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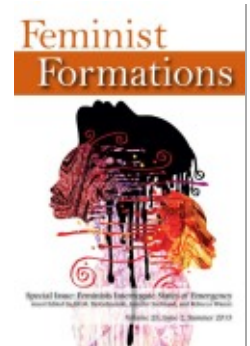
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Deportable Subjects: Lesbians and Political Asylum

Rachel Lewis

This article explores how deportation as a state of emergency structures the queer migration narratives of lesbian refugees and asylum-seekers. The first part of the article discusses the ways in which the political asylum system produces queer, and specifically lesbian, migrants as deportable subjects. The second part examines queer anti-deportation advocacy emerging from within these spaces of deportability or crisis. The third part analyzes a 2010 piece of performance art, Oreet Ashery's Staying: Dream, Bin, Soft Stud and Other Stories, that reflects upon the everyday practices and embodied experiences associated with deportability. What is crucial about this particular text is that it enables the lesbian refugees involved in the project to take an active role in the production of their asylum narratives. In doing so, the article suggests, media and cultural advocacy on behalf of lesbian asylum can provide a site for the articulation of new sexual rights claims.

Keywords: Ashery, Oreet / cultural advocacy / deportation / human rights / lesbians / migration / Namigadde, Brenda / narrative / political asylum

It is no mere contrivance or exaggeration . . . to say of the 'deportable alien' that—like the exiles and bandits to whom Agamben analogizes the figure of bare life, excluded from all political life, disqualified from any juridically valid act, and yet in a continuous relationship with the power that banishes it—no life is more 'political' than hers.

—Nicholas DeGenova and Nathalie Peutz (2010, 47)

In its May 2011 special issue “Forty Under Forty,” *The Advocate* magazine celebrated lesbian asylum-seeker Brenda Namigadde as one of the world’s “top forty” gay rights activists under age 40. Namigadde was originally denied political asylum in the United Kingdom on the grounds that she could not provide proof of her homosexuality. According to the online blog *Political Scrapbook*, the judge in charge of Namigadde’s case found it strange that she took no interest in lesbian magazines or other forms of cultural production pertaining to her sexual orientation (Canning 2011a, 2011b). Upon the rejection of her asylum appeal, Namigadde was placed in detention, from where she was due to be deported to Uganda on January 28, 2011. Two days before Namigadde’s scheduled deportation, however, Ugandan gay rights activist David Kato was brutally murdered after he successfully took out a legal injunction against the Ugandan magazine *Rolling Stone* for its role in inciting homophobic hate crimes. In response to Kato’s murder, journalist Melanie Nathan (2011a) of the US-based site *LezGetReal: A Gay Girl’s View on the World* launched a massive global internet campaign in which she demanded that Namigadde be granted a stay of deportation. *LezGetReal*’s online internet campaign subsequently attracted the attention of David Bahati, the author of Uganda’s proposed anti-homosexuality legislation, who, after reading one of Nathan’s articles, called the author directly and asked her to give Namigadde a “message.” Bahati informed Nathan that Namigadde would be welcomed back to Uganda on one condition: that she “abandon” her homosexual behaviour (Nathan 2011b). If she did not do so, he told her, Namigadde would be imprisoned upon her return. On the morning of Namigadde’s scheduled deportation, her story appeared on the front cover of *Metro*, a magazine distributed for free in most British cities with a readership of approximately 3.5 million people.¹ As a result of the intense media coverage surrounding her case, Namigadde was eventually granted a stay of deportation just minutes before her plane was scheduled to depart, despite the fact that the UK Border and Immigration Agency continued to maintain that she was not a lesbian. Namigadde’s lawyers have since stopped trying to prove their client’s sexual orientation and are now arguing that it is *perceived homosexuality* that is responsible for the “well-founded fear of persecution” she would face upon her return to Uganda. Referred to as the *Brenda Namigadde Effect*, Namigadde’s case, and the media coverage surrounding it, has set a new legal precedent for perceived homosexuality as grounds for political asylum in the United Kingdom (ibid.). While homophobic and anti-immigrant newspapers in Britain have predictably accused the lesbian asylum-seeker of manipulating the UK asylum system (Barrett 2011; Barrett and Leach 2011; Tedder 2011), *The Advocate* continues to celebrate Namigadde as a leading advocate for lesbian rights.

The representation of her case in *The Advocate*’s special issue is symptomatic of the increasingly high-profile nature of LGBTI asylum cases within global gay rights advocacy. As Alice Miller notes, successful LGBTI asylum cases represent “visible victories”—rare phenomena in the human rights world

(2005, 162). Indeed, international interest in the treatment of LGBTI refugees and asylum-seekers has grown exponentially since the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published its official guidelines on claims relating to sexual orientation and gender identity in 2008. In response to the UN's identification of LGBTI refugees as central to its gender- and sexuality-based violence-prevention strategy for 2011–16, the United States has taken a leading role in the establishment of Emergency Transit Centers for LGBTI refugees who are in the process of resettlement. According to the Obama administration, LGBTI refugees constitute a “priority population of concern,” one that is especially vulnerable to danger and abuse at every stage of the displacement cycle (Richard 2012).

