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QUEERING SOCIAL RESEARCH ON SEXUALITY, MIGRATION AND ASYLUM THROUGH CO-AUTHORING WITH PARTICIPANTS

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Abstract

This article draws on a dialogue between a social researcher and a research participant. The analysis unfolds through our sustained dialogue and the autoethnographic narratives we share. Co-authoring gave us both unexpected insights pertaining to experiences of researching and undergoing the asylum process from the viewpoint of the sexual minority subject. We wanted to do this by producing an autoethnographic account (Reed-Danahay 1997; Ellis 2009), important to 'revealing the interconnection of one's personal experiences and larger social structures' (Ruiz-Junco and Vidal-Ortiz 2011). In the writing of this article, one important consideration was to attend to the power relations that could shape our common undertaking. For this, we referred to the scholarly work of Richa Nagar whose thoughtful cross-border co-authoring practices reinforce the importance of critical self-reflexivity. In so doing we attempted to attentively contextualise the participatory methods we use as researchers of the social, and to take them out of the apolitical vacuum in which they may readily end up when they are co-opted by the managerial cultures of the neoliberal university.

Keywords

migration, refugees, sexualities, queer epistemologies, co-authoring, collaborative research methods

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Introduction: on speaking *with* and vulnerability

In recent years, social scientists have more directly challenged the rigidity of the separation between theory and method, or researcher as *knowledge producer* and respondent as *data mine* (Back, Sinha with Bryan 2012; Boellstorff 2010). In participatory action research (Kesby et al. 2007; Kemmis, McTaggart 2008) or activist social research inspired by feminist scholarship (Nagar 2006, 2014), troubling traditional writing practices has become a common practice to make the text produced politically relevant to the people included in a research project. But it is also true that making respondents participate in 'our' projects does not automatically lead to more honest, more important or more sociologically true accounts of their lives, that is, of the subjective, the social worlds and the economic structures they navigate. 'How to see from below', as Haraway (1991) put it, 'is a problem' as it is never a neutral or innocent position. Without doubt, when conducting social research, maintaining an alert self-reflexive gaze and behaviour on the part of the researcher is a vital process.

At a time when policy expectations about academic research tell us that a study's impact must be 'measured, monitored and accounted for in monetary terms' (Mills and Ratcliffe 2012), using participatory methods holds a set of new risks for the social researcher. In the UK for instance, 'participation' has become institutionalised within academe as that which gives value to a social research project. This is part of the larger processes of the neoliberalisation of the university – where knowledge production has been reorganized by becoming more and more aligned with the 'value-chain' and commercialization of knowledge (Jordan, Dapoor 2016). In this respect it is necessary to attentively contextualise the participatory methods we use as researchers of the social, and to take them out of the apolitical vacuum in which they may readily end up when they are co-opted by the managerial cultures of the neoliberal university.

This text has come to fruition from a sustained critical dialogue between two actors, Calo, the social researcher and Joseph, the respondent/non-specialist researcher. Co-authoring gave us both unexpected insights pertaining to experiences of researching (for C) and undergoing (for J) the asylum process from the viewpoint of the sexual minority subject. We wanted to do this by producing an autoethnographic account (Reed-Danahay 1997; Ellis 2009), important to 'revealing the interconnection of one's personal experiences and larger social structures' (Ruiz-Junco and Vidal-Ortiz 2011). In the writing of this article, one important consideration was to attend to the power relations that could shape our common undertaking. For this, we referred to the work of Richa Nagar whose thoughtful cross-border co-authoring practices reinforce the importance of critical self-reflexivity. Nagar (2014) invites her readers to make oneself 'radically vulnerable' in the process of co-authoring in alliance work, which involves a constant work of turning the analytical gaze on oneself as a researcher located in specific places. She writes:

> If structures of oppression and subordination are legitimized through professions, that is, cults of expertise that have the power to create knowledge and to selectively empower or devalue knowledges, then the kind of coauthoring I am arguing for asks that alliance workers simultaneously trouble this picture in multiple sites (2014: 173).

