# 14

# "I AM MYSELF"

## Queer Refugee Narratives

*Elif Sarı*[1]

The moment I heard about the coming together of this exciting anthology, I knew in my heart that Aram's stories should be *in the Handbook* among the refugee narratives this *Handbook* presents. Aram is a self-identified queer lesbian refugee whom I met through my ethnographic research with Iranian LGBTQ refugees in Turkey. What makes me want to write about Aram, more than anything else, is that they *queer* all the structures, sites, and systems they encounter and navigate, ranging from asylum bureaucracies to hospital corridors, from textile factories to community meetings. Here, I use "queer" as an embodied subject position that transgresses binary gender norms and a disorienting act (an unsettling method and a disruptive orientation) that challenges hegemonic narratives, disrupts binary thinking, and resists normalizing regimes. Aram is/does both, and by taking inspiration from their relentless queerness, this chapter presents two narrative experimentations to tell Aram's stories of queerness and refugeeness. In doing so, I hope to offer a queer(ing) perspective on writing with and about refugees.

The first narrative uses auto-ethno-fiction to bring together many stories told by Aram in one compositive narrative, which tells Aram's journey of what they call "arriving at self-knowledge" regarding their identification as queer. The second narrative offers an ethnographic account that follows Aram's struggle to make queerness recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a legitimate identity category and lifeworld.[2] Queerness in these narratives is not merely an "add-on" to Aram's refugee story. Rather, queerness—and the desire/struggle to be recognized, treated equally, and not punished for who they are—constitute the very fabric of their refugeeness. It is this desire to freely and safely *be themselves* that prompted Aram and most other queer, trans, and gender non-conforming refugees to leave their homes, families, and friends behind and seek asylum elsewhere. However, as the narratives in this chapter illustrate, the asylum system introduces various barriers to refugees' mobility, freedom, and safety and, in doing so, prevents them from realizing their desire to *be themselves*, which is, ironically, the main reason they become refugees in the first place. Aram's persistent navigation of, and resistance against, these structural constraints to live their life in a way that feels true to their sense of self is what is at the heart of their queerness and refugeeness and, thus, my writing.

One significant barrier to refugees' desire to *be themselves* is the carceral politics of asylum. Western states exclude racialized refugees from their territories and instead make them linger in liminal sites of waiting and incarceration in the Global South.[3] Aram, for instance, applied for asylum in 2014 and, although they completed all necessary processes and became eligible for refugee resettlement many years ago, they still wait in Turkey for resettlement to Canada as I write this chapter in 2022. In the context of this ongoing waiting and stuckness, engaging with Aram's narratives offers us a chance to bear political witness to global border closures that immobilize refugees and defer their needs, plans,

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and aspirations—ranging from access to safe queer spaces to gender affirming health care, job security, and equality—to the not-yet temporalities of resettlement.

Furthermore, Aram's narratives demonstrate that as they face an uncertain future due to closed borders, LGBTQ refugees also live difficult and precarious lives in Turkey and face various constraints on their rights, freedoms, and access to resources. Some of these structural barriers that severely impact refugees' physical and mental wellbeing and deny their right to freely *be themselves* include asylum- and aid-seeking bureaucracies that require refugees to fit their complex identifications into rigid and essentialist gender/sexuality categories; a cisheteronormative and xenophobic healthcare system that maltreats and discriminates against queer and trans refugees; an exploitative informal labor market that profits from refugees' precarious status while forcing them to conform to binary gender norms; and carceral refugee settlement policies that isolate refugees in small Turkish towns where their desire to *be themselves* singles them out as different and makes them vulnerable to homo/transphobic violence.

In exposing this oppressive system, Aram's everyday experiences and stories *queer* dominant representations of asylum as a journey from repression to liberation. Rather, they point us to the carceral, capitalist, and cisheteropatriarchal logics embedded in the transnational asylum system and expose the multiple forms of physical, economic, and emotional violence that this system generates in refugees' lives. However, this critique of violence might run the risk of turning refugees into victim figures who do not have any control over their bodies, lives, identities, and narratives in the face of structural forces.[4] This is where approaching "queer" not merely as a subject position but also as a disorienting act and an unsettling method becomes of utmost importance. For instance, in both narratives, readers will see how Aram's gender non-conformity disorients all asylum officers, social workers, medical authorities, and employers who want to know whether Aram is a man or a woman. However, Aram's body, gender performances, and speech acts constantly and actively resist answering this question within binary sex/gender norms. Aram refuses to surrender to strict identity categories and tell their complex life in prescribed refugee narratives. They struggle to live their life and tell their truth in a way that is most authentic to them, even if that means losing their job, fighting with asylum authorities, or being denied humanitarian aid. Their acts of refusal and resistance challenge the dominant portrayal of refugees as weak and vulnerable figures and thus *queer* hegemonic victimhood narratives.

