**Queer Humanitarianism in the Time of War: The Global Emergence of Syrian LGBT Refugees**

Dissertation
zur Erlangung des philosophischen Doktorgrades
an der Philosophischen Fakultät der
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

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**Göttingen 2020**

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background, Motivation, and Research Questions

In September 2012, MantiQitna Network for Gender and Sexual Rights had its third regional lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) Middle East and North Africa (henceforth MENA) conference. I was a board member of MantiQitna, and so I was one of the co-organizers of this large-scale event, which gathered around 100 nascent and experienced LGBTIQ activists from across MENA and its Diaspora. Jaafar, my best friend and primary interlocutor,[1] took part in the conference. At the time, we had not seen each other since June 2010. It was his first trip outside Syria, and the conference was held in Bodrum, a touristic city in southern Turkey. The Syrian uprisings had already started in March 2011, but they had not yet turned extremely bloody. Mobility was still possible for most Syrians, who could travel visa-free to most neighboring countries, including Turkey.[2] The large-scale discourse surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity-based asylum had not yet taken shape, and queer and trans* Syrians, like Jaafar, did not even think it a possibility.

But the situation in Syria was deteriorating, and Jaafar's safety upon returning home could not be guaranteed. During the conference, MantiQinta's executive director, Yahia Zaidi, and I tried our best to convince Jaafar to seek asylum in Turkey through the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Yahia, himself a gay refugee from Algeria working as a social worker and counselor for refugees at a refugee support organization (called *Convivial*) in Belgium, was quite familiar with asylum systems, procedures, and institutions, and had a wide and dependable activist network that could help Jaafar in any way

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[1] Unless stated otherwise, all names are the interlocutors' first names. I use them at their permission and their request.

[2] This changed in 2016, as Turkey imposed an entry-visa on Syrians wishing to enter Turkey by air or sea. This has been thoroughly analyzed as an effect of the infamous EU-Turkey deal, which was put in place to "stop" the movement of Syrians from Turkey into Europe. See, for example, Sabine Hess and Gerda Heck. "Tracing the Effects of the EU-Turkey Deal: The Momentum of the Multi-Layered Turkish Border Regime," *Movements: A Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017): 35 – 56.

possible. Jaafar considered it, but in the end, he chose to return to Latakia, our hometown in Syria. In hindsight, Jaafar regrets not having stayed in Turkey; though he explains not having felt the "urge" to stay in Turkey and seek asylum through UNHCR by pointing out that (queer) life still felt livable in Syria in 2012. He felt that there was still hope that the Syrian uprisings could succeed in toppling the regime and building a new country; and that becoming an LGBT refugee was not an option he cared, felt strongly, or knew much about.

This "urge" Jaafar spoke of is affective, ambivalent, confusing, and did not have a discourse to give it a relatable representational and discursive dimension. In 2012, there was not enough discourse to feed that "urge." (If the media around him had told him that being a refugee is the only possibility for Syrian queer and trans* people to survive, would he have felt more of an urge?) Conversely, there was not enough affective currency to Syrian queer and trans* people, so there was very little discourse about them in relation to the conflict. The gory images of suffering and dying that drove international interest in queer and trans* Syrian refugees would only become commonplace and mainstream years later.

Fast-forward to 2014. Jaafar, along with his friends Wissam and Hasan, all gay and in their twenties, decided to finally leave Syria for Turkey. The main impetus for this decision was that Karam, a very good friend of ours, had left Syria in 2013, had sought asylum through UNHCR, and had been successfully resettled within a phenomenal period of time. By the time Jaafar, Wissam, and Hasan arrived, Karam had already been resettled in Sweden. Karam's successful resettlement story made them and others in the Syrian queer and trans* communities hopeful that their cases would be processed just as quickly. They contacted me and asked me to arrange their flights from Beirut, where they would travel from Latakia, to Turkey. Their first stop upon arriving in Ankara was the city of Balikesir, which they chose because Karam had lived there prior to his resettlement and knew people who could help the newcomers.

As I followed everyone's journeys, I could not help but notice the incremental yet steady change in the ways they spoke about asylum, refugeeness, gender, sexuality, themselves, and their lives in Syria. The ambivalence and ambiguity that characterized Jaafar's thinking in 2012 has, slowly but surely, transformed into stories about queer and trans* suffering in Syria. That is not to say that queer and trans* people did not suffer in Syria, or that there was not an abundance of suffering stories to tell; but the narratives of what constituted Syrian 'queer and trans* suffering' began to sound quite unfamiliar to those of us in the community. Simplistic and straightforward narratives of State oppression, legal persecution, family ostracization, coming out, invisibility, honor killings, the lack of a Syrian queer and trans* community, and the absence of the possibility of a livable queer life constituted the bulk of these new narratives; and queer and trans* asylum seekers started to memorize, rehearse, project onto their own experiences, and repeat these stories at interviews with UNHCR, journalists and media-makers, as well as at conferences, workshops, and any gatherings where they are expected to narrate their journeys in exchange for humanitarian support. While I never questioned the existence of these dynamics and experiences, coming from Syria myself and having lived with all of them there, I could not quite hide my shock at how their stories of suffering heavily modified the details and dynamics of life in Syria, filtered all contextual information, sieved out whatever could confuse decision-makers or their Western or NGO-activist audiences, and sanitized their lived experiences in order to cater to very Western models of narrating sexual identity development.[3] Whenever I asked them why they felt the need to tell their narratives in these specific ways, the answers were always very affective: anger, frustration, fear, and uncertainty. Clearly, as a Syrian migrant in Germany who, luckily, did not have to seek asylum and was able to secure jobs and education

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[3] See Laurie Berg and Jenni Millbank. "Constructing the Personal Narratives of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Asylum Claimants," *Journal of Refugee Studies 2, no.* 2 (2009): 206.

opportunities, I could not understand their position. I did not question their suffering; only the reductive and at times false contextual information they gave about their lives in Syria. Yet, as many of my interlocutors later reflected, the feeling that asylum and resettlement were their only hope was very intense during the waiting years, to the extent that any questioning of the ways they told their stories felt like a direct threat to their credibility and, hence, to their chances at resettlement. Therefore, I listened, waited for events to unfold, and followed their life trajectories at their own pace and with their own needs. It was during this time that I started to conceptualize this project.

After all, 2014 was the year that discourses around Syrian asylum-seeking and refugeeness in general became more prominent, though Syrian queer and trans* people were still an obscure "group." By the end of 2014 and throughout 2015, however, there was an unprecedented explosion in representations, discourses, news, narratives, and stories circulating on social media. Syrian LGBT refugees gained representational currency as a constituency. More Syrian queer and trans* friends, acquaintances, and people started to escape to Turkey to seek asylum through UNHCR or to continue their journeys to Europe. Journalists swarmed Turkey for scoops and sensational reporting on Syrian LGBT refugees. The world became a spectator to the horrifying atrocities of Da'esh against alleged "gay" men in areas under its jurisdiction in Syria and Iraq. UNHCR emerged in much NGO reporting and journalistic pieces as a main global actor in helping Syrian LGBT refugees. Activist groups and organizations in Turkey and globally started paying attention to the political/funding potential attached to the emerging group of Syrian LGBT refugees. In response, Syrian LGBT refugees started to adopt, reproduce, and circulate these discourses and representations in ways that were starkly different from when I first started following my friends' journeys in 2013 and early 2014.

As a Syrian gay man who had lived in Syrian prior to the uprisings and who meticulously followed the vicissitudes of the discourses around and representations of Syrian queer and trans* populations over the years of conflict, I made three observations that are the crux and starting points of this research project. First, Syrian queer and trans* populations were gaining representational currency on an unprecedented scale and in very particular ways, especially towards the end of 2014 and throughout 2015. Second, Syrian queer and trans* populations became conveniently reduced to and solely represented through tropes of suffering, oppression, and misery, a precondition of their becoming relevant objects of Western media obsession and humanitarian benevolence. Third, prior to this specific historical juncture, there was very little journalistic, activist, or academic writing on Syrian queer and trans* lives, histories, subcultures; and although there was a media/journalistic hype around Syrian queer and trans* populations starting 2014, any work that questions or challenges those representations and discourses of suffering was and remains largely lacking. It was with these observations in mind that I asked the following overarching questions:

1- Under which conditions and through which discourses, frameworks, and representations did Syrian queer and trans* populations become knowable and recognizable as an identity group with self-evident histories of suffering and oppression and monolithic escape narratives?

2- How did Syrian queer and trans* populations' encounters with the humanitarian-asylum complex (Western media, LGBT NGO landscape, journalists, UNHCR, local authorities, governments, and States) shape the hegemonic discourses around what it means to be a Syrian LGBT person?

3-  How were Syrian queer and trans* populations in Turkey governed; under which material, legal, social, and political conditions; and through which humanitarian logics, dynamics, and actors?

4- What are the different subjectivation processes and mechanisms through which Syrian LGBT refugees were produced as a monolithic constituency in the years following the uprisings of 2011?

5- What are the lines of flight, divergences, queer elements, affects, and encounters that deconstruct the very frameworks and deterritorialize the assemblages that activated the emergence of the Syrian LGBT refugee constituency and its discourses?

To answer these questions, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork (2014 – 2015) in Istanbul, Turkey, with Syrian queer and trans* refugees and asylum seekers with a specific focus on those seeking international protection through UNHCR and its third-country resettlement program. Following their life trajectories and asylum journeys and processes, I map the ways in which Syrian queer and trans* populations emerged and were produced as a homogenous, easily identifiable LGBT group despite having been irrelevant, unknown, and rather obscure prior to 2011. Furthermore, this research project critically examines and analyzes a wide array of media and activist representations and narratives, UNHCR documents, discourses, resettlement processes and policies, and guidelines, and global LGBT political discourses around queerness, Syria, and refugeeness, on the one hand; and foregrounds the ethnographic experiences, stories, and reflections of my interlocutors—as well as my own autoethnographic interventions—on the other.

## 1.2 A Note on Language/Terminology

As I center the ways in which queer and trans* Syrians articulate their own experiences and reflections on the discourses, politics, and policies that target them, questions of language, culture, gender, and sexuality become indispensable to the project of documenting and analyzing the dynamics of migration and asylum for queer and trans* Syrians on the move.

Therefore, for the purposes of this research project, I use LGBT,[4] gay, queer, and trans*, to

denote different things. I use "LGBT" to refer to the ways Syrian queer and trans* refugees

are homogenized and spoken of by most media outlets, non-governmental organizations

(NGOs),[5] governments, and asylum-humanitarian institutions. I use "gay" primarily to

emphasize the hegemony of this identity category in representations of and discourses around

Syrian LGBT/I refugees in general, whereby Syrian gay male refugees are posited as

sufficiently representative of the entirety of the queer and trans* spectrum. When talking

about Syrian queer populations, I use "queer" not in an identitarian sense, but as that which

escapes identity categories and their fixed narratives and structures. In this usage, I follow

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's classic definition of "queer" as "the open mesh of possibilities,

gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the

constituent elements of anyone's … sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify

monolithically" (1993: 8).

While "queer" has come to relate predominantly to sexuality, "trans*" encompasses a

wide array of gender non-conforming/nonnormative ways of being. The asterisk, "a wild card

in internet search lingo," keeps open the elements and possibilities of what "trans" can refer to

beyond fixed gender identity categories (Steinmetz 2018). As Jack Halberstam explains, the

asterisk is used to "open the term up to unfolding categories of being organized around but

not confined to forms of gender variance … it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance

what the meaning of this or that gender-variant form may be …" (2018: 4). With that in mind,

I use "queer and trans*" as open-ended signifiers to emphasize those elements of Syrian queer

and trans* people's self-understanding, histories, and experiences that had existed prior to

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[4] Only in one of the articles, "Transgender as a Humanitarian Category: The Case of Syrian Queer and Gender-Variant Refugees in Turkey" (2020c), I use LGBTI with the Intersex signifier. Otherwise, I use LGBT, mostly, also as an acknowledgement of the absence of intersex issues from mainstream LGBT politics.
[5] For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the acronym "NGO" (plural NGOs) throughout to refer to domestic, regional, and international non-governmental organizations.

their encounters with Western media obsession and the humanitarian-asylum complex or that are not seen as fitting or intelligible to mainstream LGBT frameworks. Lastly, I use cis- or cisgender to refer to people whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth and to emphasize the normativity often attached to this group (Altman 2014: 61–62). Given that I am presenting my research in English, this overview of the English terms used was in order. However, the main language of fieldwork was (different dialects of) Syrian Arabic, and the ways in which Syrian queer and trans* populations identify or speak of themselves in relation to gender and sexuality rely on various systems of identification that I explore in the first and third articles to varying degrees. At this point, it suffices to mention that "queer and trans*" in the usage I describe above is the best available equivalent for the more "local" terms and identity categories that Syrian queer and trans* populations relied on while in Syria or still use as part of their expanding repertoire of identity categories and discourses post-2011.

## 1.3 Queer Humanitarianism as an Analytical Framework

In addition to "queer" as an open-ended signifier, when used together with "humanitarian," I emphasize the regulatory function of queerness as posited by Jasbir Puar. Speaking of the US context, Puar argues that the granting of rights, media representation, and the inclusion of some previously excluded gays and lesbians into the imaginary of the nation has led to "the emergence of national homosexuality—what [she terms] 'homonationalism,'" whereby these gains are premised solely on the production, segregation, and exclusion of "sexual-racial" others who are then perceived as outside the nation and less belonging to those accepted by it. Queerness becomes a mode of regulation and a modality that demarcates the ideal queer (consumer, white, privileged, cisgender) from other, less ideal ones. As Puar states,

> The emergence and sanctioning of queer subjecthood is a historical shift condoned only
>
> through a parallel process of demarcation from populations targeted for segregation,

disposal, or death, a reintensification of racialization through queerness. The cultivation of these homosexual subjects folded into life, enabled through ''market virility'' and ''regenerative reproductivity,'' is racially demarcated and paralleled by a rise in the targeting of queerly raced bodies for dying. (2007: xii)

In her conceptualization of homonationalism, Puar, perhaps unwittingly, creates a clear-cut binary between the normative queer citizen—now accepted into the US national imaginary—and the racialized others, who are "dis-identified as citizens" (Puar 2007:38) and are thus perceived as a threat to the nation because they are not "queer" enough or do not embrace the new "queer" normativities folded into the way the US nation imagines itself.

But what happens when the queer subjects under consideration do not live within the borders of the nation-state but are potential future-citizens of the US or another "gay-friendly" Western country? How does regulatory queerness function when applied to LGBT refugees or asylum seekers who have the potential to become future "queer citizens" of the nation-state? In the case of Syrian queer and trans* populations on the move, who are seeking international protection through UNHCR or other agencies and hoping to be resettled and become future citizens of countries where homonationalist agendas abound, how are we to approach the extent to which regulatory queerness within homonationalism's mandate affects their subjectivities, livelihoods, and discourses prior to their resettlement? Surely, despite constantly being evoked to account for the "globalization" of Western LGBT identities, politics, and analytical frameworks, and the proliferation of the "gay-friendly West vs. the backward rest" binary, homonationalism remains bound to the nation-state in its conceptualization and cannot fully account for the emergence of LGBT subjects in other contexts, especially not subjects on the move, fleeing their countries, and seeking international protection in a transit country such as Turkey.

To fill this gap, I argue that what extends homonationalism's mandate on a transnational level is the humanitarianism of Western nations—primarily asylum-granting ones—that targets nonnormative genders and sexualities in non-Western contexts as its fields of operation. I term this queer humanitarianism (a fuller discussion of its theoretical constituents and implications is provided in the "Theoretical Framework" section). In this reading, queerness's open-endedness, rather than having a liberating effect, lends itself to becoming a regulatory and disciplinary mechanism as well as the "optic," to lift a term from Puar (2007: xiii), through which humanitarian and asylum institutions, aid organizations, LGBT and refugee support NGOs, Western governments and their migration policies and politics, as well as various media outlets—all claiming to be propelled by a "natural" human drive and will to alleviate the suffering of others; in other words, by humanitarianism—control, manage, discipline, and produce LGBT refugee subjectivities, discourses, and representations against the backdrop of increasing queer and trans* migration and flight. This convergence of queerness as a regulatory optic and humanitarianism as the desire and will to help; the nodes of global, regional, and national actors this convergence generates and involves; the subjectivities, representations, and discourses it transforms and produces; and the lines of flight and tensions it elicits are all components, effects, and products of queer humanitarianism. Indeed, if homonationalism traces a history of the production of regulatory and normative queerness by the inclusion of some (white, consumerist, middle class, etc.) through the exclusion of some (racialized others) within the nation-state, queer humanitarianism sheds light on the processes through which already racialized non-citizens outside the bounds of the nation-state are produced into a binary of proper vs. improper queers through the prism of humanitarianism.

This dynamic already has a recent history, and there have been many events that incited global debates about the queer politics of help and aid: the arrest of 52 "gay" men

during the Queen Boat raid in Cairo in May 2001 (Long 2004), the hanging of the two Iranian

boys in 2005, whose sexual identity was a site of controversy and heated debate among

human rights and LGBT organizations globally (Long 2009); the so-called "emo-killings" of

gender non-conforming young men in Iraq in 2012 (Ruhayem 2012), the anti-gay propaganda

law in Russia in 2013 (Edenborg 2017), and the global debates surrounding the Ugandan anti-

homosexuality act between in 2014 (Rao 2014; see also Klapeer 2019), to name a few.

