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“NOT THE PARADISE WE IMAGINED”: THE DISCURSIVE
POLITICS OF THE “TRUE SELF” IN QUEER MIDDLE
EASTERN REFUGEE MIGRATIONS

Abstract

The use of “true self” in western media coverage of queer Middle Eastern refugees is a contradictory, unattainable identity for queer Middle Eastern refugees. This “true self” suggests that queer Middle Eastern refugees are only able to live out their essential queer selves after receiving asylum and moving to the West. This narrative of true selfhood ignores the rupturing, transformative process of refugeehood, as well as the geographical-historical conceptions of identity, and relational, place-based making of self in which refugees become refugees. True selfhood, disguised as western freedom, serves as merely another normative script in which queers in the West must present their identities as legitimate to a heteronormative, cisnormative society that does not conceptualize of other formations of self. Here, the contradiction between true selfhood and queer Middle Eastern refugeehood becomes a site where the logic of political asylum regimes breaks down, and where other understandings of queer Middle Eastern refugee selfhood may start to emerge.



CONTRADICTIONS OF THE “TRUE SELF”

In my research on queer Middle Eastern refugees, I noticed the following recurring sentiment, often phrased in these exact words, in media coverage of queer Middle Eastern refugees who have sought asylum in the West: “Here, I can finally be my true self.” This phrasing, evoked in slight variations across countless “feel good” queer refugee resettlement narratives, does a distinct kind of discursive political work in the context of queer Middle Eastern migrations.

In one sense, this discourse operates spatially by constructing the “over there” of the Middle East as a homogenous non-queer or anti-queer place where it is impossible to be one’s true queer self. At the same time, this “true self” discourse positions the West as a place that can uniquely accommodate the essence of a queer person’s “true self.”

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This positioning of the West as a queer refugee safe haven conceals the constant violence against queer people and refugees in the West as well as the entangled sexual geopolitics and legacies of colonialism that complicate the East/West binary.

Queer people in the West are constantly told to be their true selves or appeal to true selfhood to access their basic needs, desired lives, and imagined futures. This issue of “truth” and authenticity is one that continues to present itself in the queer context, contemporaneously and historically. Queer people must strategically and repeatedly claim stable identity categories to appeal to societies that refuse to conceptualize, accept, or allow for fluid or changing selves. From insisting that their identities are not a phase, and therefore not curable or punishable, to petitioning medical practitioners to provide them individualized care, queer people must parrot nearly identical narratives to acquire their basic needs and ensure their safety. Here, queer people constantly exist in the unsettled contradictions of authenticity.

Similarly, various institutions, from immigration offices to media apparatuses also require refugees to prove their authenticity in certain ways.² When the immigration and asylum regime operates on a foundation of suspicion—a mission to pull the real from the fake—while also requiring refugees fit their stories in narrow, legible categories, authenticity becomes a precarious tightrope and the truth becomes unattainable.³

When we seek to study global immigration and asylum systems, we must understand that these systems piece together contradictory understandings of the “human,” rights, history, and selfhood that have paved an impossible route for refugees who tell the truth. How these tensions overlap often comes into view when queer refugees encounter the state. Queer migration scholars pay special attention to these encounters, teasing apart the constructions and political arrangements that have created our current system of asylum.⁴ Luibhéid and Cantú foreground gay and lesbian immigration exclusion as both a state investment in maintaining the heteropatriarchal nuclear family as well as racial and class hierarchies.⁵ Here, migration can be understood through strategic sites of state power. Likewise, Susana Peña’s work on the “imprecise gaze” of the state during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift provides a viewpoint into the contradictory forms of queer refugee visibility that are produced through politically deliberate recognitions and misrecognitions of

queerness by the US state.⁶ The path to state recognition is a precarious one, and never guaranteed, not even by "truth."