Narrating this stubborn queerness also comes with an ethical and political responsibility to *queer* the writing itself. While the second narrative in this chapter reads like conventional ethnographic writing and, thus, does not need much explanation, I want to say a few things about the first one, which is an "auto-ethno-fiction" narrative. *Auto*, because it is Aram's story told by Aram themself. *Ethno-fiction,* because although the narrative reads as if Aram told it at once, it is indeed a composite of many stories and narrative genres that Aram and I produced during my ethnographic research. In constructing this composite narrative, I followed the flow of Aram's storytelling in a four-hour film footage (recorded by their roommate for a collaborative audiovisual project idea) as the main narrative structure. I reconstructed parts of this narrative by bringing in different but interlinked stories or different versions of the same stories from our other conversations, recordings, and writings, including semi-structured interviews (recorded for my dissertation), petitions and letters (written by Aram and translated by me for submission to asylum authorities), re-scripted dialogues (enacted by Aram and written by me), and an audiovisual experimentation with Aram's "refugee folder" (containing photos, asylum documents, travel permits, bank statements, hospital appointments, and email exchanges) and the stories behind that personal archive.

The reason I blended these different stories, genres, and temporalities into one composite narrative is grounded in feminist and queer epistemologies, which engage with refugee narratives not merely to learn about refugees' lives per se but as social and political critiques of militarism, racism, capitalism, colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchy as well as sites where identities, norms, and power structures are constructed and contested.[5] Such engagement also extends into the act of writing. The questions of voice, form, and temporality in writing are not merely analytical matters or stylistic choices but deeply political issues that can reproduce or transform the "relations of power and knowledge" that situate queer/refugee experiences "within silence, erasure, and violence."[6]

When I began working on this chapter, I knew which stories I wanted to tell but struggled to find a format that felt right. In presenting different narrative genres, I resisted following the standard citation instructions for incorporating block quotes and dialogues into the text. I did not want to use different formatting (e.g., 12pt. font and double spacing for my writing and smaller font, single spacing, and extra indenting for Aram's narratives) because I wanted to disrupt, albeit textually, the established hierarchies between the ethnographer as an expert and her narrative as analysis, on the one hand, and refugees as interlocutors and their narratives as empirical data, on the other. I also did not want to divide Aram's stories into sub-sections, such as gender and sexuality, carcerality, healthcare, labor, and waiting, because they are inseparably intermingled in Aram's everyday experiences and narratives. Furthermore, I refrained from prioritizing one version of a given story over others, as Aram and I shared those stories many times and each re-telling was a site of connectivity, transformation, and healing. For weeks, I wrote and re-wrote, experimented with formatting and styling, only to realize that choosing one version among others confines the story to a single temporality, a stagnant moment in life, dismissing how both the story and its subject/narrator/listener continually evolve through the acts of telling and listening.

Auto-ethno-fiction allowed Aram and I to be in the same text, like we are sitting in the same room, talking together, learning from each other's words and silences, completing one another's sentences as we often do, and collectively building a narrative that draws on many stories and memories accumulated during our years of connectedness and collaboration. Moving between different spaces, contexts, and temporalities in the same narrative also enabled me to respect each version of Aram's stories and appreciate new insights in each re-telling. Together, these thought processes and writing experimentations showed me, once again, how rich, difficult, and messy queer refugee lives are, and how, in addition to the interventions and interruptions they make to hegemonic narratives, they also resist being told within the confines of a singular narrative form and a linear homogenous temporality.