The language of emergency that drives the Obama administration's rhetoric on LGBTI refugees is characteristic of mainstream representations of refugee populations as signaling a humanitarian crisis in need of resolution. Peter Nyers has commented on the ways that emergency discourses determine how refugees are spoken of by governments, international aid organizations, and humanitarian groups: “Unlike the lives of migrants, the condition of refugee has no normality; it is life in a state of emergency and is stripped bare of all cultural and political qualities” (2006, 21). While LGBTI refugees and asylum-seekers are undoubtedly vulnerable to danger and abuse in the context of the refugee camp, as a number of human rights reports have documented, they are also at risk of violence as a consequence of political asylum policies.² As a result of the fact that sexual orientation and gender identity are still relatively new grounds for political asylum, it is often difficult for LGBTI refugees to translate their experiences of persecution into the kinds of asylum narratives that are recognizable to the state. Caught between universal human rights and the particularities of state immigration controls, many LGBTI refugees and asylum-seekers are condemned to a state of emergency at the US border rendered invisible in the Obama administration's discourse on refugee camps. Indeed, the Obama administration's relegation of LGBTI refugees to Emergency Transit Centers on the margins of the social order conveniently obscures state violence in the form of the United States's own immigration and asylum policies—policies that continue to leave many queer refugees and asylum-seekers legally vulnerable to deportation (Randazzo 2005).

In this article, I explore how lesbian refugees and asylum-seekers are turning toward media and cultural production in the form of independent filmmaking, theater, performance art, and online activism as a means of resisting deportation. Despite the newly emerging body of scholarship devoted to theorizing deportation (Anderson, Gibney, and Paoletti 2011; Bibler Coutin 2010; DeGenova 2002; DeGenova and Peutz 2010; Walters 2010), there has been relatively little attention to the ways that gender and sexuality, along with race, class, nationality, and geopolitical location, produce particular migrants as deportable subjects. By *deportability*, I am referring to the lived experience

of the constant threat of removal, as well as to the ways in which immigration laws and policies render specific migrants legally vulnerable to deportation (DeGenova 2002). Building on recent work in sexuality and immigration studies that engages with the social construction of the undocumented migrant (Luibhéid 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2012), this article examines the socio-legal production of queer deportability in the context of political asylum policies. As I suggest, deportability, or the possibility of deportation, structures the experiences of the vast majority of LGBTI refugees and asylum-seekers; for this reason, I argue that the political asylum system is a crucial site for exploring the relationship between sexuality and deportation.

The first part of the article considers how the political asylum system constructs queer, and specifically lesbian, migrants as deportable subjects. An analysis of the challenges to successful lesbian asylum claims illustrates how state practices of deportation are inextricably linked to gendered, racial, and classed norms of sexual citizenship. The second part of the article examines emergent media and cultural production created by lesbian asylum-seekers intended to contest the deportation regime. The third and final part of the article discusses a 2010 piece of performance art, Oreet Ashery's *Staying: Dream, Bin, Soft Stud and Other Stories*, that reflects upon the everyday practices and embodied experiences associated with deportability. What is crucial about this particular text is that it enables the lesbian refugees involved in the project to take an active role in the production of their asylum narratives. In doing so, I suggest, media and cultural advocacy on behalf of lesbian asylum can provide a site for the articulation of new sexual rights claims.

Sexuality, Political Asylum, and the Deportation of Lesbian Migrants

I find that the Appellant was not and is not, on the evidence before me, a lesbian. . . . I find such peripheral information to describe what went on, either in Uganda or in the United Kingdom, very generalised and quite simply lacking in the kind of detail and information of someone *genuinely living that lifestyle*. . . . The Appellant appears to have taken no interest in forms of media such as magazines, books or other information relating to her sexual orientation. Whilst there is no requirement to do so it does seem *strange*, if she is exercising the *real sense of freedom* she claims, that she does not do so.

