



A Quest for Home: Queer Migrants and Belonging

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Abstract:

This paper aims to provide a general overview of the difficulties queer migrants face when integrating into their receiving communities. Employing an interdisciplinary, intersectional lens, this paper discusses what is meant by belonging writ large, belonging in the queer community, and how queer migrants must often face obstacles erected not only by external forces, but by ones they have constructed for themselves. Specific areas of examination include the Canadian immigration system's treatment of queer migrants and how queer migrants categorize themselves within the larger community. This discussion takes place against the backdrop of the Canadian migrant narrative in which Canada and the wider Western world are thought to be accepting, progressive nations where queer migrants can "be themselves". As this discussion reveals, however, the lived experiences of such migrants paint a thoroughly different story. The goal is to demonstrate how this othering—both internal and external—creates a unique series of challenges that merit further investigation. Further, I aim to challenge the notion of Canadian supremacy in queer expression and directly tackle the creeping of homonationalism in contemporary political discourse.

Résumé :

Cette dissertation vise à donner un aperçu général des difficultés auxquelles sont confrontés les migrants LGBTQ+ lorsqu'ils s'intègrent dans leurs communautés d'accueil. À l'aide d'une perspective interdisciplinaire et intersectionnelle, ce document examine ce qu'on entend par appartenance en général, appartenance à la communauté LGBTQ+, et comment les migrants LGBTQ+ doivent souvent faire face à des obstacles érigés non seulement par des forces extérieures, mais par celles qu'ils ont construites pour eux-mêmes. Les domaines particuliers d'observation comprennent le traitement que le système d'immigration canadien réserve aux migrants LGBTQ+ et la façon dont les migrants LGBTQ+ se classent au sein de la collectivité dans son ensemble. Cette discussion se déroule dans le contexte du récit des migrants canadiens dans lequel le Canada et le reste du monde occidental sont considérés comme des pays

progressistes et tolérants où les migrants LGBTQ+ peuvent « être eux-mêmes ». Comme cette discussion le révèle, les expériences vécues par ces migrants peignent une histoire complètement différente. Le but est de démontrer comment ce changement — interne et externe — crée une série unique de défis qui méritent une enquête plus poussée. De plus, j'ai l'intention de contester la notion de suprématie canadienne dans l'expression LGBTQ+ et de m'attaquer directement à l'escalade de l'homonalisme dans le discours politique contemporain.

Keywords: LGBT, Queer, Migration, Belonging, Community

Introduction

Humans are intrinsically social animals. We survive, thrive, and develop in society—not simply living amongst others, but living *with* others. The complex social web that binds man together provides not only methods of survival, but just as importantly, a sense of community and belonging. Abraham Maslow, in developing his hierarchy of needs, proposes that love and belonging are fundamental human needs necessary to lead a full and actualizing life.¹ Man generally binds with those with whom he grew up: his family and his community. For those who continuously reside where he was born, kinship often constructs itself naturally. However, there is an important caveat for those who do not “fit in”. For members of social groups who are deemed as ‘other,’ (criminals, “perverts”, the ethnically inferior, and other such constructed terms of marginalization across various societies and times) belonging may be increasingly difficult—if not impossible—to achieve.

Such marginalized groups may face severe ostracism in the communities in which they were born, but once we combine such challenges with the migratory experience, the idea of belonging becomes much more complex. Migrants in such marginalized groups must not only face the challenge of finding belonging as immigrants, but also as the ‘othered’. A group that solicits special intrigue is that of queer² migrants who are received in Western countries. Given the large disparity between attitudes towards queer identities in many Eastern/Western and Northern/Southern global communities, these migrants must not only deal with their migrant identity, but must also grapple with their queer identity in their new community which may

¹ Abraham Harold Maslow, *Motivation and Personality, 2nd Ed.* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1970).

² In this essay, the term ‘queer’ is to be interpreted with a wide berth; it is meant to encompass all sexual orientations and gender identities that fall out of the traditional cisgender and heterosexual categories. Terms used in cited works, such as ‘LGBTQ+’ or ‘Gender and Sexual Minorities’ should be interpreted as falling under the queer umbrella for our purposes.

conceptualize and view their queer identity in a vastly different manner than their sending community.

