Transgender as a Humanitarian Category

The Case of Syrian Queer and Gender-Variant Refugees in Turkey

FADI SALEH

Abstract In this article, the author foregrounds transgender as a useful category of analysis to shed light on the issue of gender variance and its articulations within the encounter between Syrian queer and gender-variant refugees and the humanitarian-asylum complex. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Syrian queer and gender-variant refugees in Istanbul in 2014 and 2015, this article contends that *transgender* as a term first circulates among the queer and gender-variant circles as a thinkable possibility primarily through its function as a humanitarian category, especially as propagated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). By highlighting this specific encounter, the author attempts to demonstrate, however, that rather than focusing on what the term does to the persons it interpellates, one must map out and document the ways the term is taken up and negotiated by the Syrian queer and gender-variant populations themselves, a method that could help ameliorate the negativity attached to *transgender* as a Western term and show that other systems of identification and histories of gender variance in the Syrian or Syrian diasporic contexts do not simply disappear or are subsumed by *transgender*, but are further complicated by it and continue to exist alongside it.

Keywords transgender history, humanitarianism, UNHCR, Syrian queer and gender-variant refugees, Syria, Turkey

What was there before *transgender* and *transsexual* in Syria, a country whose gender-variant and queer populations came under the purview of Western activist and humanitarian institutions, politics, and discourses only recently?[1] And how can we calculate the coordinates of the exact moment of the terms' arrival and entry into the gender and sexual imaginary of the scattered communities of Syrians in Syria and Syrian queer and gender-variant refugees in the diasporas, before and after the uprisings of 2011 and the ensuing conflicts? If we were to extend the observations that there is an "unevenness of [the] global

DOI 10.1215/23289252-7914500

circulations" of LGBT identities in general (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999: 441–42) and an "uneven distribution and reception of the term transgender across different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic communities" in—and I add, beyond—the US context (Stryker 2006: 15), how do we problematize the assumption of logical and smooth global circulation of the terms (Aizura et al. 2014: 314)? And, finally, how do we capture the various temporalities at which they reach spaces, the transformations they effect, or the ways they are translated, tweaked, modified, or simply deemed irrelevant within their new linguistic or sociocultural environments?

These inquiries are part of a larger critical project that traces, documents, and critically questions the conditions under which Syrian queer and gender-variant populations, although previously irrelevant to Western LGBTI politics and academic knowledge production, have gained such representational currency in humanitarian, activist, and media discourses and have become essential figures in articulations around migration, refugeeness, and asylum-granting states' politics and policies. My project and the reflections I present in this article are based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with queer and gender-variant Syrians living or transiting in Istanbul between 2014 and 2015, with a special focus on persons who applied or intended to apply for resettlement through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). My choice of Turkey was rather strategic, given that many of my queer and gender-variant friends and acquaintances who escaped Syria headed toward Turkey in general, and Istanbul specifically, encouraging many others from the communities in Syria to follow suit (see Saleh, forthcoming). At some point, Istanbul became a favorite destination for queer and gender-variant Syrians, especially those who wished to apply for resettlement through the UNHCR.[2] Some of the subjects in my research are friends, some are acquaintances, and some are persons I have either heard of or whom I simply met in Istanbul for the first time during my many visits before and after I began conceptualizing my project. However, a common denominator among my interlocutors in this article—and a central factor to my reflections on the vicissitudes of gender variance within the Syrian context—is that they have all grown up with or experienced being part of the Syrian queer and trans* communities in Syria prior to leaving the country. Also, since my work is primarily ethnographic and given the lack of systematic studies of queer and gender-variant lives and lived realities in the Syrian context before or after the uprisings, personal stories, oral histories, autoethnographic recollections of past encounters, memories, as well as the ethnographic materials I collected both in the field in Istanbul and during my follow-up all constitute the "makeshift" queer/trans* archive (Muñoz 1996: 7) I simultaneously construct and draw on to reflect on the initial questions I raised at the beginning of this article.

While most representational investments are poured into maintaining and reproducing Syrian queer and gender-variant refugees as products of injury, suffering, and pain, other histories recede to the background and, I wager, are produced as undesirable, unnecessary, or irrelevant to the humanitarian rescue missions. In this article, I shall focus on how this discourse of Syrian LGBTI refugees as products of histories of injury produces lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex refugees whose understandings of gender and sexuality necessarily mimic or are unquestionably compatible with the sensational UN or Western narratives of "this is how it is like to be an Arab, Middle Eastern, or Syrian LGBTI person." Put differently, what *gender* and *sexuality* signify to Syrian queer and gender-variant populations beyond their circulation as grounds for persecution and suffering is neither questioned nor investigated. Employing transgender as both a useful category of (historical) analysis, to use Joan W. Scott's (1986) famous formulation, and "as an analytical category" in which "concepts [of] borders, imaginaries, and 'home/s'" converge (Camminga 2019: 2), this article foregrounds gender variance among Syrian refugees and the analysis of its dynamics within the context of war and asylum in Turkey as indispensable to the task of writing more nuanced accounts of the emergence of transgender as an identity category among Syrian queer and gender-variant populations.

