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Limbo life in Canada's waiting room: Asylum-seeker as queer subject

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Abstract

This paper puts queer theory's "subjectless critique" of identity to work in challenging the state's biopolitical use of essential, authentic identities in asylum law and practice. It not only builds upon, but also departs from existing scholarship that calls on state actors to recognize a wider range of forms of gender and sexual diversity that make people vulnerable to persecution. By contrast, I investigate how the practices of "destination" countries produce asylums-seekers as dispossessed, deportable, precarious queers, regardless of sexual identity or practice. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with asylum-seekers and their supporters in Toronto, Canada, I highlight the waiting room as one type of material and metaphorical space that produces asylum-seekers as liminal queer subjects. I argue that approaching queerness as precarity, rather than lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identity or even sexual and gender diversity, provides alternative and expansive ethical horizons for queer and migration politics.

Keywords

Queer, refugee, asylum, subjectless critique, waiting room, waiting

Queer theory has historically sought to challenge liberalism's ahistorical propensity for "installing injury as identity" (Brown, 1995: xi) by directing critical attention toward sexuality not as an identity, but as a diffuse form of power that is deeply imbricated in histories and geographies of violence (e.g. Foucault, 1990; Puar, 2007). In particular, the tradition of queer "subjectless critique" (Eng et al., 2005) insists on a queer studies without a "proper object" (Butler, 1994)—a point of reference with a marked lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) identity—in order to offer "a more expansive, mobile mapping of power" (Butler, 1994: 21; see Oswin, 2008). Subjectless queer critique has been used to understand a range of non-LGBT-identified figures—from the African American "welfare queen" (Cohen, 1997) to the Brown man profiled as a putatively perverse Arab terrorist (Puar, 2007)—as queer, and thus to nurture incipient possibilities for coalition politics among differently marginalized people. Thus queer theory's anti-identitarian impulses

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have served not simply to negate the liberal fetish of identity, but to cultivate alternative experiments in worldbuilding (Sedgwick, 2003; van Doorn, 2013).

In this article, I argue that queer critical mappings of power can prove particularly useful to scholarship grappling with late modern nation-states' drive toward the violent production, policing, fencing, management and expulsion of "stateless" populations (Arendt, 2001; Brown, 2010). Indeed, subjectless queer insights resonate with the burgeoning critical geographical literature on asylum (Gill, 2010), which seeks to challenge tropes of (in)authentic or (un)deserving "refugeeness," (Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Lewis, 2013) and expose the neoliberal, geopolitical and mundane contingencies that inform putatively neutral forms of refugee law (Malkki, 1995; Mountz, 2011; Shakhsari, 2014). Separately and at their intersections, both queer and critical asylum scholarship have sought to better map possibilities both for critically inhabiting extant political forms, and imagining more emancipatory alternatives to the biopolitical management and exile of refugee populations (Darling, 2009; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013; White, 2014).

What, then, could it mean for scholarship and for politics to think of asylum-seekers as *queer*, irrespective of sexual identities or practices?[1] This article aims to stage a productive dialogue between subjectless queer critique and the critical geographies of asylum by considering the *spaces* that I argue produce asylum-seekers as queer. A growing body of scholarship has sought to consider the dilemmas, violences and pleasures that LGBT asylum-seekers encounter, and much of it has generatively engaged queer insights about the performativity of identity and the violence of essentialist renditions of gender and sexual diversity (Lee and Brotman, 2011; Luker, 2015; Murray, 2016). My goal here, however, is to foster even greater engagement with queer theory's subjectless critique of identity within critical scholarship on asylum. Side-stepping the question of the "truth" of asylum-seeker's identities, I focus on the space of the *waiting room* as a both material and metaphorical site that renders asylum-seekers precarious and queer precisely through their quotidian experiences of space/time. Both banal and exceptional, inside and outside the law and stretched out into a compromised, improvised kind of ordinary life (Agamben, 1998, 2005; Berlant, 2011), the waiting room is a space where sovereign and more diffuse forms of biopower routinely converge (Coleman and Grove, 2009). The space of the waiting room provides an alternative departure point for epistemological engagement with the state, privileging asylum-seekers' queer, peripheral geographies over their "true" identities as a potential basis for political solidarity. Using the waiting room to understand asylum-seekers as precariously queer, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, might help scholars and activists (1) further displace the drama of in/authentic refugeeness by centering the problem of diffuse but manifest state violence; (2) expand the ethical horizons for both queer and critical asylum politics by privileging precarity and vulnerability as "groundless grounds" for solidarity (Butler, 1994, 2004).

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows: In the next section I review some key common and unique strands from scholarship on subjectless queer critique, queer asylum, and the critical geographies of asylum. I note the resonances across these domains of inquiry, including around a critique of liberal renditions of identity as deployed by the state; an ambivalence about what inhabiting such idioms can accomplish; and a commitment to alternative forms of world-building that include and exceed working within available terms of state power. I then turn directly to my field experiences working with asylum-seekers in literal and metaphorical waiting rooms in Toronto, Canada. While my fieldwork brought me into conversation with people seeking asylum from homophobic and transphobic persecution, I suggest it is not identity but asylum-seekers' consignment to infantilizing psychic, spatial, and temporal liminality and precarity—to the waiting

room—that renders them queer (Butler, 2004). I contend that the waiting room contributes both to the ongoing critical project of developing better metaphors for mapping state power (Mountz, 2013), and to apprehending ethical horizons for queer, migrant justice, and coalition politics (Chávez, 2013). Finally, I turn to a conversation with a faith leader acting in solidarity with asylum-seekers as evidence of how to put subjectless queer theory's critique of identity to work. Impishly refusing the state's mobilization of identity in biopolitical differentiation between populations, I suggest, can help forge more capacious and coalitional "moral geographies" that exceed identitarian terms (De Genova, 2002; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013).[2]

Subjectless critique and queer asylum

Debates on queer spacetime and queer "subjectless critique" have generated more politically and analytically capacious understandings of queerness, adding such figures as the welfare queen, the unmarried migrant worker, and the terrorist to a heterogeneous litany of queer subjects (Cohen, 1997; Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2004; Oswin, 2010; Puar, 2007). Such scholarship has argued for an understanding of queerness based not on the "truth" of one's sexual desire, but on heterogeneous but shared estranged relationships to processes of normalization that move between the body and the population (Foucault, 1990). Significantly, "at stake for" subjectless queer critique is not simply a merely interesting, expansive scholarly understanding of queerness, but the prospect of coalitional *politics*—the hope of directing scholarly and activist attention and care to surprising ethical and political affinities, encounters, and solidarities among differently marginalized people.

