

# QUEER CRISIS: Turbulent Identity Journeys in Gender and Nation

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The doctoral dissertation of Ali Ali, M.Sc., entitled *Queer in Exile and Exile in Queer: Journeys for Asylum and Belonging across Borders and Norms* was examined on November 3rd 2023, in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki. Associate Professor Linda Lapiņa (Roskilde University) acted as an opponent in the public examination. The Custodian was Professor David Inglis (University of Helsinki).

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This text is about identity and crisis. In fact, it is about identity *as* the crisis of today's politics and society. I mobilize queer politics and theory to tackle that crisis, because queer masters and honors the failure to comply with proud and sanctified identifications and conventions (Halberstam 2011).

Scholars have exposed identity as a site of injury. In an article titled "'Gays who cannot properly be gay': Queer Muslims in the neoliberal European city", Fatima El-Tayeb (2012) shows how queer Muslims figure in Europe's public and mainstream narratives as representatives of a homogeneous Muslim other, who threatens the continent's foundational values. That is, even in milieus that flaunt and endorse love across diversity, like "rainbow communities", the mere presence of the othered-as-Muslim evokes a sense of crisis.

In fact, othering has become *the* strategy of explaining and managing crisis. An economic crisis caused by the exploitative global business became synonymous with stigmatized nationalities like the so-identified lazy Greeks (Kantola & Lombardo 2017), while the governance of crisis in Nordic politics and policy making has become coterminous with scapegoating, controlling, and bordering the racialized and the migrant (Keskinen 2023, Mulinari 2010).

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12 years ago, I landed in Europe. I carried a small suitcase, but my head was packed with expectations. I wished to leave injuries and bigotry in the places I abandoned, but they haunted me in different forms. The stigma of same-sex love reincarnated as the stigma of racial difference. To my cultural shock, I found myself identified as a crisis figure (a racialized other) in the very place where I sought sanctuary from crisis, stigma, and the violence of forced identification.

*Where is that world I had fantasized about, a world beyond crisis?* I asked, and the question answered itself: I had been fantasizing. In fact, imagining that there is a world of crisis (and another beyond crisis) *is* a crisis. And so is to stop imagining. Politics is a journey powered by the fantasy of change. More so in queer politics.

Queer has always been a realm of exile, exiled from norms of belonging, whether national or sexual. But that realm is not static. Queer is always expanding in new and further directions (Butler 1993). Journeys for asylum and belonging are not only journeys across territorial borders. The territorial crossing turns out to be a minor crossing in the race and citizenship bordering that exiles experience in the everyday and the everywhere: the media, political speech, on the street, and in intimate relations.

My doctoral thesis has been on the queer quest for belonging and home as unending journeys. Long before crossing territorial boundaries, queers challenge and cross boundaries within communities they abandon. When they cross state borders for a long-desired refuge they experience new forms and norms of exile. In my doctoral thesis, I traced how the chronic and intensified experiences of exilic norms pressed for new meanings of community and belonging. My research question was:

How does the queer exile conceptualization and politicization of home and belonging change through the journey of exile? (Ali 2023a: 21)

In other words, how does the experience of queer exile affect and effect political sensibilities? The study drew on a three-year ethnographic participant observation in a support group<sup>1</sup> for queer exiles. My participation happened in the mundane meetings and activities of the group. The conversations and the remarks that took place within these meetings informed my discussions and analysis on how queers navigate exile and create new meanings and modes of community and belonging. You might call queer exiles ‘LGBTQ refugees’ or ‘asylum seekers’. I will call them *queer exiles*. *Exile* is not a melodramatic term of ‘displaced’ or ‘refugee’ unless melodrama does justice to the exile’s dreadful sense of alienation. And *queer* is not a factor of sex or gender unless we recognize the political and the communal in the intimate and the sexual. In other words, queer is in constant struggle with norms of belonging whether sexual, social or national, and in constant struggle to protest how these norms are inseparable.

In their respective ethnographies on asylum in Denmark and Germany, Malene Jacobsen (2021), and Mervi Leppäkorpi (2022) found that mundane proximity to exiles meant following the strenuous bureaucratic work and its emotional repercussions. I did not participate in the bureaucratic procedures of the other members. However, the bureaucratic trouble and anxieties shaped their everyday and every moment. The ethnographic participation happened in the mundane aftermath of bureaucratic complications.

<sup>1</sup> The Group, and the Organization that created the group has been kept anonymous in my publications and public discussions.