We share Nagar's concerns insofar as we recognise the urgency of interrupting the processes of academic knowledge production and distribution from the vantage point of the researcher. This would imply a *queering*[1] of the researcher's positionality when conducting social research. At both a methodological and epistemological level, this involves treating respondents as active co-producers of knowledge and not only as data sources, thus opening a space for writing/speaking *with* them rather than writing/speaking *about* them. Co-authoring can unlock an invaluable critical space in the sociological literature, albeit this space ought

1. We specifically use the queer signifier here to rethink participation in research and distance between researchers/researched subjects, as well as to take issue with hierarchical forms of representation still common in sociological writing. These often tend to neglect the fact that research respondents are capable of theorising their own social worlds as opposed to solely being able to documenting them (Boellstorff 2010).

not to be understood as devoid of contradictions and limits.[2]

Experiencing, thinking through and operationalising 'radical vulnerability' as both a methodological and epistemological sensibility is the underlying thread of this article. Let us clarify this point. The term *radical* is understood as in challenging what constitutes legitimate knowledge distributed via the academic publishing industry as well as the fundamental practices of academic authorship by troubling the 'cults of expertise'. *Vulnerability* is here understood as specific; socio-economically and politically produced. This is important to stress, as under neoliberalism vulnerability is all too often cast as a naturalised characteristic of a particular social group (i.e. women, ethnic, sexual minorities and so on) and negatively conflated with the 'spectre of weakness' and suffering (Gilson 2014:38). We see this occurring within legal processes of recognition and certification of migrants' rights where vulnerability is understood technically, as it is reified as fixed and inherent to certain types of people. For example, current configurations of the asylum process rest on the asylum claimants' testimonies, namely their ability to narrate and self-perform one's vulnerability/suffering leading to potential harm. In this context, rights-claimants must provide a reified version of their vulnerability. Thus, from the outset of our co-writing it has been important to counter the reification of vulnerability that occurs in the refugee granting process, and to oppose it to the form of radical vulnerability we both experienced in addressing the themes pertinent to sexual minority refugees. Being radically vulnerable for us meant co-creating and sustaining the material conditions and the space where both of us could feel trustful enough to share intimate knowledge of ourselves, in order to differently tell stories about being a migrant and becoming a refugee—maintaining specificity without avoiding complexities.

Rigour in the delicate act of negotiating between the 'I' and the 'we' (Nagar 2014) is indispensable when co-writing, even more so for researchers who, although not (entirely) responsible for the distribution of the knowledge produced, benefit from the work of telling and translating more directly than collaborative respondents[3]. As the reader will notice, there are sections in the article where the 'I' of Joseph and the 'I' of Calo are clearly distinct, perhaps in stark contrast with each other, but there will be parts in the text where our voices will purposely merge and speak more in unison. As the analysis unfolds the tone progressively becomes more self-reflexive, more of a personal and intimate account. The autoethnographic spirit of the text made this possible, in making us 'radically vulnerable' and at once very resolute in our co-writing—particularly when we would start to gain confidence that the conversations that were taking place behind the scenes would be productive once brought to the fore.

Thinking through the ethics of co-authoring

The question of ethics in social research practice is crucial. Unsurprisingly, training as a social researcher involves learning about the paramount importance of protecting respondents from both possible direct and indirect harm. Sinha and Back (2014) argue that university ethics committees and institutions' requirements of automatic anonymity for respondents are regulated in ways that are not always productive. In fact, one could argue that anonymity as an indicator of good ethical code of practice can often be a flawed prerequisite. These scholars are critical of the ethical constraints defining what sound social research should look like as they produce an intellectual context within academia of 'ethical hypochondria' and 'unthinking conservatism' (Sinha, Back 2014: 485). The necessity of anonymysing, to follow the official guidelines of the ethical ethnographer's textbook, did not apply

2. For instance in this case there was a constant struggle emerging from the tendency of making Calo play the part of the main author – by eliciting information – and Joseph being/becoming the testimony provider. Yet despite its inherent shortcomings, a sensibility 'oriented' towards queer epistemology is advantageous insofar as it queries what it means to produce academic knowledge.