Within literature on geographies of sexuality, Oswin's (2008) provocative call for more work to take up the analytical and political challenges of subjectless queer critique continues to be heeded, though there remains considerable room for growth. Scholarship on the geographies of sexuality has engaged with queer subjectless critique in two overlapping ways. The first form of engagement has been an expansion of literature on identities other than LGBT ones, and on intersections between sexuality and other co-constitutive vectors of identity (for a recent review see Brown, 2012). Yet geographical inquiry into sexuality that approaches sexuality as identity and seeks to multiply the vectors of identity can also risk reinstantiating the very liberal move— "reinstalling injury as identity"—that provoked the formation of queer theory and related poststructuralist approaches to difference and power in the first place (Brown, 1995: xi). Thus another, related tendency in the literature on sexuality has been to approach sexuality from optics that consider but do not privilege identity, and instead prioritize the operation of power through space and time—investigating relationships between law and sex work (Hubbard and Sanders, 2003), population management and colonial governance (Legg, 2010) morality and efforts to discipline precarious urban denizens (Rutland, 2015; Seitz, 2015), and intimacy and the geographies of post/colonial power (Oswin and Olund, 2010; Pratt and Rosner, 2012).

The diverse valences and uses of the queer critique of identity as a liberal fetish also surface in the robust literatures on migration, asylum, and sexuality. As Luibhéid (2008) puts it, queer migration describes both, "a set of grounded processes involving heterogeneous social groups and a series of theoretical and social justice questions that implicate but extend beyond migration and sexuality strictly defined, and that *refuse to attach to bodies in any strictly identitarian manner*" (169, my emphasis). For many queer asylum scholars (see e.g. Anker and Ardalan, 2012; Lewis, 2014, 2013; Shuman and Hesford, 2014), queer anti-essentialism enables challenges to restrictive state renditions of sexual identity that excise asylum-seekers from historical and political context and punish the

failure to comport with Western identitarian idioms of sexuality as essential identity with the threat of "deportability" (De Genova, 2002). Numerous scholars have observed that the expectations for "appropriate" refugeeness are profoundly gendered and sexualized—that asylum-seekers risk unintelligibility if they do not comport themselves as "typical" gay men, lesbians, mothers, or if they demonstrate forms of agency or passivity that immigration officials deem out of character (Conlon, 2011; Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Shuman and Bohmer, 2014). Scholars such as Shuman and Bohmer (2008) turn to critiques of essentialism to both challenge the epistemological rigidity of asylum law and praxis, and offer correctives that cut against ethnocentrism and a violent insistence on linear narratives of trauma and migration. In the context of existing state bordering and asylum practices, the hope of such interventions is often to enlarge the circle of state recognition, to make room for a wider range of sexual and gender diversity, and to better accommodate the palimpsestic and scrambled character of trauma, in ways that render fewer asylum-seekers "deportable" (De Genova, 2002). Yet critical recognition of the contingent and relational character of refugee status, and the centrality of state management to the distribution of that status, should not be taken to foreclose the agency of asylum-seekers. Indeed, careful scrutiny of the scripts to which successful asylum-seekers must adhere has shed light on the performative negotiations asylum-seekers make in interfacing with the state, showing how asylum-seekers carefully inhabit the prevalent idioms in "structures of sympathetic normativity" (Berlant, 2000: 43) that dictate the terms of "appropriate" refugeeness (Murray, 2016; Waite et al., 2014).

At the same time, as Luibhéid (2008) suggests, a non-identitarian queer critique can stretch dominant understandings of what might be considered the "proper object" (Butler, 1994) of both queer asylum scholarship and, I might add, queer (and) migration politics. Importantly, this strand of queer migration scholarship goes beyond both LGBT identities and beyond forms of sexual diversity that resist naming. Thus De Genova (2010) suggests that the massive 2006 migrant protests in the United States might be read as *figurally* queer, precisely in their embodied immanence, their risky, defiant insistence, "¡Aquí Estamos, y No Nos Vamos! [Here we are, and we're not leaving!] (101)." And Luibhéid's (2013) fine study of national anxieties surrounding the figure of the pregnant migrant in the Republic of Ireland points to the ways in which a range of migrants might be rendered "queer," relegated to the outside of national heteronormativity through the conjuncture of neoliberalism, racism, sexual migration and the immigration apparatus. This exciting work refuses to restrain queer scholarship on migration to its proper object in LGBT migrants, or even to let "queer" stand in for the forms of sexual and gender diversity that would exceed or rebuke the ethnocentric, identitarian terms of such interpellations. Instead, it tracks sexuality as a vector of power.