This research essay will investigate this intersectional challenge. I will attempt to explain what is meant by belonging, how queer migrants navigate the social milieu of their new home, and how they are perceived and treated in Canada and the US by other people and larger collective social actors. These investigations will allow me to explore how queer migrants construct or find an identity in their new homes—or fail to do so. To illuminate my discussion, I will be drawing on numerous sources: initially those of a theoretical nature to expound on what constitutes belonging vis-à-vis migration, and then numerous case studies and lived experiences of queer migrants to demonstrate how, in many cases, such migrants face a variety of barriers in achieving belonging in their receiving community. These barriers range from those that have been ‘self-inflicted’ to those that have been state-inflicted, and everything in between.

What is Belonging for Migrants?

Recent sociological work in migration studies has attempted to make clear the often-murky concepts of identity and belonging. In “Identity, Belonging and Migration”, Jones et al. discuss at length what is truly meant by these terms. They conclude (and I agree that) the term ‘identity’ vis-à-vis belonging in migration is overly simplistic and often “hides more than it reveals”.³ Discourse surrounding identity tends to treat identity as a collection of attributes that an individual has, with belonging being framed as that identity matching that of the larger community. Given the versatile, complex and nuanced position of man in society, this definition fails to explain why some belong

³ Paul Jones and Michał Krzyżanowski, “Identity, Belonging and Migration: Beyond Constructing ‘Others’,” In *Identity, Belonging and Migration*, ed. Gerard Delanty, Ruth Wodak, and Paul Jones (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 38–53.

and why some do not, especially when applied to highly pluralistic societies in which there exists no clear ‘group identity’, yet many identify as belonging within it. To rectify this inconsistency, Jones et al. call for a ‘conceptual unpacking’ of identity in an effort to move towards a more holistic view of what is meant by belonging.

In their discussion, Jones et al. highlight numerous factors that affect how migrants experience belonging. For instance, belonging involves not just individuals, but also governments and institutions; for example, an immigrant who has his visa approved experiences belonging significantly differently than she who has migrated irregularly or has had her visa rejected. Furthermore, individual identities in a subjective lens (as in, how she herself identifies) interact with collective identities of both countries and sub-communities—this idea of community identity will play a key role later in our discussion as we focus on receiving queer communities. Most importantly, however, is Jones et al.’s recognition that belonging in a community necessitates a two-way elected membership. A migrant must be accepted by the community as one of their own to belong, but just as importantly, she herself must also accept and desire to belong to that group. Without this two-way membership, belonging cannot truly be said to exist. Thus, for the purpose of our discussion, we will not decide upon one fixed definition of belonging, but rather keep these complex and nuanced issues in mind. This nuanced definition is central to our understanding of how queer migrants find belonging, specifically in light of the ‘two-way’ exigence of acceptance. Now that we have a brief overview of what belonging looks like, let us turn to some examples of how this sentiment of belonging intersects with the queer migrant experience.

Barriers to Belonging: Internal and External

As demonstrated in Jones et al.'s article, forging a sense of belonging is a much wider task than intuition would suggest. A variety of barriers may be erected that impede any migrant's ability to develop a sense of kinship with their wider community. As previously mentioned, there is a great deal of nuance that is at play within these relationships. For example, when we speak of 'achieving a sense of belonging,' does that necessitate that a migrant feels as though he belongs in relation to *everyone* around him? Or does feeling a sense of belonging within solely one subgroup of the larger context suffice to say that one has achieved belonging? Indeed, it seems as though there is a hierarchy of belonging at work that must be taken into account when navigating this discussion. For example, a queer migrant may feel as though she belongs in the receiving queer community, but perhaps she also feels completely excluded from the wider community, or another subcommunity with which they share a piece of an identity (such as ethnicity or religion). To further expound on these intricacies, I will now be examining various types of barriers to belonging, loosely grouped in two categories: those which are *internal* to queer migrants and those that are *externally* imposed upon them.

