeks "credible" victims in line with dominant Northern assumptions about the nature of SOGI-based persecution on the one hand, and the assumed identities, appearances, and characteristics of victims on the other. This situation is confounded by what Calogero Giametta has termed the "sexual politics of asylum" (2017), where the rights and political recognition of marginalized communities and refugees are suspended, contested, or erased by competing geopolitical understandings of and

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tolerances for sexual difference. For example, whilst international protection systems and Northern states measure the "credibility" of SOGI claims against their assumptions about sexual difference, Southern actors may deploy similar tactics to delegitimize queer communities on grounds that they are "bogus" citizens emboldened by the neocolonial aspirations of Northern states.

In this article, I will explore how this situation is shaping the responses to and experiences of queer refugees living in Turkey and Lebanon, focusing in particular on the practices of queer organizations and NGOs. This approach aims to challenge the relative paucity of research relating to the roles played by Southern queer actors in humanitarian contexts, while critiquing the dominance of Northern epistemologies of sexual difference as they exist in the policies and practices of international organizations. In particular, this article will demonstrate, on the one hand, how Lebanese and Turkish queer organizations work to "coach" queer refugees to speak the language of LGBTQ rights and identity categories, aware that a failure to do so will limit their overall "credibility" in the eyes of decision makers. On the other hand, this article will also observe how "coaching" runs parallel with their more sensitive refugee support programmes, allowing queer organisations to tentatively—and within the small space of their offices—practice a model of hospitality that often goes beyond the categorical imperative identified by Derrida: they do not seek to confirm the "credibility" of the queer refugee, but instead attempt to support the stranger in a way that accommodates the inherent subjectivities of queer, persecuted bodies. Ultimately, by exploring the interplay between Northern humanitarian responses to queer refugees, and their impact on the work of queer organizations in Turkey and Lebanon, this article will argue for a reversal in the directionality of knowledge about sexual

difference, so that queer peoples—both established host communities and newly arrived refugees—are afforded credibility and recognition on their own terms.

Sexual Normativities and LGBTQ Asylum Systems

LGBTQ asylum is a relatively novel route to protection, having been introduced into the asylum jurisprudence of several (largely Northern) states in the last couple of decades. In particular, as UNHCR's guidelines on this topic make clear (2012), sexual and gender-based persecution falls under the "particular social group" definition, meaning that individuals should be granted international protection when their "immutable" sexual and gender identities expose them to persecution by states, communities, and family members in contexts where laws either actively punish queer sexual practices and gender performances, or look the other way when sexual and gender-based violence takes place. However, the challenge comes when the applicant has to prove that (a) their characteristics are "immutable," and in keeping with the assumptions of how a queer or nonnormative person should look, speak, and behave, and (b) they actually do face persecution on these grounds. These are both challenging in part because queer asylum seekers— and the persecution that they experience—must usually *appear* in order for them to be recognized under international law. However, the sometimes private nature of persecution— often taking place in domestic contexts—coupled with the fact that the reality of such persecution ensures many queer peoples employ discretion as a "survival tactic" (Kivilcim 2017: 38), means the burden of proof placed on the applicant produces challenges that are often difficult to overcome. These challenges are further heightened by the linguistic rigidity of Northern responses to queer asylum seekers, which typically mistake LGBTQ rights categories as a universal expression of sexual subjectivity, despite the fact that such categories originate

from specific cultural, English-speaking contexts. As a result, the asylum apparatus put in place to protect persecuted queers often generates dichotomous processes of hypervisibility/invisibility and recognition/misrecognition that makes the practice of seeking international protection an intensely challenging one.

Furthermore, the linguistic, social, and cultural assumptions that frame Northern recognitions of queer persecution in the Global South are exacerbated by the geopolitical contexts that simultaneously shape the lives of forced migrants. For example, in the context of the "refugee crisis," queer persecution became a focal point of Northern concern vis-à-vis the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Spurred on by images of allegedly homosexual Iraqi and Syrian men being thrown from rooftops by ISIS fighters, Northern media outlets and governments spoke of the need to protect LGBTQ peoples, including by prioritizing them as a "vulnerable group" in resettlement programs (Ennis 2015). However, in light of the hostility faced by forced migrants from the Middle East in general—demonstrated by rigorous attempts by Northern states to prevent displaced peoples from crossing their borders (Jones 2016)—this concern for queer vulnerabilities has not necessarily benefited those who face diverse forms of persecution, or whose identities do not easily conform with assumptions about "gayness" in the Global North.