The system does not want the truth; this is constantly proven by denied applications of queer refugees who document and expose every inch of their lives only to be turned away for allegedly "faking it."⁷ Rather than tell the truth, the system requires queer refugees to reconfigure their lives in a way that is familiar to the system to which they are seeking access.⁸ Queer migration scholars have shown repeatedly that these reconfigurations also vary widely due to a variety of intersecting conditions.⁹ As Peña tells us, a performance of queerness that looks legible to one state's immigration bureaucracy may be illegible to another.¹⁰ Even within a single state, one queer refugee's asylum case accepted as the "truth" by an asylum judge may be deemed false by another.

To maximize their chance of success, queer refugees must provide specific information to gain access within the system they are navigating, regardless of what is true. Given this structure, the demand for the truth is in itself a form of systemic violence that manifests in the most quotidian ways. Queer Middle Eastern refugees must learn how to perform queer refugeehood in a way that is legible to the West, and they *must* call it the truth. Yet, it is not enough to claim a truth; a truth must be lived and performed and proven. This idea of "living your truth" is touted as the gold standard of queer life—how lucky to be in the world exactly how you were meant to be! What a goal this is for queer people to live their truth! But what gets concealed here is that there are different definitions of truth that are messy, contradictory, and unable to be neatly arranged onto and into the body. However, as people marginalized in cisnormative, heteronormative society, queer people are made to string together the words "live my truth" to make themselves coherent for a world that does not wish to understand them.

Queer Middle Eastern refugees "live their truths" under the microscope of the immigration asylum system, the media, and other institutions. If we think alongside Jasbir Puar, we can understand that queer Middle Eastern refugees must embody the homonationalist accomplishments of progressive western states that have so graciously accepted them.¹¹ As Puar tells us, homonationalism operates as a form of "sexual exceptionalism" that serves as a "regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects."¹² In the post-9/11 global queer asylum landscape, this regulatory script also

functions to sort racialized “dangerous,” aka “terrorist,” Middle Eastern asylum and refugee applicants from those deemed “safe.” Here, queerness works to neutralize this Islamophobic “threat of danger,” and becomes an avenue that aligns with notions of western progress intimately intertwined with imagined western secularity. For queer Middle Eastern refugees, this homonationalist performance of “true selfhood” hinges on a representation of the West as, ultimately, always better, more progressive, and safer than the Middle East, regardless of their true experiences.

BECOMING A QUEER MIDDLE EASTERN REFUGEE

The media coverage of Ahmad Danny Ramadan, a queer Syrian refugee who received asylum to Canada in 2014 and quickly came into the public eye, is an explicit site where the discourse of true selfhood is at work. After resettling to Canada, Ramadan quickly gained media attention through his activist work and accomplishments. Just two years after arriving in Canada, he became a Grand Marshal of Vancouver Pride. The next year he was named one of the Top 25 Canadian Immigrants and released his debut novel. Since then, he continues to be recognized for his activism and writing as contributing to the fabric of Canadian multiculturalism. Throughout this media coverage, the idea of Ramadan’s true selfhood as supported by Canada and the contradictions present in this notion have emerged over the years, and continue to appear today.

In an interview with Salzburg Global Seminar in 2017, Ramadan reflects on his refugee background. He explains that when he lived in Syria he ran an “illegal center for gay and lesbian folks to hang out,” but was arrested for his involvement and ordered to leave the country for Lebanon overnight.¹³ He locates this moment as the moment that he “became a gay Syrian refugee.”¹⁴ This is relevant not only because Ramadan actively places himself into the category of refugee, but also because he critiques the assumption that refugees are moving towards somewhere, instead describing refugees as people who have been “pushed out.”¹⁵ Thus, in Ramadan’s framework, people *become* refugees because they are “pushed out” of somewhere. This assertion clearly contests the claims that refugee identities are inherently “refugee.” In contrast to an innate identity category, the distinct act of “becoming” a refugee creates avenues for an embodied performance that diverges from how one performs a permanent identity category.¹⁶ Refugee status is often situated as a permanent identity category, but this situating in itself constitutes a unique form

of dehumanization and glosses over the reality of a refugee experience. Often, a refugee is not born a refugee, and their displacement is not an internally produced, inherent quality.