—First-tier tribunal judge, lesbian asylum case
(January 2011; emphasis added)

The primary challenge to successful lesbian asylum claims lies in the fact that the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees was designed, first and

foremost, to protect individuals from racial, religious, or political persecution, and the category *social group* included neither women nor individuals persecuted for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Article 1 of the convention provides the following definition of a refugee:

Any person who . . . owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of *his* nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail *himself* of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of *his* former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UNHCR 1950, 7; emphasis added)

While sexual orientation and gender identity have been grounds for asylum since the mid-1990s under the category of *membership of a particular social group*, it is still the case that the closer one's application conforms to the traditional model of the male political activist fleeing an oppressive regime, the more likely one is able to obtain asylum (Bohmer and Shuman 2008). In the context of lesbian asylum cases, courts still equate the lack of documented evidence of human rights abuses against lesbians in country-of-origin reports with an absence of persecution (Berger 2009; Minter 2000; NCLR 2006; Neilson 2005; UKLGIG 2010). Moreover, courts will often disregard the interrelation of gender and sexual identity in narratives of lesbian persecution (Berg and Millbank 2009; LaViolette 2007; Millbank 2002; Minter 2000; NCLR 2006; UKLGIG 2010). The routine nature of rape in some countries, for example, can render it a private practice from which every woman is equally at risk rather than a form of political persecution in the eyes of immigration officials. As Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman note, when traumatic events appear ordinary and sexual violence becomes normalized in this way, it is difficult for women and lesbians to come across as credible applicants for asylum (2008, 250).

The second, and perhaps even greater, challenge currently facing lesbian asylum applicants is not being able to prove their sexual orientation or membership of a particular social group, as stipulated in the UN refugee convention. In order to obtain political asylum, LGBTI refugees must prove both that they have a well-founded fear of persecution and that they are members of a particular social group. While a number of countries, including the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Czech Republic, and Australia, have recently rejected the *discretion argument*—namely, the notion that lesbian and gay asylum applicants can return to their country of origin and be *discreet* about their sexual orientation—a growing number of lesbian and gay asylum claims are now being refused on the grounds that the applicant's claimed sexual orientation is disbelieved (Jansen and Spijkerboer 2011, 47; Millbank 2002).

In assessing the credibility of a political asylum applicant's claim, immigration officials often rely upon stereotypical assumptions and expectations. For

example, asylum adjudicators tend to assume that all lesbians and gay men engage in practices of cross-gender identification, that they all form part of a common social group with shared cultural tastes and social spaces, and that they will all come out as gay or lesbian immediately upon arrival in the receiving country (Jansen and Spijkerboer 2011). Unlike other refugee claimants who are not compelled to perform a visible identity in the country to which they migrate, lesbian and gay asylum applicants frequently are expected to conform to neoliberal narratives of sexual citizenship grounded in visibility politics, consumption, and an identity in the public sphere in order to be considered worthy candidates for asylum (Duggan 2003). As one Canadian attorney, who has represented more than sixty gay-refugee claimants, comments: “I used to call it Gay 101. Immigration and Refugee Board members ask claimants what day the Gay Pride parade was on; where the gay bars in Toronto are located; and whether they are in a relationship” (IGLHRC 2000). In the context of the political asylum process, as Eithne Luibhéid notes, lesbian and gay asylum applicants must grapple with the stereotypical assumption that “all queers are citizens” and “all immigrants are heterosexual” (2005, xxxv).

The racialized, classed, and gendered stereotypes of male homosexual identity typically invoked by asylum adjudicators pose particular challenges to lesbian asylum applicants. The reproduction of sexual citizenship narratives can be especially difficult for lesbians and women who otherwise identify themselves as being sexually attracted to other women, given the gender-specific obstacles to proving sexuality and the paradoxes of lesbian representation within heteronormative culture. The privileging of these skewed credibility assessments in women’s and LGBTI asylum claims means that lesbian asylum cases are repeatedly evaluated on the basis of heteronormative assumptions about lesbian sexuality. According to the kinds of stereotypes typically reproduced within the political asylum process, lesbianism is variously cast as a form of gender inversion, as arrested development, and as a response to “failed” heterosexuality. (This all depends, of course, on the homophobic and sexist predilections of the particular judge in question.) For instance, judges will frequently comment on a woman’s appearance as “proof” that she is not a lesbian; they also have been known to suggest that if a woman has ever had a relationship with a man or has a child, she cannot really be a lesbian (Lewis 2010). Indeed, the sexualization of the identity narrative in lesbian and gay asylum claims, in which applicants are repeatedly interrogated about previous sexual experiences, works to the particular disadvantage of lesbian asylum-seekers (Berg and Millbank 2009, 203).

As Human Rights Watch notes, judges regularly ask lesbian asylum applicants to “explain the nature of a sexual relationship between two women” (Human Rights Watch 2011, 38). Even when lesbian asylum applicants are able to provide proof of having engaged in a sexual relationship with another woman, the link between sexuality and persecution can be difficult to establish. This dynamic is illustrated in the case of a lesbian couple from China who claimed

asylum in Australia after they were beaten and assaulted with electric-shock treatment by state police. As Jenni Millbank observes, the Refugee Review Tribunal in Australia went on to invent a variety of reasons to explain why, aside from their sexuality, two naked women found in a hotel bedroom together might be arrested by security guards. One reason was simply for making a “loud noise”—a loud noise that was the sound of two women making love (2002, 14).