As a result, queer bodies have been positioned on the front line of a geopolitical divide that, on the one hand, affords hospitality to the "right refugee"—whose victimhood is both legible to the assumptions of Northern gender and sexual norms, and the temporal, spatial, and geopolitical priorities that shape the "interests of the international human rights regime" (Shakhsari 2014: 1011). On the other hand, the claims of queer peoples for political recognition and legal protection are simultaneously discredited by some Southern actors, who have garnered

political capital on the notion that such communities are part and parcel of a morally degenerate and dangerous program of Western neocolonialism. In this way, sexual normativities are a key device in the framing of hostility/hospitality toward forced migrants and marginalized communities. They both constitute who is a "credible" queer refugee or citizen, and the unwelcome Other, which includes both nonnormative asylum seekers, refugees who appear as "bogus" LGBTQ refugees, forced migrants in general, and established hosts.

Counterdiscourses of Hospitality and Hostility in Turkey and Lebanon

In this context, the conditions of welcome offered to the "right" LGBTQ refugee are also sustained by "a distinction between East and West" (Shuman and Hesford 2014: 1028), which is arguably framed as much by Southern actors as it is by Northern notions of sexual difference. In a particularly relevant example, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in May 2016, criticised the EU for caring more about homosexuals than Syrian women and children, accusing "the west of possessing a mindset 'remnant of slavery and colonialism'" (The Guardian 2016). Such statements strategically play Northern concerns for LGBTQ rights off against the hostile and unethical treatment of refugees by European states, claiming on behalf of the Turkish state a moral superiority that is not dissimilar to the moral superiority claimed by Northern states when they advocate for global LGBTQ rights. Regardless, this discursive battle has worked to limit the freedoms of queer refugees and established hosts living in Turkey, fermenting a hostile environment that is premised on the idea that sexual difference is not consistent with Turkish culture, but consistent with European neocolonialism instead.

This situation places many queer refugees in Turkey between hostility and hospitality. For example, faced with the need to appear "credible" in order to secure international protection,

one participant told me that a male refugee felt obliged to attend his UNHCR interview in Ankara in full makeup. While UNHCR's own guidelines do not base "credibility" on such explicitly overt gender identity markers, the fear of rejection still means many refugees will take unnecessary risks: in this case, the applicant was exposed to significant harassment and persecution for looking 'gay' or effeminate. Likewise, because of these challenges, it comes as no surprise that very few queer refugees are actually registered with UNHCR in Turkey for fear of being exposed to harassment in interview waiting rooms and outside official buildings (Kivilcim 2017).

Similarly, in Lebanon, queer refugees are exposed to what Henri Myrttinen and colleagues define as a "continuum of violence" (2017: 66). Faced with a high degree of immobility, queer refugees in Lebanon are not able to legally or easily flee certain neighborhoods, cities, or towns if they encounter discrimination, harassment, or persecution. Accessing resources is also difficult, often forcing queer refugees into challenging encounters with other refugee and host community populations. As with Turkey, recent political developments, as well as a growing sense of frustration with LGBTQ rights discourses, has produced a backlash in the country, which came to a head during International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) demonstrations in 2017, and persisted during IDAHO 2018. Several events organized by Lebanese activists were disrupted by key political leaders, who justified their actions in much the same way that Turkish state actors have critiqued LGBTQ rights: the increased visibility of sexual difference in both countries is seen as evidence of encroaching cultural imperialism.

This context also places queer organizations that support refugees in Lebanon and Turkey in an "in-between zone" which, building on Shakhsari's research in Turkey (2014), I define both

by the continuum of hostility/hospitality that shapes their everyday lives, and the need to position their advocacy in relation to the wider global politics of LGBTQ rights. For example, many queer activists and organizations acknowledge the inherent problems presented by Northern categories of sexual difference. Following Joseph Massad's critique of the "gay internationale" (2007), they recognize the colonial undercurrents that shape global discourses of sexual rights. These aim to, following Spivak (1994), "save" brown gay men from other brown men, often by essentializing queer victimhood into a simple, teleological narrative that upholds the modernity of the North over the South. Nevertheless, despite often recognizing the validity of these criticisms, queer organizations—by advocating for sexual and gender rights in contexts that do not recognize them as legitimate—*appear* in the eyes of some as agents of Western colonialism. In response, they are left to navigate what Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak have termed the continuum of "tactics and imaginaries" (2007). Much like that of hostility/hospitality, this continuum places queer activists and organizations in a contradictory environment brought on less by their own complicity in Western colonialism, and more by the wider geopolitical context in which they work. By conceptualizing their work along a continuum of tactics/imaginaries, this article aims to recognize the methodologies and practices such organizations have developed in the "in-between zone" of global LGBTQ rights, and the spatial relationship of such practices with the contexts of Lebanon and Turkey.