Though humanitarianism has never been the word used to describe the global responses to

these events, as it is a term often reserved for responses to the aftermath of natural disasters,

wars, conflicts, and migration- and refugee-related events that are considered large-scale and

less "identity"-based, I use it to highlight a common factor that cuts through the "help" and

savior dynamics in the discourses around these global LGBT-related events: queerness as

identity is an effect of humanitarianism and the desire to help; humanitarianism is the prism

through which LGBT subjects are primarily produced, understood, and circulated as queer

subjects in the non-West. In the wake of the Syrian uprisings and ensuing conflicts, the

dynamics, politics, and conditions of the Western will to help queer and trans* populations on

the move have reached a pivotal point with the emergence of Syrian queer and trans*

populations as central figures in global politics around migration, humanitarianism, and

queerness. I argue that, in the specific case of Syrian LGBT refugees, the dynamics of queer

humanitarianism have come full-circle and reached an apogee in its sedimentation, cohesion,

and stabilization.

Against the backdrop of a violent armed conflict, an almost ten-year war, migration,

flight, and a growing Syrian Diaspora across the globe, the biggest humanitarian catastrophe

since World War II, unprecedented media attention on LGBT Syrians, and the coming

together of many, if not all, humanitarian, activist, governmental, NGO, and other actors

(persons, institutions, agencies, and organizations), I map the different processes through

which queer humanitarianism produces Syrian LGBT refugees and the discourses, representations, and narratives around them in the name of helping. What histories and what parts of their intersectional identities must be erased for them to emerge as proper queer subjects worthy of humanitarian protection? As a country whose queer and trans* populations were rather unknown and irrelevant prior to 2011—and even prior to Da'esh's emergence in 2014—Syria lends itself well to understanding the ways queer humanitarianism intensified the hype around Syrian queer and trans* populations and the subjectivities, discourses, and representations this "hype" produced (See Schwertl 2015).

In the three articles that constitute the bulk of this dissertation, I outline the different mechanisms and processes—media representations and discourses, UNHCR third-country resettlement procedures, NGO and humanitarian dynamics, politics of knowledge production, and globalization of human rights frameworks of LGBT politics, among others—through which this assemblage produces Syrian LGBT refugees as a constituency whose histories and narratives neatly fit Western identity categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, on the one hand; and whose circulating stories have become repetitions of the same humanitarian narrative that continues to naturalize negative affects (pain) and certain narratives (of suffering and misery) as the only legitimate properties of certain bodies (Syrian queer and trans*) who must inhabit a very clear LGBT-identity paradigm in order to be intelligible as LGBT subjects worthy of humanitarian protection. While each article highlights a different process and the material, social, political, and discursive conditions out of which it emerges, the three articles are interconnected and are part of the larger, overarching research dynamics that I shall lay out in this introduction.

In the coming sections of the introduction, I identify the many gaps in knowledge production around Syria, queer and trans* issues, migration and humanitarianism, MENA, and queer anthropology that my dissertation aims to fill. Whereas each article presents a

specific theoretical framework or trajectory, this dissertation emerges out of larger theoretical concerns and debates surrounding queer/anthropological inquiries into the fields of queer studies and humanitarianism. To that end, I introduce these theoretical debates and establish the ways in which they inform the articles together. After that, I present my methodology, methods of data collection, and the different factors and politics that have shaped and affected these choices. Then I present the three articles and summarize the arguments, analyses, and results. Finally, I present my conclusions and offer insights into future research on queerness, Syria, migration, and humanitarianism.

### 1.4 State of the Art

Located at the inevitable intersections of queer/gender studies, socio-cultural anthropology (of humanitarianism), refugee and (queer) migration studies, and Middle East/Arabic studies, my project emerges out of and fills many lacunae within the available literature on queer and trans* issues, and gender and sexuality in general, both in the Syrian and the larger MENA/Arabo-Islamic contexts. In what follows, I lay out the predominant strands of knowledge production on queerness in MENA and Syria—since both feed into each other—and map the various gaps in the fields within which this project is located.

When it comes to MENA, knowledge production on nonnormative genders and sexualities is largely restricted to three dominant strands. First, academic literature in the fields of Middle Eastern, Arabic, or Islamic Studies follows what anthropologist Kath Weston aptly calls "a form of ethnocartography" or "looking for evidence of same-sex sexuality and gendered ambiguity in 'other' societies" (1993: 341). Many of these studies look for, document, and analyze representations of what might approximate modern-day epistemologies of queerness, homosexuality, or gender non-conformity, and posit these, due to their proximity to modern Western sexual mores and rights discourses, as belonging to a more "permissive" and "tolerant" Arabo-Islamic past (Andrews and Kalpakli 2005; Babayan

and Najmabadi 2008; Boone 2010, 2014; El Rouhayeb, 2005; Habib 2007, 2009, 2010; Murray and Roscoe 1997; Najmabadi 2013). While this literature abounds in knowledge about the social, cultural, religious, and linguistic configurations of nonnormative genders and sexualities in the Arabo-Islamic past, its hyper-focus on representing this past in a very positive light and as a sign of pre-colonial, "authentic," and "diverse" ways of being and expressing sexual and gender nonnormativity remains questionable to me. Taking this critique into consideration, I contend that this strand has partially emerged as a reaction to Western accusations of sexual backwardness, a move that, as Sara Mourad reminds us, both misrepresents historical records as "ethnographic accounts" (2535) and constructs a version of the Arabo-Islamic past as free of power dynamics, representative of all the sexually and gender non-conforming people written about by mostly powerful, free men with status, and untainted by interactions with the imagined West over centuries of Arab, Muslim, and Western colonialism and conquests. In that sense, the recourse to history by certain scholars, and the projection of this history onto the present, further obscures the complexities of queer and trans* lives and subcultures within MENA.

The second strand of knowledge production resonates with the first, though with a focus on the twentieth century onward, and concerns critical literary analysis of homosexuality and gender non-conformity in novels and short stories, as well as cultural studies approaches to intellectual debates surrounding sex and sexuality in the Arab world (El Ariss 2013; Habib 2007, 2009; Massad 2008; Wright Jr. and Rowson, 1997). This literature confines itself, much like the first strand, to textual debates and representations, and pays little, if any, attention to lived realities.

The third strand can be traced back to May 2001, when Middle East and North African queer and trans* people first entered the global imaginary of gay and human rights discourses after the arrest of 52 gay men during the infamous Queen Boat event in Egypt (Amar 2013;

Long, 2004, 2012; Massad 2002; Pratt 2007; see also Whitaker 2006). This event drew unprecedented international attention that the MENA region had never witnessed in relation to an issue of gender identity or sexual orientation. Coinciding with the rise of the Internet and increasing access to it in MENA itself, this event caused a global uproar and a steady proliferation and institutionalization of narratives of suffering, oppression, and rescue—narratives whose form and content endure to this day. The journalistic and NGO narratives of suffering—regardless of which MENA context and the time, place, year, or background of what happened—started to take on a similar format, narrative style, and temporality: they would subside and disappear into oblivion most of the time, and reappear only when a large-scale, often deadly event happened. This cycle of repetitive suffering narratives was repeated in 2003, when the Egyptian police trapped people using dating apps (See Long 2004); in 2005, when the now "iconic" images of the hanging of two allegedly gay teenage boys in Iran began circulating (Kim 2005; Long 2009); in 2012, when emo-killings happened in Iraq (Human Rights Watch 2012; Ruhayem 2012); and most recently, of course, the Da'esh killings of "gay" men in Syria and Iraq (Cowburn 2016). This strand of knowledge production is primarily humanitarian, concerned only with journalistic and activist representations that further feed an undifferentiated image of suffering (as opposed to the images of happy queers in the West).[6] Some activists and activist scholars take issue with, document, analyze, and problematize the global gay politics underpinning the reporting of these specific large-scale events and the Western assumptions and notions of gender and sexuality such reporting propagates and is based on (Long 2009, 2015; Puar 2007; Rastegar 2013; Shakhsari 2014b). Such critical reflections, however, remain very scarce in comparison to the booming industry of sensational, journalistic reporting of LGBT suffering in the MENA region, and is (with the

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[6] Given that this strand of knowledge production is highly journalistic and due to the scale and number of such reports over decades on news and NGO websites, I only provide selective examples of sources that report on these issues.

exception of Sima Shakhsari's work, which I discuss later) largely concerned with analyzing discourses and images rather than ethnographically investigating such issues and their meaning and implication for queer and trans* populations across MENA.

Within these strands, the distinctive lack of knowledge production that is neither literary, historical, nor humanitarian draws attention to the potential that anthropological research could have in filling these gaps and approaching the complexities of gender and sexuality as they are lived, rather than as they should be narrated within the spaces charted above. However, anthropological research on the intersection of queer issues in the Arabic-speaking world is equally lacking (Kanafani and Siwar 2017; see also Kandiyoti 2015).

The now-classic reviews of the subfield of queer anthropology by Kath Weston (1993) and Tom Boellstorff (2007) do not contain a single ethnographic academic work on queerness in the Middle East or North Africa. Cymene Howe, in her review of "Queer Anthropology," points out that "more work is clearly needed in the Middle East and North Africa" and, despite the existence of one or the other source, "a significant gap remains" (2015). Likewise, in her review of "Transnational Humanitarianism," Miriam Ticktin only cursorily mentions the emergence of new literature on humanitarianism which "focus[es] on the way that often exoticized or ethnicized forms of sexual violence have become a reason for humanitarian intervention—prompted by familiar representations of suffering brown women and, more recently, by LGBTQ … victims of homophobic violence" (2014: 282). Ticktin mentions queer issues in this instance but fails to give any examples of such anthropological research precisely because literature that critically approaches queer humanitarianism remains surprisingly, or perhaps understandably, lacking. In their review of anthropologies of Arab-majority societies, Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar state,

> The intersection of queer studies and anthropology of the region is nascent, and we look
> forward to future ethnographic work on nonheteronormative practices, ideologies, and

identities that focuses on both urban and rural areas and includes both self-defined queer

communities and individuals and those for whom Western categories of sexuality are

largely meaningless. Given historical associations of the region with exoticism and the

difficulties of such research on the ground, researchers will have to tread carefully, but

the benefits to feminist and queer theory and to ethnography will be great. (2012: 551)

Written in 2012, the lack of references at the time to any queer anthropological work in

MENA is quite telling. While neither academic nor anthropological/ethnographic per se,

Brian Whitaker's book *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East* (2006)

and Shereen El Feki's *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World* (2013)

are journalistic/anecdotal accounts that center questions of sex, gender, and sexuality in

MENA and draw on real life stories and experiences (to varying extents), with El Feki

discussing homosexuality rather cursorily. As for academic anthropological/ethnographic

research, only a handful of ethnographies on queer issues have been published. For example,

Nisrine Chaer's work utilizes ethnographic methods and focuses on the dismally under-

studied and under-documented topic of lesbian and trans* feminist organizing in Lebanon

(2020).[7] Maya Mikdashi's ethnographic work on sex and sectarianism in Lebanon, the

intersection of which she terms "sextarianism", is an anthropological/ethnographic inquiry

into the ways sectarian and sexual difference co-constitute one another and regulate political

difference in Lebanon (2022).

Sofian Merabet's book *Queer Beirut* (2014) is an impressive ethnographic study of the

everyday lives of gay men in post-civil war Beirut, with an emphasis on the various

intersections between space, religion/sectarianism, sociocultural dynamics, and gender/sexual

identity formation. More recently, Lebanese sociologist Ghassan Moussawi's book *Disruptive*

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[7] In his ongoing doctoral research project, Nisrine Chaer (Utrecht University) explores notions of home and belonging in relation to queer and trans migration in Lebanon and the Netherlands.

*Situations: Fractal Orientalism and Queer Strategies in Beirut* (2020) is another significant and much-needed addition to the bulk of ethnographic work on queerness in MENA. In his ethnography, Moussawi offers a critique of the exceptionalism with which Beirut has been celebrated as an LGBT-friendly city and develops a different framework of reading and understanding LGBT discourses and activism in Lebanon as inextricable from the larger "situation" of volatile politics, economic precarity, and everyday violence. Notwithstanding Moussawi's critique of its alleged "exceptionalism" as a gay-friendly destination, Beirut has been at the center of these queer ethnographic endeavors, reflecting Beirut's long-standing mainstream (read: disputable) reputation as one of the most "liberal" cities in MENA and its long and vibrant history of LGBT activism.

Another context that has warranted anthropological attention is Palestine/Israel. Hila Amit's ethnography *A Queer Way Out: The Politics of Queer Emigration from Israel* (2018) focuses on a rarely studied aspect of the Israeli/Palestinian question: queer Israelis emigrating from Israel, rather than the mainstream hyper-focus on queer Palestinians heading to Israel. Another book by Sa'ed Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* (2020), is an anthropological inquiry into the politics of transnational solidarity with Palestinian LGBT activism and the question of how to balance the fight for Palestinian freedom within the LGBT movement with the struggle against homophobia beyond the usual anti-imperialist frameworks and narratives.

Almost a decade into the Syrian conflict, and despite the hyper- and at times bloody visibility of Syrian queer and trans* bodies in the media, academic work that focuses on Syrian queer and trans* issues remains largely absent. Recent scholarly publications focus on media and violence (Della Ratta, 2018), Syrian modern political history in the twentieth century as seen through print media during the 1950s (Martin 2015), or the Syrian State's political economy and resilience during the uprisings (Daher 2019). Kevin K. Martin's book

touches lightly upon the rare appearance of the question of same-sex desire among men in print media during the 1950s (2015: 135 – 141). Conversely, Della Ratta's book mentions only in passing the "gay girl in Damascus" online hoax incident at the beginning of the uprisings in 2011 (which I explore more fully in the first article). Otherwise, the only other author who taps into queer issues, very cursorily as well, is Rebecca Joubin. In her monumental book *The Politics of Love: Sexuality, Gender, and Marriage in Syrian Television Drama* (2013), despite its analytical and historical scope, depth, and originality, Joubin fails to include a queer critical perspective in her analyses, to document the various queer and gender non-conforming characters in Syrian TV drama, and to question the heteronormativity that prevails in the industry. Prior to 2011, John Borneman's ethnographic book *Syrian Episodes: Sons, Fathers, and an Anthropologist in Aleppo* (2007) also mentions homosexuality only in passing. In "Among Syrian Men", a chapter published in *Sexuality and Eroticism among Males in Muslim Societies* (1992), the author sheds light on the question of queerness and queer social constellations in Syria based on the stories and lived experiences of a number of "queer" Syrian men in the 1980s. While offering a few glimpses into Syrian queer life at the time, this chapter, much like the entire book, is rather Eurocentric and mired in uncontextualized analyses and orientalist stereotypes about Arab men's sexualities and social worlds.

While most of the literature I have overviewed is largely lacking in data and complexity, one article published in 2016 provides a more nuanced and well-contextualized discussion of queerness in Syria. In "The Many Queer Scenes of Damascus", anthropologist Matthew Gagné (2016) offers a vibrant description of the various spaces and scenes of queerness in the Syrian capital. Incisive and contextual, this article is one of few pieces available now that documents and analyzes queer life in Syria beyond the narrative framework of suffering and victimhood. While not part of his actual research project at the

time (which was focused on gay sex, queer men in Beirut, and digital media),[8] Gagné claims that the episodes he presents are ethnographic in nature. He also very clearly states that he was in Syria for the purposes of learning Arabic and doing "exploratory fieldwork," though it is not clear for what purpose, given that his primary research focus is online queer spaces in Beirut, and only this one article focuses on the Syrian context. His everyday "experiences" (2010 - 2011) within the queer circles in Damascus became "research material" years after his last stay in Syria, and at a time when Syrian LGBT refugees became hyped and important research subjects. This observation is not meant to disparage his views and analyses; it is to shed light on the politics of knowledge production on Syrian queer issues and the question of what becomes authoritative knowledge, when, how, and under which conditions. While understanding my own position as someone who started to conceptualize his project on Syrian queer and trans* issues in light of the global hype, I am wary of the lack of investment in distinguishing autoethnographic from ethnographic from oral history from autobiographical accounts in the Syrian context, and the different narratives, authority, and implications that come with each. I address this issue later in this introduction.

While academic research on Syrian queer and trans* issues and Syrian LGBT refugees remains scarce, my research project draws widely on the methodological and theoretical tenets of queer migration studies, especially in their increasing focus on LGBT asylum seekers and refugees. Fundamentally, queer migration scholarship questions the erasure of sexuality as an essential axis of power in the study of migration. It problematizes and deconstructs the often-heteronormative bases that undergird migration scholarship and its research methodologies in relation to notions such as "kinship, marriage, desire, and social roles" (Manalansan 2006: 225). It goes beyond including gender (which often implies heterosexual, cisgender migrants—mostly women) into its fields of inquiry, thereby centering

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[8] For an abstract of his dissertation, see https://www.mathewgagne.com/, accessed December 14, 2020.

sexuality as a constitutive part of all migration processes, rather than relegating it to a secondary factor that is often rendered inconsequential to the histories, politics, and dynamics of movement and migration (Luibhéid 2004: 227, 2005: ix, 2008: 171; Manalansan 2006: 225). "Queering" migration scholarship, in that sense, does not simply aim to be more "inclusive" of queer and trans* populations as new objects of study (Manalansan 2006: 226), but aims to question the very construction of "gender" and "sexuality" in relation to migration, and "acknowledge[s] that all identity categories are burdened by legacies that must be interrogated, do not map neatly across time and space, and become transformed through circulation …" (Luibhéid 2008: 170). By so doing, queer migration research historicizes otherwise "naturalized" identities (normative and otherwise) and examines the various racial, class, ethnic, cultural, and other power dynamics and hierarchies inherent in their construction (Luibhéid 2008: 172), especially through "migration regimes and settlement policies" (Luibhéid 2008:171).