In Finland, state recognition of an exile's right to residence is crucial for accessing social services and ensuring a livable life (Könönen 2018). However, the national and nationalist narrative sets an austere and hostile atmosphere and challenges that recognition (Keskinen 2023). The support group I write about (and from) accompanied and supported the members in legal procedures of asylum. Moreover, in the austere social and emotional atmosphere, the group was a space of companionship. Members often referred to that group as their "community" and "family". I looked into the queer exile's narratives and embodiment of community, family and belonging, and the shifts that happened in these narratives and embodiments throughout the journey of exile.

My ethnography traced and highlighted how affinities and solidarity politics shifted to challenge oppressive norms of governance and belonging. That happened in three aspects that correspond to three research questions that I will now unfold and discuss.

The first question: How does the subject of queer exile evaluate and mobilize affective and experiential knowledge in the official narratives and navigation for state protection? (Ali 2023a: 22)

Or in other words, how did the queer exile navigate and narrate their plea for protection vis-à-vis state authorities?

One of the participants, whom I will call Fadi, said that he was a "son of tribes". He said he was unqualified to argue with the judge in the case appeal for his asylum. Fadi had been appealing and re-appealing for 7 years for an asylum. He had no contact with kin and acquaintances in Iraq. He ended up pleading for a residence permit in the only place he knew for the past 7 years. It was hard to trace whether he had always been too demoralized to recognize and voice his injury or whether the recurrent rejections increased his sense of tribal belonging and decreased his sense of right to asylum.

Another participant, whom I will call Haifa, said that my ethnography on the sense of exile in Finland made no sense. She said that the alienation we experience in Finland was incomparable to the violence we lived "in our countries". Haifa's statement was alarming but also politically generative. It highlighted how the violence in "our countries" sucked up all other considerations.

In their mournful statements, Fadi and Haifa protested how injuries and the right to protection from these injuries had become relativized and trivialized, factoring in terms of identity and national belonging. Fadi protested our current horror of how war crimes in Palestine are happening, documented and evidenced in real time, and they are still ongoing while I write because the targets of these crimes are considered sons and daughters of tribes. The first question and the article (Ali 2022) that tackled that question were acts of lamentation and grieving. They highlighted the sorrowful situation of today's politics.

But, as Judith Butler (2003) remarks, sorrow and grief are communal issues. Likewise, Silvia Federici sees that learning to politicize and communalize our pain is a source of knowledge and a mode of connection and community making (Federici 2020). This leads to the second question, which I investigated in my second research article of my dissertation, which tackled how the injury of race and citizenship effected change in the sense and sensibility of a community.

The question was: How does the exile's embodied and mundane experience of bureaucratic and racializing injuries affect their sense of belonging and their politics of community? (Ali 2023a: 22)

The question tackled and challenged how norms of governance and identity politics hijack the mundane relationality. It has become sad but common

knowledge that fellow exiles in Europe (Akin 2017) and elsewhere (Koçak 2020, Seitz 2017) tend to deem rejected asylum seekers as fraudulent or attempting to abuse the asylum system. In that, the bureaucratic injury doubles back as a racializing stigma, where the racialized and non-citizen fellow figures again as *the* cause of crisis and scarcity. As if safety and security have become a scarce resource for the more qualified, and those deemed unqualified end up bearing the stigma on top of injury. But that is only one chapter of the story, a grievable one. The second question traced the sense of kinship that take shape among members in their shared precarity of exile.

The second article (which tackles the second question) is titled *Warming up Narratives of Community* (Ali 2023b). It narrated how, in the mundane proximity in shared alienation, members warmed up to considerations of the injuries of identity and identification. Warming up narratives of community did not mean emotional ease, but how narratives become more lively, more engaged, more thoughtful rather than easier or simpler.

In fact, ease and simplicity were a cause of worry and injury rather than warmth. For example, it was alarming and painful how members kept drilling sloppy identity clichés. I am talking about statements like “Finns are cold”, “Russians are homophobic” or “Iraqis are drama queens”. Some participants made such statements to justify their choice of distance from the sorrows of fellow exiles, or to avoid engaging in political thinking and exchanging across identification.