Methodology

The empirical data presented below was gathered over the course of two field trips to Turkey and Lebanon during the summers of 2016 and 2017, respectively. In total, representatives from seven Turkish organizations were interviewed in either Istanbul or Ankara. In Lebanon, four

organizations were interviewed, and one focus group was conducted in order to facilitate collective reflections on some of the themes covered by this research. All participants were based in Beirut. For the purposes of confidentiality, participant names and organizational affiliations have been removed.

Overall, the findings presented here are exploratory in nature: this article aims to consider how Southern actors are affected by sexual asylum normativities that are otherwise well accounted for by queer asylum scholars vis-à-vis practices in the Global North. Further research on queer asylum in the Global South is certainly imperative: this article aims to contribute to existing research here (Kivilcim 2017; Myrttinen et al. 2017; Nasser-Eddin et al. 2018, Shakhsari 2014), by examining the implications of Northern sexual rights discourses on Southern queer responses to refugees in particular.

"Coaching" Queer: Between Hostility and Hospitality in Turkey and Lebanon

Queer organizations in Lebanon and Turkey take up mediatory positions within the wider humanitarian nexus, obliged to cooperate with Northern sexual rights frameworks on the one hand, while accepting that these frameworks often fail to account for the subjectivities of the refugees they assist on the other. Nevertheless, despite adopting criticisms of rigid LGBTQ categories, or of expressing support for a more "fluid" way of thinking about sexuality and gender expression, many of the activists and organizations interviewed outlined how they are required to inform their "beneficiaries" of what they are expected to say if they are to "pass" UNHCR interviews:

When I do the social assessment, I explain to the people that, in the later interviews, they will ask you about these kinds of issues and that you have to give very specific responses when you answer, because this is a process in UNHCR. (practitioner, Beirut, 2017)

To have [a successful] claim [refugees] have to answer questions about dates, about relationships, and it is sometimes not very easy for some cases. . . . Sometimes the interviews take four hours, and you have to talk about all sorts of problems in your life, about your sexual practice, and they call you to another interview, they ask the same questions to compare. (practitioner, Beirut, 2017)

As such, the process of seeking international protection is understood as a scrutinizing one designed to determine the "credibility" of applicants against those who would *use* the system to "pass" as bogus LGBTQ refugees. This process is often so rigorous that applicants at heightened risk are deemed ineligible on account of their failure to "fit" with expectations. An awareness of this challenge has encouraged many organizations to "coach" queer refugees on how to "fit" themselves into "credible" identities, often by identifying what they should or should not say. Other times, efforts will be made to explain how a refugee from Syria *should* describe themselves: "errors" are often made by queer refugees who define themselves in "incorrect" ways, owing to a lack of familiarity with LGBTQ identity categories. Other times, people persecuted on grounds of their sexual practice and gender performance will feel reluctant to "come out" as LGBTQ, or feel uncomfortable doing so, using terms in Arabic to describe themselves—such as *lutti* (لوطي)—that are often not recognized as "credible" because they are seen as derogatory or bigoted.

Negotiating this need to simultaneously "coach" refugees, while recognizing the limits of Northern categories typically used to determine "credibility," certainly frustrates the work of queer organizations in Lebanon and Turkey: "You are put in a box, like you have to be gay. No, you have a lot of people who are straight and emotionally they are attracted to women, but sometimes they like partying and have sex with a guy and face persecution. This kind of boxing thing I am not with" (practitioner, Beirut, 2017). By contrast, queer refugee encounters with practitioners in Lebanon are often less conditional than those that take place in the interview rooms of UNHCR. They recognize that sexual practices that lead to persecution—such as sex between men—happens regardless of whether or not that same person *defines* themselves as LGBTQ. Indeed, the nature of persecution on grounds of sexual practice is a very real—and often private—feature of persecution that is often not accounted for by a focus on sexual *identities*. These require that applicants visibly "fit" themselves into identities in a way that ignores the fact that, for many, persecution stems from engaging in nonnormative sexual practices, and not necessarily *identifying as* LGBTQ. As a result, queer organizations anticipate that individuals may come to seek support who do not obviously "fit" into the "particular social group category" covered by the 1951 convention: they may possess none of the visible "characteristics" of being LGBTQ, but still experience persecution based on their *sexual practice* (Nasser-Eddin et al. 2018). Nevertheless, the "ocular epistemology" of Northern human rights law (Shuman and Hesford 2014: 1021) means this aspect of sexuality-based persecution is obscured: they fail to meet the expectations of the host, and must be "coached" to adopt the language of LGBTQ rights identities.