With these fundamental tenets in mind, queer migration scholarship has produced various works that document, examine, and theorize the experiences of migration and movement undertaken by queer and trans* subjects through a queer lens.[9] Some of the earliest work to highlight and centralize questions of border-crossing and asylum-seeking as a result of persecution due to one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity discuss issues of sexual health, epidemics, and AIDS/HIV, and their effects on and implications for migration, sexuality, and immigration policies in the U.S. (Haour-Knipe and Rector 1997; Herdt 1997; Mishra, Connor, and Magaña,1996; Shah 2001), and immigration laws and policies as these

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[9] Queer migration scholarship examines different types of migration and movement, ranging from labor migration to sex tourism to marriage migration. Since many of these other topics are beyond the scope of this research project, and for an excellent review of queer migration scholarship, see Eithne Luibhéid "Heteronormativity and Immigration Scholarship: A Call for Change" in *GLQ* 10, no. 2 (2004)*: 227 – 235,* and "Queer/Migration: An Unruly Body of Scholarship," *GLQ* 14, no. 2-3 (2004):169 - 190, especially the footnotes. Also see Martin Manalansan, "Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies," *International Migration Review* 40, no. 1 (2006): 224 – 249.

relate to sexuality (Cantú 2009; Luibhéid 2002). In 2005, the publication of *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border-Crossings* constituted a milestone in queer migration scholarship. As a field-defining book, *Queer Migrations* raises central questions challenging migration and immigration scholarship's heteronormativity, explores the role sexuality plays in shaping migration, and examines questions of queer asylum and LGBT refugee issues as they relate to policies, laws, borders, and nation-making in the U.S. This focus on asylum-seeking and refugee status based on sexual orientation and gender identity and its history in the U.S. had wide implications for shifting the focus onto questions of asylum and refugeeness—issues that had hitherto not been at the center of queer migration scholarship. In 2008, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Henceforth *GLQ*) published a special issue on queer migration that reinvigorated discussions around migration from a variety of perspectives (historical, legal, representational, transnational, cultural, and linguistic) and expanded the purview of geopolitical spaces and temporalities outside the U.S. and its histories. However, LGBT refugees and asylum seekers fleeing their home countries to escape persecution based on sexual orientation and gender identity remained largely missing from queer migration scholarship.

As the focus started to shift away from the United States due to increased global attention on issues of persecution and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, new trends in queer migration scholarship emerged that highlighted the plights of LGBT refugees and asylum seekers escaping oppressive home countries and searching for sexual freedom in Western asylum-granting countries. This shift happened against the backdrop of a series of changes that started in the 1990s (Manalansan 1995), but slowly intensified and had more global presence after 2001: the globalization of LGBT human rights frameworks, the emergence of LGBT activism (NGO model) in non-Western contexts, and the increasing deployment of queerness and LGBT rights as a tool of dividing the world into a

"gay friendly," (therefore) modern and progressive West vs. a homophobic, (therefore) primitive and backwards rest (El-Tayeb 2011; Haritaworn, Taquir, and Erdem 2008; Luibhéid 2008; Massad 2008; Puar 2007; Rao 2014, 2020).

Critiques of these emerging dynamics, theorized as "gay imperialism" (Haritaworn, Taquir, and Erdem 2008), homonationalism (Puar 2007), and the Gay International (Massad 2002, 2008) greatly influenced queer migration literature, especially when looking at the legal, psychological, representational, and bureaucratic/institutional dynamics of seeking asylum or international protection based on persecution due to sexual orientation or gender identity. A seminal article in this regard was published by Laurie Berg and Jenni Millbank (2009) in the *Journal of Refugee Studies*. Berg and Millbank review legal and psychological literature of different asylum cases and identify, on the one hand, the patterns, motifs, and narrative queues that constitute the "expected" narrative from refugees seeking asylum based on sexual orientation, and the various issues that queer refugees face due to these narrative expectations, on the other. Much of queer migration literature highlights these issues in different contexts and focuses mostly on analyzing the imposition of narratives of sexuality and gender identity that are grounded in Western, essentialist notions, as well as narratives of progress and civilization that produce the West as progressive and the rest of the world as backwards. Moreover, this strand analyzes questions of queerness and refugeeness from the perspective of the institutions and decision-makers by closely studying court decisions— primarily rejections—of LGBT asylum seekers in Western countries (US, Canada, UK, Australia, and Germany); the bureaucratic, administrative, and legal hurdles the applicants face; and the often discriminatory and (Western) logics around sexuality, gender, *race*, desire, and identity development that the decision-makers reference in the different cases (Lewis 2013, 2014; Murray 2014; Raj 2011, 2017; Tschalaer 2019, 2020). Since the publication of the special issue in *GLQ* (2008), there have been three different special issues that address

questions of queer migration, refugeeness, and asylum: "Queer Migration, Asylum, and Displacement" in *Sexualities* (2014), addressing such questions prior to the so-called "refugee-crisis" and "summer of migration"; the SOGICA project's special issue on "International Protection and SOGI" (2018), focusing primarily on the Global North and the legal and human rights aspects of asylum laws regarding sexual orientation and gender identity across the EU; and the special issue on "Migrant and Refugee Lesbians" in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (2019), which fills a major gap in queer migration and refugee research on the experiences of lesbian migrants and refugees.[10]

Most of this work (with the exception of Mengia Tschalaer's), however, does not ethnographically approach these questions from the perspective of the LGBT refugees themselves outside of the power dynamics of the courtroom, the court decisions, or their being refugees altogether. In addition, although the work highlights the question of which narratives are allowed and which are less desirable in LGBT refugee stories, it falls short of delving deep into understanding the histories of where the specific LGBT refugees come from and how their "undesirable" stories, which often pose a risk to their asylum applications, are as varied and complex as the contexts they grew up in and the journeys they had.

Also lacking is queer migration literature that focuses on the intersection of media, Syria/Turkey, and LGBT refugees, an intersectionthat requires more active research, documentation, and analysis (see my first article). One exception is the article "Queer Migration and Digital Affects: Refugees Navigating from the Middle East via Turkey to Germany", by Yener Bayramoğlu and Margreth Lünenborg (2018), in which they examine the use of digital media by LGBT refugees on the move and its empowering as well as

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[10] The proposal for a special issue I am co-editing with Dr. Mengia Tschalaer on "Queer Liberalisms and Marginal Mobilities" has been recently accepted by the *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies*. In this special issue, we focus on LGBTIQ+ migration and mobility paradigms after the co-called "refugee crisis" and within a global context of rising authoritarianism and the intensification of borders.

limiting aspects. What is more surprising, however, about LGBT refugee and queer migration

literature is the dearth of literature on the relationship between UNHCR's third-country

resettlement and LGBT refugees in general, and Syrian LGBT refugees in Turkey in specific.

In fact, most of the literature I have reviewed so far focuses on LGBT people who crossed

borders and made it to refugee-receiving countries where they could seek asylum through

national asylum systems that recognize sexual orientation and gender identity as legitimate

grounds for seeking asylum (i.e., UK, EU, US, Canada, Australia). Much less research has

been done on countries that do not take refugees, such as Turkey, but only function as

"transit" countries for LGBT and other refugees to stay in temporarily and seek international

protection through UNHCR's third-country resettlement or other similar schemes (Canada's

private sponsorship program, for example).[11] However, recently, significant work has

emerged on queer and trans* refugees and UNHCR in Turkey, particularly in relation to the

complexities of the asylum system there and the challenges it presents for LGBT refugees

seeking international protection through UNHCR (Grungras, Levitan, and Slotek 2009;

Kivilcim 2017; Koçak 2020; Saleh 2020b; Sari 2019, 2020; Shakhsari 2014 a, 2014b).

For example, Sima Shakhsari focuses on exposing the gaps and failures of UNHCR as

a system and the paradoxes inherent in its constitution as a "rights-granting" paradigm that

both fails to fulfill that promise and produces a hierarchy of more mournable vs. less

mournable bodies of queer and trans* asylum seekers in Turkey (2014a, 2014b). More

recently, Mert Koçak highlights the different strategies LGBT refugees (must) follow to prove

the credibility of their claims and their "deservingness" of resettlement when seeking asylum

through UNHCR in Turkey (2020). Anthropologist Elif Sari's recent work focuses on the

dynamics of seeking asylum through UNHCR's third-country resettlement for Iranian lesbian

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[11] Only one of my interlocutors ended up being resettled through a Canadian sponsorship program after rejecting UNHCR's offer. The sponsorship program is a government-controlled program where NGOs or individuals can financially sponsor the resettlement of a person to Canada.

refugees in Turkey and the ways they are forced to tailor their asylum narratives to fit UNHCR's expectations of what constitutes an "authentic" and "deserving" lesbian identity (2019), and on waiting and the effects of the US and Canada's changing political and migration policies on the cases of Iranian LGBT refugees seeking international protection through UNHCR and Canada's private sponsorship program since 2015 (2020). This more recent scholarship is mostly ethnographic and does not only study court cases or focus on the bureaucratic and administrative points of view, but strongly builds on the views, opinions, narratives, and reflections of the interlocutors, who are in most cases Iranian LGBT refugees.[12]

While the bulk of this research on Turkey examines important aspects of the encounters between LGBT refugees and UNHCR, certain aspects remain understudied. Firstly, this work still falls short of touching upon or understanding UNHCR's resettlement paradigm as a security-humanitarian assemblage that is invested in the surveillance and securitization of LGBT refugees, not just in the sense of imposing Western credibility criteria on them, but in ensuring during the resettlement determination procedures that they are not a threat to the national security of the resettlement countries (See my second article.) This might be because Syrian queer and trans* refugees emerged during a war and other armed conflicts, a factor that is missing in the case of Iranian queer and trans* refugees and one that makes the question of "terrorism" and "national security" more prominent for Syrians than for other nationalities. Moreover, while this emerging body of ethnographic research engages thoroughly with the ways UNHCR enforces Western identity narratives and poses various challenges to LGBT asylum seekers in Turkey—which my research project also does—it does not engage with *what* has changed in terms of subjectivity, language, and the socio-cultural discourses on gender and sexuality that shaped the LGBT asylum seekers' identities,

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[12] Mert Koçak's work also spans other nationalities, though LGBT Iranian refugees are at the center of his work.

communities, and self-understanding prior to their escape and their encounter with UNHCR and the larger humanitarian-asylum complex. This is not a lack, per se, on the part of this emerging body of work; but it is a perspective that I emphasize as an important critical tool to not just name or document the ways Western discourses are imposed, but also show, in anthropological fashion, the transformations they effect in the different cultural constructions and perceptions of the very meaning of gender, sexuality, visibility, desire, and the body in the Syrian context and its diasporas. While my research project attempts to fill the various lacunae that I have mapped so far, it does so also by emphasizing the need for new theoretical frameworks through which to approach the specificities of Syrian LGBT refugee experiences and Syrian queer and trans* histories within the context of war, migration/asylum, and humanitarianism.

With most of the scholarship I have outlined focusing largely on the perspectives of institutions, decision-makers, NGOs, State actors, and migration laws and policies—with the ethnographic perspectives of the refugees mostly confirming these analyses—my research takes the approach of focusing almost exclusively on my interlocutors and their reflections and analyses of the institutional, administrative, and bureaucratic aspects of asylum in Turkey. While I have spoken to many LGBT activists, representatives of NGOs, government officials, etc., I have mostly centered my work around the narratives of the Syrian LGBT asylum seekers themselves. Moreover, I spoke with other Arabic-speaking LGBT refugee groups (primarily from Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon), and this provided me with excellent comparative perspectives that are outside of the limits of this dissertation, but that further expose the unequal treatment of different LGBT refugee groups within Turkey. Lastly, as the existing scholarship does the important work of mapping out the patterns of discrimination, challenges, and difficulties facing LGBT refugees seeking international protection in Turkey, and to avoid general repetitions, I choose to focus instead on the processes through which

Syrian LGBT refugees were constructed and the implications thereof on the level of politics, asylum, knowledge production, and resettlement chances.

### 1.5 Theoretical Framework

Central to my research and to understanding my emphasis on the processes that affect the emergence of Syrian LGBT refugees as a group identity is Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "assemblage" (2013). I posit queer humanitarianism as an assemblage whose constitutive parts, terms, relations, convergences, intensities, spatio-temporalities, subjectivation processes, and lines of flight I map in this dissertation. I find the concept of assemblage useful for three reasons. First, an assemblage, according to Deleuze and Guttari, consists of discursive, linguistic elements—collective assemblages of enunciation—as well as bodily, material, and affective parts—machinic assemblages (2013: 7; see also Delanda 2006.) Affects, bodies, various actors (human and non-human), and different discursive formations intermingle, enter multiple relations, and form an assemblage—in my case, queer humanitarianism—which cannot be reduced to the sum of its constitutive parts (Collier and Ong 2005: 12; DeLanda 2006: 11-12). That is, while queerness and humanitarianism are assumed to function in discrete, clear ways—one is anchored in "transgressive" sexualities, and the other in the "innate" human will to help—the collision of both assemblages changes the nature of each part, and the new assemblage formed, queer humanitarianism, is not simply an adding of queerness to humanitarianism, but one whose nature cannot simply be explained by the properties of its constitutive parts. In their convergence, queerness and humanitarianism exhibit new capacities that have not necessarily been part of the way we imagined either component to possess when approaching it from a discourse analysis perspective (DeLanda 2006: 11), a dynamic that my project demonstrates throughout. Attuned to the machinic, the material, and the affective, thinking through assemblage allows a

centralization of the non-linguistic and the pre-discursive in processes of producing new subjectivities, subject positions, discourses, and identities.

Second, assemblages are emergent, contingent, and processual (DeLanda 2006: 11, 14; McFarlane 2009: 561; Puar 2007: 204). Emergent, for it is not an "end-product" that can be claimed in language as closed-off, stable, or static—it is only capturable as it is forming, emerging, *in media res*; there is no "proper" beginning or end for it, only the processes and the relations its constitutive elements enter and the discourses, identities, subjectivities they produce along the way. Contingent, for it is unpredictable and cannot be known in advance; even if the writing process of an assemblage is a retrospective one, the writing itself must ensure that contingency, rather than certainty, is what characterizes its conclusions. Processual, for it is invested in the processes and "the mechanisms of emergence" (DeLanda 2006: 11), and as this project thoroughly demonstrates, mapping the processes through which Syrian LGBT refugees are produced as a constituency allows for imagining, tracing, and even effecting different processes that take research and theoretical/methodological approaches to the topics at hand into new, refreshing directions.

Third, an assemblage contains both spatiotemporally "stable" territorializations, on the one hand, and open-ended, unpredictable potentialities and their attendant lines of flight and deterritorializations, on the other (Collier and Ong 2005: 4; DeLanda 2006: 13-14; Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 22). That said, while this dissertation will map the different ways in which queer humanitarianism as an assemblage produces, limits, and stabilizes the discourses and representations of Syrian LGBT refugees as a homogenized identity, it simultaneously relies on, maps, and follows the many lines of flight provided by ethnographic materials, autoethnographic reflections and narratives, and media discourse analyses; all of which, in their inseparability and interwovenness, deterritorialize the "stable" and hegemonic discourses and open up the possibility for conceptualizing and understanding queerness, migration, war, and queer-anthropological knowledge production in relation to Syrian queer and trans*

populations *otherwise* (See Biehl and Locke 2017; Povinelli  2012, 2014; Weiss 2011). While assemblage is the overarching concept guiding my thinking on the issues at hand, the constitutive parts of queer humanitarianism—queerness and humanitarianism—are both assemblages in their own right, with various linguistic, political, material, theoretical, and methodological histories. In the following two sub-sections, I map the productive ways the interactions of their different parts provide fertile ground for theorizing humanitarianism and queerness in relation to Syrian queer and trans* populations in the context of war and migration.

### 1.5.1   A Note on Humanitarianism

I understand humanitarianism as, first, a "regime of care," which Miriam Ticktin defines as "a set of regulated discourses and practices grounded on [the] moral imperative to relieve suffering" (2011: 3); second, as a "potent force of our world" that consists of a "global spectacle of suffering and a global display of succor" (Fassin 2012: xi); third, and most importantly, as "a language that inextricably links values and affects, and serves both to define and to justify discourses and practices of the government of human beings" (Fassin 2012: 2). I present these interconnected definitions of humanitarianism, its language, discourses, and modes of governance, to highlight its most prominent components as an assemblage, a collective assemblage of enunciation (language, discourses, values, spectacle, practices, regulations, politics, institutions) and a machinic assemblage (affects, suffering, bodies, human beings, events). Thus, humanitarianism is not perceived to be some natural human drive to help the less fortunate, but as a "recent invention," a system for the governance and management of human beings,[13] and, I argue, an intricate and complex assemblage whose constitutive parts enter into

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[13] See Didier Fassin. *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2012; Miriam I. Ticktin. *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2011; Jean Bricmont. *Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2005; and Eyal Weizman. *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza*. London: Verso, 2012.

different relations with every new event, context, and group of people. Characterized as one of the worst humanitarian crises of our time (Giovetti 2019), the Syrian conflict has seen an (re)intensification of humanitarian sentiments, politics, and interventions on an unprecedented scale.