Internal Barriers

Internal barriers to integration present a significant challenge to achieving belonging as per our adopted interpretation thereof. Before we delve into this aspect of sociality, however, we must first discuss what is meant by 'internal' barriers. I do not intend to say that the following issues are manufactured or constructed internally within a migrant, nor do I intend to insinuate that such barriers are anyone's fault or doing. Internal barriers refer to social or cultural factors which, independent of their origin, have been internalized within migrants and thus impede integration due to the internal effects they can have on migrants, psychological or otherwise. Thus, in this

section, we will examine societal factors that have been internalized and reified within the psyche of queer migrants which prevent them from belonging.

In anthropologist Dai Kojima's "Migrant Intimacies", Kojima discusses how many queer immigrants self-exclude from the larger collective communities that exist within their receiving society. Specifically, he examines how queer members of the Asian diaspora residing in Vancouver navigate within and outside of the larger Vancouver LGBTQ+ scene. In his work, Kojima introduces the concept of the 場末 (*basue*), a Japanese term meaning a 'place on the outskirts' or 'rundown district'. In an illuminating interview, Kojima discusses with participant Shin how he and various other gay Asian men have cloistered themselves off from the wider Vancouver queer community by creating their own *basue*, despite the preexisting queer community being one of the primary motivating factors in their decision to immigrate to Vancouver.⁴ It should be noted that the term *basue* carries a heavily negative connotation: often conjuring up images of dingy eateries, shantytowns, and 'ghettos,' for a more Western term. It is also notable that it was Shin himself who first employed this term, coining it to describe him and his other gay Asian friends' gatherings in secluded locations, far from the larger queer nightlife and festivities.

In a different study, Kojima interviews Yasu, a self-described 'gay and chubby' Japanese immigrant living in Vancouver. Yasu, much like Shin, is quick to demarcate himself from the larger queer community in Vancouver. As Kojima notes, Yasu, in describing his place in Vancouver's gay community, demonstrates his "ambivalent identification with the predominantly white, racialized physicality that dictates the embodied relations of desirability".⁵ Yasu discusses

⁴ Dai Kojima, "Migrant Intimacies: Mobilities-in-Difference and Basue Tactics in Queer Asian Diasporas," *Anthropologica* 56, no. 1 (2014): 33.

⁵ *Ibid*, 37.

how he feels marginalized from the gay ‘bear’⁶ community in Vancouver due to his race, concluding that the gay scene in Vancouver is very Caucasian-centric. This sentiment of exclusion, whether real or imagined, presents a significant barrier to achieving belonging. It essentially violates Jones et al.’s fundamental exigence that the migrant and receiving community mutually accept each other. Given that Yasu purports not identifying with the gay community over this ‘body stratification’, one can clearly see how he has internalized this experience, which in turn presents as a serious barrier to belonging.

Unlike Yasu, however, not all queer migrants self-exclude due to being marginalized; some indeed consciously decide and desire to cloister themselves from the wider queer, white, heterosexual, etc. communities that surround them. In “Pathways of Desire”, Hector Carrillo investigates how gay Mexican men who immigrate to the US (specifically, San Diego) interact with the community around them. Throughout his interviews and ethnographic studies, he encounters a wide range of experiences vis-à-vis gay Mexican immigrants and those around them. His study reveals that many gay Mexican men cloister themselves within the queer community, only going out to Latin gay bars and clubs due to cultural and linguistic affinity.⁷ While many of his participants report frequently having casual sexual partners of other races, the overall theme is that, despite sex acting as a ‘bridge’ to other communities, socially, many Mexican gay men prefer to remain amongst themselves in their new American home. This is significant as it demonstrates that one can feel a sense of belonging within a subgroup, while simultaneously rejecting other subgroups or the general collective identity itself (here, namely the white, black, and American gay male groups). While Carrillo’s work does demonstrate this cloistering effect, he also discusses

⁶ ‘Bear’ is a term frequently used among gay North American men to denote a heavysset gay man; it is one of many ‘archetypes’ of the gay body that exists within the gay community.

⁷ Héctor Carrillo, *Pathways of Desire: the Sexual Migration of Mexican Gay Men* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 144.

how native-born American gay men can also act as bridges to the larger queer community. For example, Carrillo discusses the case of a newly-arrived Mexican gay man in San Diego who, unfamiliar with American queer mores, is taught how to ‘be gay’ in the US by a white man in a gay bathhouse.⁸ In this, one can see the duality in the role of the wider community vis-à-vis queer migrants simultaneously acting as bridges and boundaries.

