

Queer migration: LGBTQ+ people in search for supportive ground – an experiential enquiry into interweaving multiple identities



J.M.V. Turner, *A Rainbow above a Landscape*, c. 1828-40

'In the dark time of the year. Between melting and freezing

The soul's sap quivers.'

(T.S. Eliot '*Little Gidding*', 1942)

This is an edited version of a talk given in March 2021 at *The International Event: Enhancing Mental Health in LGBTQ+ Communities* organised by Pink Therapy. I chose to publish it in Winter Edition of UKAGP Newsletter, between 'the frozen past and the molten future', to honour the last year's World Mental Health Day's theme 'Make mental health and wellbeing for all a global priority' and looking forward to the LGBT History Month in February 2023.

Migration of gender, sex and relationship diversity (in short GSRD) people is habitually depicted through the lens of a Western centric narrative in a romanticised, simplistic way – of 'backward', 'rural' individuals, moving to the modern metropolis, where they are free to express their true sexual identity. 'This narrative is a hallowed one in domestic "coming-out" discourses

as well as in a burgeoning international human rights arena' (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001). In reality, each migratory journey is a unique and complex process, significantly changing the individual's identity and affecting mental health. This essay focuses on personal experience of LGBTQ+ migrants, including my own, in an attempt to challenge prevailing assumptions around queer migrations to the UK, but also about immigration and queerness in general.

I was born in Poland and moved to the UK in my mid-20s. I will be sixty-two this year and so I have lived in this adopted country of mine for well over half of my life. I live on the outskirts of a small town in Hertfordshire together with my husband, who was the reason I left Poland all these years back. My husband, also a migrant, originally from a large city in India – a talented young nuclear physicist, was recruited by a prestigious British university during the so-called 'brain drain' of the early 1970s, which brought India's scientists to the UK. We have been together for over thirty years. I am a psychotherapist and, until the Covid-19 pandemic, I worked from my private practice in London, travelling back and forth on most weekdays. Now, my work is exclusively online, and so I am currently completely stationary. Migration has intertwined with rootedness throughout my life.

In one respect my husband and I are in a privileged position as we both moved to the UK out of choice. The same cannot be said for our families, who experienced forced migration in times of catastrophic political change and war. My father and mother's families had to flee Eastern Poland, first, from the Red Terror of the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917, and again, in 1939/40, in the aftermath of invasion of Poland after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, when the territory of Poland was divided between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Faced with death, my ancestors needed little; men took up arms, women strode to reach the border with babies glued to their breasts and sobbing children. Well-loved family homes and precious possessions abandoned in a hurry. Those family members who did not manage to leave were killed, or incarcerated and later deported by train to remote labour camps in central Siberia and Auschwitz, others simply perished in the chaos of the ensuing war. Then again, on the other side of the world, as a consequence of the India's bloody partition of August 1947, my husband, as a young boy, had to flee his ancestral village. Their land and home were deemed to be on the Pakistani side and within days it became clear that as a Hindu family, regardless of their prior status, they were in danger. During their perilous journey the family witnessed some of the worst mass violence and atrocities, and continued to suffer the effects of forced migration for many years after. The unspoken pain and unbearable grief of those traumatic experiences made themselves at home in subsequent generations of both our families.

Sadly, a large proportion of people seeking refuge in another country, including LGBTQ+ people, migrate in just such situations, because of a well-founded fear for their safety and life.

Some escape persecution, instability, violence and war, or decide to move to a new country in search of better living conditions, freedom of expression and acceptance – as is the case with many queer migrants, who furthermore commonly flee the discrimination, harassment and hate crimes, intolerant laws, oppressive cultural and religious standards and therefore marginalisation experienced in their country of origin, neighbourhoods, and commonly their own families. Take, as one example, the story of Nyasha, a lesbian woman from Zimbabwe, shared recently by *PinkNews* as part of their LGBTQ+ Refugees Welcome campaign. ‘Homosexuality is illegal in Zimbabwe and once her family found out about her sexuality, Nyasha was subjected to the abusive practice known as “corrective rape” by her uncle. This follows the idea that corrective rape is a form of conversion therapy and that a person’s sexuality can be changed through sexual assault. By the time Nyasha fled Zimbabwe, she had endured years of sexual violence as no one in her family had tried to stop it from happening’. In order to save herself she had to leave her daughter behind (Kelleher, 2022). The *PinkNews* campaign puts a spotlight on the painful realities of many gender, sexuality and relationship diverse people across the world face that force them to leave their homes, from familial violence to anti-LGBTQ+ laws.