The contours of a humanitarianism that takes queerness as its field of operation have crystallized through the events of the Syrian uprisings, migration, and flight due to the ensuing wars, the emergence of Da'esh, and the encounter between Syrian queer and trans* populations and the humanitarian-asylum complex. This convergence between humanitarianism and queerness—queer humanitarianism—and the  various processes, subjectivities, tensions, negotiations, discourses, speculations, and affective entanglements characterizing and emerging out of this convergence, have reached an apogee, whereby the regulatory functions of both humanitarianism and queerness collide through the affective management of bodies and the production of homogenous, manageable subjectivities (Syrian LGBT refugees) as a group identity. If "humanitarian government"—humanitarianism's mode of governance— is, as Fassin aptly defines it, "the deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics" (2012: 1), then queerness, being both discursive (deployable in politics and regulatory) *and* affective (open-ended, unpredictable, and pre-discursive) lends itself as a perfect field for the modulation of human beings through sentiments. In what follows, I map both dimensions of queerness, the regulatory and the affective, and demonstrate how queer humanitarianism as an assemblage manages, modulates, and produces LGBT refugee subjectivities, on the one hand, while I retain queerness's open-endedness and affective potentiality as a means to deterritorialize queer humanitarianism, on the other.

### 1.5.2  Regulatory Queerness, Humanitarianism, and Homonationalism

Despite the revolutionary origins of "queer" and its intended function as an anti-normative stance that resists "regimes of the normal" (Warner 1993: xxvi), queer theorists, as early as

the 1990s and well into our current historical moment, have bemoaned the ways queerness has been appropriated when entering certain assemblages, especially the capitalist-liberal rights-media assemblage, whereby queer as radical has been pacified through commodification, the granting of certain rights to a select number of gay and lesbian populations (predominantly cis-, white, and middle class), and the increase in media representation, to name a few processes. Such a critique of the normalization and deployment—indeed, the stabilization—of queerness to produce "proper" gay and lesbian subjects at the expense of less proper ones has been taken even further in Jasbir Puar's postulation of queerness "as regulatory" (2007: 11), not only in the sense of producing and governing normative gay and lesbian subjects, but in a sense that goes beyond the locating of queerness within the realm of sexuality and into its function further as a "reintensification of racialization" (Puar 2007: xii), whereby "a very specific production of terrorist bodies against properly queer subjects" is taking place, and queerness becomes "the optic—and the operative technology—in the production, disciplining, and maintenance of populations" (Puar 2007: xiii). Building on Puar's critique of the regulatory dimensions of queerness, and in the context of understanding the dynamics of the production of Syrian LGBT refugees as a constituency in tandem with the humanitarian assemblage, I argue that queerness becomes the regulatory mechanism and process through which certain queer subjects are produced as properly humanitarian subjects worthy of protection, of "folding into life" (Puar 2007: 27), being granted citizenship, and being welcomed into the future nation-state, while others are produced as unintelligibly *queer*, and are thus excluded from queer humanitarianism's mandate.

The proper humanitarian subject is a normative gay (and less so a lesbian or transgender subject) in the Foucauldian disciplinary sense of these identities, whereby *normative* LGBT subject positions become the condition of possibility for the emergence of the humanitarian subject, and the "humanitarian condition" becomes the condition of possibility for the Syrian LGBT refugee to be intelligible as properly *queer*. For Syrian LGBT

refugees, and in fact for LGBT refugees in general, queerness as a process of the (re)intensification of racialization and the production of non-white bodies as terrorist bodies mutates into a different dynamic as it converges with humanitarianism. In Puar's formulation, the homonormative gay and lesbian subject folded into the nation-state is primarily white, whereby whiteness emerges as the property of proper queer subjects. This convergence between whiteness and queerness is further enabled, continues Puar, by "the simultaneous engendering and disavowal of *populations* of sexual-racial others" (2007: 2, emphasis in original). For LGBT Syrians, inhabiting disciplinary LGBT identities and the refinement of the narratives out of which their LGBT identities are supposed to have emerged is a process of the approximation of those subjects to white queerness. On this plane, the LGBT refugee's Syrianness is foreclosed, suspended, put on hold; it becomes the "sexual-racial" other that needs to be disavowed so that they can emerge as properly gay or lesbian by approximation to the whiteness of normative gay and lesbian subjects' identities.

In its convergence with humanitarianism, queerness exhibits properties that go beyond its historical discursive formation as the "domain of sexuality" and morphs it into an affective technology of racialization, nationalism, Islamophobia, and—as I argue—of the distribution of humanitarianism. Conversely, humanitarianism as an assemblage, in its convergence with homonationalism and queerness, becomes an affective technology of discipline, control, and the production/allocation of vulnerability, worthiness of protection, and care resources. However, unlike critiques that locate the emergence of such a dynamic within discourses of progress/backwardness, Islamophobia, and racism, I argue that a more essential process out of which these discourses, their subjects/objects, and politics emerge continues to be left out: the global distribution, circulation, and projection of certain emotions/affects as more appropriate for certain bodies, spaces, and times than others.

Here, I would like to turn shortly to humanitarianism and the centrality of

affects/emotions to humanitarian government,[14] and how these relate to regulatory queerness

and LGBT refugees. In a global market where suffering and negative affects form the

unquestionable, universal basis for queer identity formation (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 1999;

Brown 1995; Sedgwick 2003; Love 2007a) as well as the allocation of sympathy, care, and

humanitarian help (Fassin 2012; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997; Fassin and Rechtman 2009;

Sonntag 2003; Ticktin 2011), negative emotions as they relate to queerness are no longer

imagined to be part of white, Western LGBT populations' present, but rather as something

that belongs to the past. Many queer theorists have lamented this "development" and argued

that the circulation of positive affects as properties of Western nations and their LGBT

populations is a strategic move that is premised on disavowing suffering and negativity as

properties that now belong to a long-gone past, while placing the emphasis on joy, happiness,

and positive affects as the only appropriate affects to have/feel in the present as a resident

of "LGBT-friendly" nation-states (Ahmed 2008; Berlant 2011; Halberstam 2011; Love 2007a,

2007b; Muñoz 2009). While I condone this reading of the emergence of a capitalist,

compulsory mandate of happiness and positivity, I argue that it is lacking in one aspect: it is

strictly temporal and completely eschews the processes of spatialization that accompany such

disavowal of the "negativity" of the past. In fact, it is almost absurd how much of queer

theorizations in general, and studies of (queer) affects and emotions in particular, remain

detached from transnational, global, and everyday lived experiences of queer and trans*

populations, and, as anthropologists Ellen Lewin and William Leap rightly argue, are

primarily informed by "literary and philosophical texts, rather than ethnographic ones" (2009:

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[14] For the purposes of this dissertation, and following Sara Ahmed, I do not make a distinction between affect and emotion. Though irreducible to one another, I am initially interested in the discursive dimensions of queer negativity/positivity. Therefore, I use emotion/affect together and interchangeably throughout the dissertation. See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh Press, 2004, 25. See specifically endnote 4 of chapter 2 for a fuller account of her decision not to separate affect and emotion.

6). The dearth of ethnographically informed queer theorizations from non-Western contexts points to the often-ignored spatial aspects of queerness. That is, Western queer theories' obsession with temporality conveniently evades space/place as a relational phenomenon. I argue that a convenient disavowal of the "negative" past is not only enabled by focusing on the "positive" present, but also by claiming that queer negative affects/emotions now belong *somewhere else*.

Here, I am not talking about the critique that Western nation-states polish their image by selling us the story that sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are problems of other places (especially African and Arabo-Islamic contexts); rather, I point to the taken-for-grantedness of the idea that queer suffering, pain, and misery now belong somewhere else and are lived in those other places *the same way* they used to be lived in the past of the now-progressive West. What counts as pain and suffering for queer people in other places is presumed to be ontologically and epistemologically similar to what white LGBT subjects used to experience before the advent of homonationalism. In this reading, what constitutes joy, pain, sadness, oppression, and the very sexual and gender subjectivities of Syrian queer and trans* populations must conform to the discourses and narratives of what constitutes the affects, experiences, and subjectivities that are now accepted and established as intelligible to Western nation-states, their media, NGOs, and asylum and humanitarian institutions. Queer negativity is now the property of the inhabitants of those other places (in this example, Syria and Turkey), while queer positivity is located in the West. Following Sara Ahmed (2006: 67), Western queerness becomes "a spatial formation" and an "*orientation* [that] *is crucial to the sexualization of bodies*" (emphasis in original), whereby Syrian LGBT refugees who seek "happiness and joy" must reproduce this very narrative in order for them to be "allowed" to spatially move towards this kind of queerness (that is, be resettled) in the West. Queerness becomes a regulatory orientation and a spatial formation that produces Syrian LGBT refugees as proper humanitarian subjects whose suffering must resemble the disavowed past suffering

of white LGBT subjects so that they can "orientate" themselves towards the "empire," where the "seduction toward something better promises subjects an end to pain, marginalization, and violence in exchange for being recognized as legitimate subjects who can potentially participate in global capitalist relations and its future …" (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spita 2008: 129).

### 1.5.3  Queerness as Horizon, Queerness as an Anthropological Method/ology

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there … Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world. (Muñoz 2009: 1)

Ethnographic subjects are, in a sense, both life experiments and figures of surprise— not knowable ahead of time, unpredictable, and capable of shifting something in our own thinking. Remaining open to unfathomable complexity of layered entanglements … and acknowledging—even embracing—the unknown can inspire scholars to produce a more humble, tentative social science, keeping our theory more multirealistic and sensible and our modes of expression … more readily available for swerves, breaks, and new paths. (Biehl and Locke 2017: 7)

While mapping the processes through which queer humanitarianism as an assemblage forms and functions is at the center of my research, my work simultaneously and equally aims at retaining the radical potential of queerness as an analytical lens, coupled with the theoretical and methodological tenets of an "anthropology of becoming" (Biehl and Locke 2017). As both emphasize the "not here yet" (Muñoz 2009: 1) and "an attentiveness to the unknown" (Biehl and Locke 2017: 6), my queer-anthropological approach aims to deterritorialize queer humanitarianism's representational and political constrictions and to open other paths for thinking about queerness, humanitarianism, and migration in relation to Syrian queer and trans* populations. Within this framework, Syria, Turkey, and other non-Western contexts become legitimate (anthropological) sites of queer theorizing and knowledge production[15] that are not simply derivative of US and Eurocentric queer theories, but are constitutive of queerness as an assemblage in its own right,[16] one that is constantly shifting, emergent, processual; that rejects "the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality" (Muñoz 2009: 1), "care[s] for the as-yet-unthought that interrogates history" (Biehl and Locke 2017:x), and opens up a "potentiality … for another world" (Muñoz 2017:1). As I mention in my literature review, scholarship about queer and trans* populations from MENA in general, and from Syria in particular, follows a pattern that cannot imagine them as other than victims of different types of oppression in their "inherently" homophobic and transphobic cultures.

Queerness is maintained as a humanitarian issue—even identity—for queer and trans* Syrians, but never as a historical, cultural, social, and linguistic issue whose configurations, whether pre- or post-2011, raise important anthropological questions about approaching, researching, understanding, and analyzing queer cultures "elsewhere" and otherwise (Biehl and Locke 2017: x; see Povinelli 2011, 2012): how do understandings of gender, sexuality, identity, and culture—as necessarily interwoven and intersecting concepts—change when

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[15] See Jasbir Puar and Maya Mikdashi. "Queer Theory and Permanent War." *GLQ* 22, no. 2 (2016): 215 – 222.
[16] See Jasbir Puar. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (Durham, NC: 2007): 205.

seen from the perspective of the encounter between Syrian queer and trans\* populations and the humanitarian-asylum complex? How is a queer past in Syria remembered? And how does (auto-) ethnographic writing of queer cultural memory intervene in the present, challenge its discursive staleness, and provide new impetus for imagining different futures and more nuanced research trajectories?

In asking these questions, I centralize Muñoz's understanding of queerness as "distilled from the past" to imagine the future, but also emphasize an understanding of queerness as that which is never fully knowable, accessible, or representable, and that which is outside the dominant sexual and gender norms in any given time and place. Within this reading, I propose that Syrian queer and trans\* populations—by virtue of coming from contexts that have neither been documented nor written about enough, where different dialects of Arabic as well as other native languages such as Kurdish, Assyrian, Armenian, and Syriac, are spoken; the economic, social, cultural, religious, medical, and educational systems differ; and a conflict has been ongoing for more than nine years—embody queerness in its elusive, radical, and deterritorialized sense. They are subject to its disciplinary tendencies and regulatory mechanisms, yet actively destabilize and expand its contours by constantly questioning the legitimacy of the hegemonic systems in which they find themselves, and by remaining always one step away from being fully appropriated by dominant representational models of suffering and victimhood. It is important to mention here that this is not a binary opposition between "Western" vs. "authentic" Syrian queerness; far from it. Queer anthropological literature often warns against such dichotomies and emphasizes the global/transnational nature of the gender and sexual social and cultural configurations wherever they are found (Blackwood 2010; Boellstorff 2005, 2007; Dave 2012; Manalansan 2003; Towle and Morgan 2002; Valentine 2007; Weston 1998) a warning that I take seriously in my research. Opting for "queerness" as a potentially less epistemically and ontologically violent signifier is a choice made through the insistence on centering the stories, narratives,

and reflections—in short, ethnography—of the queer and trans* subjects of this research project. Following queer anthropologist Jafari Sinclaire Allen, the usefulness of queerness for deterritorializing hegemonic queer-humanitarian discourses, representations, and politics is not contingent upon whether the people themselves identify as queer (2016: 619). Queerness here "is not an identity or an anti-identity, but an assemblage that is spatially and temporally contingent" and one "that is unknown and not cogently knowable" (Puar 2007: 204). In the spirit of making this view of queerness productive, my research project foregrounds, rather than avoids, the tensions between "knowing" the communities I am studying as a Syrian gay man who grew up and spent most of his life in Syria and was/ist still part of its queer and trans* communities, and "not knowing in advance" as a queer-anthropological mode of approaching the field, talking to my different interlocutors, and doing research on Syrian queer and trans* issues in the context of war, migration, and asylum.

## 1.6 Entering the Field: Fieldwork, Methods, and Methodology

This dissertation is based primarily on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2015 in Istanbul with Syrian LGBT refugees who mainly, though not exclusively, sought international protection through UNHCR. With a keen interest in understanding the emergence of Syrian LGBT refugees as an entity within queer humanitarianism, I followed the lives and journeys of ten gay asylum seekers from Latakia, Damascus, and Homs; eight transwomen from Latakia, Tartous, Damascus, and Aleppo; and one transman from Damascus. All of them were in their twenties at the time of fieldwork. Prior to my field visits, I had started following some of their journeys from as early as 2013, albeit in the form of online ethnography[17] through social media (mainly WhatsApp and Facebook groups) and more traditional ethnographic data collection through communication tools such as Skype.

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[17] See Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller, eds. *Digital Anthropology*. London: Berg, 2013 and E. Gabriella Coleman. "Ethnographic Approaches to Social Media," *The Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 487-505.

During my fieldwork, I started to collect data primarily through participant observation, taking field notes and conducting open-ended and, in some cases, semi-structured interviews with my interlocutors. When there were more than two people involved, setting up an interview was neither desirable nor practical. Instead, I recorded most of those bigger meetings with the consent of all participants. That is, I recorded everything during an entire meeting regardless of how much of the conversation revolved "directly" around research-relevant issues. While some of these meetings were gatherings at my or a friend's home, other meetings included those that Syrian LGBT refugees had every week as part of the Syrian LGBT support group *Tea and Talk*.[18] In addition to ethnographic fieldwork, and having known some of the interlocutors from when I still lived in Syria prior to 2011, autoethnographic recollections and reflections also became central to understanding the question of how Syrian queer and trans* populations and issues entered global discourses through the queer humanitarian assemblage. In addition to the use of autoethnographic and ethnographic data, media discourse analysis has become central to understanding the explosion of media representations and narratives surrounding Syrian LGBT refugees, especially during 2014 and 2015. The intermingling of media discourses, ethnographic stories, and my own personal involvement in different capacities has constituted inseparable data gathering approaches that constantly affect and shape one another, simultaneously and consistently throughout the years 2013 – 2016.

After three separate short trips to Istanbul between July and December 2014, I decided to plan a longer field research visit to Istanbul in 2015. After my visit in November 2014, my Syrian passport expired, and I could not get a new one from the Syrian embassy in Berlin. The

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[18] While the group still exists, their in-person meetings stopped in July 2019 due to the many raids of the Istanbul police at the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM) in Tarlabaşi Street near Takism Square, where the police would arrest any person who is not registered in Istanbul and send them back either to Syria if they do not have any registration or to the city where they are officially registered. See Amami and Rollins. 2019. "For Syrians in Istanbul, Fears Rise as Deportations Begin." July 23, accessed 23.07.2020, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2019/07/23/syrians-istanbul-fears-rise-deportations-begin

reason was that I was supposed to complete mandatory military service, and the embassy would not issue passports to anyone who had not officially postponed their military service or paid exemption money (8000 USD). As I could not do either, and since I was neither a refugee nor qualified to apply for German citizenship, I decided to apply for a German travel document for foreigners, an awkward grey document that one rarely comes across. With this travel document, one has to apply for a visa to Turkey; and though I had already received a visa once for my trip in December 2014, the second time I applied (to spend two months in Istanbul in early 2015), my application was rejected. With this restriction to my mobility both as a person and as a researcher, ethnographic fieldwork onsite was no longer an option, and so I opted for online ethnographic fieldwork. That is not to say I did not use the Internet and social media before in order to collect data. In fact, I would claim that it is impossible in the twenty-first century to bypass the Internet and social media as part and parcel of our fields of operation, whereby a dichotomy between *real* and *virtual* seems questionable at best (Horst and Miller: 2012:13; see also Boellstorff 2012). Nonetheless, the quality of the interactions online was necessarily different, and it required a different type of attentiveness and reflection. First of all, talking on WhatsApp or Skype was an everyday happening for me and those in Turkey anyways. Regardless of my research agenda, we talked a lot. Social media is what sustains us and our relationships in the Diaspora and at the now-imagined home. In that sense, and if I may reference the recent Covid-19 context, the Internet and social media had already had a primary social function for the dispersed Syrians across the globe, I would argue. In fact, meeting in *real* life with all the restrictions on mobility (and I was still one of the more privileged ones) became the exception, the less viable social reality of many Syrians, LGBT or not—at least at the time. In other words, it became less "real," and more of a "virtual" possibility that might or might not be activated. That said, I became part of many closed Syrian LGBT Facebook groups and WhatsApp groups. Morning coffee informal *dardashat* (Levantine Arabic for chit-chats) and daily gossip with different people dispersed

across Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, and myself in Europe constituted the bulk of my data during this period. In fact, gossip and *dardashat* remain the most central data-generating activities throughout the years my research and writing process have been taking place.[19]

It was not until July 2015 that I was able to renew my Syrian passport, and I undertook an extended fieldwork trip to Istanbul from August until December 2015, a period that proved to be pivotal to the consolidation of queer humanitarianism as an assemblage and the emergence of a Syrian LGBT constituency. In fact, I cannot over-emphasize the significance of this period to understanding the workings of the queer humanitarian assemblage, especially in the context of Istanbul at the time. First of all, if the Syrian uprisings in March 2011 were a watershed event for Syrians rather than the rest of the world, the summer of 2015—famously dubbed the summer of migration[20]—was an event par excellence, in the Deleuzian sense, which set intensities in motion and brought together various assemblages, the products of which we are still retrospectively grappling with and attempting to pin down, document, analyze, and understand as they unfold and affect lives, institutions, borders, nation-states, discourses, and bodies.