The primary challenge facing lesbian asylum applicants is the lack of representational space within heteronormative asylum narratives for the articulation of female same-sex desire, evident in the notion that, to quote one asylum adjudicator, a “homosexual lesbian can avoid the risk of harm by being discreet in her conduct” (qtd. in Miller 2005, 159). Indeed, the discretion argument can really hurt lesbian asylum applicants. As Bohmer and Shuman note: “The belief of the asylum authorities that someone can avoid harm by not flaunting their sexual orientation is more likely to be a problem for lesbian asylum seekers because women are less likely to engage in targeted public activities” (2008, 241). In the context of refugee law, states will only grant political asylum to women who appear vulnerable either because they are openly lesbian or because they are foreign women in need of rescue from oppressive patriarchal—read *third world*—cultures (Keenan 2011, 39). In this way, the political asylum system both assumes and reinforces the invisibility of lesbian migrants.

The fact that Namigadde’s lawyers have stopped trying to prove their client’s sexual orientation, for instance, and have now constructed their appeal around perceived homosexuality is symptomatic of a particularly disturbing sequence of events in which heightened visibility of gay rights at the transnational level is accompanied by the reproduction of lesbian invisibility at the level of state migration policies. In the case of Namigadde, the British state ironically produced the very visibility it claimed it could not “see.” This visibility, in turn, resulted in the well-founded fear of persecution that the British state also claimed not to be able to recognize. As Nathan (2011b) has commented with respect to the lesbian asylum case of Namigadde, “[i]t is a great irony that in order to survive Brenda is expected to still prove in the UK that she is a lesbian and at the same time to prove that she is not a lesbian in Uganda.”³

Deportation Deferred: The Politics of Lesbian Immigrant Resistance

Given the privileging of visibility politics within the context of lesbian asylum claims, it is perhaps not surprising that a number of lesbian asylum-seekers are turning toward media and cultural productions to contest the argument made by states that it is possible for them to return to their country of origin and be discreet about their sexual orientation. Because sexual citizenship ideologies circulate through visual media and cultural advocacy, lesbian asylum-seekers are increasingly using films, theater and performance art, and online activism as a means of resisting deportation. Media and cultural productions about

lesbian migration and asylum range from narrative and experimental films, documentaries, visual and sound art, poetry, theater, and performance art to online internet campaigns like *Zami: Point of No Return*. *Zami*, for example, offers a critical reception of lesbian migration and asylum in relation to women-of-color feminism and an intersectional analysis that seeks to affirm a black lesbian identity otherwise rendered invisible within the context of the political asylum process.⁴

Perhaps the most notable anti-deportation campaign launched by a lesbian asylum applicant is that of Iranian filmmaker and gay rights activist Kiana Firouz, who played herself in the 2010 docudrama *Cul de Sac* (Goudarzi Nejad and Torkan). *Cul de Sac* focuses on Kiana's political struggles in the United Kingdom, including the rejection of her asylum application and her subsequent deportation to Iran. While the judge in charge of Kiana's case accepted that she was a lesbian, he nonetheless proceeded to argue that it would be possible for her to return to Iran and "live discreetly." As part of the preliminary publicity for *Cul de Sac*, a short trailer from the film featuring a strategically placed lesbian sex scene was thus disseminated across a variety of social media networks, including YouTube and Facebook, with the ultimate goal of raising awareness about Kiana's plight. A month after the film's premiere in London on May 15, 2010 Kiana was officially granted leave to remain in Britain on the grounds that it was no longer possible for her to return to Iran and be discreet about her sexual orientation. Kiana's case, along with that of two other gay asylum cases, attracted the attention of the UK Supreme Court, which, in July 2010, created a new legal precedent for the evaluation of lesbian and gay asylum claims in the United Kingdom. The result of the court's decision was that border and immigration officials should refrain from invoking the discretion argument in the treatment of sexual orientation-based asylum claims.

The strategy behind the creation of *Cul de Sac* was to render Kiana's lesbianism visible enough to prevent her deportation. As Kiana has commented in interviews regarding the implications of her involvement with the film and the impossibility of her return to Iran:

I'm happy to be the first Iranian lesbian who dared to kiss her girlfriend on screen. No film has ever been produced that features an Iranian lesbian playing herself. As an Iranian woman and filmmaker, by collaborating in this film I have killed my chances to go back to my country Iran to live, but I am proud that I have stood up for the rights of many who have had no chance to be heard. I am quite confident that there was no better way to bring up the issue and raise global awareness. (Torkan 2010)

In *Cul de Sac*, which is shot on location in a variety of settings—including, for instance, London's Candy Bar, which is referenced in a number of lesbian asylum decisions—Kiana's girlfriend Nicki is played by her actual girlfriend at the time of the film's production. Indeed, a great deal of the film is devoted to

allowing Kiana to document the precise nature of her sexual relationship with Nicki, which is represented in the film according to a highly stylized butch-femme dynamic. *Cul de Sac* also features a number of dialogues between Kiana and Sayeh, who plays the part of an Iranian journalist, in which Sayeh's hostile interrogation of Kiana's sexual orientation is intended to mimic the structure of a political asylum interview. In these conversations, designed to enable Kiana to perform her credibility as a lesbian asylum applicant, Kiana repeatedly states that "homosexuality is not my choice . . . it is my nature."