## Narrative I: Arriving at Self-Knowledge

When I was in Iran, I knew myself as a lesbian (*khodemo lesbian mishenakhtam*). My knowledge of these issues was minimal at the time, and my circumstances didn't allow me to improve my knowledge to better know what is what. When I came to Turkey, I went to the UNHCR and told them that I am a lesbian. My sexual orientation (*gerayesh-e jensi*) has always been toward girls. I mean, I've never felt attracted to guys. That's why I thought I was a lesbian.

Things changed for me when I began to live in Turkey. First, my clothes. In Iran, I had to wear *manto* [a jacket falling down the knees] and *roosari* [veil]. Here, I was freed from *manto* and *roosari*. Second, I could freely say that I am LGBT. Well, I couldn't tell everyone because, here too, there is homophobia. But I could tell at least some people, which gave me a new sense of freedom. I didn't have to lie anymore. I could now say I am LGBT.

But soon, the word "LGBT" began to make me less happy than the first time I came here [*laughs*]. I thought I'd be content when I free myself from the restrictions I faced in Iran. However, when I entered the community and introduced myself as LGBT, and when people called me "miss" (*khanoom*) and used my female name (*esm-e dokhtarane*), it didn't feel right. It surprised me. "Why am I not happy? I have everything I dreamed of." My biggest dream was to freely say that I am LGBT, that it is my sexual orientation. I never dared to say it in Iran. I acquired this freedom here, but I still wasn't happy when they called me *khanoom*.

I then changed my name and introduced myself as butch, but it didn't prevent people from calling me *khanoom*. At the time, my knowledge was still limited. For instance, I saw the first trans person in my life here in Turkey. What is trans, what is FtM, what is MtF, I learned them all here. Then I began to think I might be trans because I don't like to be a woman. I talked with trans folks, explained how I feel, and asked for their opinion. One of them told me, "Until you are sure, don't use hormones." But I said, "No, I am sure. I don't like to be a woman; therefore, I have to be a man" (*man dust nadaram zan*

*basham, pas bayad mard basham*). This idea was planted in my mind by society—that one must be either a man or a woman.

For hormone treatment, I had to go to Izmir, a two-hour drive away from where I live, to see a psychologist. After the psychologist gives me a letter that recognizes me as transgender, I can have a prescription for free hormones. Psychologists in my town do not know about trans issues. Everyone in the State Hospital maltreats us because we are foreigners. We don't have proper health insurance. We can't speak the language and thus can't explain ourselves adequately. And doctors never try to communicate with us. They don't even show the slightest effort to understand our problem when they realize we're refugees. Once I went to the State Hospital with a severe toothache. I tried to speak with the doctor by using Google Translate. When I tried to say, "I need to fix my teeth," I used the verb *tamir etmek* in Turkish, which is apparently used for repairing cars. The doctor, nurses, everyone laughed at me when I used it for my teeth. Then sitting on the doctor's chair under anesthesia, I didn't dare to speak again. I assumed she would do a filling or a root canal. But she pulled two of my teeth out without even telling me. Can you believe it? If I were a Turkish citizen, I would still have those teeth. But because I was a refugee, she didn't even bother to fix them. She pulled them out.

Hospital staff maltreat people like me also because of our physical appearance. Each time I show my refugee ID at the registry desk, the person looks at me, then looks at my ID, then looks at me. They're confused because they can't tell my gender. Sometimes they think that I am a man who stole a woman's ID [*laughs*]. I must explain that I am a woman and the person in the photo is me. Long story short, the healthcare system here is not made for queer people. I had heard about that psychologist in Izmir. The local LGBTQ group had suggested him for being knowledgeable about trans issues and supporting trans people. But I couldn't go to Izmir because I didn't have a travel permit. Oh, let me open a parathesis here.

When I had registered with the UNHCR in 2014, they had sent me to Denizli. It is where I've been living for eight years now. But I've been living in this small city that's not my choice and without my consent. I don't have the right to go to a neighboring town, even for one day, unless I go to the Migration Management,[7] wait in line for hours, explain my travel reasons, provide documentation, convince the officers, and finally, get a travel permit. I sometimes need to go to other cities for administrative or medical purposes. Sometimes, I just need a vacation. But it's hard to get a permit. And because of my look, the officers at Migration Management make it even harder for me. They deliberately humiliate me because of my physical appearance. Once I needed a permit to go to Istanbul to attend a queer NGO's workshop. The officer kept me inside for 40 minutes and interrogated me about my gender and sexuality:

OFFICER: So, you are lesbian?