It is important to mention again at this point that Jaafar is my best friend and primary interlocutor. We have been best friends since 2008. Ever since I left Syria in 2010 to do my Masters in Germany, Jaafar has been my biggest connection not necessarily to the community, but to a reflective, nuanced, and detailed level of what has been happening with/in the community during the war, primarily in Latakia, but also in other contexts in Syria. Of course, I have been in touch with many other friends still residing in Syria regularly, but it was thanks to Jaafar that many who did not know me personally got to know me

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[19] In their doctoral research project on Syrian LGBTIQ refugees in Lebanon, Razan Ghazzawi (University of Sussex) develops and theorizes *dardashat* as a methodology and a method of data collection that reflects the cultural dynamics of conversing and chit-chatting among Syrians. During our conversations about our respective research projects, *dardashat* has frequently come up as central to our fieldwork and the way we interact with interlocutors and collect data. To the best of my knowledge, Razan Ghazzawi has gone further in exploring its methodological underpinnings for research in the context of queer asylum.

[20] See Sabine Hess et al. *Der lange Sommer der Migration: Grenzregime III*. Berlin, Association A, 2016.

through him, which opened a whole network of starting new friendships with older

acquaintances or becoming acquainted with people one heard of before, but never actually

met in real life in Syria. In that spirit, a couple of days after I arrived in Istanbul, Jaafar had

already set the scene for a big welcome meeting at the most frequented hangout for queer and

trans* Arabs and Syrians in one of the small alleyways branching out of Istiklal Street,

Kafeka café. As a shisha café with a reputation as a queer- and trans* friendly cruising spot,

Kafeka was central to most of my fieldwork encounters, where I had many meetings,

discussions, and interviews with almost all the Syrian queer and trans* people involved in this

research. When I arrived at Kafeka, it was an overwhelming evening; we were twelve people

from Latakia, Damascus, and Homs. Later, we were joined by two other friends whom I knew

from Latakia, and their friend from Iraq, who in two days was going to be resettled to the US

through UNHCR after years of waiting. As this person announced the happy news to the

table, and as was customary for many Syrians in 2015, the talks turned to asylum,

resettlement, escape, crossing by sea, and the countries where it would be best to resettle.

After all, 2015 was the year when Germany temporarily adopted an open-door policy for

migrants, and hundreds of thousands made it to Germany that year, with the numbers reaching

a pinnacle in that specific month of August in 2015 (Horn 2015). Many of the people sitting

around the table were either waiting for money to arrive from family and friends or had

arrived in Istanbul a few days prior and were already preparing their boat arrangement by a

smuggler. Some others, however, came to stay and apply for asylum through UNHCR, or had

already applied and are awaiting that one phone call with their interview or departure dates.

Everybody knew, to varying degrees, who I was, what I did, and where I had lived for the last

few years. Living in Germany automatically made me the person to ask about the prospects of

life there, the pros and cons, and the advantages and disadvantages. I tried to answer all

questions to the best of my knowledge, making sure to communicate the fact that I was in a

very different position from them and could only answer as a resident who did not have to seek asylum and already had access to a set of privileges.

The question that was most frequently asked was whether I thought it is better to seek asylum as Syrians or as gay (given that all except for one trans*woman were gay cis-men). The question was surely surprising and puzzling, for whereas resettlement as a scheme became more or less known to many within the queer refugee circles in Turkey, Lebanon, and other "transit" countries, seeking asylum based on sexual orientation or gender identity was not a highly-discussed topic, and I could not really think of large-scale or ground-breaking legal cases, reports, statistics, or precedents which I could cite to properly answer that question. Despite all the journalistic articles and sensational stories, social media pages, policy briefings, and a handful of reports by NGOs on LGBT refugees, a full-fledged, systematized political discourse around queer asylum had not yet crystallized. Surely, the contours of a humanitarianism that specifically targets Syrian LGBT refugees had started to take shape, at least in the political arena of competing global (read Western), regional, and local humanitarian organizations and activist groups. Yet, it did not have an identifiable face, a clear-cut discourse, or homogenous policies. Therefore, I answered to the best of my knowledge, and did recommend that they apply based on coming from Syria, a country torn by war, given that this had proven to be less complicated for many who had already made it to Germany.

When I asked why they would not seek asylum through UNHCR instead of risking their lives in the sea, many had similar concerns about what their friends had undergone in the asylum process, the worst aspects of which being the long waiting time until resettlement and the arbitrariness of the system. Many cited the case of Jaafar and Hasan, both of whom were at the table, who had waited for almost two years for a departure date. Wissam, who applied with Jaafar and Hasan on the same day, had already been resettled to the US in July 2015.

Although the three fled together from the city of Latakia in 2014 and were all part of the same case/story, Wissam had made it and the others had not. Of course, Jaafar and Hasan's story is not exceptional, but rather a standard story for asylum seekers who sought international protection through UNHCR. What is probably exceptional about Jaafar and Hasan's story is that, much like many other LGBT Syrian refugees until that point in time, their being Syrian gay refugees had been represented, written about, discussed, and globally packaged as exceptional vis-à-vis many other refugee groups and populations, an exceptionalism that neither they nor their friends seemed to feel or see at that point, at least not in the same ways it was circulating (See second article). Of course, when pitted against LGBT asylum seekers from other nationalities, Syrian LGBT refugees were most definitely favored and had a better chance of being resettled in phenomenal periods of time. However, this dynamic led many to mistakenly believe that among Syrian LGBT refugees and asylum seekers, the process and chances of resettlement were both unified and guaranteed, which was not the case. Given all these factors, those who were planning to go to Europe felt justified in wanting to risk it as Syrians, but not as gays; a dichotomy of two identity positions, or in this case rather orientations, that seemed to steer this specific group in different directions, risks, and spatialities.

That divide between Syrian queers seeking asylum as Syrians in Europe and other queers seeking international resettlement based on sexual orientation or gender identity via UNHCR in Turkey, two assemblages with very different constitutive parts, was the driving force behind conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Istanbul primarily with those who sought asylum through UNHCR. This division was also partially the result of the complex asylum situation in which Syrians in general, and Syrian queer and trans* populations in particular, found themselves after fleeing to Turkey. Directly after the uprisings in 2011, Syrians started to flee to Turkey to escape the intensifying conflicts and seek protection. This prompted the Turkish government to immediately establish what it called a "temporary protection regime,"

which became a fully-fledged legal regulation governing the status of Syrian refugees in October 2014.[21] Under the temporary protection regime, Syrians occupy a particular position that sets them apart from other nationalities/groups. Although a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, Turkey still applies a "geographical limitation" to the Convention (Zieck 2010: 593-94) which stipulates that only Europeans can seek asylum and be considered refugees in Turkey, whereas non-Europeans are only allowed to reside in Turkey temporarily while seeking international protection through UNHCR's resettlement program. Syrian nationals or stateless persons originating from Syria are neither of these two categories (Sari and Dinçer 2017: 59-60). The temporary protection status restricted their right to seek asylum through UNHCR. Notwithstanding this restriction, there was a select number of people whom UNHCR deemed to be highly vulnerable groups among Syrians. Although not explicitly named, Syrian LGBT refugees gradually emerged as a *de facto* vulnerable group under UNHCR's mandate, and they could seek asylum if they could prove a "well-founded fear of persecution" due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Kivilcim 2017: 28). In this constellation, those who stayed in Turkey and sought international protection through UNHCR had to foreground their queerness or trans*ness (they are escaping homo- or transphobia in Syria) rather than their Syrianness (because Syrians simply escaping war cannot seek international protection unless they fall under certain extremely vulnerable groups). However, this also implied that the respective LGBT refugees had to go through a long, tedious, and bureaucratic process, which many who headed to Europe found too time-consuming, complicated, and demanding.

In fact, everyone I knew who crossed by sea during that year arrived as a Syrian in Europe and felt that they did not want to complicate things by talking about their gay

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[21] The temporary protection regime governing Syrians and stateless persons originating from Syria is based on article 91 of Turkey's first asylum and migration law, *The Law on Foreigners and International Protection* (fully enforced in April 2014) and the Temporary Protection Regulation (issued in October 2014). See Asylumineurope, n.d. "Introduction to the Asylum Context in Turkey," accessed 29.11.2010. https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkey/introduction-asylum-context-turkey

identities, fearing that the authorities in Germany might start a separate, more complicated, and longer asylum process similar to the one at UNHCR in Turkey than if they registered with the "self-evident" reason of being Syrians escaping war. This is also the reason why, in my research in Turkey, I had not encountered a single Syrian queer, bisexual, or lesbian woman seeking asylum through UNHCR, as all the people I knew either wanted to settle down in Istanbul, refused to seek international protection through UNHCR, or headed to Europe. They did not want to deal with long waiting times in Turkey as queers *and* as women. Interestingly, however, the rise of populist sentiments across Europe, the presidency of Donald Trump, and the big wins for right-wing parties in different EU countries were cited as some of the reasons that incited fear about the future of Syrian refugees in Europe, especially that most countries still give temporary residence permits to Syrians.

Following up on all of my interlocutors, including those who are now in Europe, I learned that many people started to come out publicly, and have tried to ensure that their queerness is known in case the European governments ever decide to start designating Syria as a safe country[22]—something that has already started—so they will always be able to cite their sexual orientation and gender identity as a reason why they should not be returned. This assemblage is very different from that of the UNHCR-Turkey-Syrian-LGBT assemblage, and I argue that it is the latter that has morphed into a larger, stabilized queer humanitarian assemblage. Given that Syrian queer and trans* populations in Turkey seeking asylum through UNHCR stayed, were not mobile, were waiting in limbo, and thus less threatening, less generative of lines of flight due to their "controlled" movement, and more fixable, I argue that these factors strongly led to the consolidation and sedimentation of queer

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[22] Since 2019, the Danish government has made several statements alleging that refugees could be returned to Syria because it is a "safe" country. See, for example, Miriam Berger. 2019. "Denmark Denied Refugees Asylum by Arguing It's Safe for Them to Go Home." *The Washington Post*, December 18, accessed November 29, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/12/18/denmark-denied-refugees-asylum-by-arguing-its-safe-them-go-home-syria/. See also,"Denmark may return Syria refugees as Damascus area deemed 'safe.'" 2020. *Middle East MonitorJuly 6, accessed November 29, 2020.* https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200706-denmark-may-return-syria-refugees-as-damascus-area-deemed-safe/

humanitarianism. In other words, those who stayed, despite the "summer of migration" and the possibility of heading to Europe, became the global objects of various actors, such as journalists from all over the world, primarily white US-American gay men, Western LGBT organizations (such as ORAM), Turkish LGBT organizations (such as Lambda Istanbul and SPoD), UNHCR itself and its implementing partner ASAM (Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants), resettlement agencies such as the International Organization of Migration (IOM) and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), representatives of embassies, politicians (such as Randy Berry, the special envoy of the human rights of LGBT people in the United States), an intensified circulation of writings, imagery, videos on various social media platforms and in other media (for example, the film *Mr. Gay Syria*).

The coming-together of all these actors, though prompted by the summer of migration, was possible through choosing to focus on those living in a highly affective state, continuously tense, always in anticipation, with a constant mixture of fear and hope. Observing the complex dynamics of the interactions between Syrian queer and trans* populations in Turkey and those actors is at the center of the work presented here. It was a dynamic of observing and recording the ways that such dynamics produced Syrian LGBT refugees as a monolithic constituency: a group of people who suffered homo- and transphobia, left the country, sought asylum via UNHCR, and waited for a Western country to resettle them out of queer humanitarian benevolence. This extends homonationalism's mandate, turning it into a queer humanitarianism that purportedly extends its benevolence, rights, and protections to those from other nations who are, however, good potential citizens of the future nation: seeking asylum without "illegal" crossings, static, waiting, succumbing, disciplined, and following identitarian narratives of suffering, oppression, and rescue dictated by all those actors. While following and mapping the ways in which this constituency was emerging at the time, my observations were intensified by my interlocutors' feedback on

these very processes. Feedback, however, did not always come in the form of talking, reflecting, and thinking through the various events happening: eruptions of anger, depression, extreme frustration, and a nagging sense of anticipation were part and parcel of the ethnographic fieldwork. What makes in-person interactions fundamentally different from online ethnography is that the body's capacity to affect and be affected is most pronounced in these situations: affect takes primacy, discourse comes second; assemblages come together, ethnographic reflection comes later. Syrian queer and trans* populations in terrible living conditions, some doing sex work, some surviving on money from family and friends, or doing twelve-hours a day jobs with very little income in a competitive environment such as Istanbul of 2015 started to reproduce and heavily rely on the emerging image of a Syrian LGBT constituency with the entire repertoire of suffering narratives attached to it, suffering that focused much less on their misery as Syrian and queer/trans* in Turkey, but rather that continued to invest in producing histories of suffering in and about Syria that were either inaccurate, not representative, reductive, or simply wrong.

Although being LGBT was not criminalized in Turkey, and although Istanbul was known for having a vibrant LGBT community, organizations, and nightlife—which is what drew many Syrian LGBT refugees to it in the first place—2015 was the year when many things started to change in the Turkish queer political scene. On Sunday, June 28, 2015, I received a message on WhatsApp from Jaafar. It was Pride Week, and I knew that Jaafar and other friends were going to their first Pride event that day. The excitement had been building up day after day, much less because it was Pride and more because it was a Pride march in Istanbul, Turkey—which, as Jaafar always exclaimed, made it feel more political than many others around the world. The first message had a sense of urgency: "Fadi!" he said. I replied, never expecting the next message to be: "They are using water cannons against [the march] and we are running away and soaking wet." For the first time in 12 years, the police were dispersing the gay pride march in Istanbul. Later that day, Jaafar and I had a video call, and

Jaafar narrated the details of what happened. One statement he made described how it felt for him as a Syrian gay refugee in Istanbul: "I never thought I would experience water cannons and being chased by the police at a gay pride march in Istanbul, when I did not even experience such a thing in Syria." This event marked a shift in the queer political dynamics in Turkey's public sphere. Nightlife and other aspects of queer commercial visibility had been flourishing over the years, but Pride as a political event continued to be banned or dispersed in the years following 2015. Many of the incremental, but steady, successes of the queer movement in Turkey over a decade of activism, which peaked during and after the Gezi Park protests in 2013, were increasingly at risk (Çetin 2016). A more conservative rhetoric regarding LGBT issues has been taking hold and the State continued to curtail LGBT freedoms (Cunningham 2016; Fishwick and Guardian readers 2017; Yackley 2020). These challenges to queer activism and the LGBT movement in Turkey were happening against the backdrop of the "refugee crisis" and a general atmosphere of xenophobia, increasing "anti-Syrian sentiments" (Simsek 2015), discrimination, and violent incidents against Syrian refugees in various parts of the country (Baban et al. 2017).

Despite the few "safe" spaces Istanbul could offer queer and trans* people, and in an environment of increasing hostility towards Syrians, Syrian LGBT refugees occupied a difficult position and experienced intersectional, multi-layered levels of discrimination due to their national origin, refugee status, and being LGBT in Turkey. Violence and discrimination were an everyday happening to many of my interlocutors in different aspects of their lives: work, housing, health services, public space, relationships, sex work, and, of course, dealing with the bureaucracies of the State, its migration directorates, and related institutions. Denied work while their resettlement cases were ongoing, many of my interlocutors had to settle for working "illegally" for long hours, little pay, and no guarantees or insurance (Baban et al. 2017: 81). Of course, this applies to all Syrian refugees in Turkey, but many of my interlocutors emphasized the fact that being LGBT caused further discrimination and less

access to work than their non-queer counterparts, especially if they exhibited any signs that were socially read as being "queer." This limited their options to working in saunas, cooking in hotels or restaurants, LGBT NGOs, and sex work. Trans* sex workers experience daily violence, and Syrian trans* refugees have to deal with the extra layer of being discriminated against by society at large, the police, their clients, and at times the Turkish LGBT community, some of whom sometimes saw them as concurrence. For many Syrian LGBT refugees, reporting to the police when incidents of violence occurred would not even cross their minds, for it was known that "there is a pattern of impunity and leniency for violence against women and hate crimes in Turkey that perpetuates violence against women, as well as hate crimes against queers, transgender people, and sex workers" (Sari 2015; see also Sari 2020), and being a Syrian refugee in Turkey exacerbates such a dynamic. On different occasions, some of my interlocutors were physically assaulted, their phones and wallets stolen, and they went home bleeding. They would not go to the hospital or report these events to the police. Such violence was not exclusive to their interactions with Turkish society and institutions, but also extended to the Syrian communities in Istanbul, especially in relation to housing.