By conforming to stereotypes that lesbians are butch, politically outspoken, and like to hang out in lesbian bars, Kiana's involvement in *Cul de Sac* allows her to construct her lesbian identity according to the model of the male political activist that is typically privileged within international refugee and asylum law. Arguably, it is only by performing her identity as both lesbian activist *and* out sexual citizen that Kiana is able to render herself undeportable. In doing so, however, Kiana's anti-deportation campaign problematically reproduces the kinds of gendered, racial, and classed stereotypes that are responsible for the challenges to lesbian asylum claims in the first place. In this way, Kiana's strategic invocation of gay immutability arguments works to undermine campaigns for sexual asylum by encoding an ideal of lesbian visibility that is virtually impossible for the vast majority of queer female asylum applicants to meet.

In the final part of this article, I analyze a 2010 piece of performance art, *Staying: Dream, Bin, Soft Stud and Other Stories*, produced by London-based interdisciplinary visual artist Oreet Ashery in collaboration with the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group and designed to be used in lesbian asylum cases. *Staying* comprises a series of intimate and erotic dialogues among twelve lesbian asylum-seekers, all of whom develop alter egos as a way of revisiting and retelling their traumatic experiences associated with human rights violations and the threat of deportation. Unlike *Cul de Sac*, *Staying* offers a critical reflection on the limits of the self-narrative in lesbian asylum claims. By politicizing everyday acts of desire as constitutive of human rights and global governance, *Staying* enacts a form of cultural labor that seeks to counteract state-sanctioned violences that subject the sexuality of lesbian migrants to symbolic erasure. In doing so, *Staying* has the potential to teach asylum adjudicators about the relationship between gender and the everyday in a way that challenges the political asylum system's production of women and sexual minorities as deportable populations.

Deportation as Lived Experience: *Staying: Dream, Bin, Soft Stud and Other Stories*

House: How is life treating you living in Brixton, compared with your home country in Africa?

Bin: I am not living yet.

House: What do you mean?

Bin: I am not living yet in Brixton, I am staying in Brixton.

House: What is stopping you from living?

Bin: I have to wait for the Home Office.

—Oreet Ashery, *Staying: Dream, Bin, Soft Stud and Other Stories* (2010)

Staying: Dream, Bin, Soft Stud and Other Stories (2010) is an online publication based on an interactive performance project with twelve lesbian asylum-seekers that took place over the course of six workshops in 2009. Directed by interdisciplinary performance artist Oreet Ashery, *Staying* was commissioned and produced by the Artangel Foundation in collaboration with the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group. The director of the group, Jill Power, who commissioned *Staying*, wanted the publication to be able to travel with the workshop participants wherever they went—to their lawyers, to the Home Office, and to journalists covering their cases—while also providing a template for future cultural work on lesbian asylum. The final publication consists of a series of transcribed dialogues with the participants, poetry, interviews, photographs, and handwritten texts, along with a number of essays about lesbian migration and asylum.

Staying, which alludes to the legal process known as a *stay of deportation*, calls attention to the ways that deportability, or the possibility of deportation, constitutes a significant presence in the everyday lives of lesbian asylum-seekers. Ashery wanted *Staying* to foreground the constant sense of uncertainty experienced by lesbian refugees and asylum-seekers, many of whom are forced to negotiate multiple court cases, rejections, legal appeals, detention, possible deportation, and poverty. What struck her most as an artist is that one of the ways in which lesbian and gay asylum applicants have to prove their sexual orientation in court is by writing a twenty-page profile outlining their entire sexual history:

As an artist who works extensively with the performances, scripts and constructs of identity and subjectivity, particularly in relation to markers of gender, race, religion, national status, ethnicity and economy, I was drawn to the writing-of-the-self, the writing of one's 'gay 20 page profile' in the context of the immigration experience. The notion of writing, and hence performing

one's identity, in order to 'prove' who you are to the state and its legal ambassadors, struck me as a significant feature for those who have to engage with it. (Ashery 2010)

The goal of the workshops was to open up a space through which the women involved in the project could perform a different kind of identity or self, a performance freed from the need to prove anything about their previous sexual experiences or encounters. As Ashery puts it, "I wanted the participants to be able to tell their stories, something they all seemed very keen to want to share, and perform their identity in a way that allows for gaps, slippages, repetitions and new structures of embodying and imagining the self" (*ibid.*).