To that end, I argue that Syrian gender-variant and queer populations encounter *transgender* first and foremost as a humanitarian—rather than a social, cultural, medical, or political—term whose implications, politics, meanings, and effects rest primarily on its ability to enable mobility, govern and regulate nonnormative genders and sexualities, and interpellate gender-variant and queer populations into being as intelligible transgender refugees for the asylum-granting institutions and countries. My argument draws on the insight that, despite its being "infinitely malleable," *transgender* also "functions as a term that carries a distinctive kind of analytical and ideological fixity . . . most visible when the category is utilized in relation to mechanisms—such as human rights—whose functions are often predicated on a dubious conceptual stability" (Camminga 2019: 2). It is this sense of transgender as a mechanism of what Didier Fassin (2012: 1) aptly calls "humanitarian government" that, I argue, emerges within the assemblage of Syrian queer and gender-variant refugees, the UNHCR, and *transgender* as a term.

As a population whose very access to humanitarian protection by the UNHCR hinges on their having a "well-founded fear of persecution" because of their gender identity, Syrian queer and gender-variant applicants must learn to navigate the meanings and implications of *transgender* as the primary signifier of their diverse senses and iterations of gender within the humanitarian space of the UNHCR. As the only identity category that allows them to articulate their

histories of injury and suffering based on gender identity, the emergence of *transgender* becomes inextricably intertwined with its becoming part of "the language of humanitarianism" (2) and its capacity "to generate support among listeners or readers" (3) and, I add, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), Western activists, and decision makers in the asylum institutions. This designation of *transgender* as a humanitarian term is based on another central contention I make in this article: that, in contradistinction to various configurations of gender variance, sexual practices, and bodyness prior to this encounter with the humanitarian-asylum complex, the idea that transgender as an identity is predicated on an understanding of one's gender as being completely separate from one's sexual practices, desires, and sexual identity still rings hollow to or does not fully register for many queer and gender-variant persons from the Syrian context and its diasporas.[3] In other words, the discourses and systems of identification many Syrian queer and gender-variant asylum seekers have drawn on for their self-understanding and identifying become irrelevant precisely because their capacity to signify Syrian applicants as "humanitarian objects" is foreclosed by the monolithic trajectories imposed by transgender as a humanitarian category. Thus, although *transgender* as well as the various "local" concepts and terms used by Syrian queer and gender-variant populations are all equally capable of capturing the social, cultural, legal, medical, and economic complexities of being gender nonconforming, only *transgender* can function as the term "that inextricably links values [the moral necessity to alleviate suffering] and affects [pain], and serves both to define and to justify discourses and practices of the government of [queer and gender-variant Syrians]" (2).

However, in a move that might seem counterintuitive, I expand this argument to argue that the term's capacity to homogenize in a specific context must never be read as the term's full domination over all other systems of identification or complete infiltration of the consciousness of those it interpellates. In my view, there has been an increasing circulation and institutionalization of a critical trajectory within transgender studies that assigns a negativity to the term, specifically in transnational contexts. This critique invests heavily in warning about the term's ability to colonize other contexts through the transnational humanitarian and activist complex; to subsume many other identities and gendered ways of being and erase local/indigenous epistemologies of gender and sexuality; to appropriate non-Western cultures' understandings of gender variance; to reproduce problematic rights-based discourses and activism; and to produce new racial, ethnic, and bodily hierarchies (Stryker and Currah 2014; Stryker and Aizura 2013; Dutta and Roy 2014; Valentine 2007; Towle and Morgan 2012; Namaste 2005; Spade [2009] 2015; Puar 2017; Beemyn 2013).

Keeping this observation in mind, and in anthropological fashion, I test the term's purported hegemonic reach by focusing not on how the powers that be

intend to use or institutionalize the term transnationally but on how Syrian queer and gender-variant populations, in their encounter with the term as a humanitarian one, take up, employ, circulate, modify, understand, or simply ignore *transgender* as a term that does not erase or subsume but exists alongside their previous and still relevant systems of identification. By doing this, I intend, on the one hand, to build on B. Camminga's (2019: 2) critical insight in *Transgender Refugees and the Imagined South Africa* that, first, the term "transgender transforms as it travels, taking on meaning in relation to bodies, national homes, institutional frameworks and imaginaries" and, second, that its movement as a category is indissociable from "the movement of the people who invoke it." On the other hand, I centralize a model of "subjective mediation" (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999: 445), whereby I "listen to talk-about-[transgender and gender variance] to see what that talk can tell us *about* identity categories" (Valentine 2003: 126) and ethnographically "report on and respect people as we find them in various locations" (Lewin 2016: 598). I document gender variance nomenclature they rely on even when it might be considered problematic, outdated, or not as "empowering" as *transgender*, and I highlight narratives that are neither intended to be nor lend themselves to being read as romanticized visions of "local" queer and gender-variant "cultures of resistance" (Aizura 2014: 143).

Finally, as a first step in countering both the erasure of gender-variant refugees and the lack of historical narratives of gender variance in Syria, I follow a Syrian transwoman's story of fleeing Syria through obtaining legal papers that recognize her as "gender variant" and account for this possibility by providing a short genealogy of gender variance within the Syrian context. In a Deleuzian/Guattarian sense (1987), this story is a line of flight that diverges from/deterritorializes the exhausted narratives of "nothing" in Syria before humanitarian intervention and the naturalization of the image of the suffering Syrian LGBTI refugee (Saleh 2020), on the one hand, and follows a trajectory that enables the mapping of histories and archives of knowledge yet to be excavated and desubjugated within the growing field of transgender studies, on the other (Stryker 2006: 12–13; Foucault 1997).

Transgender as a Humanitarian Category and the Production of Proper Transgender Refugees: "Should We Address You as a He or a She?"