I didn't think he would know what queer is and didn't want to explain, so I said yes.

OFFICER: Do you want to become a man?
ME: No, no. I am not transgender. I am lesbian.
OFFICER: Why do you wear men's clothes then?
ME: This is how I feel comfortable.
OFFICER: Are these men's pants?

[Points to my lower body. ME]

ME: I think they're unisex.
OFFICER: Do all lesbians wear men's clothes?
ME: No, everyone has a unique style. This is how I like to dress. Other people wear different things.

[The officer types on his computer for a few seconds, then stares at me from head to toe.]

OFFICER: Do you grow a beard?
ME: No. As I said, I am a woman.

[The officer types a few more words, then looks up at me again.]

OFFICER: You don't grow a mustache either?

[While touching his mustache.]

ME: No.
OFFICER: I bet you'd like to have a mustache.

[He laughs. I don't answer.]

OFFICER: So, do you have a girlfriend?
ME: I do.

[I didn't tell him that we broke up to prevent further questions.]

OFFICER: Is she also lesbian?
ME: Yes.
OFFICER: Does she also look like a man?
ME: No.

[My travel permit is printed and signed at this point, but the officer keeps asking questions.]

OFFICER: Does your family know you are like this?
ME: They do.
OFFICER: Are they okay with it?
ME: No, we had problems. That's why I came to Turkey.

[He hands me the permit while giving me another long look.]

OFFICER: So, what are you going to do in Istanbul?
ME: I'll attend this organization's workshop.
OFFICER: The letter says you're a guest speaker.
ME: Yes.
OFFICER: Good. Don't forget to mention how much the Turkish state does for you.

When I left the office, I was on the verge of tears. My hands were shaking out of anger. I wanted to scream all the swears I knew. I had to go through this to travel to Istanbul for a two-day workshop. It's such a simple thing, isn't it? But as you see, it is not simple for us refugees at all. That's why I couldn't go to the psychologist in Izmir either because I didn't want to ask for a travel permit. I would do anything not to go to the Migration Management. But the permit wasn't the only reason. I didn't have the financial means to commute to Izmir once or twice a month to see a psychologist. Besides, I was working in a textile factory and couldn't take a day off to go to Izmir. Look, I don't want to open another parenthesis here [*laughs*]. But I must [*laughs*].

You know, we refugees have become sick here. Our body is sick; our mind is sick. I love Turkey because it has given me some things that I didn't have in Iran. I am myself here (*inja khodamam*). But Turkey has also taken some things from me, and I don't know if I'd be ever able to take them back. Those eight years I've spent here with the hope that one country would give me refuge. I am not expecting any country to support me until the end of my life. I just need one country to let me go there, so I earn my living and care for myself. These past eight years have taken so much from me. When I entered Turkey, I was 31. Now I'm 39. I have the physical ability to work in a factory now, but I don't know if I'd still have it five years later. When I came to Turkey, I didn't have waist pain. I didn't have neck pain. Now, even a short walk or climbing a few stairs leaves me in unbearable pain. Why? Because I've been standing on my feet doing textile work for ten hours.

If you haven't worked in a factory before, it might be hard to imagine the pain and exhaustion, even for a day. Textile work is difficult, but your body becomes numb after a while. Our bodies get used to that kind of work as if they know we don't have any other option. We didn't choose to work in textile; we had to. No one asks if you have one loaf of bread at home to survive the day. Everyone thinks that refugees get money. That we are given at least one room. No. No states, no NGOs support us. We are forced to work. And when I said work for ten hours, that is just regular working hours. In many factories, they force us to work extra. I remember once I worked until 3 a.m. As we were leaving, the foreman said, "Everyone come to work at 8 a.m. as usual." When we reacted, he said, "If you don't come on time, you'll be fired." Imagine we worked until 3 a.m. By the time we go home, it would be 4 a.m. And we must leave home in three hours to make it to the factory at 8 in the morning. We all said, "There is no point in going home. Let's all sleep here."

