Refugee Hosts

Local Community Experiences of Displacement from Syria: Views from Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey

Psychogeography, Safe Spaces, and LGBTQ Immigrant Experience: Reflections from the “At Home in The Village?” project

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How can representations of local communities as particularly ‘hospitable’ and ‘welcoming’ spaces in fact obscure complex realities of exclusion? In this contribution to our Representations of Displacement (https://refugeehosts.org/representations-of-displacement-series/)series, Siobhán McGuirk explores the ways in which NGO and media reports have (mis)represented sexual minority refugees’ arrival in an “inclusive” community in the USA characterised by rainbow flag “gaybourhoods” and welcoming “safe spaces.” In contrast to these dominant NGO and media narratives however, McGuirk’s research suggests that the reality of fleeing home, and of being welcomed into US “gaybourhoods,” is not a linear process of travelling from “fear to safety”: instead, it is a complex process of (un)welcome and insecurity, where inclusion in certain communities is simultaneously framed by experiences of racism and xenophobia (https://refugeehosts.org/2017/03/01/travelling-fear-in-global-context-exploring-everyday-dynamics-of-insecurity-and-immobility/).

Psychogeography, Safe Spaces and LGBTQ Immigrant Experience: Reflections from the “At Home in the Village?” Project

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Since 1994, immigrants to the United States who have fled persecution in their home country because of their nonconforming sexual orientation or gender identity have been eligible to apply for asylum. Yet it is only relatively recently that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer (LGBTQ) asylum seekers have received significant attention in press, advocacy, and academia. For the past five years, I have been conducting ethnographic research with LGBTQ asylum seekers and asylees, as well as with specialist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing the population with support. The narrative popularized by NGO and media coverage of LGBTQ asylum seekers is that theirs is a linear and progressive journey, to borrow from one NGO campaign email, "from fear to safety".

A short film made by the NGO Immigration Equality (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p500h-1ihCc) illustrates the salient features of this narrative, using text and voice-over interviews alongside evocative music and carefully chosen imagery to assert a familiar arc: life back home—in this case, interchangeably Uganda, Russia, and Nicaragua—was stifling, violent, intolerable. Obtaining asylum in the United States was challenging, but made easier with the support of Immigration Equality. Life post-asylum in the United States is safe, endorsing, and liberating. The promotional video is affective and effective—and likely successful in encouraging viewers to donate to the organization, which in the words of one protagonist, "saved my life."

Other media echo this narrative, or emphasize specific elements: of living an entirely isolated life in "homophobic countries" (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/no-way-out_b_8822946.html); of being unable to find support within intolerant immigrant communities in the United States (https://worcestermag.com/2012/10/18/when-very-bad-things-happen-to-innocent-people-174593101/10085); of being desperately vulnerable and needy (https://www.thedailybeast.com/lgbt-asylum-seekers-need-america-more-than-ever); of U.S. LGBTQ communities providing a safe "welcome" (http://oramrefugee.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/oram-rainbow-bridges-2012-web.pdf); of a happy, "successful", and "free" life following the grant of asylum (https://www.immigrationequality.org/tamaras-journey-a-story-of-hope/). While reflective of some individuals' experiences, these established dominant narratives sit in stark contrast with the majority of my LGBTQ asylum seeker and asylee interlocutors' experiences.

For many, the decision to leave home was fraught with uncertainty and made hesitatingly, despite facing persecution. They were very much active in shaping their experiences of migration and asylum seeking, and were not passive, needy victims of circumstance—as they frequently saw themselves portrayed in interviews and other media. Their experiences in the United States were likewise varied, with notable elements in common often omitted from NGO fund-raising campaigns. For example, nearly all of my asylum seeker interlocutors found it challenging to secure jobs, as their non-U.S. qualifications were viewed with suspicion. Anti-immigrant sentiment fostered discrimination in housing applications, as well as within workplaces and hiring processes. Many encountered racist and/or Islamophobic attitudes for the first time in their lives, and grappled with new ascribed social statuses alongside very real economic hardship. The majority relied on diaspora communities for financial and social support. Despite being unable to return to their countries of origin, many reunited with family and friends elsewhere as soon as they received permission to travel outside the United States. Vera, an asylee from Russia, summed up the feelings of many LGBTQ asylees when she reflected: "back home, they just don't accept one part of you… Here, it's like they accept *that* part of you, but not all the others."

Disruptions: collaborative psycho-geography

I examine these more complex realities in more detail in my doctoral thesis (https://search.proquest.com/openview/531eacafa055afca0751f36afee34f90/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y). More recently, I have been working in collaboration with interlocutors to create our own media on LGBTQ+ asylum seeker experience. Our project is called "At Home in The

Village?" Drawing on anthropological mapping, film, and psychogeographic (https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/journeys/9/2/jy090201.xml) methodologies (http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781444310689.ch11/summary), we are filming journeys through the built environment of U.S. urban gayborhoods to elicit reflections on what it means to be an "LGBTQ asylum seeker" in the United States. Our choice of location is prompted by recognition of how Pride events, gay villages or "gaybourhoods", and rainbow flag imagery feature prominently in popular media about LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. This framing implies that simply being in an outwardly appearing LGBTQ+ friendly space connotes "freedom". Our films question that assertion, and present alternatives to the dominant, linear and progressive, "fear to safety" narrative.