The above examples provide a sketch of a much larger picture: namely that simply being queer does not equate with having *membership* to the queer community. Conversely, being queer does not necessitate *wanting* such membership. Finally, being a migrant does not necessitate wanting to be a part of *all* memberships. Migrants, much like people in general, are selective (either free from or because of outside pressures) in whom they associate with or to which groups they belong. On the one hand, Kojima’s investigation provides a dimension explaining how some Asian gay men, due to a sense of rejection, isolate themselves and create shantytowns, being at home neither in their sending or receiving society. On the other hand, as Carrillo demonstrates, some queer migrants choose to insulate themselves for cultural reasons, rejoicing in the formal freedom offered in the West while preferring the culture and language of their fellow Latin kinsmen. In these examples, we can see that many barriers to belonging are ‘outward-flowing’—perhaps not because of a migrant’s beliefs, but eventually being reflected in them.

External Barriers

Outside of their interpersonal relationships and intrapersonal experiences, queer migrants face a variety of external factors which can significantly limit their ability to achieve belonging. Whereas in the previous section we explored how migrants may choose to not belong in certain

⁸ A bathhouse is the informal name for an establishment which is set up like a sauna or locker room to which gay men go to socialize and often have casual sexual encounters.

collective identities, we will now proceed in examining other actors who influence the receiving society in such a way that a migrant's ability to belong in the larger group is negatively affected. In this section, we will explore numerous institutions; namely, the traditional media and the state, to illuminate how these actors often act as gatekeepers vis-à-vis migrants and a larger community.

The media plays an integral role in the construction of North American perspectives on immigration. Famous media scholar Harold Lasswell (1971) describes the media's threefold role as follows: surveillance, correlation, and transmission of social heritage.⁹ This triangle of influence is highly powerful when shaping discourse; for example, the recent use of the term 'illegal alien' for those who immigrate irregularly has reified the image of irregular immigrants as non-human.¹⁰ As demonstrated, the media often creates harmful dichotomies of 'good' and 'bad' immigrants. Unfortunately, queer migrants are not spared. Fatima Jaffer, a South Asian queer rights activist based in Vancouver leads the queer civil rights group Trikone Vancouver. In "Homonationalist Discourse", she describes her experiences navigating the tense relationship between her membership within both queer and non-white ethnic groups which have traditionally conservative views on same-sex activity. Homonationalism, according to Jaffer, is "the nation-state's selectively strategic incorporation of privileged queer bodies in the project of nationhood often in times of war".¹¹ She goes on to further discuss how certain immigrant groups, which are frequently charged with 'backwardness' and 'homophobia' by conservative media groups (specifically here, *The Vancouver Sun*) and how such discourse creates a negative dichotomy between "civilized" and "uncivilized" migrants. This creates a difficult tension within migrants who are

⁹ Sheila L Steinberg, "Undocumented Immigrants or Illegal Aliens? Southwestern Media Portrayals of Latino Immigrants," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 28, no. 1 (2004): 116.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Fatima Jaffer, "Homonationalist Discourse, Queer Organizing and the Media," *Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, February 29, 2012.

contemporaneously queer and members of such ‘backwards’ ethnic groups, as they in turn must choose between Western ‘queer enlightenment’ (and, in doing so, denouncing their religion or race) or be labeled as unsupportive of queer rights. Much like Jaffer herself, such migrants are faced by a gatekeeping media, which privileges certain forms of expression and belief and denigrates those who refuse to cede. This gatekeeping poses a significant barrier to creating belonging, as one must now ‘cleans’ their identity to truly belong, which can be, at best, insulting and, at worst, ostracizing.

Civil actors are not the only ones whose politicking can have destructive effects on migrant integration. The nation-state itself, via the implementation and operation of its various migration institutions, can also have demoralizing and even destructive consequences for queer migrants. Refugee claimants who come to North America due to fear of persecution because of their queer membership often face various legal obstacles which consequently act as formal barriers to achieving integration and belonging. A specific area of interest is the refugee process itself: queer refugees are often put through various legal battles to ensure that they will not be repatriated to their country of origin.