I worked in another textile factory that paid us monthly. In the month I worked there, the employer forced us to stay for extra work (*ezafe kar*) every night. We couldn't say no because he threatened us with not paying our wages. To whom could we report this? How could we complain? We had two options: either stay for extra work or let the entire month's wage go. I didn't have the luxury to let that money go because my entire life depended on it. Rent, food, medicine, everything. And even when they torture us at work, we can't make a complaint because we don't have work permits here. We work illegally. Let's summarize the situation: "We, the state, don't give you work permits, but we don't give you financial aid, either. Find a way to live on your own. You should have known that refugee life is difficult." Yes, we knew it, and we didn't choose that life for fun. We had to become refugees so we could be ourselves. If we could stay in our own country [*pauses*] … I didn't become a refugee because of a desire to live in Turkey or for the love of going to America or Canada. No. I wouldn't change my own country to anywhere in the world. But my own country didn't accept me. There, I was threatened. I was treated like garbage. I was rejected by my own family, by society, by the state.

*[We take a smoke break with freshly brewed black tea. I do the same many times as I bring together this narrative. Refugee life is difficult, as Aram says. Engaging with queer refugee narratives as writers, readers, and allies is also difficult, and at times, we all need pauses and collective silences.* —ELIF*]*

In my first textile job, I told them I was a woman. Once, when I came out of the restroom, the foreman was waiting for me in front of the door. "How could you use the women's restroom?" he said angrily. "I am a woman," I said. "Don't joke with me. I'm serious. You cannot use the women's restroom," he retorted. "I'm serious, too. I am a woman," I responded. "Look, I'm warning you the last time. You cannot use the women's restroom. If you use it one more time, you'll be fired." And he fired me.

In another textile factory, I was working in the storage unit. The foreman came to me one day and said, "I don't understand you. Are you a man or a woman?" I said, "What difference does it make to you? I came here to work, and my work here has nothing to do with my gender, with my body." He kept saying, "No, no, I don't understand you." I finally said, "Imagine I am fifty-fifty. Fifty percent of me is woman; the other fifty is man." He said, "There is no such thing. Pull down your pants. I want to see what you are." I was told this in Turkey [*chuckles, pauses*].

You know, I first laughed at those things. But when the things you used to laugh at repeat themselves every day, they are not funny anymore. They become a reason for suffering, a reason for pain and hurt. No matter how much you try to laugh, you feel the pain in your bones. As if someone is constantly hurting you in the head. My life in Turkey has been like that for eight years. Turkey has made us refugees sick. Textile work has made me insane. Uncertainty has made me insane. I don't say this lightly. We suffered so much in our countries and now live here under so much stress that we all need therapy. When I go to a third country and have health insurance, going to therapy will be the first thing I do [*laughs*].

Anyways, I was telling my story of arriving at self-knowledge (*be khod-shenasi residan*). I couldn't go to the doctor in Izmir and thus couldn't get hormones covered by my insurance. I vividly remember: one day, I asked one of my trans friends where he buys hormones. "For whom are you asking?" he said. "For myself," I answered. He said, "Don't do it. It's early for you." But I insisted. I eventually gave him 50 Liras, and he found me ten hormone shots. He helped me inject hormones the first two times because he knew how to do it. The third time, I watched YouTube tutorials on how to inject hormones. Imagine, I held my phone with one hand and injected myself with the other hand. The first time I did it myself, I injected it into my arm and didn't feel anything. The next time, I decided to inject it into my upper thigh [*shows*]. The first day was alright, but my leg got paralyzed the next day. I couldn't move it for two days [*laughs*]. I learned how to use hormones on my own and continued like that for one year without a doctor or any medical tests. Now that I think about it, I can tell it was perilous.

That year, I met several trans refugees. They always asked me, "You've been using hormones for six months; why have you not grown any mustache or beard?" I didn't tell them, but I was pleased deep inside of me. But I began to question, "Why am I so happy that I don't grow facial hair?" All my trans friends shaved every day, took pills, and used dozens of lotions so that they could grow facial hair. For instance, a friend of mine took a selfie and sent it to all of us when he first noticed a little bit of hair under his lip. But I never felt like that. On the contrary, I was thinking to myself that if I grow facial hair, I'd remove it with laser when I go to Canada.

Then my voice began to change; it became coarser. My chest became smaller. I enjoyed these changes because I always had problems with my breasts; I never liked them. My face began to change too. Before, 50 percent of people could understand I was a girl, and 50 percent couldn't identify my gender. Now, 80 percent would call me *agha* (mister) or *pesar* (boy), and 20 percent would be ambivalent about whether I was a man or a woman. I arrived at this point, where people wouldn't perceive me as a woman, but I still wasn't happy. First, I thought that hearing *agha* felt weird because I wasn't used to that word. But then I've realized that I don't like to be called a man.