3. Academic researchers are familiar with processes of paper submissions and peer reviewing, and they regularly discuss the work behind their writings at conferences, seminars, lectures and other events. But an author's control over the distribution of their work can be minimal—this being the case in particular for early career researchers as well as those researchers producing counter-narratives of various kinds.

here simply because it did not make sense after considering the data we fleshed out in these pages.

Further, Joseph's position on not being anonymised meant that he could make himself vulnerable on his own terms, thus reclaiming a complex picture of his feelings and of the material, socio-economic circumstances that produced his precarity. For Joseph, a former human rights advocate in Nigeria, the ethically driven concern about his anonymity I had expressed at various points in our writing process was also irrelevant, as information about his work is publicly available online. Raising this does not intend to discredit the value of anonymity in social research, but it allows us to argue that this must be negotiated at the various stages of a specific research context, and that, at times, using anonymisation can distance the study from those interlocutors who could benefit from publicly producing critical knowledge of themselves from their material social positions and viewpoints. Therefore, rather than anonymity, the bigger ethical concern and challenge in our relationship was to maintain it non-hierarchical, where we would trust each other and each of us would take responsibility for ourselves just as much as for the other.

Experiences of refugees are usually told and analysed by researchers, journalists and those working in the humanitarian sector. Thus, refugees are often made to remain in the respondent class of research processes and unable to participate in policies and debates which directly concern them. In this article we are challenging this trend in the hope that it might provoke an interesting and nuanced discussion on the participation of respondents in academic research[4]. Only recently have gender and sexuality been considered legitimate bases for seeking asylum in the Global North. The violence to which lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* (LGBT) people can be subject has received global attention; from international political institutions (e.g. the UN, and the EU) to the governmentality of the development and humanitarian sectors (Ticktin 2011; Mai 2014) and more recently including also international financial institutions such as the World Bank (Bedford 2009; Rao 2015). In the EU, anyone who claims any of these identities/orientations and who is escaping fear of persecution because of their sexuality and gender identity is eligible to seek refuge (Jansen, Spijkerboer 2011). In France, LGBT people in fear of persecution in their own countries can seek asylum, as in my experience. Some countries receive more attention than others depending on the societal and legal circumstances under which LGBT people live. In what follows the focus will be Nigeria—my home country. In Nigeria, homosexuality is illegal and punishable from fourteen years imprisonment to death by stoning[5]. It is noteworthy that the legal system in Nigeria allows for different sentences for those convicted for 'practising' homosexuality. The common law, which is a corollary of the British Victorian law, provides a sentence of fourteen years imprisonment[6].

It is stimulating to be writing based on first-hand experience as a refugee and a gay person. In Lagos I was advocating for the rights of LGBT people as well as promoting health care for gay men and men who have sex with men (MSM). This engagement provided me with very little time to address issues in my personal life and to take care of myself. Having engaged in this work for over six years, I felt burnout and decided to resign from the organisation where I was the director. I decided to learn French and afterward continue my studies in a postgraduate programme. I was already a student with a valid student status at the time I submitted my application for asylum in France. Seeking asylum as a Nigerian gay person and human rights activist was a strong point of eligibility to be granted refugee status. I must highlight that my experience of the process may not be the typical story as I was privileged given my engagement in advocacy for LGBT rights in Nigeria, regionally (at the African Commission on Human and People's Rights) as well

4. We recognise that the level of participation in a study must be contextually negotiated and it is contingent on the scope of the research and on what social, political, economic and legal spaces the participants occupy. Here we are specifying that the co-production of analytical knowledge revealed to be fruitful when doing research with migrants experiencing the refugee-granting process.