Also, in within Western society, queer migration is nothing new. ‘It has always been a cultural and historical norm within varying lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities around the world, and has been an essential part of the “queer experience” for centuries. Depicted countlessly in popular culture, in songs like Bronski Beat’s “*Smalltown Boy*,” the ritual of “queer migration,” in the West, is often the result of a multitude of oppressions that exist in the local communities, hometowns, or countries, of the individuals in question’ (Elmi, 2022). I have been lucky to meet many of them personally – some of whom are now amongst my friends. A large number of the clients I have worked with over the past 30 years are LGBTQ+ persons, who migrated to the UK, for one reason or another.

Now, before I proceed any further, I want to offer a brief explanation of how I use the term ‘migrant’, just in case it is not yet clear. The word ‘migrant’ in this essay refers to anyone who moved from one country to another, in order to settle temporarily or permanently. I make no distinction among legal immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, economic or undocumented immigrants. It has been shown that such distinctions do not reflect empirically verifiable differences among migrants, who often shift from one category to another. I also strongly believe that this type of divisions is most often imposed by the political regimes and general public in order to restrict the migrants’ rights, and is, in fact, part of their surveillance and control. I also believe that all migration has consequences, gains as well as losses; it impacts individuals who migrate, their families and communities, and has also far-reaching impact on the society, culture and economy of the receiving country, in fact the whole world.

Human migration has shaped civilisation, but today is one of the greatest challenges the world faces as there was over 100 million displaced people in the world last year as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) informed in May 2022. The precise number of migrants who identify as LGBTQI+ is unknown. Only 37 countries formally grant asylum to queer migrants due to a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity and as a result, 'there is limited generalizable research on the characteristics and experiences of LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers' (Shaw & Verghese, 2022).

At times, I also speak here of 'migration' in a more general sense, as of phenomena of moving from one place to another that characterise all living matter, from cells to insects, birds, marine and land animals, as well as people. To quote Ruth Padel's brilliant book *The Mara Crossing* (2012), 'Home and migration belong together, two sides of the same ancient coin. Home is something we make, then things change, either in ourselves or in the world, we lose home and have to go elsewhere.' And one more quote that seems particularly significant in a unique context of the present essay, 'Home is where you start from, but where is a swallow's real home? And what does "native" mean if the English oak is an immigrant from Spain? [...] We're all from somewhere else'.



Rebecca Katz, *The Magic Hour*, 2019

Experiment 1

Have you, yourself, experienced migration? If you have never moved the countries, maybe you moved away from your hometown, street; left your local community, family, friends. Spend a few moments thinking about this experience? How was it? How are you feeling right now, when you are recalling this experience?

Experiment 2

Have you met any LGBTQ+ person who migrated to another country or community? Have you had a chance to hear their experience of migration as their therapist, colleague or a friend? Are gay, lesbian or transgender and chose to move to a new country or city? What were the reasons for doing so? What was the impact of the migration on any aspect of the intersectional identity: ethnic, race, sexual, religious, linguistic, class?

I am not an academic, so this essay is rather a down to earth exploration based on personal experiences of queer migration. Over the years, I learned to appreciate that migration, far from being a simple and straightforward passage or relocation, is instead a complex and complicated process, and can be traumatic even after we have reached the shores of our 'promised land'. This was reflected in the original title of my webinar when it was first aired during the Pink Therapy conference, *Freedom to be Queer in the UK – at what cost?*

Queer migration is a precarious process as it is a process full of danger and uncertainties, the toll of which is largely underestimated. However more recently, especially in academic circles which are influenced by queer theory and gender studies, more attention has been paid to this particular phenomenon, an example of which was the 2020 conference *Queer Migrations: Transnational Sexualities in Theory and Practice* organised by University of Cambridge and CRASSH – Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. The overarching aim of this interdisciplinary conference was, in the words of its organisers, 'to perform a kind of "queering", rupturing stable, linear and Western conceptions of migration, and rethinking the ways in which queer bodies are perceived, represented and choose to move and travel through space', as well as identify and advance counter-narratives that challenge the established fantasy of global mobility; CRASSH, 2020.

The demands of immigration almost inevitably lead to a number of unexpected and often momentous decisions for each of us who decides to leave our homeland. This includes queer refugees and asylum seekers who flee the war-torn countries, violence and persecution including sexual and gender-based violence, or social ostracism that commonly leads them to suffer alienation, lack of safety and fear for their life, and who arrive in the UK seriously traumatised and may experience problems with mental and physical health and expect from their host country protection and support. This is currently the case in the UK following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or before that during the Syrian conflict, or the ongoing exodus from the African continent in search of safety, food and work. This also applies to LGBTQ+ individuals fleeing Uganda where same-sex relationships are against the law and carry a life sentence, or Iran, where homosexuality is punishable by death, and gay men in particular are frequently blackmailed and targeted, or the Caribbean, where colonial-era 'anti-buggery' laws

fuel hatred and violence towards people who are found to be non-heterosexual and criminalise consensual sexual relations between adults of the same sex in private.