Instead, the categorization of someone as a refugee is a highly mediated action, one that does not usually involve self-identification, but rather an outside inscription onto the person as a refugee.¹⁷ This inscription brings with it a set of preconceptions concerning the self and a refugee's ability to engage with their own subjecthood. Namely, because refugees are externally defined by specific codified international legal frameworks, such as the United Nations' 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, as well as media and state responses that reflect "geopolitical interests that reinscribe ideas about which groups deserve support,"¹⁸ refugees' engagements with their selfhood and subjectivity are predominantly seen as confined to these inscriptions. Thus, to "become" a refugee actually calls for an extensive reshaping of the self and the performance of selfhood according to these inscriptions. Yet, a "refugee" is also someone who has been drastically changed, and transformed into someone new due to their displacement.¹⁹ Therefore, the very category of "refugee" also works to destabilize the concept of a consistent or "true" self, repositioning the performance of true selfhood as a flawed notion — one that assumes a kind of stagnancy rather than a view of the self as relational to surroundings that are historically and materially contingent on space and time — and an exorbitant burden that is placed onto refugees.

Yet, in one of the first articles that ran about Ramadan, he tells the reporter: "Here, I have the ability to be myself finally."²⁰ This sentiment is carried through many of Ramadan's media appearances throughout the years. In a 2016 article that ran in *Daily Hive Vancouver*, Ramadan discusses his choice to come to Canada, saying: "I wanted to come to a country where I would be myself, my true self, and just be happy for who I am and be free to present myself and wear my rainbow colors proudly."²¹ Similarly, a 2018 *Tourism Vancouver* video showcases Ramadan explaining, "This openness of the city and the beauty of it allows me to be exactly who I want to be."²² However, these claims to a true self create a tension because Ramadan had to become a queer Syrian refugee in order to be his true self in Canada. Additionally, these claims discursively work to construct Vancouver — and the West — as the only place where Ramadan can be his true self, while relationally constructing Syria — and the Middle East — as somewhere that entirely impedes Ramadan's authenticity. However,

“Danny Ramadan” is a curated public figure, one who is meant to be read coherently, but like all people, is fraught with important contradictions that pull at the fabric of the queer Syrian refugee construction. These points create tensions that actually work to humanize Ramadan, to reinstate his subjecthood, and to create fissures in the object Ramadan’s image has been turned into.

Ramadan’s objectification exists in the context of a larger border and immigration system. Because “asylum remains a precarious construct in which questions of legitimacy—and of ‘truth’—continually shift,” the metrics and motivations that decide what is true and what is false need to be thoroughly interrogated.²³ This system expects queer Syrian refugees to internally and externally “become” the right kind of queer Syrian refugees by translating themselves and transforming their stories into commodities that can be easily consumed and celebrated as examples of the nation’s progressive endorsement of LGBTQ rights. Ramadan accomplishes this act of translation and commodification quite successfully, but he is not the only queer Middle Eastern refugee who must shape himself in this homonationalist image.²⁴

As an Arab man, Ramadan’s alignment with these homonationalist tropes is critically situated within the geopolitical context of Canada in 2014. Ramadan is among one of the earlier groups of Syrian refugees admitted to Canada, and in many ways his continuous positive media representation is auspiciously meant to signal the fruitful potentials of a national open door refugee policy. This proposed Canadian immigration framework, now unsurprisingly unfulfilled years later as Canadian immigration policy stalls while worldwide displacement worsens, gestured at the time to promises of prioritization for state-designated “vulnerable” refugees and notable expansion for private refugee sponsorship.²⁵ However, these policies have resulted in unevenness across refugee groups, even among queer Middle Eastern refugees.²⁶

Even in 2014, this discursive promise of a Canadian “open door,” like all state-regulated immigration, was not unconditional. Critical refugee scholars have shown the dissonance of promoting “welcoming” asylum while the structure of global immigration continuously justifies brutal dehumanization and hierarchical categorizing of people, locating the very category of refugee as a site to render this contradiction intelligible.²⁷ Espiritu tells us that this is where the “good refugee” narrative emerges.²⁸ Through the “good refugee,” harmful immigration policies and histories can be recast in a

vision of western saviorism that displaces the ongoing global colonial entanglements that have produced refugees.