During the entirety of my fieldwork in 2015, most of my gay interlocutors lived in a dorm of around 10 people, half of whom were non-queer and some of whom held extremely conservative opinions on gender, sexuality, and religion. Being LGBT was one thing; being with or against the revolution; Alawite, Shiite, or Sunni; gender non-conforming or feminine all became factors that intensified the living situation for my interlocutors, treading murky waters and ensuring that they were as discreet as possible when it came to those topics and issues when around other Syrians. In fact, questions relating to politics and the uprisings were at times the bigger source of fear for my interlocutors, a fact that points to the need for intersectional analysis that does not continue to reduce them to their sexual orientation or gender identity. My trans* interlocutors, on the other hand, mostly lived in the more "posh"

areas around Taksim, Istiklal Street, Cihangir, and Şişli as a measure of safety, despite the more expensive costs of living. Many of them lived in what was well known in 2015 as the "trans\* building," which was continuously "occupied" by Syrian trans\* refugees and thus turned into a "safer" place for the Syrian trans\* sex worker community in a largely transphobic and violent environment.

Within these multi-layered dynamics of discrimination and violence that I followed, observed, and recorded during my fieldwork, anger, sadness, frustration, and exhaustion were part and parcel of everyday life for my interlocutors. Such affective states were also partially induced by the insecurity of waiting for resettlement, a reality those who went by sea managed to escape. One striking dynamic that I traced day to day in my interlocutors' interactions with the different humanitarian, State, activist, and media actors, however, was how their narratives of suffering and misery in Syria increased proportionally to the discrimination and suffering they faced in Turkey. That is, in journalistic interviews, resettlement interviews, activist workshops, or when seeking support from NGOs, their affective responses to the daily violence they experienced in Turkey *had to* translate to more narratives about suffering in Syria. Given that they are seeking asylum based on persecution in Syria, speaking openly about the violence in Turkey was rather irrelevant and less useful to their asylum cases. However, together with longer waiting times and extreme global attention to Syrian LGBT refugees in Turkey at the time of my fieldwork, I contend that this led to further adoption of ready-made suffering narratives about the past in Syria, an intensification of the circulation of narratives and images that construct the past in ways that are intelligible to UNHCR, media, and other actors, while completely detaching their narratives from the actual suffering, discrimination, and oppression they were experiencing at the time in Turkey due to their national belonging, refugee status, gender identity, and sexual orientation. In fact, the continuous reproduction and repetition of suffering narratives neither helped expedite their asylum processes at the time nor changed their living situation in Turkey as Syrian LGBT

refugees. It is at this interstice of having to appropriate these tailored suffering narratives about "back home" while recognizing their limiting potential to help the very queer and trans* people they are said to represent and help that a certain tension between ethnography and autoethnography started to crystallize.

Observing, recording, interviewing, questioning, taking notes, and living through many of the affective states my interlocutors go through are all activities that are expected to be conducted from a distance and with the aim of doing the crux of what anthropological inquiry is about: "to report on and respect people as we find them in various locations" (Lewin 2016:598). It was this necessary distance that was continuously pointed out by my interlocutors: although being a close or good friend to many was supposed to dissipate this distance, it was actually the reason why many poured their hearts out in front of me with the implicit expectation that I will never speak about how they actually view UNHCR, media representations, queer humanitarian discourses, Turkey, asylum policies, and their own histories in Syria.

Despite suffering at the hands of many journalists and LGBT organizations who would harass them daily for interviews, write up false information to add some sensational details to their stories, or LGBT activists promising them help and quick resettlement if they do as they are told, the expectation was that I, at best, hide their critiques and the actual information of what was happening and how they felt until they were all successfully resettled or left Turkey to another safe place. That I did, of course. However, the autoethnographic, reflecting on my autobiographical stories in the past with the same people I am writing about now and how we lived as queer and trans* people in Syria, emerged as a constantly nagging feeling of discomfort, a reflection on the dynamics happening in Istanbul, and as queer methodology and method (Adams and Jones 2008, 2011; Jones and Adams 2010; Muñoz 1999) that converges with the ethnographic and offers refreshing ways of approaching, understanding, and destabilizing the emergence of the suffering Syrian gay refugee figure and the restrictive

determinacy and absoluteness of the discourses surrounding Syrian LGBT refugees at the time. The writing process started much later, after almost all the interlocutors were either resettled, moved somewhere else, or, in fact, went to Europe, hated it, and decided to head back to Istanbul (especially trans women- more on that in the conclusion). Capturing those various assemblages, their convergences, tensions, lines of flight, territorialization and deterritorializations, while maintaining the un-capturable, the non-representational, and the open-endedness of the many questions I pose in the conclusions to the articles presented here was a tough, yet rewarding task that entailed, as I have shown so far, a delicate tracing of events, situations, affects, and discourses, all of which guided the choice of methods and the need to update my methodological thinking as I go along.

### 1.7 The Articles

In the three articles presented in this cumulative dissertation, I highlight three different processes through which queer humanitarianism as an assemblage produces Syrian LGBT refugees as an intelligible constituency within the epistemological, political, and transnational boundaries of what counts as "properly queer" (Puar 2007: xxi), therefore "worthy" of humanitarian protection. Each article maps the dynamics and conditions of possibility for each of these processes, and challenges/deterritorializes them by introducing various lines of flight and allowing different research and writing trajectories, histories, and assemblages to emerge.

In the first article, "Queer/Humanitarian Visibility: The Emergence of the Figure of *the Suffering Syrian Gay Refugee*" (2020a), I offer a partial account of the media, activist, political, and purported "humanitarian" representations and frameworks through which Syrian queer and trans* populations have come to be reduced to the abstract figure of *the suffering Syrian gay refugee*. Very essential to this account is a mixing of methods, whereby I bring media discourse analysis, autoethnographic stories, and ethnographic narratives to bear on the

genealogy of the figure of *the Suffering Syrian Gay Refugee*. I argue that the very visibility accorded Syrian queer and trans* populations hinges upon the circulation and normalization of certain experiences and narratives of oppression, violence, and refugeeness as the only suitable origins of Syrian queer and trans* subjectivities and histories. The queer humanitarian assemblage activates the production of this figure through the assembling of certain affects (pain, sadness) with certain experiences (suffering, death, persecution), and both are heavily circulated as part of the Syrian queer body's experience, a body that emerges then as an intelligible gay subject who needs queer/humanitarian protection and is thus accorded a very specific kind of queer/humanitarian visibility.

The most dangerous thing about this process is not the representation itself, but rather the normalization of what I call "associative frameworks," whereby the excessive circulation of these representations foregrounds certain frameworks (Syrian-suffering-gay-refugee) as the unquestionable, taken-for-granted bases for all knowledge production on Syrian queer and trans* populations, refugees or not. This has methodological implications with regard to the question of writing queer histories outside the West because it instates certain frameworks as the most "natural" starting points of research and writing, where one does not ask, "Did you suffer in your home country due to your sexual orientation or gender identity, and if yes, how?" but rather, "Tell me how you, as a Syrian LGBT refugee, suffered, were forced into invisibility because of (self-evident) homo- or transphobia in Syria, and how you found freedom and visibility in the West thanks to UNHCR?" Such a formulaic question presumes suffering, in/visibility, homophobia, transphobia, and queer freedom to be unproblematic, self-explanatory, and universal terms that must have the same histories, meanings, and implications regardless of context.

While my tracing of this process focuses on specific events (*Gay Girl in Damascus*, Da'esh's violence against alleged gay men, the 2015 Security Council meeting on Da'esh and LGBT rights) and their circulation as media-events primarily through blogs, social media

platforms, and journalistic media outlets, the auto/ethnographic accounts I bring into the article intervene, destabilize, and actively deterritorialize *the figure of the suffering Syrian gay refugee* by highlighting those elements whose erasure from the mainstream narratives forms the basis of the stabilization of this figure. In this deterritorialization, I do not propose a counter-discourse or a different narrative as such, for that would take us back to the realm of representation and historical certainty. Therefore, I start and end the article with questions; questions that unsettle the hegemonic ways queer and trans* Syrians are approached and questioned about their lives and experiences. By asking questions that do not assume the universality of the hegemonic terms by which Syrian LGBT refugees are constantly represented, different, more nuanced narratives can be generated that are not definitive and maintain an open-endedness to those queer, unknown, and unintelligible elements of Syrian queer and trans* populations' experiences, lives, and histories.

In the second article, titled "Resettlement as Securitization: War, Humanitarianism, and the Production of Syrian LGBT refugees" (2020b), I follow another process through which the homogenous group of Syrian LGBT refugees is constructed: namely, the encounter between Syrian queer asylum seekers and UNHCR in Turkey. Between 2013 – 2014, and due to the temporary protection regime put in place by the Turkish government for Syrians fleeing to Turkey, Syrians were not allowed to seek international protection through UNHCR, or other similar institutions, based on fleeing war or conflict alone. Only a select number of Syrians who belonged to certain vulnerable groups were allowed to seek asylum through UNHCR. One of these groups was LGBT refugees. Unlike other groups, however, Syrians seeking asylum for reasons such medical conditions, surviving torture, etc., were still clearly affected by the war itself, so war was still considered, at least indirectly, as the clear cause of their conditions and main motivation for their escape. In contrast, however, Syrian queer and trans* people were allowed to seek asylum through UNHCR based *only* on sexual orientation and gender identity, causes that have *no* connection to the ongoing war. This, I argue, created

a dichotomy between Syrian queer and trans* asylum seekers as a group that is escaping homophobia/transphobia and non-queer Syrians as a group that is escaping war and conflict. Throughout the entire asylum process, Syrian queer and trans* asylum seekers *must* erase and disavow war, their experiences with it, or any elements of it that shaped, affected, or constituted their sense of gender identity and sexual orientation, thereby actively producing a narrative of their sexuality or gender identity as a result of homo- and transphobic threats or violence, a process that presumes homo- and transphobia to be ontologically and epistemologically independent and separate from the experiences of years of war. Within this dynamic, it becomes incumbent on the queer and trans* asylum seekers themselves to produce a narrative that meticulously falls within the limits of recognizability and intelligibility of what a credible gay refugee from Syria must be like. This has created another dichotomy in which heterosexuality is produced as a property of Syrians escaping war, while queerness becomes understood as belonging to those escaping only homo- and transphobia, and queerness is then understood as "secure" and "non-terroristic," and "heterosexuality" is produced as a threat to national security of resettlement countries.

It is within this dichotomy that resettlement through UNHCR becomes an arbiter of securitization, whereby resettlement countries offshore their "war on terror," fortify their borders, and extend their national security mandates by targeting sexuality as their field of operation. This has led to the emergence of celebratory discourses that claim that Syrian LGBT refugees are an exceptional group in comparison to their non-queer counterparts, primarily through positing them as non-terrorist and non-threatening proper future-citizens as opposed to heterosexual or non-queer refugees whose potential for being a "threat" to national security is considered to be ontological. However, as my ethnographic intervention demonstrates, this distinction is false. By following the stories of four different asylum seekers between 2013 and 2016, I demonstrate that, refugee status determination interviews and procedures took a drastic securitization turn after Da'esh emerged in 2014. Prior to

Da'esh, questions relating to security issues were irrelevant to seeking asylum based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Yet this changed in ways that also affected Syrian LGBT refugees, who also became seen as potential security threats until their narratives and stories proved otherwise. That Syrian LGBT refugees, also the product of war, had to disavow war and their experiences with it in order to emerge as "safe" and proper LGBT refugee subjects worthy of protection not only produces histories of gender and sexuality that are inaccurate and selective, but also exposes many asylum seekers to the danger of having their asylum cases rejected because they do not succeed in separating war from homophobia when telling their escape stories. This produces a Syrian LGBT constituency whose gayness can only be narrated as a single-axis identity, whereas all other vectors of identity and the material conditions (of war) that shape and constitute their very senses of queerness, refugeeness, and subjectivity must be elaborately disavowed and sieved out within the humanitarian space of UNHCR.

In the third article, "Transgender as a Humanitarian Category: The Case of Syrian Queer and Gender-Variant Refugees in Turkey" (2020c), I foreground transgender as a useful category of analysis to shed light on the issue of gender variance and its articulations within the encounter between Syrian queer and gender-variant refugees and the humanitarian-asylum complex. Within queer humanitarianism, transgender as a term first circulates among the queer and gender-variant circles as a thinkable possibility primarily through its function as a humanitarian category, especially as propagated by UNHCR. As it enters the UNHCR-Syrian queer and gender-variant asylum-seekers-language assemblage, *transgender* exhibits a new capacity that extends beyond its function as a gender category: It activates the production of "proper" transgender refugees. In this dynamic, *transgender* is not taken up by Syrian queer and gender-variant asylum seekers as a term that "actually" describes them or reflects their sense of gender identity. Rather, it enters their imaginary primarily through its function as a humanitarian term that produces them as subjects worthy of humanitarian protection if they

conform to its implications and forsake their own cultural and linguistic systems of identification as queer and gender-variant Syrians.

Transgender as a humanitarian category achieves this in three ways: first, it assumes that sex, gender, and sexuality must function with the same epistemological frameworks through which sexual orientation and gender identity operate in the West. Second, it imposes a model of having to separate one's sexual orientation from their gender identity and expression, a separation that is new in the West itself and not fully realized in the Syrian context yet. Third, and following the previous point, it forces asylum seekers to produce themselves as either "transgender" or "gay cis-men" and never to mix both or mistake one for the other if they want to be considered worthy of protection. That is, transgender asylum seekers cannot apply through sexual orientation (which is assumed to be heterosexual), and gay asylum seekers cannot be too "gender non-conforming" and are still expected to approximate what is imagined to be a "cisgender gay subject." By this logic, Syrian queer and gender-variant asylum seekers, who depend on different cultural and linguistic systems of identification and self-understanding, have to adjust to UNHCR's prescriptions of gender and sexual identities and discourses. In this reading, transgender (often used in its shortened version "trans" within the Syrian queer and gender-variant communities) becomes a term that interpellates gender-variant or queer Syrians into a temporary, humanitarian subject position, rather than subjectivity, which they occupy and adopt within UNHCR's humanitarian space, but which they reject, only partially adopt, transform, or simply neglect when they enter the assemblage of their everyday lives and social circles in Istanbul. By highlighting this specific encounter, I also attempt to demonstrate that, rather than focusing on what the term does to the persons it interpellates, one must map and document the ways the term is taken up and negotiated by the Syrian queer and gender-variant populations themselves, a method that could help ameliorate the negativity attached to "transgender" as a Western term and show that other systems of identification and histories of gender variance in the Syrian or Syrian

diasporic contexts do not simply disappear or are subsumed by transgender, but are further complicated by it and continue to exist alongside it.

In the Syrian context, prior to the encounter with transgender as a humanitarian category, one's sexual orientation is predominantly understood as the drive behind their gender expression or identity. Thus, the *tant*, an effeminate person assigned male at birth, is neither strictly a real man nor a real woman, and it is "their" desire towards men that explains their nonnormative gender identity or expression. A *shemale*, a term perceived to be pejorative in many parts of the Western world yet still predominantly used by Syrian transwomen, is also understood as an identity that has its origin in one's sexual orientation, precisely through being attracted to men. However, unlike *tant*, the assumption is that the person wants to go a step further and transition, though not fully. A *woman* in the queer and trans* communities in Syria is a fully "operated" person, who people do not refer to as *shemale* or *tant* anymore, but simply as a *woman* with no reference to her trans*ness or history of being a *tant* or a *shemale*. I sketch these three types briefly here to emphasize the point that transgender does not enter the Syrian queer and trans* imaginary as a term that changes one's subjectivity, which, as I have explained, emerged out of very different identifications. Transgender within UNHCR, however, requires the forgetting, leaving behind, and hiding of these other systems of identification, a process that not only misunderstands and misrepresents where Syrian queer and gender-variant applicants come from, but also produces them as transgender or gay in a strictly humanitarian sense. This humanitarian dimension of the production of the Syrian LGBT constituency depends on disciplining gender non-conformity and enforcing *transgender* as a term that is supposedly capable of both describing many gender-variant Syrians and understanding their histories of gender identification prior to this humanitarian encounter.

In the final section of the third article, to bring to light parts of the histories of what it means to be gender variant in the Syrian context and challenge the repetitive and often

vacuous narratives of suffering, I further delve into Syrian queer and gender-variant history by focusing on a line of flight, an escape journey from Syria that completely destabilizes the regimented narratives produced by the queer humanitarian assemblage and offers new directions of thinking beyond transgender identities as simply rooted in suffering, injury, and escaping transphobia in Syria. Instead of the generic storyline of "transwoman suffers transphobia, escapes, and seeks asylum somewhere else," I focus on the story of a Syrian transwoman, Lara, from the city of Tartous in Syria. In this brief story, I focus on how she got an exemption from military service in Syria, a difficult task that many queer and gender-variant Syrians succeeded at. I argue that Lara's escape story, which diverges from the normative humanitarian stories of suffering, constitutes a line of flight that deterritorializes our thinking of what it means to write queer and trans* histories in non-Western contexts through ethnographic writing and anthropological inquiries outside the humanitarian spaces and their often-stifling power dynamics.