Reflections: reconsidering "safe spaces"

Travelling through the ostensibly "safe spaces" of rainbow lined streets, collaborators reflected on their experiences of immigration, and on various barriers to establishing a sense of belonging to local communities—including but not limited to the "gayborhood". In the clip above, Melina negotiates and debates her attitude and feelings towards the space and, relatedly, to the assumption that she should feel more "at home" here than elsewhere. A collaborative, psycho-geographic approach allows time for meandering thoughts, and space for contradictions to emerge without the pressure to clarify ideas, or find assertive conclusions. Initial assertions of feeling "comfortable" or "at home" in the village often erode, or evolve from moment to moment as we weave through an area, recalling specific interactions past, or being interrupted by sights and sounds in the present. The approach, and output, allows for a greater understanding of how ambivalence and ambiguity mark LGBTQ+ immigrants' feelings of being at home.

We are still collecting footage for this project, and in various U.S. cities. Our initial findings reveal how the insecurity of waiting for a decision on an asylum claim can create significant boundaries for people to feel welcome in the village, and moreover that this feeling does not dissipate with a grant of asylum. It is rather often compounded by the prohibitive cost of "going out," and by experiences of racism and xenophobia—which were felt acutely by a Nigerian interlocutor who was subjected to racist abuse while we filmed in Chicago's Boystown district.

In our conversations, hope for a better future can nonetheless feel just around the corner—out of sight, but not out of mind. That hope is not necessarily tied to places mapped in popular discourses

as welcoming and affirming, however. In contrast to the narratives stated and evoked in popular advocacy campaigns, news reports, and NGO publications, interlocutors like Milena reveal that specialist NGOs and ostensibly sympathetic press might (re)produce and (re)affirm the same stereotypical ideas about LGBTQ identity that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Officers use to evaluate—and frequently to deny—asylum claims of people regarded as suspect because they do not feel sufficiently "at home" (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00918369.2012.699865) in the village. In this incipient project, we are creating alternative visions of LGBTQ+ immigrant experience that are perhaps most suitably presented as fragmented glimpses —reflecting that our journeys, regardless of officially granted statuses, are not linear and progressive, but are rather complex, circular, meandering, and possibly always incomplete.

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If you have found this piece of interest, you may consider reading these additional essays on the Refugee Hosts website:

Antonopoulou, A. (2017) 'The Virtual Reality of the Refugee Experience' (https://refugeehosts.org/2017/11/28/virtual_reality_refugee_experience/)

Blachnicka-Ciacek, D. (2017) 'Refugees Present/Absent. Escaping the Traps of Refugee (Mis)representation' (https://refugeehosts.org/2017/10/09/refugees-presentabsent-escaping-the-traps-of-refugee-misrepresentations/)

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2017) 'Introduction to the Representations of Displacement Series: Spaces and Places not Faces' (https://refugeehosts.org/representations-of-displacement-series/)

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2017) 'Gender, Religion and Humanitarian Responses to Refugees' (https://refugeehosts.org/2017/04/24/gender-religion-and-humanitarian-responses-to-refugees/)

Greatrick, A. and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2017) "Travelling Fear' in Global Context: Exploring Everyday Dynamics of In/Security and Im/Mobility' (https://refugeehosts.org/2017/03/01/travelling-fear-in-global-context-exploring-everyday-dynamics-of-insecurity-and-immobility/)

Harsch, L. (2018) 'Giving Refugees a Voice? Looking Beyond 'Refugee Stories'' (https://refugeehosts.org/2018/01/08/giving-refugees-a-voice-looking-beyond-refugee-stories/)

Loris-Rodionoff, C. (2017) 'Hope, Resilience and Uncertainty: A Day with Displaced Syrians in Southern Turkey' (https://refugeehosts.org/2017/08/08/hope-resilience-and-uncertainty-a-day-with-displaced-syrians-in-southern-turkey/)

Turner, L. (2017) 'Who will Resettle Single Syrian Men?' (https://refugeehosts.org/2017/02/16/who-will-resettle-single-syrian-men/)

Weatherhead, K. T. (2017) 'Thinking Through the Concept of 'Welcoming'' (https://refugeehosts.org/2017/09/11/thinking-through-the-concept-of-welcoming/)

Zbeidy, D. (2017) 'Widowhood, Displacement and Friendships in Jordan' (https://refugeehosts.org/2017/12/11/widowhood-displacement-and-friendships-in-jordan/)

2 thoughts on "Psychogeography, Safe Spaces, and

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