5. Laws criminalising homosexuality in Nigeria have emanated from the English law, customary law and legislation.

6. In northern Nigeria where there are twelve states implementing the Sharia law since 2000, homosexuality is punishable by death.

as internationally (at the UN). This meant that information about my work could readily be verified by a simple search on Google. In addition, at the point of my asylum application I was already relatively proficient in French. My knowledge of the asylum proceedings and French language meant that I required little support from local non-governmental organisations in presenting my asylum application—which must be submitted in French.

I went to the prefecture[7] in Marseille, where there is a different queue for asylum seekers and those who need to regularise their residence either by marriage or work. I retrieved the application, filled the form, submitted in time and was called for an interview within six months. The interview process at the *Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides* (OFPRA)[8] was relatively smooth, the officer said: 'I have learned about you and little details is required'. My interview lasted about ninety minutes and my refugee status was confirmed in four weeks. I received the news at my home and I changed my residence status from student to refugee. I was expecting an interview in which I could have been asked to 'prove' my homosexuality. The requirement of proving one's homosexuality when facing the asylum institutions has been a controversial issue for many refugee-receiving countries (McGhee 2000; Millbank 2009a; S Chelvan 2011; Giametta 2017). Particularly asylum seekers who do not fall into stereotypical understandings of homosexuality are not considered real homosexuals—their credibility being denied they are often refused refugee status.

After elaborating on the ethics of co-authoring and anonymisation practices in social research, we want to now continue to locate both our experiences as migrants and queers. We will then reflect upon the question of whether the conditions are there for sexual minority refugees to live livable lives in the receiving countries as well as the set of new 'unfreedoms' and the limits in social, economic and political participation they face.

The encounters: from interviewing to co-writing

I (Calo) arrived in Marseille in January 2014 to start a new job in a language I barely spoke and in a place where I only knew one person. Since then I have lived in this city to conduct my research as a post-doc fellow on the topic of asylum for gender and sexual minority migrants in France. This was after having finished my doctoral studies in London on the same topic of research in the UK context. Moving to France from the UK had an impact on me, yet the composite sense of uprootedness and homemaking inherent in migratory experiences was not new to me (apropos questions of *home* and *migration* see Castaneda et al. 2004). When I moved to the UK from Italy in 2004 the conditions of my arrival there were uncannily similar. At that time I was following my desire of inhabiting a social environment where I could study and conduct research on sexuality. I then decided to leave Bologna for London when I took into consideration the 'cronyism, nepotism, lack of transparency and political interventions' characterising Italian higher education (Constant and D'Agosto 2010).

My recent migration to France from the UK meant leaving behind my home and the hectic lifestyle of juggling my time between writing my thesis, working in an asylum support group, my political work at the local level and my friends. Although we shall return to the question of loneliness later in the text, it is significant here, as it became a starting point in our discussions about migration and sexuality. These conversations allowed us to make sense and vocalise our migratory experiences in ways that we had never done before, including thinking through our feelings of loneliness in the new social context where we found ourselves. Juxtaposing our narratives and anecdotal knowledge enabled us to think through sameness and difference in the lived experience of a EU migrant and a migrant who seeks asylum in Europe respectively.

7. In France, the prefectures belong to the Ministry of the Interior. In the context of the asylum claiming process, the prefecture is where asylum seekers start their applications. The substantive interview would then take place at the OFPRA (see below).

8. The Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides (OFPRA) is the national asylum authority in France whose offices are based in Paris.

Let us recount more in detail how this saw the light of day in Marseille.