2. **"Queer/Humanitarian Visibility: The Emergence of the Figure of *The Suffering Syrian Gay Refugee."* 2020. In "Queering the Middle East", ed. Walaa Alqaisiya, special issue. *Middle East Critique* 29, no. 1: 47 – 67.**

   **https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2020.1704501**

3. **"Resettlement as Securitization: War, Humanitarianism, and the Production of Syrian LGBT Refugees." 2020. In** *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation,* **edited by Eithne Luibhéid and Karma R. Chávez, 74 – 89. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.** [https://doi.org/10.5622/illinois/9780252043314.003.0006](https://doi.org/10.5622/illinois/9780252043314.003.0006)

4. **"Transgender as a Humanitarian Category: The Case of Syrian Queer and Gender-Variant Refugees in Turkey." 2020.** *Transgender Studies Quarterly* **7, no. 1: 37 – 55.** https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7914500

**5. Conclusion**

In this research project, I mapped some of the processes through which queer humanitarianism as an assemblage produced, circulated, and stabilized Syrian LGBT refugees as a homogenous, monolithic group identity. As a population that was virtually absent from global LGBT discourses, activist and media representations, and academic knowledge production, I argued that it is first and foremost through the category of "refugeeness" that Syrian queer and trans* populations started to enter the global imaginary of what Syrian queerness and trans*ness is and must have always been. By closely following the lives of Syrian queer and trans* populations in Istanbul and mapping out their encounters with the different constituents of queer humanitarianism, primarily humanitarian institutions such as UNHCR, I argued that Syrian LGBT nonnormative genders and sexualities have come to be understood primarily through a humanitarian lens that produces not only the very identities the Syrian LGBT refugees inhabit, but also the very frameworks and affects through which they are expected to narrate these identities.

Producing them as objects of humanitarianism and what I call "the Western will to help," Syrian LGBT refugees became the most recent figures of queer suffering, death, and oppression through which Western organizations not only stabilize the binary narrative of the West as progressive, gay-friendly, and happy vs. the rest as regressive, homophobic, and miserable, but also actively base the Syrian LGBT refugees' worthiness of humanitarian help on their capacity to erase their own histories of queerness/trans*ness and reproduce Western narratives of what queer life must have been like (rather than how it was) in Syria. This humanitarian dimension—narratives of needing help, monolithic stories of oppression, suffering and escape, and an overwhelming desire to experience the West's sexual freedoms—becomes the condition of possibility for Syrian LGBT identities to emerge, be intelligible, and be acceptable by Western media, UNHCR, NGOs, activist organizations,

humanitarian organizations, asylum countries, states, and the different societies in which Syrian LGBT refugees live after fleeing. That is, any histories, narratives, stories, or frameworks that might present different understandings of gender, sexuality, queerness, trans*ness, and nonnormativity become undesirable, unacceptable, and a threat to the coherence of the disciplinary identity frameworks Syrian LGBT people are expected to inhabit in order to be recognizable as humanitarian subjects.

As it is my contention that Syrian LGBT refugees cannot possibly defy or challenge the narratives or the frameworks they must follow and inhabit within queer humanitarian spaces, I urgently frame my research project as an anthropological inquiry and argue that using ethnography as a method and methodology becomes indispensable to the project of going beyond discourses and delving into the personal narratives, lived realities, critical reflections, and affective responses of Syrian queer and trans* populations. Ethnographic fieldwork allows for the creation of less hierarchical spaces where Syrian LGBT refugees can differently articulate their concerns, speak about their histories, and reflect on the transformations in their (gendered and sexual) self-understandings, identities, and consciousness against the backdrop of war and flight, migration, encounters with the humanitarian-asylum complex, and becoming the focus of international attention.

Throughout my research project, I lay out not only the ways queer humanitarianism as an assemblage forms and stabilizes, but also the various ways ethnographic accounts and reflections and autoethnographic recollections become important sites of affective intervention that open up new spaces for interpretation, ask more questions than give definitive answers, and ensure that the past remains relevant for the present and help in re-envisioning the future of humanitarianism, politics, asylum, and knowledge production in relation to queer and trans* populations outside the West.

While most discussions around LGBT refugees often use homonationalism as a theoretical framework, I proposed queer humanitarianism as more suitable for approaching the emergence of Syrian LGBT refugees as a group identity and understanding the processes that produced it. As I have argued, Syrian LGBT refugees, migrants, and populations in general have come to be understood as "always" desiring/needing refugeeness and humanitarian help; desiring/needing escape from their home countries and previous lives; and desiring/needing Western nation-states, their LGBT rights, and the sexual freedoms they offer. While homonationalism depends on certain gay and lesbian citizens, who are granted rights, representation, and state recognition, to reproduce nationalist, racist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic ideologies against sexual-racial others, LGBT refugees who must reproduce narratives of the West as a progressive gay haven and the beacon of LGBT human rights are not citizens of the Western asylum nation, but are rather "potential" future citizens of the different asylum countries who must be produced, disciplined, and modulated a priori to become legible and intelligible sexual and gendered citizens of the "future" nation they desire. This affective desire toward the asylum nation is at the heart of the construction of the Syrian LGBT refugee's sexual and gender identities. However, while the "potential" for their belonging to the nation affectively shapes their identities and imposes the "homonationalist" discourses they must reproduce to become "citizens", they are not citizens; they do not live in the nation-state; they do not enjoy the "privilege" attached to the gays and lesbians who are complicit in the production of homonationalism. The defining aspect of Syrian LGBT refugees, then, is their being objects of queer humanitarianism: that is, it is their need for humanitarian protection, and the homonationalist discourses constitutive of that need, that could best help us understand the way LGBT refugee identities are produced. Queer humanitarianism, which targets nonnormative genders and sexualities outside the West as its field of operation, reproduces homonationalist discourses primarily through this convergence of Syrian queer and trans* populations' affective need for humanitarian protection, their

desire to belong to the imagined freedoms of Western asylum countries, and their "potential" of becoming a future citizen of this nation. In this formulation, homonationalism becomes only one constituent part of the queer humanitarian assemblage. Queer humanitarianism becomes the condition of possibility for the production of Syrian LGBT refugee identities, discourses, and representations, on the one hand, and solidifies homonationalist discourses through different processes that discipline and control non-citizen queer and trans* populations in transit asylum countries, such as Turkey, and through humanitarian institutions such as UNHCR.

With this in mind, the main focus of my research project was to map out these processes, trace their histories and trajectories, and intervene in, question, and deterritorialize their hegemonic discourses with a critical ethnographic lens. To that end, within the scope of this cumulative dissertation, I mapped out three different processes through which Syrian LGBT refugees emerged as a group identity whose representations, narratives, histories, and life trajectories became homogenized and heavily regulated in the context of post-2011 Syrian uprisings, the emergence of Da'esh, and the so-called Syrian "refugee crisis".

In "Queer/Humanitarian Visibility: The Emergence of the Figure of the *Suffering Syrian Gay Refugee*" (2020a), I follow the international media production, consolidation, and circulation of the figure of the suffering Syrian gay refugee by focusing on pivotal media events through which this figure was constituted and circulated as the most "accurate" and most relevant representation of what Syrian queerness is and how it must be further represented in media, research, and humanitarian and activist work. By using ethnographic and autoethnographic recollections and accounts, I problematize the politics of producing this type of visibility and provide alternative frameworks for more complex and nuanced representation and knowledge production.

In "Resettlement as Securitization: War, Humanitarianism, and the Production of Syrian LGBT Refugees" (2020b) I trace the production of Syrian LGBT refugees as a group identity within their encounter with UNHCR and its third-country resettlement paradigm. In this process, I argue that Syrian LGBT refugees are produced through a securitization lens whereby they must tell their persecution narratives within the framework of escaping homo- and transphobia in Syria, rather than as a result of war. In other words, war must be filtered out of their narratives as a factor that is completely irrelevant to their gender, sexuality, or sense of queerness and identity for two reasons. First, mentioning war challenges decision-makers' fundamental tenets of defining LGBT identities outside the West as anchored in experiences of (cultural) homo- and transphobia, thus risking their asylum cases. Second, talking about war as part of their asylum narratives might suggest that they were somehow involved in the war, a factor that has led, as I demonstrate in this article, to rejecting some of my informants or having their cases indefinitely pending. In this dynamic, UNHCR emerges as a securitization apparatus that resettles only those who succeed in narrating their identities as "secure", "non-terrorist", and non-threatening to the future resettlement country.

In "Transgender as a Humanitarian Category: The Case of Syrian Queer and Gender-Variant Refugees in Turkey" (2020c), I explore the process through which Syrian queer and trans* refugees are produced through the Western distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity, a distinction that is not constitutive of the ways gender and sexuality were understood or lived in the Syrian context by many of my interlocutors. I demonstrate how, in their encounter with UNHCR, specifically trans* and gender-variant refugees must inhabit UNHCR's definitions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender in order to be intelligible, and therefore I conclude that transgender is primarily understood and employed by Syrian queer and trans* refugees as a humanitarian term that does not necessarily change or destabilize

their previous, more "local" self-identifications or understandings of queerness and trans*ness (which do not conform to UNHCR's).

By mapping these processes, I highlight queer humanitarianism's dependence on suffering, sadness, pain, fear, and other negative affects for its structures, discourses, and humanitarian mandate to help Syrian LGBT refugees to function. In this dynamic, negative affects are constantly posited as the desirable and legitimate ones to have and claim as part of one's LGBT refugee identity, whereas happiness, joy, and other positive affects become undesirable and even unintelligible when Syrian LGBT populations, or queer and trans* people outside the West generally, experience or talk about them as essential parts of their queer subjectivities and experiences prior to their encounters with the West or the queer humanitarian assemblage. Happiness becomes the property of Western LGBT populations, and as Heather Love reminds us (2009), this type of happiness becomes "compulsory" for LGBT people in the West, because since they have their rights recognized, gay marriage, capitalist consumption possibilities, and some media representation, why should they not be happy?

Many queer theorists critique this normative and capitalist "compulsory happiness" (Love 2007a) and call for resisting and queering it by celebrating negativity and negative affects and re-politicizing them in the face of the hegemonic gay happiness culture that dominates the West and often discards negative feelings as something that does not belong the present anymore (Ahmed 2011; Duggan 2003; Halberstam 2011; Love 2007b; Muñoz 2009; Puar 2007). Calling for a celebration of negativity that borders on romancing "the negative" (Muñoz 2009: 12) as well as "romanticizing it" to the extent of considering it the most viable political solution to the culture of queer positivity is not only problematic, but also completely detached from the way queer negativity functions in other contexts. In other words, celebrating trauma, depression, sadness, suffering, and pain as political affects that will

"save" us from the capitalist imperative to be happy eschews the fact that queer negativity is the engine and fodder of queer humanitarianism and that only negative affects and experiences are allowed to be politicized or narrated as part of one's LGBT subjectivity and identity elsewhere. The capitalist, global market of suffering (Kleinman, Das, und Lock 1997: xi; see also Ahmed 2004: 31 – 33), its NGOs, State politics, humanitarian organizations, and a vast network of queer humanitarian actors are strongly dependent on the perpetuation of these discourses of queer negativity as inherent to the LGBT experience and history in MENA. This transnational aspect of negativity is conveniently left out of queer theorizations of affect and does not account for this global culture of "compulsory unhappiness" that LGBTs outside the West must narrate as the most fundamental part of their identities and lives in order to be intelligible and worthy of representation, rights, and humanitarian protection in asylum countries. Instead of valorizing queer negativity, I argue that there is an urgent need to document, celebrate, and politicize queer joy and happiness in non-Western contexts, on the one hand, and to allow for queer suffering, pain, and experiences of oppression and discrimination to be narrated with all their local, regional, and global complexities, and not just through the filters and frameworks of queer humanitarian governance and Western expectations, on the other. By doing this, we can challenge and deconstruct the hegemonic humanitarian discourses surrounding queerness and what it means to be a queer person or lead a queer life outside the West.

In relation to migration, asylum, and refugeeness, this observation becomes essential to challenging the ways in which granting asylum and refugee status to LGBT refugees is strongly premised on the following three requirements. First, LGBT refugees must reproduce very specific narratives of suffering that look like the suffering that white LGBTs had gone through prior to the rise of homonationalism. These narratives become the only ones intelligible to decision-makers and the larger humanitarian-asylum complex. Second, an

LGBT refugee's suffering must be told in relation to gender or sexuality as these are predefined and understood by the asylum and humanitarian institutions, but never in relation to how such categories are understood or function in other contexts, for example, in the refugee's home country. Moreover, in one's asylum narrative, gender and sexuality must never intersect with one another (one must either be gay, and presumably cisgender, or transgender, and presumably heterosexual); a lesbian, transgender asylum-seeker must always choose one identity and must erase all the ways any other identities might affect or intersect with it. Moreover, if her cultural systems of identification do not distinguish between gender identity and sexual orientation as two ontologically different categories, which is the dominant logic in the West, then the difficulty of narrating her identities might further risk her credibility as an asylum seeker.

Third, joy or other positive affects currently have no place in queer humanitarian discourses and spaces. Narrating joy as part of one's gay refugee identity or self-understanding is seen as a contradiction and as something that is inconsequential to one's identity formation, unless it is narrated in the future sense, as that which belongs only to the country granting asylum to the Syrian LGBT refugees. That is, queer joy and happiness do not exist for Syrian LGBT refugees prior to arrival and can only be found in the asylum country. Joy can never be narrated in the past tense, as that which could be remembered fondly, because it is seen to contradict the coherence of suffering narratives. Pain and joy, in the queer humanitarian assemblage, are considered opposites that cannot exist in the queer refugee's body simultaneously. Syrian (or generally non-Western narratives of) queer joy becomes a challenge to Western happiness discourses and destabilizes the very tenets on which Western mainstream gay culture and politics have been built. Asylum and humanitarian systems that have the power to grant protection must revise their cultural scripts of what counts as suffering and what counts as joy, and they must stop considering them antithetical

to one another within humanitarian spaces. This obsession with maintaining the West as the only happy place for queer and trans* people everywhere can be fatal to many LGBT refugees who might "make the mistake" of sharing one happy memory or reminiscing about something that helped them survive or make it through violent or difficult times as queer and trans* people in their home countries.

Moreover, the imposition of very specific narratives of suffering does not render only stories of joy dangerous to one's asylum case. In fact, any other story of suffering that does not match what decision-makers imagine queer suffering in Syria to be like becomes unintelligible and a threat to one's livelihood and chances of resettlement or of being recognized as a refugee. We need to ensure that a gay refugee who is loved by his family, but experiences physical violence constantly in public space is also believed without the story of his family love and support being considered an anomaly or a sign that he must be lying. The binary of suffering vs. joy as a contradiction that the queer and trans* refugee body cannot inhabit must be deconstructed.

LGBT refugees who, of course, must centralize their stories of persecution and suffering should not be expected to always know in advance the exact definitions of gay suffering according to decision-makers, Western media, and the humanitarian-asylum complex. Simultaneously, if LGBT refugees mention something positive about their experiences back home, this should not be seen as a contradiction, but rather as one aspect that does not render their asylum narrative inconsistent, but actually rather more realistic and complex.

Being an object of queer-humanitarian benevolence has become the condition of possibility for knowledge production on Syrian queer and trans* populations, whereby any knowledge that does not start from the assumption of "suffering, oppression, sadness, and misery" as the ultimate defining social factors of all queer and trans* Syrians is often

discarded as not political or not useful for Syrian LGBT refugees. Syria, as a country that does not have gay rights, is thus understood as a context where queer life is not livable, where queer culture is impossible, and where the social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions of queer and trans* experiences are relegated to the background as irrelevant because they are not considered useful to people seeking asylum. Equating having rights to "having a good and livable queer life" is central to this dynamic, whereby the Western assumption and obsession with rights discourses and the narratives of human rights a priori assumes that not having rights is the same as leading a sad queer life of suffering, a logic that my interlocutors had to negotiate at every step of their asylum processes. What counts as a good and livable queer life to them varies greatly from the Western assumption that "gay rights must be the epitome of queer joy." Of course, in this dynamic, Syrian LGBT refugees' need for asylum dictates in advance which type and form of knowledge becomes valuable and what they can and cannot say as part of their history or subjectivity. Thus, sensational journalistic narratives and NGO reports have become the only possible ways of writing about Syrian queer and trans* populations, and narratives of suffering that mimic how white LGBT subjects "used to" suffer in the past—but not anymore—have become the most acceptable type of knowledge.

My research project takes on this issue and argues that any future research must understand the intersections between asylum, migration, humanitarianism, and queerness within the Syrian-Turkish and larger MENA context not just as bureaucratic service provision processes but  as points of negotiations and transformations of cultural and social values, structures, and mores, and thus invest in mapping the processes through which queerness, gender, and sexuality were transformed by also documenting how these categories were lived and experienced prior to and during the war/migration/humanitarianism events. Such a centralization of a queer cultural anthropological perspective does not take suffering at face value nor does it presume that suffering means the lack of queer visibility and subcultures, but

provides a space where queer and trans* Syrian subjects can speak more "freely" and reflect on their lives without the constant threat of losing their asylum cases if they share their life stories through their own frameworks, rather than through the queer-humanitarian frameworks of knowledge production. A queer anthropology, and its attendant method/ology of queer ethnography, is best suited for this task.