I was unhappy when people called me *khanoom*. Now that they called me *agha*, I still wasn't happy. What was my problem?

One of my friends had gone to Canada, and we would talk on Skype almost every night. Well, his resettlement is a whole other story [*laughs*]. We had met in Denizli and became close friends. When we said goodbyes before his departure in 2016, I got a bit emotional. My friend laughed and said, "Don't be ridiculous. We will see each other in a few months." He had come to Turkey only three months before me. By that logic, I should have gone to Canada three months or, at most, a year after him. But after he left, the resettlement countries closed their borders and stopped accepting us. My friend's cohort was the last one that could leave Turkey. After them, all of us got stuck here. My friend has been living in Toronto for five years now. He is finishing a degree in college. He adopted a dog, furnished his apartment the way he likes, bought a car. He has made friends. He is going on vacations, saving money, making plans. Not just him; all refugees who came to Turkey only a few months before us have been living in America or Canada for five years now. Don't get me wrong; I am happy for them. But anyone in my shoes would ask the same question, "Why not me?" My friend told me we'd see each other in a few months. Those few months have become years now, and I am still in Turkey.

Now we don't talk that often, but when he first went to Canada, we used to talk almost every night. On one of those nights, we were chatting about hormones and stuff. I told him, "So-and-so, I don't

know if I should continue using hormones." "Why do you hesitate?" he asked. I said, "You are trans, and each change in your body makes you happy and excited. But I'm not like that at all. Now that people don't understand my gender, that my body is a female body, I'm still not happy." I even made a joke, "I don't understand what I am. Each time I think I am something, I forget about the other thing I previously was. Like, I'm not that anymore; now, I'm this." [*laughs*] He said, "Aram, have you heard about queer?" I said no. "These things you're telling me reminded me of queer. Go do a little bit of research about queer on the Internet, and then we will talk again."

When we hung up, I typed "queer" into Google. I read the first page that came up. Then the second, the third. The closer I came to the bottom of the screen page, the bigger and bigger the smile on my face became [*smiles*]. Those days, I had arrived at a point where I was afraid of myself because I couldn't understand why I was like that. I thought I couldn't figure out what I was, maybe because I had a mental problem, as the doctors in Iran told me. After reading about queer [*pauses*] … I found myself in those writings. I realized that people like me exist. That I am not abnormal. That the doctors were not right [*chuckles*]. My family had forced me to see many doctors in Iran, and they all had told me that I was sick, that my mind was sick. I think I internalized it to a certain extent that when I couldn't figure out what I was, I began to recall those doctors' words and worried that I might be sick. But after I read about queer, I was like, okay, I am queer. There are people like me who don't see themselves as either man or woman. It's not weird that my sexual orientation is like that of a lesbian, that I am attracted to women. But as for my personality, for my identity, I don't like to be an *agha* or a *khanoom*.

I am myself. I am Aram.

## Narrative II: "Refugees Cannot Be Queer"

In August 2018, Aram was fired from their job in a small textile factory for insisting on using the women's restroom despite the foreman's several warnings that Aram, whom the foreman perceived as a man, was not allowed to do so. Aram has worked in different textile factories since they arrived in Turkey in 2014. They were questioned about their sex/gender in violent and humiliating ways at each job they worked and fired from those jobs due to their non-conforming gender expression. Having spent time with Aram, I have also witnessed how they are constantly asked whether they are a man or a woman in NGO offices, hospitals, banks, and stores. On many occasions we were together, they were denied access to women's restrooms in cafes, parks, and shopping malls, and subjected to harassment on the streets by locals, other refugees, and sometimes by the police.

As most textile factories in Turkey hire workers according to a strict gender division of labor, Aram could not find another job for months. They eventually decided to apply for the monthly financial aid (750 Turkish Liras; the equivalent of 125 U.S. Dollars in 2018) that the UNHCR had recently begun to provide for trans refugees. Aram believed that they should be eligible for "trans money" (*pul-e trans*) because they couldn't find employment due to their gender expression—one of the reasons why the UNHCR gives this financial aid to trans refugees and not to gay, lesbian, and bisexual applicants. Besides, Aram thought, they faced discrimination and harassment due to not only their sexual orientation (lesbian) but also their gender identity (queer). Thus, they wanted the UNHCR to recognize their queerness as a legitimate identity category, like transgender, worthy of support and protection.