In February 2015, Wissam had the most important interview for his third-country resettlement process in Turkey: the one with the US delegation from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which was held at the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), one of the implementing partners of the UNHCR in Istanbul for applicants whose country of resettlement is the United States. This interview was the last one in a series of procedures that Wissam had to go through

to establish himself as an intelligible gay refugee, eligible for resettlement to the United States. Wissam, a Syrian citizen from the coastal city of Latakia, was twenty-five years old at the time and had been in Turkey for a little less than a year. He applied for resettlement at the UNHCR in Ankara in the spring of 2014, and his case was accepted by the United States for resettlement. When Wissam went to his interview at the ICMC in Istanbul, he did not go unprepared, for he took cautionary measures and decided to follow a piece of advice that was more or less standard among people applying for resettlement based on sexual orientation: namely, act as gay (read: feminine) as possible, put on lots of makeup, and try to perform whatever gender expressions they shall perceive as typical of being gay.

At the interview, however, Wissam was not read at first glance as gay, for he was asked a question that discombobulated his assumptions about what counts as a gender expression connected to gayness and what might be instead perceived as a sign of one's gender identity. At the outset, the head of the delegation asked him whether he would like to be addressed as a he or a she during the interview. Given that Wissam's entire process was based on his sexual orientation and not his gender identity, the question was disorienting to him because, in his mind, he clearly applied as a gay man, which already implies that he is not transgender. However, the question, whether asked to assert the validity of his claims until that point in the process or to discipline his nonnormative appearance, performatively produced Wissam's appearance and his asylum claim as a gay (cis-)man as incompatible and in need of a disciplinary question. Moreover, it forced him to produce and prove himself in that space as a gay (cis-)man through asserting that his makeup and feminine gender expressions are inconsequential for his self-identification as a man who is sexually attracted to men. "Taken aback and smiling cautiously," recalling his reaction at the time, "I said, he."

Wissam's request to be addressed as a "he" implied that his gender had to correspond to the sex assigned at birth, for otherwise, he would have to identify as a "she" and apply based on gender identity, an asylum claim that would render his queer sexuality irrelevant to his application and would instead produce him as a (presumably heterosexual) transgender woman. In other words, if he identified as a lesbian, bisexual, or queer transwoman, Wissam would probably not be able to apply based on sexual orientation, but rather on gender identity: claiming asylum on the grounds of sexual orientation forecloses, bureaucratically, the possibility of applying based on gender identity. This negation of femininity, not just as mere "performance" but also potentially as integral to one's sexual identification, becomes the condition of possibility for a properly masculine, cisgender, gay identity to emerge within the humanitarian space of the UNHCR, whereby "categories such as 'trans woman' or 'gay man' are seen as necessarily mono-gendered" (Dutta and Roy 2014: 332). But this clear-cut distinction between transgender and

homosexual as two separate identities emanating out of different loci is a recent development that has so far manifested itself in various forms of dissociating gender-nonnormative behavior from sexual identities in an attempt to produce the subjects inhabiting these identities as gender normative (Valentine 2003, 2007; Stryker 2008b; Stryker and Currah 2014; Najmabadi 2014). However, since its popularization in the early 1990s and subsequent, intensified circulation in activist, policy, and academic knowledge venues, *transgender* has been constantly perceived and remains disseminated as an umbrella term that indexes various gender-nonnormative expressions, identities, or gendered ways of being in the world,[4] or, in the words of Susan Stryker (2008a: 19), that "refer[s] to the widest imaginable range of gender-variant practices and identities." Yet, in the context of migration, asylum, and resettlement, *transgender* seems to be deployed less to refer to many gender-nonconforming persons and more as a mechanism that enforces the bifurcation of the sexual from the gendered/sexed as the necessary condition for some to become recognized as intelligibly gay and others as transgender. Notwithstanding my contention that the UNHCR invests in producing "public representations of the human beings to be defended" (Fassin 2007: 501) and presenting the very transgender and gay cisgender subjects it later claims to represent and protect as prior to their interpellation by the UN discourses around these identities (Shakhsari 2013a: 100; 2013b: 568; Saleh, forthcoming),[5] I remain wary of the subtle implication that these new subjectivities are now seen as permanent and internalized to the detriment of other subjectivities or relations to one's self, body, gender, and sexuality. Performing what it entails to become a credible gay or transgender refugee does not make a subject, I contend, but a temporary subject position that they necessarily need to inhabit and that, in the process, affects and transforms their self-identifications but never fully substitutes them. Perhaps one could think of these rather circumstantial changes effected by the encounter with the term *transgender* within the space of the UNHCR in Turkey as a Syrian queer/gender-variant asylum seeker through what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987: 93) conceptualize as "incorporeal transformations." That is, encountering *transgender* or its logics expressed in language transforms Wissam into a gay cis-man within the interview space, but that transformation is both incorporeal and contingent on the circumstances (95) in which the utterance is made, thus amounting neither to a shift in identity nor to the complete erasure of the other discourses Wissam draws on to identify under different circumstances.

In fact, what the delegation does not know about Wissam is that, within the queer and trans* communities in Syria, the Turkish diaspora, or San Diego, where he lives now, he is rarely called Wissam, for we call him Josleen, the female name given to him back in the days when he was still in Syria. Although it depends

on the context and the language in which he is speaking, he rarely identifies as gay or transgender, for he still follows a spectrum of identities whose configurations of bodies, gender expressions, and sexual desires and practices do not rest on a clear-cut bifurcation of gender identity and sexual orientation as two separate realms, in contradistinction to the mainstream UN interpellation through transgender as a "gender identity, not a sexual orientation" (UNHCR 2012: 4). Although the UN guidelines emphasize that "a transgender individual may be heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual," the implication remains that being transgender and being gay are two separate grounds for claiming asylum that cannot be uttered as simultaneous identities an applicant inhabits. This further complicates the academic/activist definitions of *transgender* and points toward its instrumentalization when used in the context of migration and asylum. But since Wissam/Josleen is not strictly transgender but considers himself on a spectrum of gender variance that still tends more toward being gay than transgender on the UN scale, the question remains, how do gender-variant persons who actively seek asylum or are automatically categorized under the sign of transgender employ, discuss, or negotiate the term?