Marseille is the city where I met Joseph through the research contacts that I had previously established in Paris. Despite my efforts in reaching out to people, Joseph was one of the very few gay refugees I was able to initially contact in Marseille and for that reason I remember being particularly excited to meet him. I was told that he had been (and still is) a human rights activist with a focus on sexuality in Nigeria. I arranged an interview with him in Marseille, during which we talked about his experience of migrating to France, the asylum proceedings he went through, and his life after being granted refugee status. We saw each other again only a month after this first research encounter. From the next time we met it was clear that we were starting a dialogue that exceeded the research questions I had prepared. We met several times in the cafés on the Vieux-Port in Marseille. Here, as well as in the more sheltered environments of our respective apartments, we would find it easy to share stories. In these places we were not so distant any longer, the sense of detached formality that had characterised our first interview encounter had started to dissipate. Although we were not oblivious to the differences in our migratory journeys, some common ground was emerging through our accounts.

In this process it was interesting to witness how germane knowledge was triggered unexpectedly by points which might have seemed far from being pertinent or helpful to our argument. This happened at the start of our encounters when I asked Joseph to think about an image or an object evocative of his migratory journey from Nigeria to France. I suspect that this specific question emerged from my previous experiences in the ethnographic fieldwork with gender and sexual minority refugees, when respondents had told me that their aspirations about living in cities such as London or Paris were influenced by the images to which they were exposed while living in their countries of origin[9]. In recognising the impact of the visual realm in shaping aspirations, desires, expectations and migratory projects (Mai 2001), I had hoped that for Joseph my request would make sense and that it would allow us to talk about migration differently from the ways he had had to talk about it within institutional settings. Before our third meeting I sent him an email:

C – Do you remember our talk about 'images' last time we met? Could you bring with you a photo/object, or more than one, that represents your migratory journey to Europe?

The reply:

> J – About the images, I did not forget and I have been thinking of what might be appropriate. In fact, I didn't take any photo while coming to Europe because it wasn't a drastic migration. I came in as a student – you know this already – so no 'ceremony'. More so, I have been to Europe several times before choosing to stay in France so any of my photos may not really vocalise the message you're trying to give.

Joseph stressed that this request was not relevant to him. The non-drastic and unceremonious nature of his migratory experience justified the lack of a significant repertoire of images/objects that could reveal more about what migrating meant for him. As he points out in the email, he had been to France a few times before moving to the country as a student, finally becoming a refugee. The main significant difference in our experiences concerned access; I was visiting France from London—travelling straightforwardly with my Italian passport whilst he was arranging his travels from Lagos having to wait a long time to obtain his travel visas. Our close writing exchange mattered to us because it was conducive to elucidating relationships of sameness and difference and making them *specific* (Boellstorff 2005).

Similarly to Joseph, I did not have an image or an object symbolising my migration from Italy to England or from England to France. Why would I ask him that question? I was trying to elicit a discussion about migration, but in so doing I was treating him as a data-mine, creating a distance between us. Somehow

9. Respondents often talked about the importance of seeing a documentary film, a newspaper and magazine articles, and mostly Internet images of gays, lesbians and trans people living in these cities.

the question indicated an assumption on my part that given his refugee status he would have a more charged attachment or affective disposition towards his migration history. By telling me that 'any of my photos may not really vocalise the message you're trying to give' Joseph resisted my request of talking about his immigration through personal images, which could have easily sentimentalised his narrative. Further, this reminded me that I had to be attentive not to impose my preconceptions on Joseph's decisions about narrativising his experiences.

Albeit the basis of our writing together was to disrupt the researcher/researched hierarchical order, we had to often grapple with the risks of falling into the trap of who *is* who and who *plays* who. Writing as a refugee is important to critically share a personal perspective on migration based on sexual orientation and being a Nigerian in France on my own terms. And as a social researcher, this particular co-writing process is meaningful as it has involved putting into practice my questioning of textual inertia when addressing the complex relationship between a researcher and a respondent. In social research literature, text often fails to grapple with this complexity—not because text is in itself inherently and unavoidably fixed, but rather because of the material writing conditions and publishing practices under which it is produced and shaped.