I helped Aram get in touch with the UNHCR's main domestic implementing partner organization and called a social worker from that NGO's Ankara headquarters. The social worker could not comprehend for a while *what* Aram *was*. After my brief explanation of "queer," she interrupted me to ask, "So, is the applicant bisexual?" I said no and explained further how Aram perceives queerness as their gender identity. She then asked me if Aram was trans. I said no again. "It is hard to apply for this aid if the applicant is not transgender," she responded.

Aram and I were sitting on a bench in the hospital as we waited for Aram's dentist appointment. I began to explain to the social worker how Aram had been fired from jobs and harassed on the streets due to their physical appearance. "Restrooms!" Aram whispered to me, and I told the social worker that

Aram can't use public restrooms. "My name," Aram whispered to me again, and I told her that Aram does not use the female name assigned to them at birth. The social worker paused for a few seconds and said, "These sound very similar to our transgender clients' problems." "Yes!" I agreed excitedly, "This is why Aram wants to apply for this aid given to trans refugees." "I understand," she sighed, "but I doubt the UNHCR would recognize queerness. It does not even recognize bisexuality easily." She nevertheless suggested that Aram go to the NGO's local branch in Denizli and submit a petition explaining their problems.

In the following days, Aram wrote a three-page petition. While I cannot cite the entire letter here due to confidentiality, I would like to present its conclusion:

> "In these past four years, I did not feel safe even for one day. Employees, landlords, police officers, doctors, strangers on the street, and even other LGBT refugees have constantly questioned my presence, my physical appearance, and my gender. 'Are you a man or a woman?' I have heard this question almost every day …. Due to these reasons, I, as a queer lesbian person, would like to apply for the financial aid that the UNHCR gives to transgender refugees. I need this financial aid to afford my basic needs, as explained above. However, I do not want to change my asylum case to 'transgender' because I have no desire to change into a man, as I emphasized elsewhere in this petition. I am *queer* and *lesbian*. As you know, *sexual orientation* and *gender identity* are two different things. My sexual orientation is the same as I registered with the UNHCR—lesbian—and it has not changed. I am biologically a woman and attracted only to women, and thus, I am a lesbian. However, my gender identity is queer. That is, I do not see myself either as a man or a woman. As I explained in detail, due to my queerness, my life experiences are very similar to that of trans refugees. I suffer from similar forms of discrimination. The most challenging among them is that I cannot find employment due to my gender and therefore, need financial support."

Aram wrote the petition in Farsi, and I translated it into Turkish and English. I could not help but laugh when I read the sentence, "As you know, *sexual orientation* and *gender identity* are two different things." Aram looked at me with angst, "What happened?" "Nothing," I said, still giggling, "You gave the UNHCR an introduction to gender and sexuality." "Well, I had to. You saw that they don't know what queer is or gender identity and sexual orientation are. They don't even entertain the idea that one can be discriminated against on both grounds at the same time." "It is a great petition," I said affirmingly. "It is clear and informative. I would assign it in an *Introduction to Gender and Sexuality* class." This time we both laughed.

In the following days, Aram submitted the petition to the NGO, which then sent it to the UNHCR's Protection Department. As usual, the UNHCR did not get back to Aram for months. One day, Aram and I were having lunch in my apartment when the UNHCR called to inquire about the petition. Aram began to describe their physical appearance in graphic details, such as wearing men's clothes, binding their chest, and having short hair. They also mentioned that they have more masculine facial features and a coarser voice due to the testosterone hormone they used for a year. Then, they explained the difficulties they face due to their non-conforming gender expression by giving specific examples from their work and everyday life experiences.