On a particularly stormy and rainy evening in November 2014, Jaafar and Yazan, two of my friends who applied for resettlement at the UN based on sexual orientation, arranged for the three of us to meet some of their trans* friends and acquaintances who resided in the bustling Istiklal Street, the touristic heart of Istanbul and a relatively safe part of the city that makes it favorable for Syrian trans* refugees and asylum seekers who wish to come to Turkey. We went to visit Leen,[6] a self-identified *shemale* from Aleppo.[7] Two of Leen's friends were also visiting, Samar and Sara, both from Aleppo, and had been living in Istanbul for quite some time as well. We knew of each other, but that was the first time we met in person. While sipping Turkish coffee and acquainting ourselves with our respective stories and histories, I introduced myself more fully and mentioned that I had been living in Germany since June 2010 and that I was working on a project that focused on Syrian queer and gender-variant refugees, which ultimately included everyone sitting around at Leen's place. They already knew from Jaafar that I sporadically worked with LGBTI organizations in the Middle East and North Africa region and actively aided many asylum seekers in applying for asylum at the UNHCR in Turkey.

This introduction of me as a researcher-activist who is also from the Syrian queer and trans* communities has ineluctably changed the trajectory of our conversation from getting to know one another to questions about asylum and humanitarian institutions. The main questions revolved around whether to apply at the UNHCR based on gender identity, go through too many procedures and bureaucratic hurdles, and wait for years in Istanbul before a decision is made; or

flee by sea and then land and apply for asylum in a heavily bordered and guarded fortress Europe, a route that is particularly dangerous for those fleeing while trans* but that is sure to grant them faster recognition as refugees, not only because of their trans* identities but also because of being trans* Syrians. During our conversation, they inquired, for example, about life in Germany, the length of the process of applying at the UNHCR in Turkey, and which European destination was the best for asylum and living conditions for queer and gender-variant refugees. What struck me that evening was how the conversation was starkly marked by a smooth shuffling of identity categories, terms, and words. Sometimes they would use *trans*[8] as an identity marker and its arabized, feminine variation *transaye*[9] whenever speaking about the UNHCR and the process of applying for asylum or simply speaking about the West or living in Europe. However, they automatically retain their self-identification as *shemales*, a term that in its arabized, plural form would be pronounced *shimelat*, when speaking about their lives in Istanbul or reminiscing about life in *al-Jaw*, a community-invented word that literally translates into "the atmosphere" and refers to the large, well connected, imagined, and real queer and gender-variant communities primarily across the big cities of Syria and now in the diaspora as well.[10] Sara, despite fully presenting as a woman in public and applying at the UNHCR as a transgender woman, insists that she is neither a *shemale* nor a *transaye* but adamantly identifies as a *tant*,[11] a word that within *al-Jaw* indexes an array of ways of being gendered, including feminine gay men, cross-dressers, and transfeminine persons pre-op or feminine gay men taking birth-control pills aiming for a more androgynous (read: female) body, but ultimately, any person assigned male at birth who has no problem with being given a female name or addressed with feminine pronouns, even if they were presenting as masculine within *al-Jaw* or in their everyday lives. Primarily, however, and as a reclaimed injurious insult that is regularly hurled at us *tantat* who strongly identify with the femininity the word *tant* socially signifies,[12] *tant* can be more accurately defined as any person assigned male at birth who lays claim to femininity not as mockery, imitation, or devaluation of the feminine, as *tantat* are often accused of "using" femininity, but as an integral component of their subjectivity and sense of sex/gender/sexuality.[13]

During my various field visits to Istanbul, there were times when I would meet and sit with friends and old acquaintances for the first time after their transition. Yet when it came to the issue of addressing them with the proper pronouns, not much has changed, and addressing them with feminine pronouns was effortless, for as has been standard within *al-Jaw* for decades now, pronouns and gendered forms of communication remain the same. That is, most Syrian queer and gender-variant persons within *al-Jaw* address each other with feminine pronouns and use female names to identify and address persons assigned male at

birth in their bodily and gendered variations. In other words, *al-Jaw* actively excluded queer and gender-variant persons assigned female at birth, including transmen and lesbian (cis-)women, whose communities neither adopt the language of nor fully mingle with persons from *al-Jaw*. One of the main reasons for this separation is the anchoring of *al-Jaw* and its systems of identification that I have laid out so far in the community members' sexual desire toward men, rather than their sense of gender only. That is, a *tant*, a *shemale*, or a (fully operated) *woman* as yet another gender-variant category within *al-Jaw* are understood as identifications that people inhabit owing to and through their being objects of the sexual desire of and subjects who desire men. In other words, desiring or being desired by other men is often employed as the rationale that explains these identities within both *al-Jaw* and the larger Syrian society.

