

## Real Queer? Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Refugees in the Canadian Refugee Apparatus

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Real Queer? Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Refugees in the Canadian Refugee Apparatus

David A.B. Murray

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Reviewed by Siobhán McGuirk

Real Queer? is a welcome addition to the growing field of queer migration studies, offering a detailed case study of how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) asylum seekers are viewed and assessed by actors working within and around the Canadian “refugee apparatus.” Murray’s term aptly frames the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) as functioning, primarily, to solidify the ideology of the liberal nation-state.

Murray focuses on “inland” claimants—individuals who apply to the IRB for protection from within Canada—rather than on resettled refugees. Asylum seekers citing homophobic and/or transphobic persecution are termed Sexuality Orientation or Gender Identity (SOGI) claimants. Murray, mirroring the choices of lawyers, advocates and some claimants themselves, uses “LGBT” interchangeably with this more legalistic term. He however notes that both acronyms—as all terminologies related to sexuality and gender—are “fraught with historical, political, linguistic and cultural baggage, which is heightened when inserted into the refugee apparatus” (10). This insight is confirmed throughout the book, which steadily peels back layers of bureaucracy to reveal the homonationalist ideals at play in every stage of the determination process.

Murray posits that SOGI refugee claimants in Canada are repeatedly measured, by state agents and non-governmental actors alike, against Western archetypes of LGBT identity that are raced, gendered, and classed. Failure to conform to these limited expectations can severely jeopardize a claim. The refugee apparatus, Murray argues, functions to cement the popular imaginary of Canada as a liberal safe haven, welcoming to people fleeing (in this case) homophobic persecution “over there.” Murray’s intention is to trouble the homonationalist, “queer migration to liberation narrative” upon which the apparatus rests.

Organizing his chapters in a primarily chronological order, Murray traces claimants’ ostensibly linear journey through the system—from claim submission, to interview and assessment, to final determination. This chapter arrangement is doubly effective: it allows Murray to hone in on specific moments, or “steps” in the process, while also building, on the basis of cumulative evidence, a convincing overall argument.

Chapter 2 details how legal advocates, and support group leaders and members, encourage SOGI refugee claimants to participate in LGBT organizations, to study the terminology, geography, and history of local LGBT “scenes,” and to memorize every detail of their Personal Information Form. These efforts are intended to dispel IRB Officers’ suspicions that a claim is “bogus.” Here, Murray reveals the very literal ways in which claimants’ “knowledge,” taken by IRB Officers to reveal the “truth” of their claim, is both taught and learnt.

Chapter 3, the most ethnographically rich section of the book, demonstrates how former SOGI refugees process, and occasionally reinforce, these lessons. “How to Be Gay (Refugee Version),” steps out of the overarching chronology to address how refugees and asylum seekers, in collaboration with citizen advocates, (re)construct archetypes of LGBT refugee identity for public consumption, in the form of a theatrical production. The moral arc of their play—the masculine, brusque, and intentionally “inauthentic”—appearing claimant is denied asylum, while the assertively gay hero receives a positive

determination—appears to justify salient fears of “bogus” refugees, and portrays the IRB system as fair and efficient. As such, the play “reflected the hegemonic homonationalist discourses found throughout the Canadian refugee apparatus” (79). Yet, Murray argues, the differences of opinion aired throughout the rehearsal period also reveal the agency of SOGI refugees, the instability of identity categories, and the power of statist ideologies to ultimately “render certain imagined performances as legible, authentic and legitimate, rewarding a few and potentially punishing many more” (79). His insight deepens Lionel Cantú’s (2005) analysis of how LGBT asylum seekers become complicit in homonationalist constructions.

Chapters 4-6 examine the junctures at which claimants’ performances of authenticity are put to the test, and further address the question of knowledge-production, with focus on the documents that are created, disseminated, and consumed within the refugee apparatus. Murray’s approach to his array of collected texts—including fictionalized accounts of interviews authored by an IRB Officer—is inventive, and his call for further anthropological engagements with documents (83-86) is compelling. His attention to Officers’ emotional response to claimants adds an unusual and welcome dimension to existing literature on SOGI asylum interviews—an otherwise relatively well-documented area of research on LGBT asylum seekers (cf. Johnson 2011; Jordan 2009; Kimmel and Llewellyn 2012; Lewis 2013; Rehaag 2009).

Murray’s analysis of non-governmental actors’ role within the apparatus is also striking. In their deliberations over how far to endorse a SOGI claimant, refugee support group leaders appear to look for the same signs of “genuine” LGBT identity, and betray the same fears of “bogus” claimants, as IRB Officers. Their “epistemic anxieties” are, Murray argues, produced by affective and intuitive responses to claimants, embedded within legalistic and bureaucratic norms, and informed by their sense of responsibility to the state (p.93). As such, the documents that they produce may serve to “reproduce inequalities and racial, gendered and geopolitical hierarchies” (83). These insights echo my own research findings concerning NGO workers’ engagements with LGBT asylum seekers in the United States. The particularities of the Canadian case are worth teasing out, however, as notable differences exist in the rhetoric and realities of these two distinct North American systems.

In one of the most important and commendable interventions made in the book, Murray turns his critical lens onto scholarly texts used within the apparatus—including his own research on gender and sexuality in Barbados (Chapter 6). Reflecting on how his work has been represented to, and interpreted by IRB Officers, Murray concludes that academics must seek to counterbalance the unintended uses and consequences of their research through explicit engagement with the refugee apparatus—a clear motivator for this monograph.

*Real Queer?* balances a number of goals. It is a forensic analysis of a bureaucratic and complex state apparatus, and a convincing corrective to normative stories about SOGI refugees’ journeys to, and experiences in Canada. It is also an at times deeply personal rumination on the role and responsibilities of anthropologists, and other “experts” whose research may be employed by the state in its efforts to shore up those same, problematic and exclusionary, narratives and norms.

Murray is mostly successful in these aims. He acknowledges one shortcoming of his text, that narrow focus on SOGI refugee claimants’ experiences within the apparatus risks re-inscribing an essentialized identity onto his interlocutors. Murray attempts to correct this impression in his closing chapters, by discussing the post-determination trajectories of four individuals introduced at the outset of the book. Conversely, this approach may reemphasize the salient image of asylum seekers as stuck in stasis, consumed wholly by the refugee apparatus, while awaiting a decision that will necessarily transform their lives. As the few notable glimpses into refugee claimant’s everyday realities reveal (e.g., p. 144), the refugee apparatus may not be as all-consuming a feature of their lives as Murray asserts. Fuller exploration of this question arguably belongs to a different project, however, and Murray’s choice of focus is justified. His book offers important theoretical and methodological contributions to the interdisciplinary study of migration and sexuality, revealing the power of nation-states to regulate and discipline the queer immigrants attempting to settle within their borders.

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