According to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA), there are 69 countries where homosexuality is still illegal, and they include roughly 70% of the Commonwealth countries. The statistics remains surprisingly unchanging; even as the Western European, most North and South American countries, Australia and New Zealand are becoming increasingly tolerant, Russia, China, and several Eastern European countries, like Poland and Hungary continue to restrict public discussion and dissemination of information concerning same-sex attraction and gender identity, reinforcing stigma and prejudice and becoming increasingly hostile towards the LGBTQ+ individuals. This means that many queer migrants are often severely traumatised, with deep-seated internalised homophobia and shame that continues to nibble on their confidence and health, as if from within, long after they moved to a newly found safety of their chosen country. However, the agony is not limited only to these extreme cases as the vast majority of individuals who migrate experience multiple stresses related to the process of migration itself that evidently impact their mental wellbeing, including the loss of contact with their loved ones, friends and social support systems, loss of job and means of financial support, loss of language, as well as so called cultural bereavement, due to the loss of cultural and religious customs and bonds.



Abdullah Qureshi, abstract portraits in *Unruly Politics* in Twelve Gates Arts, Philadelphia, 2018

The author of the above triptych portrait, Abdullah Qureshi is a Pakistani-born artist, curator and researcher, who studied art in the UK and now lives in Helsinki, Finland. Using portraiture as well as film and multimedia, he examines formations of queer identity and resistance in Muslim migratory contexts. (If interested you might see more of his ongoing

project here: <https://mythologicalmigrations.com/>) Throughout his art and writings, Qureshi points to the experienced recurring ruptures in the migrants' identities and lives as they negotiate boundaries of exclusion and inclusion that continue to loom large on their settlement and integration journeys particularly with reference to the migrants' sexuality, gender, race and religion intersections. He argues that 'after reaching "safety" in Europe, there is often little dialogue on their healing and recovery.... and the natural need of a human being to connect and find community with whom they may identify is not recognized.' (Qureshi, 2018, pp. 112) What is particularly interesting, when recalling his six years of studying art in London, Qureshi observes that while he did go through the process of discovering himself and his sexuality in London, it never really came to the forefront. 'Ironically, it's when I moved back to Pakistan that I was confronted with how to identify myself. I started learning very quickly different people were seeing the identity framework in different positions. For example, there were people who resisted the use of the word "gay" altogether in Pakistan. And for me, it was fascinating there were people who were not even using that kind of identity label'. (Sultan, 2019)

Even if observed by Qureshi impact of migration on the individuals' own sense of gender and sexuality has only recently started being properly researched, it has been supported by numerous personal stories of my LGBTQ+ clients and friends, and certainly my own personal experience. Perhaps the best is to tell you here my own story that can offer an illustration of this phenomenon and serve as an explanation of how I use the term 'queer' in this essay, which relates directly to my own process of leaving the country of my birth to settle in the UK.

Until recently, I was happily identifying myself as a gay man. Since my teens, being gay not only indicated my sexual orientation, but also epitomised my choice of alternative lifestyle, including among others my dress code, and my choice of... shoes – in my late adolescence, when Poland was still ruled by the communist regime, I would parade through the streets of Warsaw in my favourite bright red leather knee-high boots I hired from the costume department of the Polish National Opera, where I used to earn pocket money treading the boards as an extra in their varied productions. And I can assure you that wearing red boots was not a part of communist propaganda on my part! Instead, these were my 'kinky boots' – my gay way of demonstrating to the world that I was different, or camp, in the way that Susan Sontag (1964) depicts, as 'a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous', 'the glorification of "character"' that exposes love of exaggeration, playfulness, artifice, 'the victory of "style" over "content," "aesthetics" over "morality," of irony over tragedy.' Notwithstanding, they also demonstrated my gay defiance against the oppressive authorities. I felt daring and, from the perspective of time, surprisingly invincible. Even more importantly, the word 'gay,' that has no clear substitute in the Polish language, would have most clearly expressed, who I then was as a person – the rebel, the outcast, foreigner in the country of my

birth; everything would revolve around being gay that was also simultaneously organising all the other aspects of my then personal identity. I had a strong sense that my gay identity was then as firmly fixed as the prevailing political regime of that time in Poland.

However, after my moving to the UK, and more recently, as I am getting older, equipped with all I know about myself and the world, I am increasingly inclined to think and talk about myself as queer, as this term seems to address many more facets of my complex and, yes, complicated nature, including my current philosophical and political stand in the world. According to Michael Warner, 'the term "queer" rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political-interest representation in favour of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal,' which is particularly useful when like me, one talks of transformation, or to use the term borrowed from Gestalt therapy – creative adjustments, rather than mere accommodation to the social *status quo*. This transformation also means that I have gained more access to my own vulnerability and changeability; no longer do I feel as unyielding and fixed as before, but experience myself as an ongoing process with my choice restored.