In order to facilitate the recounting of diverse lesbian-migration histories, she constructed the workshop sessions in a way that allowed the participants to reflect on, and ultimately reclaim, the legal narratives they were compelled to perform in court—narratives upon which, in many cases, their lives depended. To this end, Ashery enlisted the involvement of a variety of well-known lesbian performance artists and activists, including Lois Weaver, founder of Split Britches and professor of performance studies at Queen Mary University in London; poet and film curator Cherry Smyth; and filmmaker Campbell X. The final online version of *Staying* features twelve chapters, each belonging to a separate character developed by the participants in the project. The characters represented in *Staying* are archetypes, symbols designed to represent particular hopes and fears, as well as possibilities for social transformation. Ashery wanted the women's lesbian-migration stories to be mediated by the participants' development of alter egos within a group context, so that traumatic recollections could be recollected and debated within the context of the workshops. In *Staying*, alter egos provide a way for the lesbian asylum-seekers involved in the project to talk about traumas, overwhelming memories, and specific experiences in relation to the political asylum system, along with urgent cultural and political questions concerning sexuality and relationships.

Many of the alter-ego performances in *Staying* revolve around the women's everyday encounters with the deportation regime, the experience of arrest, and the memory of past or attempted deportation. As a concept or practice, *staying* not only invokes resistance, as in the notion of staying put, but also implies the possibility of hesitation and delay. In the context of the workshops, staying thus articulates the agency of lesbian asylum-seekers at the same time that it seeks to convey the multiple forms of violence and discrimination inflicted on lesbian migrants by the constant threat of deportation. In *Staying*, these traumatic lesbian-migration histories are translated, worked through, and debated via queer performance and the production of alternative cultural narratives.

In the first chapter of *Staying*, the character Treeman recalls her shock at the suddenness of her attempted forced removal from the United Kingdom:

Once I was put in detention for two months and suddenly, out of the blue, I was escorted from the centre to the airport and it was five minutes before the plane was to leave, so I shouted at everybody: 'I DON'T WANT TO BE DEPORTED.' There were four officers holding me, two on each side, they were consoling me, telling me to keep my voice down and to stay calm. I said: 'NO. I DON'T WANT TO GO. GET ME OUT OF HERE.['] My girlfriend called and told me on the phone: 'Shout, shout, don't let them take you.' So I shouted . . . I've never screamed so loud in my life . . . and they had to take me off the plane.

Treeman's encounter with the UK deportation regime illustrates the everyday violations of the rights of migrants who are placed in the fast-track detention system, an accelerated process in which asylum applicants remain in detention a matter of days or weeks, during which time their claims are examined and then decided. As Treeman's narrative indicates, migrants placed in this system are given little warning of their impending deportation and are frequently denied the right to contact their legal representatives. When migrants are deprived of such fundamental rights, their only remaining option lies in their physical ability to resist forced removal. Indeed, such everyday acts of resistance can be crucial, giving lawyers the vital extra time needed to prepare fresh legal representation and appeals. As Treeman notes, however, the ability to continuously resist such practices of state violence can take a profound psychological and emotional toll upon queer asylum applicants: "Just before that [my deportation] I'd been thinking: 'OK, they can do what they want to me. I am tired of my life. If they want to take me away, they can. . . . If they want to kill me they can kill me. . . . I give up.' I was really so down, I was ready to go. I'd given up on my life."

Treeman's recollections of her attempted forced removal acknowledge the profound emotional and psychological effects of deportability upon queer refugees and asylum-seekers. Her narrative illustrates how the constant threat of deportation produces feelings of hopelessness and despair. As Lois McNay has written, "[t]he emotion of hope . . . is crucially linked to a particular social position, most especially to the agent's objective ability to manipulate the potentialities of the present in order to realize some future project" (2008, 281). One's ability to experience hope is contingent upon one's ability to imagine alternatives to the present. Deportability, however, produces migrant *illegality* not merely as an anomalous juridical status, but as an "enforced orientation to the present," one which, by definition, withholds all promises of the future (DeGenova 2002, 427). In this way, the condition of deportability leaves migrants unable to make long-term plans, and in some cases unable to imagine any kind of viable future at all. For many queer asylum applicants, uncertainty about the future, combined with the traumatic experiences they have already undergone in their countries of origins, leads to severe depression and anxiety. As one applicant commented, "I can't stop taking antidepressants. My curtains

are always closed. I don't want to see anything. I don't want to meet anyone. I don't want to go out. I tried a couple of times since I'm here to kill myself, because of my situation" (Miles 2010, 30).

The queer-deportation narratives in *Staying* show how contemporary practices of state violence deprive lesbian refugees and asylum-seekers of crucial emotional resources. The character Cloud, for example, describes her alter ego as a "grey penetrable cloud" trying to find a way to cope with the reality of deportation without losing hope. Following the group's suggestion, Cloud attempts to imagine the sun's rays breaking through the clouds as a way of mediating the emotional anxiety produced by her everyday struggles for social justice and recognition.