The moments that appeared to be slippages in a shared autoethnographic space finally turned out to be insightful. They reminded us of the importance of letting oneself being affected in the ethnographic encounter (Saada 2012), willfully receiving from one another and eschewing prejudice. In fact, the imagined image that we never shared did something; from producing self-critical reflections to prompting Joseph to see beyond his own experience and critically think through the experiences of other Nigerian gay refugees living in Europe.

I (J) have met many migrants who take the decision to leave their country and sell all their possessions; they dispose of everything and they know that they are not coming back, or at least not soon. Under these circumstances, keeping images of when they arrive in a place can easily acquire an important symbolic value. Recently a Nigerian friend, who now lives in Brussels, showed me a photograph and said: 'look this is the picture of me when I first arrived in Belgium'. This, he told me, was a way to remind himself of the importance of what he had done. My Nigerian friend in Brussels remembered the airline company he travelled with to reach Belgium. He revealed to me that this journey was the most significant he had ever taken because he knew that he was leaving Nigeria in order to claim asylum in Europe. He disposed of everything he had in the country; his migration project had life-changing consequences right from the start. More generally, however, when I see refugee friends posting pictures of their boarding passes online it is hard to tell what these images signify to them. In fact, in today's world we are bombarded by images, let us think about their abundance on social media—think of Facebook, Instagram or YouTube—people regularly publish photos and broadcast themselves. Thus, at times, the symbolic charge that one might attribute to an image related to an individual's migratory journey tells more about what others see, or want to see, in it than about the person's attachment to a particular image.

From the ineffable notion of *freedom* to the tangibility of *social realities*

Migration from one's country of origin is linked to both the infrastructural conditions of that country and one's subjective possibilities, needs, desires and ambitions for the future. In my case, it was a complex mix: I needed to be free in my sexuality without the associated criminality. I desired to live in a social environment where I would be respected for who I am, without prejudice. Finally, I had the ambition of pursuing my career, which required a more favourable socio-economic and political environment for me to accomplish.

From the outset of the writing process Joseph readily considered the importance to develop the question of freedom for refugees. Some time before we embarked on this project I had sent him a book chapter

that I had recently written about the necessity on the part of refugees to produce a biographical narrative when facing the asylum institutions (Giametta 2016). From this essay, we picked up a specific part of the argument which was the meanings of living freely after experiencing the asylum process and becoming a refugee. We both soon realised that discussing the wide-ranging concept of freedom would probably lead us nowhere. Nonetheless, thinking through liberal ideals of freedom from the perspective of the refugee became a productive exercise. In this process we shifted our focus from the term 'freedom' to words such as autonomy, expectations, desire, social reality, unfreedoms and so on.

From the perspective of the person fleeing persecution, being free has the evident meaning of being free from harm or the fear of being harmed (See Geneva Convention Art.1), thus inextricably linking the notion of freedom to safety. Being free from harm in one's social environment depends on many factors, amongst which one may list the range of identity traits as well as the socio-economic circumstances characterising one's position in a society. Becoming a refugee implies that in order to be free from harm one needs to give something up. As I have written elsewhere (Giametta 2017), obtaining a certain freedom for refugees—the freedom not to be persecuted in the past in their home countries, triggers a series of new unfreedoms in the present that shape their future in the new country. Refugees have all been subject to the prohibition to work in the receiving country (France in this case), which is in force during the first twelve months after lodging an asylum claim[10]; they might have been subject to the practice of detention in immigration removal centres; and this occurs while coming to terms with the impossibility of returning to one's country. Even after refugees gain their status and official documents, the history of unfreedoms that results from the material conditions imposed by the asylum system of the receiving state, is revived and prolonged. In this sense in the following section we argue (primarily Joseph) that unfreedoms for refugees are inflected by political, social and economic factors limiting their potentials to participate in the receiving society.