Sexuality on queer migrations thus speaks back to the burgeoning literature on critical geographies of asylum, much of which uses Foucaultian (2010) biopolitics to open up essentialist understandings not only of the figure of the asylum-seeker, but the state apparatus that seeks to scrutinize and contain her (Gill, 2010). Geographers have approached the dispersed management of populations of asylum-seekers and refugees in relation to the "domestic" population as biopolitical, or enlisting and empowering a wide social field to differentiate between subjects made to live and those left to die (see e.g. Ingram, 2008). By attending to the material and banal operations of bureaucracies responsible for managing, distributing, and denying asylum, scholars have identified gaps, fault lines, contingencies, failures, and openings in the architecture of state scrutiny, detainment, and expulsion (e.g. Mountz, 2010). Shakhsari (2014) takes a queer biopolitical understanding of asylum even further, drawing on emergent theories of

necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003; Puar, 2007) to contend that where asylum based on sexual orientation or gender identity comprises a ‘‘golden case’’ for *some* LGBT migrants (1,001), entire populations seeking refuge from war or economic hardship—she notes in particular Afghan families—are implicitly marked for social death.

How then, are scholars and activists to contend with processes of differentiation that are at once deathly, routinized to the point of banality, contingent, and diffuse? Darling (2009) offers one answer with a helpful ambivalence about the urge to interrupt and fundamentally reject the sovereign practice of differentiation.[3] While Darling shares Giorgio Agamben’s opposition to the biopolitics that incessantly distinguish (proto-)citizen from rejected ‘‘fake’’ asylee, *bios* from *zoos*, he notes the necessity of citizen groups that defend and sponsor asylum-seekers. Such groups, Darling contends, though not as a permanent solution to the state-induced problem of statelessness, nevertheless comprise vital and creative reckonings with a bad system, confrontations that expand possibilities for survival. Darling’s insight parallels writings in queer migration and asylum scholarship, which note a persistent tension between the immediate horizons of stopping deportation and the infinite ethical obligation to a ‘‘queer no borders imaginary’’ that challenges the fundamental structure of the biopolitical immigration apparatus (White, 2014).

It is at the site of this aporia—between the expansive ethical demands of solidarity and the instrumental, partial compromises necessary to ameliorate the present—that I contend a (re)turn to the subjectless queer critique of identity can prove particularly generative. Recent scholarship on queer migrant activism (Chávez, 2013; White, 2014) has argued that the intersectional character of queer migrant identities can help to usher in new political coalitions. Yet scholars also note the danger of the emergence of new respectable LGBT migrant identities, such that ‘‘what’s queer [in a subjectless sense] about queer migrant politics’’ (White, 2014: 978) risks getting left behind. I am suggesting that what risks getting left behind here—the promise of a subjectless queer critique that challenges violent forms of biopolitics through a relentless critique of identity—might thus also form an alternative ethical horizon. Approaching queerness not as identity but as precarity (Butler, 2004)—as repudiated vulnerability, dependency and desire—might bring queer (and) migration politics into encounter with ethical demands that incite even more creative and critical forms of politics. And indeed, I aim to show here that in key moments, queerness as precarity already operates as an ethical horizon in some political coalitions. Approaching queerness as precarity can help forge alternative ‘‘moral geographies’’ (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013) within and beyond the nation-state, inhabiting and exceeding the dominant idioms of identity politics (see also De Genova, 2002; White, 2014). In the following section, I turn to one type of metaphorical and material space that I argue has played a central role in producing asylum-seekers as precarious queer subjects: the waiting room.

Queer precarity in Canada’s waiting room

I have demonstrated how subjectless queer critique displaces the identitarian ‘‘proper object’’ of queer subjects in order to generate more ‘‘mobile mappings of power,’’ new (and old) and surprising figurations of queerness, and alternative horizons for political solidarity (Butler, 1994: 21). Likewise, critical work on asylum aims to better trace the spatial logics and material operations of nation-state sovereign violence in order to support efforts to contest it. Indeed, Mountz (2013) describes part of the project of contemporary political geographies of sovereignty as a ‘‘search for appropriate spatial metaphors’’ for sovereignty’s mutating and historically freighted forms (831). For Mountz and others, such work has

entailed developing more precise understandings of the geographies of those who find themselves displaced by power in its simultaneously juridical and biopolitical modes.

As one contribution to such a search, I am proposing the significance of the space of the *waiting room*, both as a metaphor, and as a quite literal material site, that produces asylum-seekers as precarious queers. This metaphor draws directly on recent work theorizing asylum-seekers' experiences of waiting (e.g. Hyndman and Giles, 2011) and the Sisyphean deferral of rights as both stretching out the present, and bringing about a kind of slow or preemptive death (Berlant, 2011). Some asylum scholars have begun to think of asylum-seekers' experience of liminal time as queer, noting to its asynchronous relationship to the putatively productive, orderly temporal logic of capitalism (Shakhsari, 2014, see Freeman, 2010). Rather than the linear trajectory of ''reprotime'' (Halberstam, 2004) that organizes life along a progressive continuum—birth–childhood–education–marriage–procreation–work–death—asylum-seekers experience life as an impasse—not only in countries of origin, but zones of transit and arrival (Berlant, 2011). Thus Shakhsari's (2014) inquiry focuses on the precarious limbo lives of queer and trans Iranians living in Turkey and seeking asylum in a third country through the UN High Commission on Refugees. This meticulous ethnographic scholarship highlights often-overlooked geographies of violence. Indeed, Shakshari's object is not hostility within Iran toward certain forms of gender and sexual diversity, but the indifference of Turkish state and civil society officials in dispossessing and deferring the rights claims of a wide range of Iranian (among many other) asylum-seekers living in Turkey. In a particularly haunting interview, one of Shaksari's gay informants confides, ''I am not depressed because I am gay. I am depressed because I have been waiting for so long without any support'' (1,007).