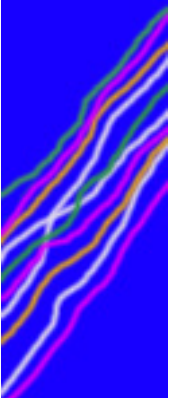
The statement “Finns are cold”, justified the lack of engaged political dialogue between the Finn and the racialized by naturalizing a so-called “cold Finn”. That is as injurious to Finns as it is to the racialized, and most injurious to lively and meaningful politics.

Likewise, the notion “Iraqis are drama queens” collapsed vulnerability with drama and melodrama. While the hope in queer communities is to highlight discounted vulnerabilities rather than to dismiss them as drama. While Haifa, mentioned above, thought it was melodramatic of me to highlight the injuries of race and citizenship in Finland, others highlighted and honored these injuries.

Over the period of three years, I have seen and documented how members’ narratives shifted from identitarian into queerer. From remarks of mistrust and rivalry to remarks and acts of fellowship and solidarity across identification, where injuries of race and citizenship were discussed and protested.

One of the participants, whom I will call Bingo, said that only with the support group did he find the joy of recreational activities and the meaning of public participation in queer political events. It was only among people who shared his experience and, as Bingo put it, “walked similar paths,” that he could find meaning and joy. This is not melodrama; it is political speech, even if it did not take the loud and proud form of conventional politics. Because it did not, it signaled precious but often discounted shifts in community and communication. Its warmth could be felt only in proximity, but it was invigorating and life-sustaining to community politics. Members’ proximity in times and circumstances of trouble triggered and mobilized what Donna Haraway (2016) calls *odd kinship*, kinship that does not follow big norms and terms, but emerges in the midst and mess of shared trouble, in unexpected alliances and connections.

However, connection does not always feel warm or smooth. This is the issue I examined in the third article of my dissertation, where I posed a question that traced another kind of warmth. It traced warming up the methods of doing politics and political analysis.



The question is: How do members of a community inhabit the skepticism and ambiguity in belonging and communicability, and how can the embodied experience of uncertainty and skepticism inform and reform community politics? (Ali 2023a: 22)

The question is in other words: What the hell are we doing here and what the hell is the purpose of this community? My answer was, keep asking, this is why we are here. Because closure is the death of political communities (Nancy 1991).

The third question questioned normative and stagnating methods of politics and sloppy political narratives. The article that tackled this question was titled *On Purpose: Solidarity by Accident or Design and the Generative Ambiguity in Between* (Ali 2023c). In that article, I revealed how, throughout my research, I avoid claims of surety over the participants' meaning and meaning-making. For Reiko Shindo (2012), community, in its most political sense, means the working through unworkability of community and communication. And for Derek Ruez and Daniel Cockayne (2021), a committed research dwells on the multiple interpretations of acts and statements.

Let's dwell on Haifa's statement where she said that the racism and the alienation we encountered in Finland were insignificant, just because they were incomparable to the violence we encountered "in our countries". Her statement highlighted how the injuries in "our countries" are so omnipresent, haunting us, and discounting injuries we experience in the country of refuge. Haifa protested, by accident or design, the politics of complacent gratitude that are not only injurious to people from "our countries" but also damaging community politics, and politics proper, everywhere and every time.

Community and belonging, in the group and throughout the study, figured *not* as a static placeholder of identity. Community turned out to be a site where the singular selfhood was contingent on the embodied life of the collective. That is nonsovereignty in Berlant's sense (2016), to be open and receptive in real time. That is engagement in speaking, analyzing, and mobilizing from within a shared circumstance, rather than abstractions and norms.

How did the queer exile conceptualization and politicization of home and belonging change through the journey of exile?

In conclusion, queer community is an ongoing work that defies conclusiveness. What should never change is the persistence of queer as a realm of change, as refusal of settlement and closure. Change figured in how activism and belonging were never bounded by identity or settled on norms. Change figured in keeping modes of relationality and methods of mobilization lively and mobile to nudge stiff norms of governance and belonging. Change also figured in the unfinished collective imagination and cultivation of a more livable belonging.

A dissertation is the tip of an iceberg. It is a glimpse into a life I lead meanwhile I research and write texts. The fieldwork itself was an act in the big scene of sociopolitics where mourning, warming-up and negotiating modes of connection and communication happened. The fieldwork was one of the quests, among other members' quests, for belonging in a circumstance of exile.

And the stories of a political community never end. They keep happening to challenge oppressive closures, because persistent and vigorous attunement to oppression and injuries is what makes a community or a family (whether nuclear or global) worthy of being pursued unstoppably.

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