Gender expressions and bodily modifications are thus understood as being manifestations of these persons' sexual desires toward men, rather than as independent from them. Therefore, it is not an anomaly that a *tant* who at all times of her everyday life presents as a woman identifies more with gayness than with transgender and that a self-identified *shemale* sees her gender and bodily modification as the next step of being a *tant*. Unlike heterosexual cis-women, it is not their gender identity that explains their sexual desire; rather, it is their sexual attraction toward men that constitutes a decisive factor in their identification and self-understanding as *shimelat*. Thus the idea of a *tant* (especially one who takes hormones) or a *shemale* (which implies that she has already taken hormones or has had certain operations) that is not sexually into men is an ontological impossibility. That is not to reduce the queer and gender-variant persons' identifications to their sexuality or sexual desires at all, as that would be both violent and wrong. My aim is to emphasize that this aspect has not simply vanished and is still quite prevalent and powerful, notwithstanding the globalization of the separation between gender and sexuality, especially through the humanitarian-asylum complex, whereby "transgender identities are seen to emanate from the experience of 'gender'" and "are conceptualized as quite distinct from homosexual identities, which are seen to have their source in 'sexuality'" (Valentine 2003: 125).

Sara, despite her self-identification as a *tant* presenting as a woman, understood that she had to stick to *transgender* as the term that will render her eligible for humanitarian help, but not as a term that represents her or through which she could identify outside the space of the interview rooms. *Transgender* in her case and in Samar's functions as a term that interpellates them as humanitarian subjects who applied for resettlement at the UNHCR, a space they enter as transgender and leave as *shimelat* or *tantat* while entering the assemblage of Istanbul, their lives, and their communities.

But if war and asylum is the context within which *transgender* emerges as a humanitarian term, one must equally investigate the material conditions and

various discourses under which the terms that preceded *transgender* emerged or functioned. What would a genealogy of gender variance in Syria look like from the ethnographic perspective of the here and now? To offer a preliminary answer to this question, I trace a line of flight that suggests necessary "epistemological correctives," to lift a term from Jasbir Puar (2017: 36), to the sensational and undifferentiated narratives of suffering, flight, and "there was nothing there before they came to the West" story line. Thus I turn to another ethnographic encounter in 2015 with a transwoman from Tartus, my hometown's neighboring city on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, with whom I had a long discussion about the way she managed to escape to Istanbul with the least violence possible in a war environment.

Nariman lived with a friend, another transwoman from Tartus, in what was known among the Syrian transwomen as the *transat* (transwomen) building, which was located in the Cihangir area of Istanbul near Taksim, the most touristic part of the city. While drinking maté, a South American drink very popular in Nariman's hometown, and chattering about this and that, she started telling me about how she managed to leave Syria for Turkey although she was enlisted for military service.[14] It was Nariman's worst nightmark, both because those enlisted are not allowed to leave the country and because she is a transwoman. However, she found out there was a way for her not to serve in the military: namely, proving that she had a "sex identity disorder," an extralegal procedure and possibility specific to the military, medical, and police institutions. Out of her excessive fear of being dragged into military service, especially because she had already missed the deadline for joining, she went directly to her recruitment unit, explained her situation to them, and was duly informed that she would be exempted from military service if she shared her story in her own military unit. "I was afraid they would not let me go if I went directly to them," she added, "and so I went and asked a psychologist to write a report about my situation, which he acceded to do seconds after looking at me (pointing at her body and implying that he immediately saw that she was not a man), and then I went to the head of my unit and submitted it." According to her, they accepted it, and she went through a series of procedures, whereby a "hormones doctor," as she called him, also had to write a report for the military committee to prove that she was not a man, and this committee would then make the final decision. At the end, she received a stamp on her military service book that clearly states اضطراب هوية جنسية ("sex" identity disorder).[15] This has not only allowed her to start transitioning into the body she wants without too many negative repercussions, but also facilitated her passing through government-controlled checkpoints on her way to Beirut, where she took a plane and flew to Istanbul.

Nariman's story is neither uncommon nor new, for it was common knowledge to *al-Jaw* that any person assigned male at birth but whose body can

be read as physically "female," as opposed to solely acting or dressing in a feminine way, could be exempted from military service. Consequently, more transwomen started taking hormones with less fear of being exposed both because they could always use "the military service exemption" as an excuse, on the one hand, and because, as many queer and gender-variant friends and acquaintances claim, the current war situation made certain forms of visibility more tolerable, on the other. What is important to know here, however, is that the consumption of "feminizing hormones" harks back to another, but inextricably linked, genealogy of gender variance in Syria, that of a birth-control pill produced by the German medical company Bayer called Diane. Within *al-Jaw*, Diane has an indubitably trans* history.

In the absence of medical-legal structures and services that support queer and gender-variant persons who wish to transition to whichever degree, Diane became an intractable part of the recent history of gender variance in the Syrian context. Obtainable over-the-counter, Diane allowed many who wanted to transition an opportunity to prove that their bodies were also hormonally more "feminine" than "masculine," which then allowed them, much like Nariman, to be exempted from military service or which prepared them for their operations in the hidden market of sex-change surgeries, as they are called in Syria.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that those mechanisms and clandestine, yet not unknown, systems of transitioning, obtaining legal papers, or being recognized as gender variant are enabled by the fact that trans* populations are not legal subjects, as there are no laws that govern the status of trans* people.[16] Thus, the processes by which a trans* person has their legal documents changed and their gender identity recognized are all extralegal. In Nariman's and many other stories of exemption from military service and escape from Syria, extralegality and the spaces it opens up for negotiation with the various state institutions and society at large become more viable sites of approaching and understanding gender variance and its politics in the Syrian context than through rights-based discourses, for example.