Placing Ramadan, as well as other queer Middle Eastern refugees who have been represented in popular news media, in conversation with this repetitive "true self" narrative raises critical and necessary questions that follows Espiritu in challenging the "good refugee" narrative. As Espiritu tells us, "We need to imbue the term 'refugee' with social and political critiques."²⁹ If we do so, we begin to understand that Ramadan is not coincidentally cast into a media space of minor celebrity. Rather, these representations of him do a distinct kind of geopolitical work to reinforce dominant narratives of Canadian homonational multiculturalism.

Central to the way Ramadan's story reinforces these narratives is the continuous engagement with the concept of a "true self." In this case, these claims to authenticity attempt to establish Canadian multiculturalism as uniquely accommodating to the "essence" of Ramadan's selfhood. In the context of displacement, the essentialist designation of Ramadan as someone who occupies a stagnant, stable identity works to conceal an understanding of displacement as a rupturing, transformative process. Additionally, it works to conceal the role of displacement in Ramadan's becoming of his current self. Although Ramadan may have had to leave his family, friends, and life in Syria behind when he resettled, maintaining that his essence remained with him is yet another way to integrate Ramadan into a collective Canadian "multicultural" nationalist imagination that relies on stable, easy-to-categorize identities. Queer people are constantly being pushed to confine themselves within the borders of authenticity, but in the case of Ramadan, his status as a queer Syrian refugee creates unique tension with the idea of a true self. In other words, these tensions reveal a fundamental instability inherent in the concept of a true self and beg the question: What exactly can Canada offer Danny Ramadan when it comes to being a "true self"? This opportunity to be a "true self" appears to be merely a western restriction disguised as a western freedom.

TRUTH AS A FALSE PROMISE OF FREEDOM

The 2018 *Vox* article "Trans Refugees Fled to Greece for a Better Life. They Found Intolerance" is another example of media coverage of queer Middle Eastern refugees in which living one's queer truth is positioned as the ultimate freedom.³⁰ The article features five

transgender Middle Eastern refugee women reflecting on their experiences resettling to Greece. The article's central point is that these women had expected Greece to be more accepting than their Middle Eastern countries of origin; however, their lived experiences in Greece consisted of constant danger due to anti-trans violence and racism, as well as financial instability and other challenges of resettlement.

This article engages with the spatialized discourse of the true self that marks the Middle East as anti-queer and the West as a queer safe haven, but in a way that is contradicted by the experiences and testimonies of the featured refugee subjects. The *Vox* article suggests, "For transgender men and women, their arrival in Greece should mean they are finally able to express their true identity."³¹ Similarly, when describing the narrative arcs of the different individuals interviewed, arrival to Greece is marked by an ability to finally be one's true self. For Zahra: "Upon reaching Greece in December of last year, Zahra could finally express her gender identity as she saw fit," and for Sahab: "Moving to Greece meant that 27-year-old Sabah, too, was finally able to express her gender identity."³² There is something about the "finally," evoked three times in this way, that illustrates a hierarchy of queer progressiveness where the West is a destination that promises queer freedom, and the Middle East is a place queer refugees are always trying to escape until they *finally* make it out.