Unlike Cloud, the character Dream is unable to find any relief from her experiences with the political asylum system. Instead, she is perpetually tormented by a recurring dream she had while still in Gambia of being taken away in handcuffs. As Dream states in the context of the workshops, she had never understood the dream before because she never considered herself to be a criminal, but she later recognized the dream as a way of predicting her future:

Before I came [to the UK] I had this dream. I dreamt it a long time ago and what I dreamt about actually happened. I've never committed a crime, but in the dream I was a prisoner, and I did not understand why. I was taken in handcuffs like a criminal. . . . It's one of these dreams that will [always] be with me because I don't know about asylum. . . . I fight all of these things because where I come from, you have to do something really, really, really big to be handcuffed. And I haven't done anything bad. So it's hanging over me. The dream is following me.

In *Staying*, Dream's narrative constitutes an act of witnessing, one that recalls both the trauma of the dream itself and the ways in which state violence toward lesbian refugees and asylum-seekers renders dreaming of a better future impossible. Ashery notes in her introduction to the publication that the participant who developed the character of Dream left the project shortly after the first two sessions due to "changing life circumstances." As spectators, we are left to wonder whether Dream's departure from the project was a result of the violent practices of detention and deportation that she had feared.

The collective narratives of deportability created by the characters in *Staying* illustrate the profound impact of state violence on the everyday lives of lesbian refugees and asylum-seekers. These queer-deportation narratives call attention to the political oppression and sense of psychic dispossession that can result from the experience of being a contingent subject with no right to work, no access to benefits, and, in some cases, no right to travel outside a designated holding area. Thus, the lesbian-deportation narratives in *Staying* show how state violence can operate at the level of emotional debility by depriving queer refugees and asylum-seekers of the freedom to truly live.

A crucial goal of *Staying* was to intervene in the political asylum system's production of lesbian migrants as disposable populations by reclaiming the practices of sexual self-narration that underwrite the political asylum process, practices that consistently pose a credibility problem for lesbian asylum applicants. The goal of the workshops was to allow for the production of alternative narratives of sexual identification in which the erotic autobiographies of lesbian refugees could be articulated as creative works in progress. In *Staying*, the recounting of lesbian-migration histories takes place largely through the group's alter ego, otherwise known as SuperLover. Intended first and foremost as a response to the exclusion of lesbian migrants of color within the political asylum system, SuperLover functions as an erotic counter-narrative to the oppressive forms of social intelligibility that constitute such lives as unrepresentable. As pure fantasy, SuperLover opens up a space for the characters in *Staying* to talk about women's sexual desires and specific sexual acts, as well as role-playing, power relations, and control in sex. This section of the publication includes dialogues about safe sex, the right to sexual freedom and sexual pleasure, emotional self-expression, the importance of fantasy and communication in sexual interactions, and the right to sexual information and education. The erotic dialogues with SuperLover in *Staying* range from conversations about the racialized, classed, and gendered dimensions of butch-femme power relations to the decision on the parts of certain characters not to pursue lesbian relationships upon arrival in the United Kingdom. As one woman writes in the margins of the publication, "I am single by choice"—a narrative that would not help her win in the context of her asylum case.

As part of the group dialogues in *Staying*, SuperLover asks whether there is a specific erotic and sexual language for women who desire women in films, television, literature, pornography, and art. SuperLover also discusses the possibility of writing alternative forms of pornography and erotica that engage more directly with lesbian desires. The primary purpose of the group dialogues with SuperLover is for the women involved in the project to explore how lesbian sexuality is conceptualized across a number of different cultural sites. What connects these disparate group conversations is the question of whether or not there is a specific mode of representation that speaks directly to or about lesbian desire. Many of the dialogues with SuperLover allude to the production of lesbian subjectivities in a climate of neoliberalism and consumerism in well-known cinematic and literary texts, such as *Bound* (1996), *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *The L Word* (2004–09), *When Night Is Falling* (1995), and *Don Juan in the Village* (1990). *Staying* also features poetry-writing exercises modeled on Langston Hughes's "Harlem Night Song." The poetry exercises are intended as a way for the participants in the project to reflect on how the interactions among race, gender, sexuality, and urban spaces give rise to the creation of particular sexual and cultural scripts.

By presenting political analysis in everyday terms, the erotic dialogues with SuperLover in *Staying* engage in practices of cultural citizenship that are located directly in the experiences of lesbian refugees and asylum-seekers.⁵ These erotic narratives open up a space for the women in the project, as well as for the asylum adjudicators evaluating their cases, to reflect on the intersections among race, class, and gender in lesbian-migration narratives. By using examples from queer visual and literary culture to comment on the problems of representation and in/visibility that are specific to lesbian asylum claims, *Staying* compels asylum officials to become more aware of the ways in which lesbian refugees manage their own understanding of their erotic autobiographies in relation to experiences of persecution and forced migration. Thus, the cultural performances of lesbian asylum in *Staying* illustrate how everyday life functions as the basis for articulations of lesbian-migrant subjectivity in transnational and diasporic contexts.