In sharing Nariman's escape story, albeit briefly, I attempted to foreground historical narratives that belong neither to the far past nor strictly to the present. By centralizing these histories, I hardly intended to provide an authentic description of local cultures of queerness and gender variance. Although the terms *transsexual* or *transgender*—or their translations for that matter—were neither mainstream nor fully adopted by gender-variant populations in Syria, the effects of the discourses and technologies that produced the medical category of transsexuality were no less present in the Syrian context.[17] Notwithstanding the absence of a legal framework to govern gender variance, words adopted by the community—*tant* and its French origins and *shemale* with its clear non-Arabic

etymology and history—are hardly local or indicative of pure cultural formations of gender and sexuality. These systems of identification, if anything, "highlight the crucial articulation between the local and the global" (Manalansan 2006: 229–30; see also Manalansan 2003) and the indispensability of studying the specific and contingent ways various populations outside the West invoke, appropriate, reclaim, or instrumentalize them to make sense of their bodies, genders, and sexualities.

Conclusion

In this article, I have addressed three issues in relation to Syrian queer and gender-variant populations from Syria who fled the country to Turkey during the years following the uprisings of 2011. First, I demonstrated how *transgender* first entered the discourses of queer and gender-variant communities from Syria in the context of war, migration, and asylum as a humanitarian term within the very specific context of the UNHCR and the larger humanitarian-activist complex. Furthermore, I explained how their being refugees, asylum seekers, or migrants encountering this complex has functioned as the condition of possibility for *transgender* to become a term that could represent them within the humanitarian spaces in which it is uttered. Second, I argued that *transgender* as a humanitarian term introduced a separation of gender and sexuality as two fully separate causes for gender variability and queer sexualities in a context that had hitherto functioned, and still functions, under different taxonomies and configurations of bodily materiality, gender variability, and queerness.

Yet by focusing on ethnographic narratives of how Syrian gender-variant and queer refugees themselves employ and circulate *transgender*, I showed how, especially in non-Western contexts, providing accounts of what the term signifies and how it is used by a certain population can help ameliorate the negativity we attach to it. In other words, we could measure the various temporalities or arrivals of the term *transgender* and its discourses through tracing and documenting the ways the term is taken up by Syrian queer and gender-variant refugees as only another identity marker, category, or discourse that competes with, exists alongside, or co-constitutes—rather than (fully) subsumes, negates, or colonizes—other epistemologies. This provides an alternative to a now-established strand of critique within transnational transgender studies that invests much of its critical energy into warning about the risks of the global institutionalization of *transgender*. This critique does so to such an extent that it unwittingly grants the term much power that it does not (yet) have and indirectly produces the populations the term "contains" as its helpless objects rather than as full-fledged historical subjects who resist, negotiate, transform, or simply ignore the term altogether. Such an approach helps avoid turning it into another vacuous term and

maintains its political, positive, and transformative potential, as well as emphasizes that the term's ownership is not tied to its "first," albeit retrospectively constructed, context of emergence. Lastly, by highlighting Nariman's story of escape, I tried to shed light on systems of mapping, taxonomization, and production of gender variance that are outside the law yet clearly draw on global and historical discourses, technologies, and understandings tied to the medical category "transsexual," which is neither "local" nor Syrian or Middle Eastern in origin, but that by now, as Afsaneh Najmabadi (2014: 9) reminds us, has histories of its own that still belong to its new sociocultural and linguistic context and equally deserve documentation and thorough analysis. While I briefly shed light on some of these histories, many "queer histor[ies] in the making" (Halberstam 2005: 170) are still emerging, speaking to one another, transforming each other in the process, and awaiting to be documented, preserved, archived, or simply embodied and enacted by the various Syrian queer and gender-variant populations in Syria and its diasporas.

To end on a critical note regarding anthropological and ethnographic writing that focuses on gender variance outside the West, I return to a comment in which Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (2013: 9), in their introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, voiced their skepticism about including anthropological accounts of non-European gender-variant people:

> While much queer work in anthropology has sought to decolonize the anthropological analysis of sex/gender variance, and while the ethnographic documentation of global gender variance springs from many motivations, including support for the political struggles of non-European gender-variant people, we nevertheless have steered away from including in this collection what we think of as "cross-cultural analysis" of sex/gender, for two reasons. First, we seek to resist a common interpretive stance . . . that represents non-European gender-variant cultural practices as timeless "traditions" bound to being polluted or diluted by the introduction of exogenous modern forms. . . . Second, to resist the implicit bias of this "cross-cultural" work that privileges "homosexual" or "queer" optics over trans-oriented heuristic as its default mode.

While I share their skepticism on many levels that the negativity attached to the term *transgender* when looking at non-Western contexts both romanticizes a hardly existing "authentic" culture and is disproportionate to the actual ways the term is taken up and employed by gender-variant persons themselves, I still plead for more room for debate on the place of an anthropology of gender variance within transgender studies. As this article showed, for some populations, whose recent histories have been far from documented or narrated, (auto)ethnographic

stories might be one of the very few ways available to unearth and put these stories out there as legitimate historical accounts or descriptions and analyses of contemporary processes. At a time when much knowledge production is "plague[d]" by a "platitudinous and journalistic rhetoric" (Puar 2007: xxiii) and poisoned by humanitarian and protection dynamics that do not even grant Syrian gender-variant and queer refugees the space to speak up or tell other histories that will not harm their asylum applications or chances for resettlement, damning anthropology tout court as not fitting for (Euro-American) transgender studies, regardless of by whom, how, where, and with whom the anthropological accounts are being produced, might unwittingly reproduce the same power dynamics and gestures that Western scholars wish to avoid.