Shakhsari's informant refuses an identitarian referent as the primary determinant of his woes, instead diagnosing the absence of support ''here''—in not just the time, but the space of the present—as the cause of life's unbearability. What an explicitly spatial referent—the waiting *room*—adds to a discussion of waiting and asylum, then, is an insistence on thinking time and space together. Indeed, waiting isn't just a temporal problem, it's an experience of liminality in the spaces of the psyche (Oliver, 2004) and everyday life. One doesn't simply wait in a spatial vacuum; one waits ''here,'' with no necessary guarantee of a hearing, much less a favorable one, and thus in a constant condition of deportability (De Genova, 2002). The waiting room thus flags bureaucratically induced forms of epistemic and material precarity (Butler, 2004) that asylum-seekers experience not only in refugee camps (Agamben, 2003), or in nation-states that allow temporary residence so people can seek asylum in a third country (Shakhsari, 2014), but in the politely indifferent bureaucracy of would-be final destinations. Moreover, delays themselves owe to uneven geographies of power, as subjects' wait times in the waiting room are themselves based on geopolitical interests and necropolitical logics that produce some populations as subjects of life and others as prematurely killable or already dead. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) suggests, it is the denizens of the ''rude'' nations of the global south who are consigned to the time and space of the ''waiting room of history,'' (7, see also Eng, 2010).

What makes this experience of liminality *queer* is twofold: First, queer here stands for in for the indeterminacy of identity—that which cannot be or has yet to be authenticated, that which exceeds but may yet be incorporated within the terms of social and psychic intelligiblity. Asylum-seekers inhabit waiting rooms—including not only formal state spaces, but all the material spaces that comprise the impasse of their everyday lives—in order for agents of the state to decide that they are who they say they are, that their stories add up, that their identities might prove essential enough to guarantee their entry into can intelligible personhood and teleological narrative (Shakhsari, 2014;

Shuman and Bohmer, 2008). Second, and more metaphorically, queer stands in for what structurally resists identity, what remains unintelligible or cannot be signified: experiences of desire, precarity, and dependency that are constitutively unassimilable to the biopolitical, identitarian logics governing asylum (Georgis, 2013). Judith Butler (2009) intimates that exposure to the precarity of the other induces a call to ethical responsibility by reminding us of our own primary dependency on others—but only if that precarity is intelligibly human in the first place. One might think here of the repudiated desires of the economic refugee, who is not only dismissed as acquisitive and ''undeserving,'' but who is individually saddled with the burden of entire histories of state-organized capitalist dispossession that are disavowed as external to the ''political'' purview of asylum law.

However, in proposing the waiting room as a space that produces asylum-seekers as precarious queers, I hope to do more than simply diagnose and expose violence. More than that, I am proposing the waiting room and the subjects it renders queer as demanding ethical and political responsibility from queer (and) migration politics. In the following section, I introduce a vignette from my empirical research that demonstrates how LGBT politics might answer the demands of queerness as precarity, rather than sexual identity or even sexual practice.

Queer asylum support in austere times

My argument about the waiting room as a space producing queer precarity *and* coalitional possibility emerged from a set of surprising encounters during ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with a refugee peer support program at the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto (MCCT), a large, celebrated, predominantly LGBT church in Toronto, Canada. My inquiry into the refugee program stemmed from a more wide-ranging research project on practices of urban, national and transnational citizenship at the church, which has been at the forefront of numerous struggles, including around police brutality, migrant rights, same-sex marriage, and transnational outreach to LGBT Christians, over its storied 43-year history. Between 2011 and 2013, I conducted hundreds of hours of participant-observation and 54 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 56 individuals involved with various facets of the church's myriad ministries. The refugee program comprised one of my core case studies, and I spent the summer of 2013 interviewing 16 people involved with the program, including eight asylum-seekers and program participants, eight church volunteers and staff who identified as Canadian citizens, and two immigration lawyers. In both the larger project on the church and my especial focus on the refugee program, I came to the research interested in the potential for coalitional, non-identitiarian or subjectless queer politics within seemingly identitarian institutions (Eng et al., 2005). While the church's history is steeped in such concerns as reconciling LGBT identities and religious traditions, I also found that as a spiritual space, the church in moments enables people to suspend the burdensome requirements of politicized identity and embrace more capacious forms of citizenship in excess of the nation-state (Isin, 2012).

The refugee peer support program at MCCT supports what Citizenship and Immigration Canada calls ''inland'' refugee claimants—those who make asylum claims after their arrival in Canada, and who continue to live, often quite tenuously, in Canada until a hearing. MCCT initially formed the group to create space for those seeking asylum from homophobic or transphobic persecution under the UN Convention on Refugees, as Canada has recognized asylum claims based on persecuted sexual orientation and gender identity since the early 1990s (Lee and Brotman, 2011; Murray, 2016). However, in contrast to other secular social service organizations working with LGBT asylum-seekers in the

Greater Toronto Area, the church refuses to police the sexual or religious identities of its participants. The impact of the program has been extensive. Refugee peer support group meetings reached over 600 people in the Greater Toronto Area between 2007 and 2014, with an average monthly attendance of 75 to 100 people. Meeting in the sanctuary after the popular 11 a.m. worship service, the group proffers testimonials and tips from successful asylum-seekers on negotiating the legal and logistical hurdles of the immigration process, organizes presentations from local immigrant social service and LGBT organizations, and provides participants the opportunity to collect documentation from the church in order to support their asylum claims. As of fall 2014, church officials had written letters of support for over 200 individual participants in the refugee program.