After Gayatri Gopinath – the professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, and the Director of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at New York University who was a key speaker at the 2020 *Queer Migrations* conference, I see 'queerness as a possibility, a sense of self knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality'. Unlike the term 'gay,' which stands in opposition to 'straight,' and, in its form, is therefore unavoidably fixed; 'queer' seems, to speak to the *in-between*, embracing all the middle space that is delineated by both polar opposites of 'gay' and 'straight,' and includes them both. The key address of Gayatri Gopinath can be accessed on YouTube, <https://youtu.be/znioXGpkrKQ>.

The experience of queer migration did not receive explicit attention until the emergence of *the field of queer migrations*, about a decade and a half ago. So, how does sexuality shape migration processes? How queer migrants are treated by the receiving countries? How migration transforms queer communities of the western world, together with their rights and recognition? How migration process affects sexuality and gender of a queer person? These and many other questions configure the field of this still young science that ensures that queer migrants are not being overlooked or forgotten.

The research into queer migrations clearly confirms that the vast changes, which ensue in the process of moving from one country to another, and perhaps in particular for a queer person moving to the UK, inevitably involves many significant adjustments in their personal sense of who they are. This includes a sense of personal identity and the intersections of some other aspects of identity, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality,

religion, language, disability etc. This is when many migrants grow into profoundly changed selves that they could never have anticipated.

For some of the migrants being uprooted and moving countries is so traumatic that they never are able to settle down in their new place – their lives become temporary arrangements, living from the unpacked suitcases, ready for return to the country of origin or moving on, somewhere else.

Others might take on the new identity, often of their adopted country, they either blend into it, learn the new language, change their accent, name, way they dress and move, become indistinguishable often boasting about the superiority of the new culture over the inferiority of their motherland or their own past. Worse still, some become staunch anti-immigrant hard-liners.

For others, however, the initial departure is just the beginning of their journey onto finding their own identity dissimilar to their original one and also different from that offered by the new place – their migration is just a pretext to disrupt their established identity that they have managed to outgrow a long while before.

In my case, I have been struggling for a while between calling myself Polish, then British, then Polish-British and European – all of which felt somewhat not right; at least after changing my name several times from Piotr to Peter and back, I settled with Piotr which now feels very different to my original name given to me by my parents. It seems like this moving back and forth, triggered by my migration to the UK all these years back, has alerted me to an existence of another territory, that was invisible to me before – the space beyond the static narratives and identifications, the land of fluidity and freedom to choose.

I imagine that the process described above is in some way similar to the realisation of one being non-heterosexual, or non-male, non-female, or indeed non-white or non-black in this matter, which for many people marks a point of departure, the letting go of one's way of seeing themselves that is no longer accurate. A person moves then to the polar opposite, i.e., homosexual, or a female or a male, *third not possible*. Unless, like it happened with me, through my process of migration, one lingers longer and attends with engaged attention deliberately to the whole continuum of emerging possibilities that both polar opposites demarcate. The richness of such *in-between* space that opens up for us is immense.

So, let me state that all migration, and queer migration in particular, cannot be reduced to a mere balance of gains and losses, or costs and benefits – as any such suggestion would do huge disservice to the emotional, cognitive, and spiritual upheaval that each and every

migrant is faced with – even if many of them rarely talk about their experiences of their own accord, unless in a therapy room or amongst friends in intimate heart-to-heart talks.

Experiment 3

Now, before I go any further, I want you to imagine two brief scenarios that most migrants have to go through several times a day, when already safely in the UK. Most often this is to do with their appearance, like the colour of their skin, behaviour, or how they dress or speak; their foreign look and accent – to put it simply, their difference.

Please consider the following scenarios and take a moment to notice your response; your feelings, thoughts, and sensations in your body as I talk you through the script on screen now:

1st scenario:

A stranger asks you: *'What is your name?'*

You tell them your name, i.e.: *'Piotr' ('Agnieszka', 'Shunashir' or whatever your name is)*

A stranger says: *'Oh, no! I won't call you that! It is just much too difficult! I'm sure you won't mind if I call you Peter (or Agnes, or Shawn, or whatever is easier for them pronounce)?'*

[Notice your present experience]

And now another scenario:

2nd scenario:

A stranger asks you: *'Where are you from?'*

You say: *'I am from here, I'm local.'*

A stranger says: *'No, I mean where you really from?'*

[Notice your present feelings, thoughts, and sensations in your body; you might wish to talk about your experience with others]



Photo by Ed Gregory, 2015 – Stokpic, (Freerange Stock)