As a result, queer organizations operate in the "in-between zone" created by the conditions of hospitality in the Global North, as well as the hostility toward nonnormative sexual

practices common in Lebanon and Turkey. Nevertheless, given the often pressing need to secure

international protection for those at extreme risk of violence and exploitation because of their

sexuality or gender performance, queer organizations must amend their queer politics, and

instead adopt tactics that will enable their beneficiaries to seek refuge in line with the normative

assumptions of the asylum system. As a result, the continuum of hostility and hospitality—and

the ways in which it has been framed by the "sexual politics of asylum" (Giametta 2017)—

ensures that the humanitarian responses of queer organizations to refugees must operate on a

parallel continuum of action: the conditions of hospitality in the Global North informs the tactics

of queer Southern organizations in a dialectical manner. In this sense, organizations accept that

the international asylum system requires people to adopt identities and categories that they may

not feel comfortable or even identify with, and that strategically speaking such organizations

have a role in "coaching" toward these categories as a means of securing international protection

for their beneficiaries. Along this continuum, queer organizations position themselves as

mediators, both creating within the space of their offices and support groups some form of

unconditional welcome, while simultaneously acknowledging that—beyond this space—failure

to adopt normative notions of sexual difference may result in a failure to secure international

protection for those who need it.

     This understanding extends beyond UNHCR resettlement, relating also to the wider

network of service provision, where support for "credible" LGBTQ refugees is more

forthcoming for those who "fit" than for individuals who do not adopt an identity category. As

one practitioner in Turkey explained: "What matters is that [refugees] have a kind of identity

awareness. OK, I am gay, bisexual, or transsexual. Somehow this makes it easier to find support.

For other people, who might . . . not have an identity connection, but face persecution, they

might not be able to access support" (practitioner, Istanbul, 2016). In a situation of precarity and insecurity, this "identity connection" may allow organizations to offer more useful and targeted referrals, relating to specific challenges facing queer refugees. However, in lieu of an "identity connection," individuals may miss out on key services. This also reflects within practitioner responses to queer refugees the need to encourage individuals to come into an "identity connection" to access humanitarian support in Lebanon and Turkey, and not just UNHCR resettlement.

This notion of an "identity connection" is itself constructed by those who seek support from queer organizations too, leading to tensions within and between queer communities, who also construct notions of "credibility" about sexual difference. For example, tensions between the host queer community and queer refugees from Syria were highlighted as a key concern. These animosities formed on numerous lines of difference, including that some members of the latter were not "credible," and on the perception that some refugees from Syria are entitled to rights and privileges denied to queer members of the host community. For example, religion can often play an important role in shaping hostility between Lebanese and Syrian queers receiving support from Lebanese organizations: "You have other people who are religious and they are trying to struggle between their faith and their sexuality so they do feel that they are kind of judged by the other people who are not very religious or who do not care about religion" (practitioner, Beirut, 2017). As such, there is an anticipation among some queer Lebanese activists and community members that others in the room *should* abide by notions that LGBTQ rights are incompatible with faith, something that resonates with the assumptions of Northern decision makers, who often fail to understand how applicants can be queer and religious, given strong secular assumptions that religious belief is antithetical to sexual difference (Giametta

2014). This is not unique to certain members of the host community, but also features in the

attitudes of some queer refugees from Syria: one participant recalled how beneficiaries

sometimes ask "how [an individual] can be gay and Muslim?" (practitioner, Beirut, 2017). This

can create internal hostility that practitioners attempt to overcome by adopting "inclusive"

programming: "We work to not have any problem between the refugee community and the

Lebanese LGBT community. For that, all our activities are inclusive" (practitioner, Beirut,

2017). However, this sometimes means that it is easier to avoid discussing topics, like religion,

that otherwise might be taboo: "We do not ask about religion" (practitioner, Beirut, 2017). The

extent to which this may deny the articulation of faith in relation to one's sexuality suggests a

subtle conformity to secular frameworks that treat faith negatively, as a source of division and a

threat to "inclusive" programming. Nevertheless, as Sima Shakhsari argues with regard to queer

refugees in Turkey, much of this animosity stems from the dominance of LGBTQ rights

discourses in the framing of international protection: "at times, policing by others leads to a form

of competition in order to prove to UNHCR that one is more authentic in their identity than

others" (2014: 1003).