Church practice, like most support and solidarity work with asylum-seekers, has had to scramble to respond to shifts in the logic and practice of Canadian asylum policy. On the one hand, the MCCT refugee peer support program enables asylum-seekers to compile archives that performatively consolidate their queerness, strengthening their asylum claims (Lewis, 2013; Murray, 2016). On the other hand, that people must "prove" their queerness at all speaks to longstanding contradictions in the Canadian nation-state apparatus that have produced intensified effects in the past decade. Canada is routinely framed in nationalist and liberal multiculturalist discourses as "very generous" with respect to immigration and asylum. But although Canadian policy has arguably proven progressive vis-à-vis the asylum policies of Australia, the United States or the United Kingdom, careful study positions Canadian asylum policy as more and more continuous with the broader global trend against refugee claims: "In an increasingly securitized global environment, governments prefer to select refugees from abroad for resettlement and to decrease the number of those who arrive on sovereign territory of their own accord to make an asylum claim" (Mountz, 2011: 382). In Canada's case, this strategy has taken the form not of forcing asylum-seekers off-shore, as in Australia, but of increasing administrative and technical barriers to successful inland asylum claims.

Under the Conservative government in power from 2006 to 2015, the federal government granted itself the authority to indefinitely detain asylum-seekers deemed "irregular arrivals;" implemented deep funding and eligibility cuts to basic healthcare for refugees and asylum-seekers; expedited hearing times for all asylum-seekers to 60 days to impede claimants from developing well-supported cases; sped up hearing times even more dramatically (30 to 45 days) for asylum-seekers from putatively "safe" countries; cut the number of publicly sponsored refugees; further devolved responsibility for refugee support to civil society; authorized the collection of biometric data on asylum-seekers from 29 countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean to share with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police; and in the midst of all these cuts, called on LGBT and diasporic civil society groups to "step up to the plate" (Black and Keung, 2012; Canadian Council for Refugees, 2013; Kenney, 2010; Keung, 2012, 2013; Marshall, 2014). While the biopolitical character of the Canadian nation-state immigration apparatus has long and insidious roots (see Mongia, 1999), migrant justice activists (see e.g. No One Is Illegal—Toronto, 2010) and even liberal immigration experts (Cohen, 2013) have characterized the past decade as marked by mounting paranoia and austerity in the nation-state immigration apparatus.

Under such conditions, performatively compiling the right kind of archive—of one's identity, relationships, and fears of persecution—is a matter of life and death (Lewis, 2013, 2014; Murray 2016; Shuman and Bohmer, 2008). To be sure, "proving" one's LGBT identity is not the only element required of claimants for a successful case. Destination countries, including Canada, are notorious for using spurious generalizations about the relative homophobia of asylum-seekers' countries of nationality to decide whose

fears of persecution are truly "well-founded" (Ling, 2012). But for LGBT asylum-seekers, a bevy of cases—some high-profile, but most of them under-the-radar—attest to the costs of assembling an inadequate personal archive of LGBT identity. In October 2013, MCCT hosted a fundraiser organized by the migrant justice group No One Is Illegal for Augustas Dennie, a middle-aged man who was deported back to St Vincent and the Grenadines in April 2013 after his asylum claim was unsuccessful. Even from the account of himself he made public, Augustas had had a messy life—a life riddled with the kinds of complexities that can keep one on the outside of legibility to nation-state litmus tests of authentic gayness and thus refugeeness. Augustas recounted severe homophobic persecution in St Vincent, including one beating so severe it affected his brain and capacity to use one of his arms. Attempting to pass as heterosexual, he formed relationships with women and became a father to one son. These relationships, Augustas conceded, were far from happy, and he had a criminal record from time in the US that included reported domestic violence.

I first met Augustas in the fall of 2012 while I was writing as a journalist about emerging social services for LGBT migrants on Toronto's historically working class and racialized east side. I readily connected him with the LGBT publication Toronto *Xtra!*, which helped publicize his case. I felt motivated to do so, in large part because I doubted Dennie's far from cookie-cutter narrative would elicit sympathy from the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), and from identity-based LGBT groups. Yet fortuitously, *Xtra!* followed up and helped drum up support for Augustas's case. A petition drive supported by No One Is Illegal ultimately gathered 700 signatures against Augustas's deportation and for granting him asylum, and then-Member of Parliament Olivia Chow publically inquired on Dennie's behalf. Whenever I ran into Augustas episodically in the social hall after church, we chatted and ate cookies and drank bad church coffee from Styrofoam cups. A self-described regular in Toronto's gay village, he told me that despite having an active social and community life, not having a long-term partner made his queerness so hard to authenticate in the eyes of the IRB. He had no photos of a bourgeois romance with a boyfriend to show a judge; only memories of pleasure, and of pain. Since his deportation, Augustas' dispatches to contacts in Canada have described his effective social death—socially determined unemployability, and routine death threats against his life and that of his son. Augustas' story illustrates the ways in which sovereign power mobilizes and exploits the performative production of identity through the trope of the "fake" asylum-seekers (Rennie, 2012). His case points to the urgency of looming deportation as the pivotal yet unpredictable event it comprises in many people's lives (De Genova, 2002). In order to challenge the state's spurious use of dramas of (in)authentic identity to curb successful asylum claims, I want to turn to what's queer, not about asylum-seekers' identities, but about their precarious relationships to space and time.

Thinking from the waiting room

It was in the context of this ethnographic research on MCCT's refugee program that I first encountered the waiting room at the Canadian IRB office in downtown Toronto. The aim of my initial visit in September 2013 was to support Paige, a friend and interview subject I met in the refugee peer support group at MCCT.[4] Paige, who volunteered at church as a candle-bearer, enthusiastically made a beeline for me after I came to the support group looking for interview volunteers. A few weeks later, she and I met up and chatted at a mall near her home in Toronto's working class and highly racialized Jane and Finch neighborhood, and then began routinely catching up after church services. After getting to know Paige for a

few months, I nervously but unhesitatingly wrote a letter of support for her request for asylum from the homophobic persecution she described experiencing in St Vincent and the Grenadines. Paige had agreed to call me as soon as she got her hearing date, and she did. I initially showed up for Paige's hearing wondering whether I could secure permission to attend it as a silent observer, as she had requested. As fate or bureaucratic norms would have it, I ultimately wasn't able to get on the list to attend Paige's asylum claim hearing. But this spatial constraint serendipitously gave me greater insight on a less remarked-upon, yet in my view equally significant, space in the everyday geographies of asylum-seekers and of nation-state immigration management (Mountz, 2011): the waiting room itself. As I observed in my fieldnotes about that fraught, ordinary afternoon, the waiting room is a site of convergence between state power in some of its most and least dramatic forms:

> Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the waiting room in the Immigration and Refugee Board office at 74 Victoria Street in downtown Toronto is its unremarkability. In these rows of drab chairs, people sit. They may tense up. They may appear bored, blasé. Some haven't slept the night before their hearings. Some haven't slept well for maybe days, months, years. Some come dressed in what might be their finest clothing. Others look more business casual. The most formally dressed in the room, accompanied by rolling briefcases and large file folders, are the immigration lawyers.
>
> Any two people in this room could share a geopolitical conflict that touched their both their lives, a relationship to empire, a last name, a religious faith, or a favorite color—or next to nothing. Incommensurable histories, differences, trajectories cross, collide and combine in unpredictable but stratified permutations. Perhaps the only thing these people most certainly share is that they must wait.

People sit in families, in couples, in groups. Babies scream. To the ear of this Anglophone-Francophone, people seem to be chattering in Farsi, Jamaican patois, Russian, Somali. They could be talking about something urgent, or rehearsing the most salient, straightforward renditions of their stories in their heads—or not. In any case, it passes the time, something the asylum-seekers I've interviewed described experiencing as both a dearth and surplus.

The waiting room is a site where these distorted timelines, at once stretched out and compressed, "too much," and the "not enough" converge. Anodyne as it might seem at first glance, the waiting room spatializes the liberal fetish of state neutrality. Concealing the nation-state agendas, economic and geopolitical imperatives, and vagaries of identity that structure people's attenuated access to the right to remain, the waiting room disingenuously posits a horizontal relationship between equal applicants, all of whom must wait their turn (as though) alike. At the same time, the physical and psychical toll of waiting belies other, uneven experiences of the waiting room—and compels alternative geographies of solidarity.

But it was another encounter that helped me to more clearly understand the *queer* effects of the waiting room and the condition of potential deportability (De Genova, 2002), not in the literal material space of the waiting room, but in ordinary affective life. I met Elizabeth, a middle-aged woman from St Lucia who had quietly volunteered to participate in my research, in a lobby space near a downtown subway station at the University of Toronto. Elizabeth spoke to me pointedly and at length about her frustration with the strict constraints that her categorization as an asylum-seeker imposed. With the date of her asylum hearing still up in the air and stringent limitations on her employment in the meantime, she got a job cleaning homes and offices. Because of caps on social assistance for asylum-seekers, most of Elizabeth's income went to rent, food, and her daughter in St Lucia, which left her "working for crumbs to stay in this country." Continuing, she showed

me photographs of the broken door of her overpriced east End Toronto basement apartment, which faced a boiler room.

But most strikingly, Elizabeth told me, the liminality of her status (in employment, housing, immigration, sociality) meant that romantic love was, chaotically and frustratingly, both the first and the last thing on her mind. Alongside the photographs she showed me, Elizabeth checked her email intermittently during our conversation. She flagged my attention to her inbox, which contained nearly a hundred unanswered messages from women on online dating sites:

> When people say you landed, you arrived in Canada, or you're a refugee claimant—it's not a happy place to be, 'cause it's a limbo stage. And limbo stage does not help you. It helps in a way when you pass that limbo stage, but limbo stage, I mean, to be in limbo—can't make long-term plans. Why would you want to make long-term plans when you haven't had a hearing, you don't have your papers saying "Welcome to Canada"? You have no welcome. You made a claim. You made an application. You're waiting for your answer. And if it wasn't for those groups to help and constantly just sit down and talk about your stress ... there's no answer to it but talking about it helps ...
>
> I'm the type of person, I'm not looking for that [casual sex], I'm looking for a long-term relationship, and picking up with someone that's filing for refugee claimant, it has a lot of setbacks. First of all, you don't know if the person really likes you of if they really just want to get involved with you so as to get more evidence that they're gay, 'cause you do need the evidence. I'm not getting involved with it. ... You're looked at suspiciously when you give people that have their papers here, you tell them of your status, your immigration status, then you're looked at. There's a period, during that time, when you wait, I wouldn't advise anyone to get into a relationship ... And so I give up on the dating sites. Honestly, I give up on the dating sites for now. I get 99 people wanting to meet on Zoosk, I just don't respond.

Elizabeth's experiences of frustrated desire shed further light on the contradictory character of "sexual migration," and on the figural queerness of the asylum-seeker. Leading scholarship on sexual migration has argued the ambivalent position of love as a motivating factor, and challenged a neat distinction between "good" and "bad," "authentic" and "inauthentic" feelings (Manalansan, 2008). Such work has played an important role in dedramatizing sexual migration by contesting pernicious dominant tropes, such as that of the disingenuous migrant performing "fake" affective labor. Insights from my fieldwork further contribute to the dedramatization of sexual migration, suggesting that sometimes, sexual migration might not involve all that much sex at all. Though framed as a site of the good life for LGBT people, the liminal character of life in Canada as an asylum-seeker can defer and place significant material and affective constraints on the pursuit of that good life. LGBT or not, asylum-seekers are forced by their consignment to the waiting room to organize their intimate lives on non-normative temporal and spatial terms, outside the narrative trajectories of romance (Halberstam, 2004; Oswin, 2010). The austere and draconian organization of refugeeness in Canada is producing non-normative temporal and spatial orientations toward sex, love, and desire that are not so much LGBT (or "not" LGBT) as *queer*.