'We're all from somewhere else' as the title of another of Ruth Padel's books states. 'In 2019, the fifty million people around the world were forced from their homes by conflict and disaster. In the climate crisis, these numbers will go up. The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 makes the lives of in flight even more vulnerable than before'. (Padel, 2020)

'Where are you from?' in the above scenario is not necessarily a prejudiced or racist question, but for those of us with the history of migration – our own or our ancestors', and above all for all British people of colour, it is a loaded one. We answer it uneasily, unsure if the conversation is going to unravel into something more distressing, as the encounter between Lady Susan Hussey and Ngozi Fulani did last November at the charity gala in Buckingham Palace. 'We don't know what the intent of the question is: what is lurking beneath the surface? Why does the questioner want to know where we're from? Is it simple innocent curiosity, or is it designed to put us in our place? Do they want to make assumptions about us based on stereotypes about our heritage? Are they racist?' (Sherine, 2022). Even if the question 'Where are you from?' is important, too often in Britain today it is asked in the wrong way, for wrong reasons, in particular that the meaning of this question has radically changed in a vastly different political and social context since Brexit.

This typical situation of ambivalent welcome in the adopted country experienced by the majority of migrants many times a day every day is exquisitely depicted by Guyanese-born Canadian writer Tessa McWatt in her debut book *Out of My Skin* (1998) that is worth reading in its entirety. Even if not dealing specifically with queer migration, McWatt's novel offers a powerful exploration of personal histories of migration raising questions of identity, race, and belonging as well as skilful analysis of the effects of colonialism in the New World, specifically in Canada. I found her observations depict this phenomenon superbly no matter the country.

When the main character of the book, Daphne, searches for her identity among the lost tribes of contemporary urban life of Montreal, and eventually meets her biological aunt Sheila for the first time, Sheila wonders, how Daphne responds when people ask her 'Where are you from.' Sheila goes on to say:

I have a friend, a lady from home – she makes me laugh. She says, 'In dis country it's important to have the propa 'hyphenation'. Funny, makes it sound like havin the propa' papers, but it's just what you call yourself when someone asks you where you're from. 'Where are you *from*?' 'I'm a Canadian.' 'No, I mean where you *from*?' 'I've heard that so many times in thirty years. Now you know your hyphenation. West-Indian Canadian. What did you used to say?' ... 'Nothing. I'd say nothing' . . . (pp. 81)

For Daphne and Sheila, the insistence in the question, 'where you *from*,' reveals the trap of multicultural hyphenation that marks out black Canadians, in this case, as belonging

elsewhere. They have, quite literally, in casual conversation, been refused access to the inside of the informal boundaries of Canada – its symbolic breast. A subtle act of exclusion emerges in the repetition and shifting emphasis between the questions, ‘Where are you from’ to ‘I mean where you *from*.’ This barely-detectable meaning indicates the virtually invisible means through which the exclusion of any person of colour operates in the entire western world.

From my experience in the UK, this behaviour is rife. I know about it from my British-Indian husband and my Black, African and Asian friends and clients. However, these subtle acts of exclusion do not only apply to people of colour, but the vast majority of migrants who because of their differences stand out from the so-called native people of their host country. Speaking a different language or speaking with a foreign accent, as I do, wearing unusual clothes or behaving differently to the way that is customary in the host country marks immigrants as racialised outsiders – so they are regularly, at the same time, both greeted and excluded. Queer migrants, the vast majority of whom viscerally recall violence or harassment experienced in their motherland for being gender-sexual-relationship diverse, now are faced with more or less covert rejections and microaggressions in their imagined paradise – the place they travelled hundreds if not thousands of miles to, in search of safety and freedom.

To give an example from my own life, even though, as I mentioned, I had never seriously considered leaving the country, where I was born and spent a happy childhood until I met the person I fell in love with, who happened to live in the UK, I was nevertheless a victim of persecution directed against homosexuals in Poland during the communist regime. And I am not at all referring here to the demeaning insults and slurs, or the hostile stares that my compatriots treated me with on a daily basis – for this is simply the normal reality of GSRD people in our homophobic world, regardless of country, including the UK. I am referring to a much darker systemic homophobia on a country-wide scale, where to the same extent the state as the Catholic Church had spread hatred and collaborated in affirming repressive policies towards sexual and gender minorities during the years of so-called People’s Poland.