Political, social and economic participation as a refugee

As a refugee who was politically active in his country, and not being allowed to formally participate in the political life of the country of arrival is frustrating to say the least. Being in exile, I cannot participate in Nigerian politics nor can I be engaged politically in France. Although I have a right to naturalisation based on my refugee status, this process is hindered by the fact that I must have worked a certain amount of hours and earned revenue in France to be naturalised[11]. When seeking asylum, the notion of losing the freedom to be counted as a political subject is hardly thought of; the urgent necessity is the freedom from oppression, harm and persecution. Yet one's sense of self is particularly damaged when unable to speak out.

In France, first as a student and later as a refugee, socialising was a challenge. I remember that I would spend hours on Skype with a friend, as this was the only way I could imagine not feeling lonely. Otherwise, I would occupy myself with schoolwork and freelance jobs. Being gay played a significant factor in my inability to easily socialise. For instance, exploring the Nigerian community in the region where I live was not an option. My sexual orientation was an obstacle; many of my compatriots (similarly to those living in Nigeria) might not understand what it means to be gay at best, or might be hostile towards me at worst. I met a few Nigerians at the barbershop where I go in Marseille, but I could never relate to them—there was not much that united us apart from our nationality. In this respect, Calo's experience of moving to France seemed to be different insofar as the Italian co-nationals that he befriended in Marseille were accepting of

10. Circulaire du 26 septembre 1991 relative à la situation des demandeurs d'asile au regard du marché du travail' NOR: PRMC9100057C, JORF n°226 du 27 septembre 1991. See: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000539042

11. http://13.accueil-etrangers.gouv.fr/acces-a-la-nationalite-francaise/vous-souhaitez-demander-la-20/article/liste-des-pieces-a-fournir

his queerness, but similar to mine with regards to the difficulty of finding a queer social network in the city.

We both grew up in a time when the Internet was just beginning to play a central role in how we socialise, from making and keeping contact with friends to meeting partners. Joseph's experience of 'culture shock' referred mostly to the ways people would communicate over the Internet and particularly the way online users in the geographical area of Marseille would organise their intimate encounters. There is a burgeoning body of scholarly research on the impact of digital technologies on the shaping and understanding of sexual subjectivities and behaviours. These sociological investigations have been important in examining the continuum and the ruptures between social norms lived both in the physical and virtual world. While online technology 'provides a forum for users to engage in new forms of pleasures and erotics, the encounters between bodies are marked by profiles and conversations which filter and govern intimacy through disciplinary norms around race, masculinity, whiteness, physical aesthetics and geography' (Raj 2011:2).

Throughout our discussions Calo revealed that he had often felt objectified as a 'Mediterranean man' within the sexual communities he navigated on gay dating sites and applications. This would often create unrealistic expectations concerning the enactment of a specific type of southern-European masculinity that he did not embody. I also shared these racialised perceptions. Although I was able to connect with a few people on the gay social media sites in France, it was difficult to communicate beside the typical sexual solicitations. There had not been a time when I became so conscious of being black. I began to be colour-conscious because of how I was labelled. In the gay community, black men are often racially and sexually stereotyped in specific ways; I always end up being sexualised and read as someone who is dominant ('top') and well endowed. This has prevented me from easily meeting people. Indeed, it has been hard to find a partner who is sensitive enough not to make me feel objectified or victimised for being black[12]. In addition, by living in France I have gained awareness of the prejudices marking 'inter-racial' relationships, especially between a black and a white person. Bi-national couples' relationships for instance, where one of the partners is in the process of regularising one's immigration status, are socially viewed with suspicion, as they are thought to be opportunistic and not based on genuine love (Salcedo 2015). All too often in these cases it is assumed that a black person is in a relationship with a white person to get a residence permit and/or for financial advantage.

