

Real Queer? Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Refugees in the Canadian Refugee Apparatus



David A. B. Murray

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Real Queer? offers a critical analysis of the Canadian refugee determination system or what David Murray refers to as the “Canadian Refugee Apparatus” (CRA) (9), specifically focusing on the complex ways in which sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) refugee claimants become unique targets of state control. The product of an intensive ethnographic study of SOGI refugee claimants (primarily from Africa and the Caribbean), refugee support groups, and the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) in Toronto, the study provides detailed and critical insights into the politics of the refugee claims-making and adjudication process—as part of a larger state assemblage of surveillance, management and removal of migrants. Across the book’s eight chapters, Murray investigates how the CRA—through its range of constituted subjects and relations—anchors a state-sponsored system of truth-making and violent ruling of precarious claimant subjects/populations, based on arbitrary distinctions between real/credible and fake/bogus SOGI refugee claimants.

Murray situates this investigation in relation to the state’s homonationalist discourse, or what he terms “the queer migration to liberation nation narrative” (3), whereby Canada is discursively projected as a safe haven for queers escaping persecution in their countries of origin. This narrative, Murray argues, is crucially hinged on the “newish migrant identity category” (5) of the SOGI refugee claimant, who is folded into national-normativity by the CRA through a discourse of “inaugural homonationalism” (53). Moreover, Murray demonstrates how the homonationalist imperative works by requiring documentary evidence from various actors, including SOGI refugee claimants, brokering organizational bodies, and the IRB. These various forms of evidence align claimants with Western-centric constructs of SOGI, constituting the refugee claimant as a potential citizen. For example, chapters 2 and 4 focus on the Personal Information Form (PIF) and letters from SOGI refugee support groups respectively—documents that mediate and are key to establishing the credibility of SOGI refugee claimants. Both chapters demonstrate the hailing force of homonationalism as claimants learn how to use the PIF to make their stories intelligible to the IRB and as support groups establish their own credibility as “document brokers” (83) with the power to assist the IRB’s powers of interrogation and ruling. Drawing on the work of Miriam Ticktin,¹ Murray argues that these “regimes of care and their documents” (83) enable

homonationalism and enact various forms of surveillance that have violent and exclusionary effects.

Similarly, chapter 6 focuses critically on expert reports and national documentation packages (governmental, non-governmental, and media reports), as a “bureaucratic archive of sexuality” (119) that underwrites the CRA’s homonationalist project. Murray queers this archive, arguing that these documents problematically reproduce countries in the Global South as repressive, based on the presumption of “cross-cultural intelligibility” (119) of gender and sexuality. His analysis does not necessarily suggest that claimants’ countries of origin are tolerant of diverse SOGI, but cautions “against assuming transnationally uniform meanings of socio-sexual identity terms like ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian’ and ‘transgender’” (125). Furthermore, Murray shows how even the misreadings of his own work by the IRB serve to transform/straighten complex scholarly analyses into essentializing evidence about persecution or tolerance—as the only two qualifiers through which the claimant’s credibility can be assessed. We also see how the CRA’s homonationalist discourse hinges on the re-mobilization of colonial scripts, which naturalize predominantly racialized nation states of the Global South as anti-queer and intolerant.

Chapters 4 and 5 deepen this argument by highlighting the interconnections between discourse and affect in constructing and adjudicating the distinction between real and bogus refugee claimants. Through analysis of participant observation data of refugee claimants’ hearings, discussions with Refugee Determination Board (RDB) members, and a publication by a former director of the IRB, Murray demonstrates how RDB members employ a certain “calculus” (110) of affective and linguistic disciplining to determine a claimant’s credibility. Through his analysis of pauses, silences, disciplinary comments, sighs, and other non-verbal cues, Murray argues persuasively that “emotional and sensorial assessments” (113) presume a universal understanding of emotional registers such as love, loss, and trauma. Especially in chapter 5, we glimpse the SOGI refugee claimant as a particular kind of homonationalist subject, who coheres around very specific registrations of potentiality and precarity and who is fetishized within the ritual of the hearing.

While the book demonstrates the exceptional hailing force of the CRA’s homonationalist project, it also offers critical insight into the “adaptive agency” (9) of refugee claimants as they navigate the determination process. These

sites of agency demonstrate that while homonationalism is pervasive and proliferating, it is never complete. Chapter 3, “How to Be Gay (Refugee Version),” is quite instructive in this regard. Analyzing the rehearsals for a public play—which begins with a complex narrative and aesthetic but, through several disciplinary rehearsals, ends with the straightened speech and conduct of the “real” gay character—Murray carefully illustrates “how a performance of a gay male self that does not reflect the experiences and privileges of a hegemonic gay cultural identity . . . renders the performer suspect, that is, not ‘really’ gay” (76). As such, the chapter highlights how refugee claimants attempt to frustrate the encompassing and coercive force of the state-based determination process—and thus its protocols of intelligibility about sexuality and gender—while realizing that they remain constrained within an epistemic border zone that heightens their precarity. Further challenges to the CRA’s homonationalist discourse can be found in Murray’s findings that claimants have complicated relationships to Western conceptions of gender and sexuality, have complex stories about their decisions to file refugee claims in Canada, and have complex affective orientations toward their countries of origin and Canada. These findings suggest that claimant-subjects are never completely folded into homonationalist discourse.

Overall, the book makes a solid contribution to the inter-related fields of queer migration and SOGI refugee studies in the Canadian context, especially so in its focus on how the figure of the SOGI refugee claimant occupies an ambivalent relationship to homonationalism. One central question it raises is how we conceptualize the agency of “the claimant”—as a subject who is stranded within the border zone produced by the CRA, especially if this subject is at once a site of “incommensurability” (57) and “potentiality” (45)? This question is central to understanding the question mark in the book’s title, as it pushes us to think critically about what it means for claimants to simultaneously speak within, outside of, and against the hegemonic framework of intelligibility about gender and sexuality.

NOTE

- 1 M. Ticktin, *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

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Navigating a River by Its Bends: A Comparison of Cambodian Remigration



Gea Wijers

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N*avigating a River by Its Bends* is the book version of Gea Wijers’s doctoral dissertation. It comprises a collection of authored or co-authored articles and book chapters based on multi-sited fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2011 in France, the United States, and Cambodia. The study examines the life trajectories of first-generation Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees and explores how they made use of their special forms of social capital when engaging in “institutional entrepreneurship” upon return to Cambodia. The study revolves around those Cambodians who arrived in America or France before 1979 and who subsequently returned to Cambodia with hopes of helping to rebuild their country after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991.

Dr. Wijers also asked in what ways refugee settlement policies in Long Beach, California, and Lyon, France, affected the abilities of these Cambodians to adapt both

to life in exile and life upon return to their homeland. Of particular interest for the study was the question of how transnational networks and experiences from exile might influence returnees’ chances of establishing themselves back in Cambodia.

The interviews were analyzed using several key concepts such as that of “embeddedness,” by which Wijers means the process by which legitimacy is created in social networks. This notion underlies the author’s interest in the returnees’ transnational webs of relations and their ability to mobilize social capital upon return to Cambodia.

The author presents a valuable historical overview of the various groups of refugees that have spent large parts of their lives in either France or the United States. She also describes how the social, cultural, and political climate of each country at the time of resettlement and the different modes of reception have influenced how these groups have