I have thoroughly addressed and delved into ethnographic narratives and auto-ethnographic reflections on what queerness looked like in Syria and Turkey; how understandings of (in)visibility are varied and context-specific; how religious belonging, political affiliation, class, and public space in the Syrian context, on the migration route, or in Istanbul differently shape Syrian queer and trans* populations' understandings of what gender or sexuality is; how transgender women and gender non-conforming people rely in Syria on social, medical, and extralegal systems that do not make sense in liberal democracies and how they negotiate different systems of identification within UNHCR and its asylum process; how war has invariably shaped the experiences of all Syrians, not just heterosexual and cisgender, but also queer and trans* Syrians. All these issues—or may I say, interventions—become not only discarded as unnecessary by mainstream gay political agendas, but also threaten the established tenets of much of knowledge production on Syria and the MENA region. Most knowledge production remains sensational, journalistic, and limited because journalists, researchers, policy makers, humanitarian actors, or decision-makers do not ask questions that might allow for their narratives to be disrupted. Often, they come with their answers ready and then find people to fit the narratives that they already have in mind. Syrian LGBT refugees work hard on fitting these narratives in a bid to receive humanitarian protection.

As I have demonstrated, Syrian LGBT identities are strongly premised on needing or wanting help—the Western will to help. Queer humanitarianism thus produces LGBT refugee identities as effects of this "desire" to help, a desire that glues together the various actors

constituting the queer humanitarian assemblage. Conversely, the Syrian LGBT refugee's "need" for help has become the condition of possibility for knowledge production on queer and trans* issues in Syria. Discourses and narratives that correspond to, stabilize, and enforce this humanitarian dynamic become proper objects of knowledge production. Consequently, social, cultural, and linguistic histories and subcultures of queer and trans* lives in Syria are produced as "improper objects" of research and study. Unless it is of value to the LGBT refugees and their asylum cases, then it is not relevant or not necessary for now. But who decides what is of "value" to the LGBT refugees?

When Syrian LGBT refugees recall, speak about, or rely on cultural, social, or linguistic—in short, anthropological—aspects that are not "valuable" to decision-makers in asylum cases, their very livelihoods and safety are compromised. Diversifying the life narratives and producing ethnographic and autoethnographic accounts that are not premised on queer humanitarian power dynamics have the potential to change the systems from within. Allowing the space for more complex and nuanced queer and trans* narratives will fundamentally change the way asylum systems and humanitarian rescue missions function, allocate help, and distribute resources such as resettlement and refugee status. Within the dynamics hitherto mapped, I strongly argue that (queer) anthropological inquiries, framings, methods, and methodologies are fundamental, if not indispensable, to the project of making asylum systems and the various actors constitutive of queer humanitarianism more "humane", inclusive, and, indeed, political.

While my literature review clearly pointed to the lack of anthropological work on queer and trans* people, politics, and cultures in the Middle East and North Africa region, and more specifically in relation to migration, flight, humanitarianism, and an ongoing war in Syria, my research project centralized the productive intersections of these issues in contexts and with populations normally underrepresented in cultural anthropology (even within some

of the most progressive and engaged strands, such as queer anthropology). As a field that

remains "dark" (see Ortner 2015) and too focused on pain, suffering, inequality, and

oppression as the only suitable frameworks to approach queer and trans* populations in the

MENA region and Syria, cultural anthropology must strike a balance that neither neglects

such important aspects of the lives of "non-Western" queer and trans* cultures and

populations nor reduces them to victims of suffering or pain as the foundational,

unquestionable bases of their subjectivities and lives. This is achievable in many ways. First,

cultural anthropological inquiry must take gender, sexuality, and queerness, especially outside

the West, as proper objects of inquiry that are part and parcel of the social and cultural fabric

of Syrian society, migration, flight, and global humanitarian dynamics. That is, these subjects

of inquiry must not be perceived a priori as a matter of liberation vs. oppression, progressive

vs. regressive, and happy vs. sad, but rather as complex social categories and phenomena that

affect all aspects of social, political, economic, and cultural life; that have histories sometimes

intersecting with and sometimes diverging from Western epistemologies; and that are shaped

through their intersections with other equally important and socially relevant categories.

Second, ethnographic fieldwork must remain open-ended, processual, and capable of relating

to, understanding, and absorbing surprises, new encounters, and "unfamiliar" knowledge that

might unsettle the most dearly held tenets of the anthropologist in the field. As a population

that was quite unknown prior to 2011, that speaks different dialects of Arabic and other

languages as a native tongue, and that encounters war, migration, and humanitarianism on

such a scale for the first time, approaching Syrian LGBT refugees without de-familiarizing

oneself with much of what one "knows" in advance will at best result in reproducing

stereotypes, reductive knowledge, and adding no new knowledge to the repetitive mantras of

suffering and pain. Third, autoethnography and ethnography must be given a more central role

when it comes to archiving and knowledge production on queer and trans* issues in a country

like Syria, where research, academic studies, or ethnographies are virtually non-existent, and

which is largely inaccessible as a "field." In this formulation, migration, flight, and

humanitarianism emerge as relevant sites of research, not only for a one-sided anthropological

inquiry of how bureaucratically and administratively problematic they are, but also of how

queer and trans* cultural memory is negotiated, erased, transformed, or preserved. Moreover,

as much of knowledge production remains focused on discourses and representations that

consistently produce Syrian LGBT refugees and populations at large as a homogenous group

defined primarily through humanitarian need and suffering, it is of utmost importance to

create  and maintain the space and circumstances for Syrian LGBT refugees to speak up,

share their stories, and reflect on their lives without fearing that their status as asylum-seekers

or refugees will be negatively affected. And finally, listening to people's stories, lived

experiences, and personal reflections on their journeys and encounters with(in) these sites,

which can only be accomplished through a critical, engaged, and "unfinished" anthropology

(Biehl and Locke 2017), becomes indispensable to presenting a fuller and more complex and

nuanced discourse of Syrian queerness and trans*ness.

## 5.1 Prospective Research Directions

Given that this is a cumulative dissertation, the number of topics discussed and the

frameworks through which Syrian LGBT refugees have been heavily constructed as a group

identity are limited. Of course, in analyzing my ethnographic data, many patterns emerged

that point to different areas that still need to be studied, written about, and explored in future

articles and generally in the fields of queer migration studies, queer anthropology, and Middle

Eastern studies. In what follows, I map out some of those potential research areas and

demonstrate their academic, political, and humanitarian significance and relevance for further

exploring, queering, destabilizing, and addressing queer and trans* issues outside the West.

First, legality has emerged as a very central topic for Syrian LGBT refugees in Turkey,

primarily through their encounter with UNHCR. More future work should focus on questions

of the law and legal persecution as issues that LGBT refugees grapple with and negotiate in their asylum cases, while considering the differences in the meaning of law and legality in different contexts. In the case of Syrian LGBT refugees in Turkey, for example, the issue of having to prove that one belonged to a minority that is legally persecuted in Syria was always present. For them to be produced and perused as an intelligible group identity, their narratives of legal persecution had to coincide with the decision-makers' narratives of what legal persecution and legal sexual consciousness are like.

Thus, when seeking international protection through UNHCR in Turkey, Syrian LGBT asylum-seekers often must refer to legal persecution as an essential part of their asylum narrative. This is primarily done by referencing article 520 of the Syrian penal code which criminalizes "carnal relations against the order of nature." While understandable, the overreliance on the "legal persecution" narrative conflates the need to reference the law in asylum/migration contexts for the "reality" of how discriminatory laws are enforced. In a country that, prior to 2011, was under an "emergency law" for almost five decades, the law, sexual citizenship, and legal discrimination/persecution were neither understood nor functioned similarly to Western, liberal-democratic contexts. This pushed many to negotiate the question of legal persecution during their asylum processes and within the larger diasporic Syrian LGBT community in Istanbul. Debates and questions about what counted as legal persecution and whether Syrian LGBT populations were in fact persecuted by the aforementioned law became all of a sudden relevant and important to their self-understanding as a "group" precisely through the sense that UNHCR and the larger asylum-humanitarian complex seems to demand a clear discourse around legal persecution of queer and trans* populations in Syria, but such a discourse had to be produced in Turkey, since experiences and understandings of legality vary and a legal sexual consciousness, as we know it in the West, is mostly lacking in the Syrian context. By highlighting the different understandings of

the meaning of legality and legal persecution in Syria, I challenge UNHCR and Western asylum-humanitarian institutions' interpretations of how legal homophobia *must* function in "oppressive" contexts and argue for the need to expand the repertoire of what "legal persecution" means to LGBT asylum-seekers from countries where legality functions differently from Western liberal democracies. Such work is not only relevant for the Syrian context, but also for many other refugee and migrant groups, who come from countries where law and legality might not always function the same way it does in Western contexts, and hence require more research, contextualization, documentation, and ethnographic analysis.

A second important area of research that needs to be explored further is one that also emerged out of my fieldwork, specifically during my follow-up with my interlocutors in the years following 2015, and that is the question of Syrian LGBT returnees. The question of LGBT returnees who voluntarily choose to leave Europe even after arriving, being granted longer residence permits than others, and having a lot of access to services, protections, and NGO support has most certainly puzzled even me from the beginning. In fact, it emerged as a topic that required further probing after one of my interlocutors, who arrived and received a five-year residence permit in the Netherlands, told me that she wanted to go back to Turkey, and she did. Perhaps ironically, she had herself smuggled into Turkey through Greece. She was not the only one; many other Syrian trans* women followed suit. Some lived longer in Europe but ended up fleeing a life they deemed unbearable and unlivable. This unusual, or may I say, "queer" migration route defies many of the most dearly held notions and beliefs in public discourses around the West, Europe, sexual freedoms, gender, and sexuality, and what it means to lead a "good" or "livable" queer and trans* life.

In (queer and trans*) migration narratives, the West is often portrayed and understood as the goal, last station, and point of arrival for migrants and refugees. This spatial mono-directionality of migration routes is often tied to hegemonic imaginaries of Europe as the

place where one could lead the "good queer life" and where queer life is more livable and enjoyable. Europeanness, thus, becomes tied to such imaginaries and the "good queer life" is often associated with having rights, personal freedoms, safety and better living conditions, and democracy. These spatial and conceptual imaginaries of Europe are often most pronounced when talking about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer refugees and migrants who often head to Europe to seek refuge from persecution and discrimination either in their home countries or in transit countries. Especially in recent years, with the so-called Syrian "refugee crisis," discourses have intensified that often juxtapose Europe as a place where LGBT refugees could "finally" arrive, live freely, and lead a good queer life, on the one hand, and the rest (Middle East in this instance) as a place where LGBT people are oppressed, unhappy, and lead only bad queer lives. Within this binary dynamic, LGBT people from MENA are often portrayed to desire Europe and the sexual and gender freedoms it stands for. Europe equals "a good queer life" whereas the Middle East becomes automatically tied to the "bad" queer life. What happens, however, when some LGBT refugees do not perceive "having rights and sexual freedoms" as equal to "having a good queer life?" What new routes emerge when some do not follow the "rest to the West" imagined route of queer and trans* migration? How do these other routes negate and problematize the automatic association of "having rights and sexual freedoms, financial security, and more nightlife" in Europe to "being happy and having a good queer life" as an LGBT refugee?

Focusing on such questions and exploring them further will most certainly challenge the stale LGBT suffering narratives and open up a space for alternative narratives of queer and trans* migration that problematize the hegemonic association of Europe and the West with "the good queer life" on the one hand, and force us to rethink and revise some of our main methodological and theoretical assumptions about migration, queerness, LGBT rights

discourses, and the livable queer life, on the other. Such data, narratives, and life trajectories put into question the production of Syrian LGBT refugees, nay, all LGBT populations outside the West, as groups that always desire the West and as groups whose queer and trans* lives in their home contexts are "unlivable." Future research must grapple with the following questions: Who decides the criteria of what makes queer life livable and what counts as a good queer life? Such questions require rigorous ethnographic research that does not take a binary of "West equals good queer life" vs. "the rest equals bad queer life" for granted or as its starting point, but rather deconstructs that very binary and attempts to understand how it came to be in the first place.

Third, another framework through which Syrian LGBT refugees are often produced and that also requires further research and work is that of family and kinship. Providing a narrative of family violence, ostracization, oppression, or threats of honor killings has become a mainstay of asylum narratives that Syrian LGBT refugees must produce in order to be intelligible and credible for asylum. In this dynamic, Syrian LGBT refugees must constantly produce a monolithic narrative that always reduces their complex relations to their families and larger society in terms of pure negativity, whereby families must always be presented as homophobic, transphobic, violent, and hateful. This representation, however, must be questioned especially as it emerges in relation to another dynamic that remains under-explored in queer anthropological research: the emergence of the Western family as the ultimate gay-friendly and progressive unit in comparison to their Muslim, Arab, Syrian, or other non-Western counterparts. This area of research is highly important and requires meticulous discourse analysis and ethnographic narratives that show, on the one hand, the ways such a narrative of the homophobic Arab family is produced and consolidated, while simultaneously documenting, archiving, and analyzing the complex dynamics of kinship, family, and queerness in the Syrian, and other non-Western contexts. This area of research is

of utmost academic and political relevance to LGBT refugees seeking asylum. LGBT refugees who did not necessarily escape family violence are often faced with the dilemma of their suffering and persecution narratives being considered un-credible, which often risks their chances of asylum. The diversification of family narratives can challenge the perception that all LGBT refugees must reproduce the same family violence narrative to be credible and allows space for those whose narratives of experiencing violence do not always hinge on such discourses.

Fourth, a narrative that often complements the family violence discourse and that requires further exploration is that Syrian LGBT people in Syria, or its Diaspora, live in complete isolation and have no access to emotional support networks or alternative kinship structures. As I have partially shown in two of my articles, this notion, while true for some, has no base in the realities of lived experiences of many Syrian LGBT populations for whom "al-Jaw" (the word Syrian LGBTs use to refer to the queer and trans* communities in Syria) has been an available alternative kinship structure for decades. Queer kinship, often celebrated as something that many Western LGBT communities have always had access to, is often assumed to be out of reach for LGBT refugees, or for many in the Middle East and North Africa region. Needless to say, this is a very important part of the asylum narrative, which produces the West as the place where queer kinship and alternative families are possible and available. While outside the scope of my dissertation, I still want to emphasize the importance of conducting more research and producing more knowledge that considers the many ways Syrian LGBT populations survived and thrived over time, for such queer kinship structures do not simply disappear, but transform in nature from one context to the other.

Fifth, while I do explore the media landscape when it comes to reporting on and writing about Syrian LGBT refugees in my articles, more in-depth and systematic research

needs to be done in this area. Questions of media representation, circulation of images and videos, and the affective, global outreach of social media are central to understanding the shifts in discourses, narratives, and very subjectivities of queer and trans* populations everywhere. This becomes particularly salient for LGBT people on the move, and in the context of the Syrian war and the so-called "refugee crisis," tracing the recent history of mediating and representing Syrian LGBT refugees and people has room for more full-fledged academic exploration.

Lastly, an area that requires urgent work, academically and politically, is that of the production of hierarchies among different LGBT refugee groups in Turkey or other transit or asylum countries. In my article on resettlement, I argue that Syrian LGBT refugees became a priority group in global discourses as well as humanitarian institutions. However, one aspect that must be further explored is how different LGBT refugee groups are produced, controlled, and regulated differently within UNHCR and other asylum systems. During my fieldwork, comparisons, contrasts, and tensions often emerged between Syrian LGBT refugees and other refugee groups, a dynamic that often translates to resentments and animosities among these groups and takes us further away from the core of the problem: UNHCR and the entire asylum system itself. Anthropologist and queer migration scholar Elif Sari and I have been having various discussions about our respective fieldwork experiences—hers is with Iranian LGBT refugees in Turkey— and we started to compare the differences in the treatment of both refugee groups and the different ways larger global political discourses affect each group. Syrian LGBT refugees are still favorable to UNHCR and asylum countries in comparison to the rest and are thus considered by Iranian and other LGBT refugee groups as "privileged." Of course, there is no denying that Syrian LGBT refugees had an advantage, though I would hesitate to use the word "privilege," for it might suggest that Syrian LGBT refugees "had" this privilege, while in fact this construction of Syrian LGBT refugees as

"exceptional" is an effect of the policies and discourses of UNHCR, Western media, and LGBT organizations. Here, we need to shift our focus onto these institutions, their policies and discourses, which produce what Didier Fassin calls "hierarchies of humanity" (2012: 223), a dynamic that pits LGBT refugee groups against each other and turns resettlement into what Mert Koçak (2020: 4) calls a "scarce resource." Against this backdrop, scholar Elif Sari and I have been reflecting on the importance of doing collaborative writing and research in this area as a way of revitalizing political discussions around UNHCR and asylum in a volatile context such as Turkey, on the one hand, and encouraging more comparative and collaborative research in queer migration and refugee scholarship, on the other.

There is still much work to be done in relation to documenting, writing about, analyzing, and understanding queer and trans* histories in Syria and MENA, and centering ethnography and autoethnography as methods is indispensable for the project of not just telling stories, but also theorizing from these stories and inventing new concepts, frameworks, methodologies, and potentially methods that are not afraid of the linguistic, cultural, and social "queerness" that Syria has and Syrian queer and trans* populations inhabit. Seeing that there is still very little ethnographic, autoethnographic, oral history, or archival work on queerness in Syria, even ten years into the conflict, queer anthropological inquiry has the most potential to challenge much of the staleness of queer humanitarianism and its discourses. The reduction of the histories of large queer and trans* communities to accommodate the narrow methodological and theoretical frameworks used to study MENA, Syria, and their queer and trans* populations as "homogenous" groups, leaves a vast archive of narratives and stories untapped and unearthed that could both save queer theory from its staleness and US- and Eurocentrism, and rejuvenate anthropology's engagement with Syria and the Middle East, which still needs to take queer genders and sexualities seriously as proper objects of inquiry.

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