This system of international protection also produces tensions between established host

and newly arrived refugee communities: the latter are often regarded by some marginalized

queers in Turkey and Lebanon as having better access to support and protection, despite the fact

that both groups suffer from shared forms of persecution:

But you know what, the real problem sometimes is that trans women from Lebanon

cannot be refugees here in Lebanon and they cannot present themselves for [UNHCR

resettlement]. They will tell you why others can travel, and share their life, and for us we

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don't have this opportunity. Some other services that are provided to refugees for free are

not provided to Lebanese. This kind of issue sometimes causes some stress between the

two communities. (practitioner, Beirut, 2017)

As a result, the hierarchies of vulnerability and visibility generated by the international

humanitarian system produce contradictions and inconsistencies vis-à-vis who can and who

cannot receive support. Queer organizations in Lebanon and Turkey must navigate this reality, at

times encouraging individuals to play into the expectations of Northern decision makers, while

recognizing that such practices often result in exclusionary or violent outcomes for others.

Conclusion: Beyond a Categorical Imperative?

Overall, this data demonstrates that several Turkish and Lebanese organizations are adopting

tactical methods that simultaneously maintain and subvert the potentially violent categorical

imperative of the international LGBTQ asylum apparatus. "Coaching" is offered to prepare queer

refugees for their interviews with UNHCR, which often means goading individuals to adopt an

"identity connection" in line with Northern assumptions and LGBTQ rights categories. This is

done while employing a more idealistic form of unconditional hospitality in the way they

welcome queer peoples to their support sessions. However, normative discourses of sexual

difference—and what they say about religion, victimhood, and "credibility"—pervade their

work, as well as the expectations of the other vulnerable groups that they work with. In this way,

their work responds to the "categorical imperative" of hospitality (Derrida 2000: 81), perceiving

sexuality as fluid, while simultaneously adapting their tactics in line with the dominant Northern

expectations and assumptions that frame the overall humanitarian response to queer refugees.

This produces at times contradictory outcomes that are themselves sustained by the contradictions of hospitality: this requires that queer strangers present themselves at the threshold as though they are not who they are, but rather who they *should* be. In this way, mainstream humanitarian responses to queer refugees ensure that they, and the Southern organizations that support them, are bound together in a state of contradiction that stems in turn from the failure of Northern epistemologies to account for the alterity of queer subjectivity.

Nevertheless, the methods applied by queer organizations in Lebanon and Turkey, whose practice of listening to the queer stranger—of resisting the need to search for "credible" queer refugees—does present an alternative approach to the one inherent in normative notions of LGBTQ rights. This approach does not necessarily do away with the contradictions of sexual "credibility"—which in turn contribute to processes of visibility/invisibility, rights and rightlessness—but works with contradictions, acknowledging, to some degree, the impossibility of recognition in light of the alterity and subjectivity of queer lives. By taking up mediatory positions as "coaches," queer organizations in Turkey and Lebanon have in turn developed methodologies and practices that can resist "the logic of fixity that sustains oppressive social norms" (Shuman and Hesford 2014: 1030) both as they exist within the humanitarian nexus and in the contexts of Lebanon and Turkey.

Overall, this article argues that it is vital that efforts are taken to reverse the directionality of knowledge about sexuality, to avoid outcomes that see Northern categories of "credibility" applied at the expense of Southern forms of knowledge about sexuality and persecution. By contrast, the responses of queer organizations in Lebanon and Turkey reflect what Amy Shuman and Wendy Hesford have defined as a "transnational sexual rights discourse that does not treat confounding identities and vulnerabilities as an obstacle to political recognition" (ibid.: 1028). In

some limited form, such a discourse is being led by Southern actors who have the skills, knowledge, and language to accommodate confounding "strangers." Of course, this is not to idealize the work of these organizations, who are themselves party to the policing of identities and notions of queer "credibility," but to recognize how their methods are able to *translate* (through "coaching") queer strangers into the known, while retaining a politics of recognition that is sensitive to the subjectivities of sexuality and gender.

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