My encounters with Paige, Augustas, Elizabeth, and with the literal space of the waiting room reverberate with myriad insights in scholarship on LGBT asylum-seekers, demonstrating how the geographies of capitalism and afterlives of colonialism shape both contemporary migration and nation-state efforts to control it (Lee and Brotman, 2011; Shakhsari, 2014); the slippages and epistemic imperialism that vex efforts to make a range of non-normative lives and desires legible to the narrow idioms of law (Anker and Ardalan, 2012; Lewis, 2013; Luker, 2015; Shuman and Bohmer, 2008); and the banality of state power

over the lives of asylum-seekers in the material and psychic spaces and times of everyday life (Mountz, 2010). Bringing these threads into conversation with queer subjectless critique, I would add that it is precisely through the waiting room that asylum-seekers—those whose asylum claims have not been verified, who are not even intelligible as ''real'' refugees—emerge as *figurally* queer. While this argument is informed by the experiences of asylum-seekers who claim LGBT identity, their *queerness* finds its etiology not in sexual truth but in state violence (Shakhsari, 2014). As putatively LGBT-friendly destination countries embrace increasingly paranoid and austere approaches to refugee policy, nation-state actors mobilize narratives of (in)authentic sexual minority identity to undermine people's requests for asylum based on a ''well-founded fear of being persecuted'' for being LGBT (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011 [1951]: 14). Working against the strategic ossification of LGBT identity in the service of state violence, I am calling for attention to the ways in which asylum-seekers' structured, vulnerable and ordinary experiences of spacetime—including and especially in *waiting rooms*, both literal and figural—position them as *queer*, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Material and affective, this queerness derives from asylum-seekers' structured, precarious relationships to work, mobility, survival, intimacy, fantasy and futurity.

The waiting room thus accomplishes the goals of both subjectless queer critique and critical asylum studies by providing a way of mapping of how identity is deployed—not through the ''truth'' of individual identity or life history, but as a discourse of power bound up with the biopolitical production of ''real'' and ''fake'' asylum-seekers. This biopolitical sorting process consigns asylum-seekers not just to the liminal experience of waiting, but the geographical and material dimensions of doing so under conditions of limited, precarious employment and wrenching psychical ambivalence and anxiety. Building on the insight of Shakhsari's informant—that his precarity is a result of his treatment in Turkey, not his gayness—I am asking what it would mean for politics to think about the waiting room as a key material and metaphorical space actively producing queerness-as-precarity. Very different itineraries might bring people to the waiting room, and people might indeed have very different experiences of that room; yet how might scrutinizing the effects of that space enable a politics of solidarity? I want to turn now to final empirical vignette that illustrates the alternative moral geographies that can emerge when the state's biopolitical tacticalization of identity to differentiate *bios* from *zoos* is met with a capacious queer refusal that goes beyond LGBT identity, and even beyond sexual and gender diversity, to embrace queerness as precarity.

'Fake' refugees? 'So what?': Refusing identity, enacting solidarity

As I noted above, part of what makes the refugee peer support group at MCCT so remarkable is its adamant refusal to ask participants in the program any questions concerning their sexual orientation, gender identity, or religious affiliation. To be sure, all of those three forms of identification can prove extremely opaque and elusive. At the same time, MCCT's history as a predominantly LGBT church—and a church dominated by white, middle-class, cisgender men at that—made this apparent refusal of identity politics or identity policing somewhat surprising to me. Indeed, in the course of fieldwork at MCCT, I heard numerous grumblings within the congregation about the presumed inauthenticity of asylum-seekers' identities and engagements with the church.

Episodically throughout my three years of research at MCCT, I encountered suspicions on the part of congregants, usually white Canadian citizens, that asylum-seekers were ''using'' the church, that ''they'' were neither ''really gay'' nor ''really interested'' in the

theological and social offerings of MCCT. My initial response to such speculations was to use evidence from my own research to argue the contrary. On several occasions, I drew on interviews with asylum-seekers from the eastern Caribbean who had indicated that the eclectic liturgical style at MCCT recalled their own polyglot religious upbringings, a not uncommon childhood experience in the region. While I had no interest in verifying the identities of the refugee program participants, I did marshal my impressions of our conversations in defense of the program to more skeptical informants. I insisted that the program participants I had met were ''genuine'' in their investment in MCCT, at least as far as I could tell. Over time, however, I learned that this strategic approach—risking recourse to essentialism in order to shore up the immediate goal of support for the refugee program—hardly had the monopoly on suitable retorts to phobic scrutiny of asylum-seekers. I learned this lesson, both from returning to queer critiques of identitarian essentialism and, just as importantly, from talking with church leaders who had to contend with the same ugly skepticism.

One Sunday, about an hour after the end of services, I met Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, the church's longtime pastor and a noted LGBT and human rights activist, and his husband John Sproule for brunch at Hawkes' preferred spot in Toronto's gay village. From the pulpit that morning, Hawkes had explicitly repudiated congregants who questioned the participation of asylum-seekers in church life. While I had already planned to ask Hawkes about the theological rationale for refusing a politics of ''authentic'' refugeeness, his remarks that morning provided even more of an occasion to do so. When I asked Hawkes why MCCT didn't prioritize LGBT identity or religious affiliation in its refugee ministry, his response outlined a set of non-identitarian moral geographies that privileged precarity over legibility:

> I know that there were other organizations in the GLBT community doing refugee work, and some of them had really wrestled with the idea that they knew some people were pretending to be gay, or that they knew of some lawyers that were telling clients, ''Pretend that you're gay and your refugee status may be approved.''... And so some organizations' response to that was to try to be more rigid around, ''Are you really gay or not?'' And I remember our conversations around that...
> I said, frankly, does it make any difference if they're gay or not, if they're escaping Kenya? If they could have a better life here? If they're economic refugees, as opposed to refugees based on sexual orientation, they're still refugees. And, it sounds trite on my part, but if you go out on a space station and look back at Earth, you see no boundaries, you see no national boundaries. We are our brothers' and sisters' keeper. We are responsible. And so some people will come through and abuse the system, and *so what?* Let's spend our energy helping people and not waste our energy worrying about it...