The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) produced a document last year entitled “Chairperson's Guideline 9: Proceedings Before the IRB Involving Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression”.¹² This policy outlines various methods of questioning and collecting evidence from queer refugee claimants and dedicates a large amount of its content to directing IRB judges to be sensitive and ‘forgiving’ towards queer refugees, given the psychological and social impact that their coming-out may cause them, and the potential lack of corroborating documentation due to the presumably anti-queer mentality that exists in the

¹² Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. “Chairperson's Guideline 9: Proceedings Before the IRB Involving Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression.” May 1, 2017.

community from which they originate. While this document demonstrates the Canadian government's interest in protecting and accommodating queer refugee claimants, there is a more complex story behind it.

In his seminal book "Real Queer?: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Refugees in the Canadian Refugee Apparatus", David A. B. Murray investigates how queer refugee claimants truly experience the IRB apparatus.¹³ Unlike the rosy picture depicted in the IRB's above policy, Murray documents how queer migrants are often discriminated against and denied refugee status for a variety of problematic reasons, ranging from cultural miscommunication between the claimant and the IRB officer, to being penalized for a lack of documentation which, were the migrant to possess, would spell certain legal or social danger in their home country. But one aspect of the refugee process is especially problematic in light of our discussion: the idea of performative sexuality and fitting Western queer norms. Essentially, queer refugees are expected to 'perform' in a certain manner that aligns with Western conceptions of gender and sexuality and, if they fail to do so, are deemed untrustworthy or lying about their sexuality to gain admission into Canada. Because Western ideas of transgender/cisgender and straight/gay are not necessarily mirrored across the globe, this often leaves queer refugee claimants who perform outside of these binaries underserved by the refugee system, often leading to them being denied admission and returned to their country of origin to an uncertain fate.

Social work scholars who specialize in analyzing the psychological toll of the refugee system note the destructive effects it has on migrants; namely, but not limited to, forcing them to relive their trauma, forcing them to adapt or 'perform' as queer in front of a judge, and isolating

¹³ David A.B. Murray, "Real Queer: "Authentic" LGBT Refugee Claimants and Homonationalism in the Canadian Refugee System," *Anthropologica* 56, no. 1 (2014): 21-32.

them from the various communities to which they belong.¹⁴ The pigeonholing of migrants and infliction of psychological trauma in turn pose major barriers to the accession into Canadian society. Indeed, one can imagine how difficult it will be to voluntarily associate with a society that has already erected formal barriers towards your identity.

As these above examples demonstrate, a variety of civil and state factors converge on queer migrants, publicizing and autopsying their identity in front of a skeptical audience. Indeed, barriers to belonging can extend far beyond the immediate communities around a person—they can permeate psychologically and exist as a suffocating ‘blanket’ upon such migrants.

Conclusion

Queer migrants occupy a unique space in relation to the community around them. Queer membership itself is an often excluding attribute that isolates many—both native and immigrant—from a variety of social spheres around them. Being an immigrant also comes with its own difficulties, including an increasingly xenophobic political discourse, legal barriers, and so forth. Being a queer migrant, conversely, burdens one with, not only an amalgamation of the concerns of the previous two groups, but in addition presents itself with its own unique challenges. As we have seen throughout this discussion, *belonging* is a fleeting and nuanced term that is difficult to pin down. Nonetheless, we have also seen the various ways in which queer migrants are excluded,

¹⁴ Shari Brotman and Edward Ou Jin Lee, "Exploring Gender and Sexuality Through the Lens of Intersectionality: Sexual Minority Refugees in Canada," *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue Canadienne De Service Social* 28, no. 1 (2011): 151-156.

perhaps more so, than the average queer person or migrant. The variety of issues that we have examined culminate in an environment that, on the one hand, is hesitant to extend its welcome while, on the other hand, pressures many queer migrants to not even desire such an olive branch in the first place. Regardless of the reason, it is clear that more work needs to be done to investigate better and more appropriate civil and state measures that can be taken to better welcome migrants, while also presenting them with a society to which they want to be welcomed in the first place

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