Probably, it is time to complicate queer anthropology and the anthropology of gender by a transgender anthropology or an anthropology of gender variance, not just as another fancy addition to the expanding list of "anthropologies," but as a way of shaking away the fear of "exoticizing gender variance" by creating nuanced ethnographic accounts that highlight queer and gender-variant people's uses and judgments of the circulated terms, *transgender* or others; that analyze the complexities of transgender politics beyond ascriptions of good and evil or claims of authenticity and cultural purity; that approach gender normativities through gender variance, and not the other way round; and that function as archives and depositories of the many existent and unfolding ways of approaching, understanding, deconstructing, and changing gender variance among populations in contexts that have only recently emerged as "relevant" sites for global, mainstream LGBTI politics, academic knowledge production, humanitarian institutions, and activist investments.

Fadi Saleh is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology at the University of Göttingen, Germany. Fadi's PhD project traces the emergence of Syrian LGBTI refugees as a constituency in discourses around humanitarianism, asylum, and queerness.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to my interlocutors/friends for sharing their stories and thinking with me through many of the arguments and analyses presented here. I highly appreciate the anonymous peer reviewers for their very helpful feedback and comments. Many thanks to Utan Schirmer for his invaluable feedback on earlier drafts of this article and for inviting me to present my ideas in his Introduction to Transgender Studies class in 2017 at the University of Göttingen, where I greatly benefited from the students' enriching and critical engagement.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, I use *queer* and *gender variant* as well as *trans** and *transman/transwoman* to refer to Syrian persons of nonnormative genders and sexualities in general and depending on the context. Although I follow Halberstam's (2018: 4–5) employment of *trans** to maintain the term's open-endedness and ability to index emerging and new forms of gender variance, I use *gender variant*—interchangeably with *trans**—to emphasize gender variance, rather than the identity categories that contain or are derived from it, as my field of argumentation and point of reference. To refer to Syrian queer and trans* populations' compartmentalization and production through specific identity frameworks by Western humanitarian and activist organizations as well as media outlets, I use *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *transgender*, and *intersex* (LGBTI). Otherwise, I retain people's self-identifications whenever quoting them directly or reporting on how they identify.
2. Of course, also for many who wanted to settle down in Istanbul or continue to Europe by sea.
3. My argument and analyses in this article are, of course, reflective of the time during which fieldwork was conducted and the biographies of my interlocutors.
4. For a comprehensive history of the term *transgender* and other definitions of it, see Valentine 2007 and Stryker 2008a.
5. Sima Shakhsari's pioneering work on queer and trans* Iranian refugees, although very informative on issues of the politics of managing and producing proper LGBTI refugees, does not go beyond rightfully arguing and explicating how the UNHCR imposes universal scripts of gender and sexuality onto asylum seekers. Thus it does not delve into the question of what these scripts are oppressing or effacing or of what the contemporary dynamics of naming, language, and cultural conceptualizations of gender and sexuality are, as these are lived within the Iranian queer and trans* communities in Iran and its diasporas.
6. Except for Wissam/Josleen, Jaafar, and Yazan, who requested that their names be mentioned, all other names have been changed to maintain anonymity.
7. I italicize the word *shemale* as I would a non-English word to emphasize that I am strictly referring to a Syrian-Arabic way of using and saying the word by those who identify through it.
8. It is important to mention that *trans* as a word is much more commonly used than *transgender* or *transsexual*. In fact, I have never heard any of my interlocutors say *transgender* or *transsexual* in full.
9. For transliterations of Arabic or arabized words, I follow the simplified transliteration system of the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, though with minor adjustments that I find necessary to convey the pronunciation as accurately as possible.
10. I emphasize the urban history of the word both out of personal experience and my observation that the community is mostly prevalent in big cities such as Latakia, Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus.
11. In his pioneering ethnography *Queer Beirut* (2013), Sofian Merabet (2013: 251), in a footnote, gives a short account of the etymology of the word *tantat*, in which he explains that it is the "Lebanese plural of the word *tante* ('aunti'). Within the context of queer-identified crowds in Lebanon, *tante* defines any male homosexual declared to be effeminate and thus a 'queen,' although that perceived effeminacy is no requirement for that identification. Otherwise, the word is used—mostly among Christians—to formally

address the sister of one's mother or father or the wife of one's uncle. It is also used as a term of respect for any older woman." In his definition, Merabet gives a Levantine dimension to the term, clearly stating its French origin, an origin that would not surprise anyone, given the colonial history of Syria and Lebanon as French protectorates until the middle of the twentieth century.

12. In Syria, *tant* is commonly used as an injurious slur against effeminate men and has come to subsume homosexuality as well. However, it is also used to regulate and discipline straight men when they exhibit signs of not conforming to what is socially expected of them. To many, at least of my generation and those who experienced growing up as part of *al-Jaw* in Syria, it is the first disciplinary interpellation into gender conformity of kids who are perceived to be gender nonconforming.
13. My reflections on the ways in which the figure of the *tant*, though wedded to its sociohistorical context, collapses the sex/gender/sexuality systems, is informed by and resonates with other figures that have been thoroughly studied and documented in queer anthropological literature. These include, for example, the *bakla* in the Philipines (see Manalansan 2003), the *travesti* in Brazil (see Kulick 1998), the *travesti* in Turkey (see Kandiyoti 2002; Pürel 2017; Görkemli 2014), and the *kuni* in Iran (see Najmabadi 2014).
14. Military service in Syria is compulsory for all males who have completed their eighteenth year and are not the only son in their family.
15. The concept of gender has only started to be mainstreamed in Middle Eastern and North African feminist circles and women and LGBTI organizations within the last decade or so. Thus *sex* (*jins* in Arabic) is still the more dominant term that implies both sex and gender. That is not to say that there are no sites or instances in which an implicit linguistic and sociocultural distinction between sex and gender is made or manifests itself. Rather, it is to indicate that such examples remain incidental rather than central to dominant concepts of sex as gender.
16. The only law that is sometimes cited as referring to transwomen is article 507 of the Syrian penal code, which criminalizes men who cross-dress for the purpose of entering women-only spaces.
17. This point draws on Joanne Meyerowitz's (1998: 160) insight within the US context that "a transsexual identity of sorts emerged well before the sexological category of transsexualism."