I still remember it as if it was yesterday, that one early morning in November 1985, at exactly 6 o’clock, there was a loud thumping on the door of my parents’ house, where I then had lived, being only 20 something and an undergraduate psychology student. My mother went to open the door and a large number of secret police in plain clothes flooded the hallway asking for me. Later on, I recall sitting between two policemen, at the back of a van, and feeling surprised by some dampness and funny taste on my lips only to find that a stream of blood was gushing from my nose. I was in shock. I must have been traumatised as I recall feeling freezing-cold like it would be the peak of winter. They took me, still in my pyjamas, to *Mostowski Palace* – the notorious headquarters of the secret service in Warsaw. Together

with hundreds other men, I was kept for the whole day in an underground cell, where I was interrogated, threatened, and verbally abused for no reason except for my sexual orientation. It was only much later, when already in the UK, that I learned that my arrest was part of an undercover operation, code-named *Hyacinth*, conducted by the police in conjunction with the Secret Service. The aim of the operation was to detain, interrogate, and register both actual and alleged homosexuals in order to create a national database, which resulted in around 11,000 men being registered. The plan was to gather compromising evidence, which would later be used to blackmail those individuals and fight the anti-communist opposition. Homosexuality was considered in Poland as potentially compromising the communist state.

For several years after the incident, I would wake up each and every morning at exactly six o'clock, drenched in sweat, with my heart in my mouth. It was clear I was traumatised, and yet I just pushed on with my life as if nothing of any consequence had happened. I know I am not the only queer person with such an awful experience, I have heard stories like mine if not worse many a time. Take for instance Layla AlAmmar, an author of *Silence Is a Sense* (2021) that tells the story of a Syrian refugee who has been so traumatised by conflict and her perilous journey across Europe that she no longer speaks. This powerful, intensely moving book bares open how trauma fragments the memory and turns people into startled animals. Trauma rejects conventional narratives, a fact that Home Office' interviewers still fail to understand. Numerous migrants forced into exile by oppression or a humanitarian and political disaster escape awful situations only to find themselves trapped by inhumane immigration system on arrival in the sanctuary of the UK. In order to be granted asylum, migrants have to be prepared to unfurl their horrors for inspection, but like the narrator in the AlAmmar's book, many find themselves unable to stitch it into a coherent pattern. Each year thousands of asylum seekers are detained by authorities who do not believe their stories. Trauma continues to perpetuate.

To complete my own story, I will only add that the unintended consequence of *Operation Hyacinth* was that it gave Polish gay people more awareness of their need for equal rights, an example of which was the launch of the *Warsaw Gay Movement* – the first gay rights organisation in Poland. Regrettably, after a short-lived political upturn of 1990s, when attempts were made to introduce equal rights for gays and lesbians, the situation soon deteriorated again. The brief growing climate of equality was stamped upon by a new government, which, with the support of the Catholic Church, has ruled the country ever since, and whose manifesto includes the description of LGBT people as 'more destructive than communists'. The effects of the increased use of hate speech and political actions directed against gender, sexuality and relationship diverse people in Poland in recent years became very apparent. As the recent report by the association Lambda Warszawa points out, 'the observed stable trend of increasing public acceptance of LGBTQ+ people and equality has broken down' (2021, p.9).

The latest ILGA-Europe ranking shows that in 2022, across the EU, ‘no country treats LGBTQ+ people worse than Poland’. I would just add, the precise number of files in the so-called *Pink Archive*, as well as its exact location remains unknown, and despite several attempts on the part of Polish LGBTQ+ community, its content is still used to identify and harass the gay men for their political end. If interested, you might want to watch a fictional story that uses incidents of real-life human rights abuse from this period as its backdrop in the Netflix’s film ‘*Operation Hyacinth*’, which is a well-directed, finely acted deep-cover thriller about police corruption with an added layer of social commentary. It has good reviews and most importantly good enough subtitles! The use of lighting and colours in this film is excellent as vividly paint the dark times during which I lived in Poland. The point it makes is obvious: What the Polish authorities did to queer people in the 1980s was horrible and traumatising.



Julio Salgado, *Queer Butterfly: I Exist*, 2019

For contrast, the above colourful picture is a painting by Julio Salgado entitled ‘*Queer Butterfly: I exist.*’ Julio Salgado is a gay Mexican born artist who grew up in Long Beach, California. Through the use of art, he has become a well-known activist within the DREAM Act movement. Salgado uses his art to empower undocumented and queer people by telling their stories and putting a human face to the issue of migration. In the interview for *Daily Bruin*, Salgado explained he used the butterfly motif in particular because it is a symbol of migration. ‘He admires how the monarch butterfly can freely travel across Canada, the United States and Mexico. “Wouldn’t it be great if human beings could do the same, without borders?” – he muses. He also says he used the butterfly because, in Mexico, the word is often used to mock queer people. Using the butterfly in his art is a way of reappropriating the word in order to take

pride in his queerness. “I wanted to change the negative meaning of the butterfly to reflect proudly that I’m queer and I’m an immigrant ... and a chubby guy” (Napolitano, 2014).