But once they make it out, the truth cannot simply be claimed, but must be lived through a certain kind of gender expression. To live one's truth is to make visible one's identity to those around them and to embody and outwardly display one's essential self for the world to see, even if it is dangerous to do so. To live one's truth when one is queer and/or transgender in a cisnormative, heteronormative society is to be in danger, and to be read as a danger to normative gender and sexuality. In the queer context, to disrupt these norms is often to become an object of scrutiny. Yet, refugee bodies are already an object of scrutiny, whether it is the gendered, racialized scrutiny of everyday individuals on the street or immigration and border agents as representatives of the state.³³

In a recent article, Fadi Saleh shows us one of the ways this scrutiny is recognized and navigated by queer refugees through the utilization of transgender as a distinct legal, humanitarian category by queer and gender variant Syrian refugees.³⁴ This utilization requires a careful alignment of self with identities that are recognizable to western asylum institutions, and the adoption of a narrative that marks the Middle East as a place a queer person must escape from.³⁵ Through the

bureaucracy of western asylum systems, we can see that queer selfhood in the Middle East is rhetorically written out of existence.³⁶ When these asylum systems only entertain testimonies that render the Middle East as backwards, undemocratic, and devoid of civilization and freedom, it is clear that this Orientalist spatialization does not recognize an ability to be human in the Middle East in the way that the liberal human subject can be "human" in the West. When the Middle East is discursively constructed as a place where people are either repressed or repressing, brainwashed, or endangered, selfhood and subjectivity are epistemologically eliminated. This is especially the case for queer subjects. Therefore, in queer Middle Eastern narratives, the West is positioned as the dream destination and as the only potential site of queer life.³⁷

However, the experiences of queer and transgender Middle Eastern refugees in the West contradict this relational characterization. In the *Vox* article, one of the women, identified with the name Asma, reflects on anti-trans violence in Greece, saying: "I feel like here is the same as the Middle East—Greece is not the paradise we imagined."³⁸ This testimony shows Greece as not quite west enough, as a place from which queer Middle Eastern refugees must still seek out a more queer friendly home through another future resettlement.

Yet at the same time, although Greece—and the West—do not live up to the expectations of queer Middle Eastern refugees, the imaginary of the West as a queer safe haven still sits on the horizon. The West as a place where queer people can be free is evoked as an aspirational future in contrast to the Middle East, which becomes a queer existential dead-end. As one of the refugees in the article, Nadia, reflects on why she and other queer Middle Eastern refugees came to Greece, she explains: "We all did this because we know we don't have any future in our country."³⁹

In the western media coverage of queer Middle Eastern refugees, truth elicits a promise of freedom, and freedom becomes an avenue to a future. Yet, in the context of queer Middle Eastern refugees making appeals to asylum and immigration systems in the West, contradictory, unattainable truth is not freedom. And to think with Mimi Thi Nguyen, for refugees, the gift of freedom promised by the West is never fully given, and is never truly true.⁴⁰

BEYOND TRUE SELVES

The use of "true self" in western media coverage of queer Middle

Eastern refugees is a contradictory, unattainable identity for queer Middle Eastern refugees. This “true self” suggests that queer Middle Eastern refugees are only able to live out their essential queer selves after receiving asylum and moving to the West. It is as if the West can uniquely accommodate queer Middle Eastern refugees’ essential selves. This narrative of true selfhood ignores the rupturing, transformative process of refugeehood, as well as the geographical and historical specificities of identity and relational, place-based making of self in which refugees become refugees.

Through the cases of media coverage of Danny Ramadan and the experiences of transgender refugees in Greece, we can see that true selfhood, disguised as western freedom, serves as merely another normative script in which queers in the West must present their identities as legitimate to a heteronormative, cisnormative society. This system does not conceptualize of other formations of self, and it is in this paradox that the truth and true selfhood remain out of reach. Here, the contradiction between true selfhood and queer Middle Eastern refugeehood becomes a site where the logic of political asylum regimes breaks down, and where other understandings of queer Middle Eastern refugee selfhood may start to emerge.

NOTES

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