References

Aizura, Aren Z. 2014. "Trans Feminine Value, Racialized Value, and the Limits of Necropolitics." In *Queer Necropolitics*, edited by Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco, 129–47. New York: Routledge.

Aizura, Aren Z., Trystan Cotten, Carsten Balzer/Carla LaGata, Marcia Ochoa, and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz. 2014. Introduction to "Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary," edited by Aren Z. Aizura, Trystan Cotten, Carsten Balzer/Carla LaGata, Marcia Ochoa, and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz. Special issue, *TSQ* 1, no. 3: 308–18.

Beemyn, Genny. 2013. "A Presence in the Past: A Transgender Historiography." *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4: 113–21.

Camminga, B. 2019. *Transgender Refugees and the Imagined South Africa: Bodies over Borders and Border over Bodies*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London: Bloomsbury.

Dutta, Aniruddha, and Raina Roy. 2014. "Decolonizing Transgender in India: Some Reflections." *TSQ* 1, no. 3: 320–36.

Fassin, Didier. 2007. "Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life." *Public Culture* 19, no. 3: 499–520.

Fassin, Didier. 2012. *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Translated by Rachel Gomme. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1997. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collége de France, 1975–76*. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador.

Görkemli, Serkan. 2014. *Grassroots Literacies: Lesbian and Gay Activism and the Internet in Turkey*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Gürel, Perin E. 2017. *The Limits of Westernization: A Cultural History of America in Turkey*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Halberstam, Jack [Judith]. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.

Halberstam, Jack. 2018. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Kandiyoti, Deniz. 2002. "Pink Cards Blues: Trouble and Strife at the Crossroads of Gender." In *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey*, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayse Saktanber, 277–93. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Kulick, Don. 1998. *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lewin, Ellen. 2016. "Who's Queer? What's Queer? Queer Anthropology through the Lens of Ethnography." *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 4: 598–606.

Manalansan, Martin F. 2003. *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Manalansan, Martin F. 2006. "Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies." *International Migration Review* 40, no. 1: 224–49.

Merabet, Sofian. 2013. *Queer Beirut*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. 1998. "Sex Change and the Popular Press: Historical Notes on Transsexuality in the United States, 1930–1950." *GLQ* 4, no. 2: 159–87.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 1996. "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts." *Women and Performance* 8, no. 2: 5–16.

Najmabadi, Afsaneh. 2014. *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Iran*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Namaste, Viviane K. 2005. *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism*. Toronto: Women's Press.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A., and George Chauncey. 1999. "Thinking Sexuality Transnationally: An Introduction." *GLQ* 5, no. 4: 439–50.

Puar, Jasbir K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Puar, Jasbir K. 2017. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Saleh, Fadi. 2020. "Queer/Humanitarian Visibility: The Emergence of the Figure of the 'Suffering Syrian Gay Refugee.'" *Middle East Critique* 29, no. 1.

Saleh, Fadi. Forthcoming. "Resettlement as Securitization: War, Humanitarianism, and the Production of Syrian LGBT Refugees." In *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation*, edited by Karma Chávez and Eithne Luibhéid. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Scott, Joan W. 1986. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5: 1053–75.

Shakhsari, Sima. 2013a. "Killing Me Softly with Your Rights: Queer Death and the Politics of Rightful Killing." In *Queer Necropolitics*, edited by Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco, 93–110. New York: Routledge.

Shakhsari, Sima. 2013b. "Shuttling between Bodies and Borders: Iranian Transsexual Refugees and the Politics of Rightful Killing." In *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, 565–79. New York: Routledge.

Spade, Dean. (2009) 2015. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Stryker, Susan. 2006. "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1–17. New York: Routledge.

Stryker, Susan. 2008a. *Transgender History*. Berkeley, CA: Seal.

Stryker, Susan. 2008b. "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity." *Radical History Review*, no. 100: 145–75.

Stryker, Susan, and Aren Z. Aizura. 2013. "Transgender Studies 2.0." In *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, 1–12. New York: Routledge.

Stryker, Susan, and Paisley Currah. 2014. "General Editors' Introduction." *TSQ* 1, no. 3: 303–7.

Towle, Evan B., and Lynn M. Morgan. 2002. "Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the U.S. of the 'Third Gender' Concept." *GLQ* 8, no. 4: 469–97.

UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). 2012. *Guidelines on International Protection No. 9: Claims to Refugee Status Based on Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity within the Context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or Its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. www.unhcr.org/50ae466f9.pdf (accessed February 17, 2018).

Valentine, David. 2003. "'I Went to Bed with My Own Kind Once': The Erasure of Desire in the Name of Identity." *Language and Communication* 23, no. 2: 123–38.

Valentine, David. 2007. *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.