Like Julio Salgado above and Sheila’s friend from the book *Out of My Skin*, I have also been an immigrant for over 30 years, but I’m not black. Furthermore, I belong to a privileged group of professionals who happen to be migrants. I am what Salman Akhtar (1998) – a psychoanalyst and prolific American writer on migration, himself originally from Northern India, labels ‘an invisible immigrant’ – invisible because I am white, middle class, bilingual (as now I speak fluent English), and did not arrive here as a refugee or asylum seeker, and yet my accent defines me as the ‘other.’

Despite putting my roots in the UK all these years back and holding British passport for well over two decades, I have my share of experiences of being excluded on the basis of my immigrant status, the experiences which have become the building blocks of my ‘hyphenation’ – Polish-British or British Pole, or as it is sometimes called ‘double consciousness.’ The term ‘double consciousness,’ which was coined by W.E.B. Du Bois (1994/1903) – an American sociologist and historian, and the first African American to earn a doctorate in 1895, to denote the subjectivity of African Americans, who lived in a culture where they were viewed as unequal to white Americans, has been adopted recently by psychoanalysts in their discourse on immigrant subjectivity and, in particular, its focus on the concept of multiplicity.

‘An immigrant enters her new country with one set of selves. These are then overwritten and refracted by her experiences with peers, neighbours, colleagues, authorities in the new culture, and this experience shapes her consciousness, subjectivity, and sense of identity,’ (Lobban, 2013, pp. 556).

Let’s have a look now again at the title of my talk: ‘Queer migration: LGBTQ+ people in search for supportive ground – an experiential enquiry into interweaving multiple identities’ and the superb 2018 screen print on muslin, printed polyester fabric, gold metallic fabric, embroidery, appliqué and quilting by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto from the series ‘*Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth*’ (see below). The artist, who identifies himself as queer is a well-known Pakistani visual and performance artist, who currently lives in San Francisco. The preamble in the exhibition catalogue states ‘*Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth*’ is an investigation into histories of popular resistance, guerrilla warfare and anti-imperialism in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia that are then re-interpreted into an archive of an imagined revolution in a post-utopian and post-human world.... The process behind the series is threefold: employing textile-based installations, video works and performance. Tapestries are created to honour real and imagined queer guerrilla fighters and the weapons they used, following from Shiite Muslim traditions of martyr and saint veneration. The source imagery for these male figures are Pakistani wrestlers whose bodies are bejewelled and bedazzled, morphed into more opulent images of what a fighter might look like in a queer world. Texts taken from an Urdu

children's book about the American Hollywood hero, Rambo and his jihad against Russian communism are then combined with these images to create a story of this world.



Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, *Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth*, 2018

My deliberate choice of focus in this essay has been the phenomenon of 'hyphenation' or its academic term of 'double consciousness' as it speaks, in my opinion, directly and with great clarity to the very precarious nature of queer migration. On one hand, intense discomfort with the constant questioning like 'Where you *from*' – portrayed in the fragment from the book *Out of My Skin* and the agony of being forced to occupy the space of the hyphen that is a well familiar experience for the majority of queer migrants – never truly being seen as 'full' citizens, never being really accepted as belonging here, but instead being from somewhere else, out of place. And on the other hand, the intense pain experienced by the vast majority of LGBT+ people of being continuously excluded no matter where they live, whether in their motherland for being queer or in their host country for being foreign, and their unending equally passionate resilience in the pursuit of affiliation, acceptance, and belonging – their quest for interpersonal connection so beautifully depicted by Julio Salgado, *Queer Butterfly: I exist!* Or in the words of earlier quoted Gayatri Gopinath (2020), 'Queerness is a possibility, a sense of self knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality.'

When a person leaves their home, family, country, and leaves behind their mother tongue, a particular system of established sexual or gender norms and rules, a person leaves behind their identity, national, familial, sexual, of gender or language and is propelled into a seemingly permanent state of not knowing. For me, as for other queer migrants, the only way of being in such terrifying and painful place was to make it into my symbolic permanent home that I furnished with uncertainty and changeability, like a nomadic tent ready to provide a shelter for a night only to be moved the following morning. Not knowing is a precarious and uncomfortable place to be in, even if one stumbles into it only temporarily in one's lifetime, let alone this becoming one's main locus of existence, uncertainty dominating one's experience. Not knowing is most often a source of much anxiety and can be terrifying. And yet for some not knowing does not prevent, but instead enables to live their lives more fully than ever before. This idea was articulated many decades earlier in the lyrical way by another queer nomad, James Baldwin, in his book-length essay *The Devil Finds Work* (1976):