Hawkes' framing, which figures Kenya as axiomatically both poor and homophobic, is surely not immured from the geopolitical thinking that informs asylum policy and practice, thinking that Shakhsari (2014) and others rightly critique. Far more compelling, though, is the rationale he provides for refusal to permit identitarian litmus tests as a basis for receiving information, advice, kinship and support at MCCT. Intriguingly, Hawkes intimates that whether on the part of the state or the church, endless probing into the inner truths of sexual identity is a ''waste of energy.'' I read this comment as a critique of the xenophobic anxiety that authorizes the elaborate production of the refugee apparatus and the waiting room in the first place. But this ''waste of energy'' could also be taken to allude to the wasted time—and space—that asylum-seekers spend in literal and figurative waiting rooms, in a psychic and spatial state of deportability as they anticipate their

authentication. Crucially, this leader of a church that has long trafficked in marginalized identity, even as it has sought to cultivate a "house of prayer for all people," is fundamentally more interested in precarity than in identity. Hawkes knows full well that the church must operate within existing structures of hospitality that fundamentally differentiate between "host" and "guest" (Darling, 2009). But by inhabiting that structure queerly, the refugee program at MCCT can simultaneously challenge the biopolitical disaggregation of "real" refugees from fakes ones, of *bios* from *zoos*. This modest form of solidarity productively directs scrutiny away from asylum-seekers, and back toward the racism, xenophobia, state violence and austerity that constitute the waiting room and so profoundly mar our times.

Asylum-seeker as queer subject

I began this article by claiming that subjectless queer critique could enrich critical asylum studies, including queer asylum scholarship, by positioning the asylum-seeker as *figurally* queer (Edelman, 2004), thus expanding the ethical horizons for both queer and migrant justice politics. While I have supported this argument with evidence concerning asylum claims that mobilize LGBT identity, at stake is not a liberal objective of making space for LGBT identities or other forms of gender and sexual diversity. Nor is my aim here the admirable and important project of showing how state strictures counterproductively send people who indeed "really" are sexual and gender minorities into harm's way (Lewis, 2013, 2014; Shuman and Bohmer, 2008). Rather, I have argued that subjectless queer critique, in its thoroughgoing critique of the liberal fetish of identity, privileges structurally induced vulnerability over authentic identity as a basis for solidarity (Butler, 2004). While it is only one such space, the waiting room is a key material and metaphorical site that produces asylum-seekers as precarious queers by holding them in temporal and spatial limbo.

Canadian asylum law and practice are often glowingly framed, from both "within" and "without," as a salutary departure from the paranoia and austerity embraced in many destination countries of the global North. Indeed, such celebration has only been abetted by the return of the Liberal party to federal power in 2015. Yet more careful study reveals an asylum apparatus profoundly structured by a biopolitical logic that infantilizes and exiles thousands. Rather than prematurely exalted nation-state practices, it is to the geographies, insights and critical practices of asylum-seekers and their allies that critical asylum scholars and activists should turn for alternative moral geographies. Indeed, the space and time of the waiting room direct critical attention toward explicit and banal forms of nation-state violence, not only in countries of origin or countries of transit that allow third-country resettlement, but in putatively benevolent "destination" countries. While some, such as Freeman (2010), have emphasized the pleasures of life outside of a normative organization of space and time, here I mean to highlight the pressure and susceptibility it can generate.

My point here is not to romanticize liminality, to suggest that asylum-seekers are bereft of agency, or to fetishize vulnerability as such. Elsewhere (Seitz, 2014), I have showcased some of the forms of resistance, satire, humor, narrative production, and conviviality with the state that asylum-seekers have generated, as have numerous others (e.g. Lewis, 2013; Murray, 2016). Rather, my project is to extend a long tradition of queer theory in arguing against identity—or even forms of gender and sexual diversity that elude naming—as the horizon for queer politics. It may reasonably be argued that I am asking "queer" to do too much. I would counter that essentialist and identitarian renditions of

sexuality are already doing far too much in the service of state violence. Under such conditions, saying "so what?" to ossified forms of identity, as Rev. Hawkes has, is not a matter of armchair poststructuralist critique, but a profoundly ethical and political challenge to the biopolitical conceit that nation-state actors can legitimately choose with whom their citizens inhabit the earth (Arendt, 2006; Butler, 2012).

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Notes

1. I use the term "asylum-seeker" throughout this paper to differentiate subjects from people whose refugee claims have been accepted by the United Nations or a nation-state. While using such language risks reifying it, part of my aim is to highlight the state-produced precarity of subjects whose asylum claims have not yet been accepted or in many cases even heard. See Luibhéid (2013); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2016).
2. Garelli and Tazzioli (2013) introduce the term "moral geographies" to describe the material, spatial, and psychical abjection of asylum-seekers through moralizing, ahistorical discourses that repudiate migrant desires. In seeking *alternative* moral geographies, I am suggesting that a queer reckoning with the vulnerability and organized vituperation of migrant desires might point to alternative departure points for queer (and) migration coalition politics.
3. Agamben (1998, 2003, 2005) locates biopolitics in the epistemological and state machinery that differentiates between *bios* (life) and *zoos* (mere animal being or "barelife"), between legally intelligible persons whose deaths matter and *homines sacri*. Agamben's work is well known to geographers and it is not within the scope of this paper to review it exhaustively. See Coleman and Grove (2009); Mountz (2011, 2013).
4. Throughout this article, full names refer to public figures or asylum-seekers whose cases have gone public. When an informant is described on a first-name basis, it indicates I have used a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

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