Alongside the social isolation to which I refer above, refugees face other challenges that also affect their capability to fight financial precarity and sustain themselves in the country of arrival. Although the lack of language skills is an important factor at times, it is not the only obstacle—racial stereotyping often plays a role in these trials and tribulations. For example, in spite of being proficient in French I still have to grapple with what my immigration status produces in a country where I am less privileged than an average person of equal qualifications and competence. A first degree in Politics and International Relations and almost a decade of work experience in development work for NGOs and human right activism, did not count very much in France. Having a stable job and steady income while in Nigeria meant that economically I was better off there than in France. Today, a stark reality seems to be falling into perspective; work experience in Europe as well as a university degree from a EU country is important in the French competitive labour market. I am qualified for all the jobs I apply for, but perhaps just less qualified than other applicants, or perhaps the fact that I am an African refugee plays a part in this.

Conclusions: research participation through critical involvement

Critical analytical space must be open in academia to those who have experienced the refugee process. But it is vital to attentively think through *how* this

12. Only very recently, after three years in France and during the course of this writing, I have entered into a relationship with a white French man.

space is opened. Co-authoring is one way in which the researcher/researched dichotomy can be queered to tell the same stories in different ways and to allow for a space of self-critical reflection about one's experience for those who share their stories. Perhaps also to learn differently about questions of social justice—at the level of both the subject and the socio-economic and political structures one lives in. Including the 'respondent's voice' into social analysis is a desirable epistemology but actively shaping the analytical dialogue (Sihna, Back 2014) between the researcher and the researched is a precious one.

Our argument is that co-producing theory with the very respondents of a sociological investigation should be deemed to be a heuristic option *if* the possibility arises for the researcher. Further, aiming to keep the dialogical form of the original exchanges in the text produced helps the reader make sense of the inevitable shortcomings, as well as the successes, which are part and parcel of the research encounter. Establishing this dialogue with radical vulnerability on both parts pushed us to grapple with multiple forms of exclusions and alienation that migration can trigger. We made ourselves radically vulnerable in front of each other, although we were not sure how this would translate into the final text once we had taken control over it through editing and the reviewing process. What we have as a final product here emerges from significant fragments of the discussions shared in a space where—through the certain degree of privilege we possess—our vulnerability consciously became a source of strength.

Throughout the text, we stressed the importance of persisting and maintaining the willingness to *be writing with* rather than *being written on*. In so doing we wanted to highlight the generative struggles with our assumptions and doubts emerging throughout the co-writing experience. We examined our positions and we wanted to think through that which did not work at first between us as co-writers. *What did not work at first* produced something; it provided interesting insights that caught our attention and made us unfold the analysis in creative ways. The autoethnographic nature of the text was effective for reconfiguring the refugee/respondent standpoint; from the exclusively relegated role of data mine into the position of critically narrating one's experience to reflect on a broader social phenomenon and at once politically reclaiming one's vulnerability.

Finally, we picked up a number of threads concerning the experiences of sexual minority refugees which lead us into uncharted territory. We learnt how to persevere, to stay with the threads we picked up, constantly challenging the fear of unproductively undoing them, of going off track—thus learning to linger on shaky grounds whilst feeling disoriented. In sum, the article sought to shift the traditional *order* of the research dialogue so that the respondent-author primarily decided what the most salient topics to be addressed should be and which research data matter. The great advantage of a sustained dialogue is that one is taken to unexpected places. The dynamism of the thoughts in exchange leads to exploring perceptions and associations of ideas that one would struggle to see from the aloofness of the writing desk. The challenge, however, was to keep the dialogue relevant over time and to *stay with it*, persistently and generously. In this process, persistence was an important quality as the undefined nature and open-endedness of the exchange triggered self-doubt. Questions such as 'are we wasting our time here talking about the concept of 'freedom'?' begun to surface. *Staying with it* offered stimulating moments of intellectual clarity when productive critical knowledge started taking shape. These were vital moments in making us persist through our sense of becoming radically vulnerable, the disagreements and divergent viewpoints and through the incumbent suspicion of having undertook a futile exercise that often translates into the mantra 'nothing's coming out of this'. But in the end something did.

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