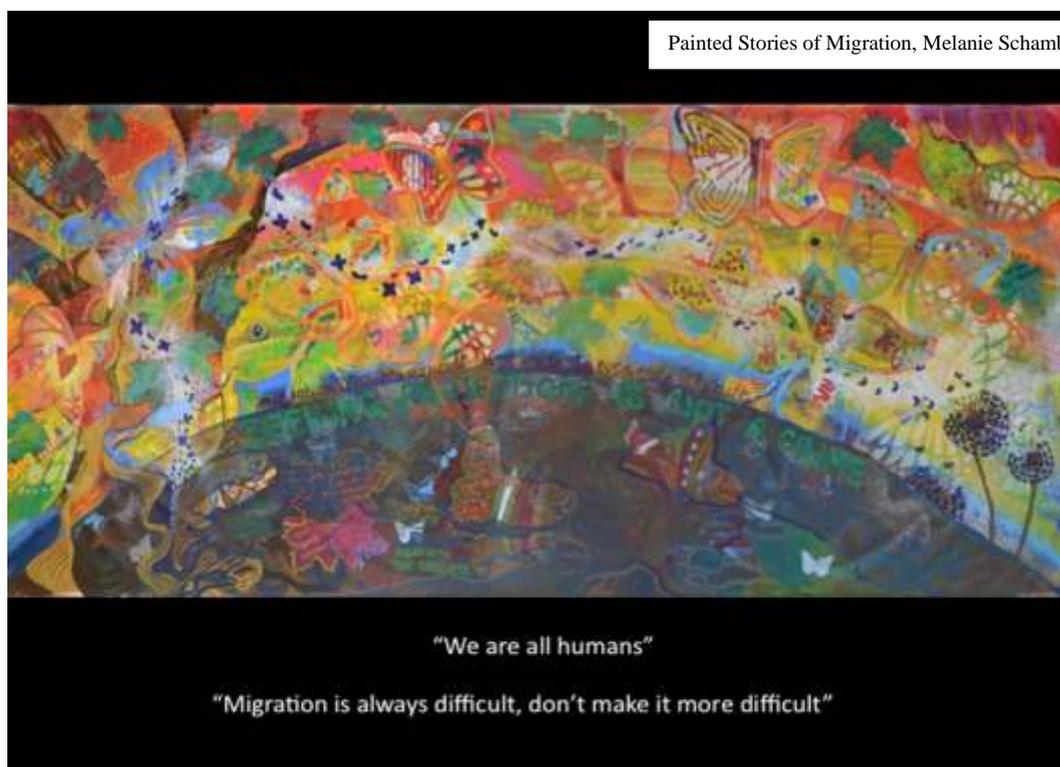
An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger... Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like robes of the desert, through which one's nakedness can always be felt and, sometimes discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes.

In my view, this is through such an act of releasing all knowledge, long established beliefs about people, who they are or supposed to be, all thoughts of ownership and understanding of location and, at the same time, remaining actively engaged in the act of living, lies the solution to the situation that most queer migrants face, as I have been trying to depict it here. They must, in a sense, 'lose themselves', give in to their existence as being marginalised and racialised for being different and yet hold onto what seem to come so naturally to them – their unending passionate resilience in the pursuit of affiliation, acceptance, and belonging. This, sometimes called 'Third Space' they live in, challenges our sense of any fixed identity and as a result, renders invalid any hierarchical claims to the innate originality or purity of cultures and people (Homi Bhabha, 1994).

I see the absurdity of man-made divisions and splits of the world that is obviously plural and in flux – physical boundaries erected between real people and countries as much as abstract ideas about people and societies developed in social sciences, not excluding our own field of psychotherapy that, at times, seems far detached from our subjective experiences, our senses; they cannot be felt, heard, seen, touched, tasted, smelled, and yet perpetuated.

Remarkably, the authors of the seminal text of Gestalt therapy written by Frederick Perls, Ralph Hefferline and Paul Goodman over 70 years ago, soon after the Second World War ended, pointed to such abstract splits being the most basic and most distractive problems that distort the human view of reality and are the source of much pain and suffering. 'The average person, having been raised in an atmosphere full of splits, has lost his Wholeness, his Integrity. To come together again he has to heal the dualism of his person, of his thinking, and of his language. He is accustomed to thinking in contrasts – of infantile and mature, of body and mind, organism and environment, self and reality, as if they were opposing entities'. Being optimistic the Gestalt Therapy authors have exposed that the unitary outlook capable to dissolve such a dualistic approach is only 'buried but not destroyed' and, 'can be regained with wholesome advantage' by the aware individuals; see 'Introduction' to *Gestalt Therapy Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman, 1951, pp. vii).

And so, when I can, I protest against these artificial partitions and attempt to heal them, together with some of my psychotherapy colleagues as well as numerous other queer migrants and artists, whom I have tried to introduce here through the visual accompaniment of my presentation. Poetry, music, dance, visual arts, and many more creative activities support queer migrants not only to express their individual experiences, but also to carry on with their persistence of promoting cross-cultural ideas and challenge all preconceptions about queer migration.





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