I argue that *Staying* provides an important corrective to the discourses of Western liberalism that underpin the political asylum process, discourses that devalorize and depoliticize the private sphere and detach sexual rights claims from their origins in the everyday practices of desire. *Staying*, by contrast, encourages the political asylum system to conceive a different kind of politics, one based both on the right to sexual autonomy and freedom from discrimination in the public sphere and on the contingency of desire. By articulating sexual rights as intersubjective, *Staying* enacts a form of cultural labor that counteracts state-sanctioned violences that subject the sexuality of lesbian migrants to symbolic erasure. In doing so, *Staying* shows how contingent populations of lesbian refugees and asylum-seekers use media and cultural productions as a way of preventing the state from undermining their ability to imagine the future.

Conclusion

As an online publication that was designed to be used in future lesbian asylum cases, *Staying* raises important questions about the ways in which radical forms of queer cultural production can be taken up by the state in the act of bestowing both sexual rights and sexual citizenship. Yet, more work is needed that investigates the relationship between sexuality and narrative in the context of LGBTI asylum claims. As Erin Power, the director of the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group, said in a 2011 interview: “Within our work, for our asylum seekers, the only way you are going to be believed to be lesbian or gay, bisexual or trans is by telling your story. That is your primary and most important evidence for claiming asylum so that story is everything.”

In response to the dominant role played by assessments of credibility in LGBTI asylum claims, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2001) has suggested that asylum adjudicators need to be sensitive to the difficulties of proving sexual orientation and gender identity and to focus instead on narratives that

help individuals articulate their sexual histories. As the Inter-Parliamentary Union has argued, asylum adjudicators need to engage in practices of critical self-reflection about the assumptions and stereotypes that typically underwrite their asylum decisions. Such an approach to LGBTI asylum cases on the part of adjudicators would require open-ended questions about sexuality that would enable applicants to carefully narrate their sexual histories, rather than solely respond to intrusive questions about specific sexual practices.

In the case of lesbian asylum claims, there is a need for greater self-awareness on the part of asylum adjudicators about the obstacles to establishing credibility. To more accurately assess lesbian applications, asylum officials need to acknowledge the challenges to narrativizing lesbian visibility. This means recognizing the ways that previous experiences of passing or concealment of sexual identity can produce a credibility gap for lesbian asylum applicants. Recognizing the challenges to narrativizing visibility in lesbian asylum claims will require immigration officials to demonstrate greater sensitivity toward what gets omitted from the self-narrative. This may mean paying close attention to the gaps and silences within lesbian asylum narratives (Johnson 2011), as well as to the ways that trauma narratives more generally renegotiate the relationship between the personal and the political (Shuman and Bohmer 2004). Ensuring that asylum adjudicators are able to adequately engage with the gender-specific dimensions of women's asylum narratives is crucial if the UN refugee convention is to be appropriately applied to lesbian asylum claims.

What is clear from the lesbian anti-deportation activism examined in this article is the importance of media and cultural advocacy for conceptualizing the relationship between sexuality and political asylum narratives. In the context of LGBTI asylum cases, the challenges of representation and in/visibility that are specific to lesbian asylum claims suggest that media and cultural production will continue to function as a powerful site of resistance for lesbian migrants for some time to come. As I have argued here, critical engagement with lesbian asylum as a distinct gender and human rights issue not only offers a fascinating and unique perspective on the limits and possibilities of media as a form of activism, it also serves as a constant reminder of the significance of the politics of representation and cultural advocacy to discourses of women's human rights and sexual citizenship in an era of globalization.

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Notes

1. Namigadde's story was also featured on the prime-time BBC television show *Newsnight* the previous evening (January 27, 2011) in its coverage of the murder of David Kato. Moreover, between the time of Kato's murder and Namigadde's scheduled deportation, 50,000 people from over 160 countries signed a petition demanding that Namigadde be granted political asylum in the United Kingdom.

2. See, for example, Human Rights First (2012); Sabine Jansen and Thomas Spijkerboer (2011); and UNHCR (2008, 2011).

3. For fascinating parallels between current LGBTI asylum policies and the historical regulation of sexuality in the context of US immigration controls, particularly around questions of proving one's sexual identity, see Margot Canaday (2009); Eithne Luibhéid (2002); and Susana Peña (2007).

4. These texts include, for example, the feature-length fiction films *Unveiled* (2005) and *The Edge of Heaven* (2007); the short experimental film *Have I Ever Happened?* (2008); the visual-and-sound art of Mónica Enríquez (2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2011) and Estelle Hébert (2009); and the play *Asylum* (2012) about Ugandan lesbian asylum-seeker Prossy Kakooza.

5. For literature on queer migration and cultural citizenship, see Lionel Cantú Jr. (2009); Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (2005); Martin F. Manalansan IV (2005); and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez (2005).

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