Aram was looking at me from time to time as they talked, and I was giving them thumbs up after each answer they gave. When they hung up, we were almost sure that the UNHCR would find Aram eligible for financial aid. However, two months later, the NGO informed Aram that the UNHCR denied their request without any explanation. Aram and I—and all refugees who knew about this petition—got frustrated and disappointed. Sympathetic to Aram's case, the social workers at the NGO suggested that Aram consider changing their case to transgender to receive this financial aid. Aram's friends made the same suggestion. Janyar, for instance, said, "You used hormones for one year. You bind your chest. You wear men's clothes. Why don't you just tell them you are trans?" Like Aram, Janyar also

self-identified as queer and used they/them pronouns. Unlike Aram, however, Janyar registered with the UNHCR as transgender and was found eligible for the same financial aid that Aram was denied. "It is not your responsibility to educate the UNHCR," said Janyar. "Just play the game by their rules and get your money." Aram, however, refused to change their asylum case: "I am not trans. I am queer and lesbian. My entire life, I have had to lie about myself. The only reason why I left Iran was to be able to be myself. If I must lie again about who I am, then what's the point of going through all this suffering in Turkey?"

Aram continued to follow up on their petition even after the UNHCR rejected their request. They brought it up in almost all community meetings organized by national NGOs. They demanded that the NGOs put more pressure on the UNHCR to recognize queer refugees. They also called out those NGOs' own stances toward queerness. "Why do you call these meetings 'LGBT refugee meetings'? I am here, and I am queer," they said in almost every meeting, and the NGO staff seemed to agree. Indeed, most of those NGOs began to add "queer," "non-binary," and "gender non-conforming" to their activities and publications after callouts from Aram and other refugees who self-identified as such. The story of Aram's petition also initiated unexpected and otherwise unlikely conversations among refugees, ranging from what queer is to the differences between gender expression and gender identity, from the limitations of the term LGBT to the experiences of gender non-conforming refugees.

Although Aram managed to carve up some space for their self-identification and lived experiences and make "queer" recognized among national NGOs and within the larger refugee community, their efforts to do so vis-à-vis the UNHCR failed. After an emotionally exhausting process of phone calls, meetings, interviews, and petitions for two years, Aram visibly lost faith in the UNHCR's claim to be inclusive of non-normative genders and sexualities. Eventually, they decided to take social workers' advice and applied for changing their asylum case from "lesbian" to "transgender." In April 2020, two years after their initial petition was rejected, the UNHCR found Aram eligible for financial aid. Aram called me to give the news: "Write this in your dissertation," they said, "tell it to your students. I want everyone to learn how 'open-minded' the UNHCR is. Please write: the UNHCR does not recognize queer (*UNHCR queer ro ghabul nemikone*). Refugees cannot be queer; they have to be LGBT."

## Conclusion

Hegemonic LGBTQ asylum narratives are "literally and figuratively straight" in their spatial and temporal orientations because they portray asylum as a straightforward journey from an oppressive past to an emancipated future.[8] They are also "straight" in their sexual orientations because they imagine gender and sexuality as innate, immutable, and unchanging features of one's identity formed through a linear trajectory of sexual development. Aram's experiences and stories unsettle these normative understandings of queerness and refugeeness and *queer* such "straight narratives" in numerous ways.

First, nowhere in their story does Aram describes their queerness as a "born this way" feature that is innate and unchangeable. Quite the contrary, as their living circumstances change—as they migrate, meet new people, enter new communities, gather new information, and acquire new experiences—their perception of self also changes and transforms. In narrating this queer journey of "arriving at self-knowledge," Aram challenges the asylum system's normative gender and sexuality regulations that oblige refugees to fit themselves into fixed identity categories and binary genders and express their identities in a causal progressive developmental model.

Second, Aram's narratives of precarious and uncertain waiting also disrupt hegemonic representations of asylum as a symbolic and physical escape from violence. Rather, they demonstrate how queer, trans, and gender non-conforming refugees are made vulnerable by the very states that claim to save and protect them, how their lives are made difficult by the same institutions that purport to help them, and how their identities and experiences are silenced and marginalized by the same regimes that claim to advocate for their rights. In exposing this oppressive system, Aram's queer refugee narratives reveal that the transnational asylum system—including Western states' border closures, international humanitarian

organizations' disciplinary gender and sexuality norms, and Turkey's sexuality, labor, and refugee politics—prevent queer, trans, and gender non-conforming refugees from realizing their desire to *be themselves*, which is, ironically, one of the main reasons of their displacement.

Third, the narration of this systemic violence also disrupts hegemonic victimhood narratives that portray refugees as passive and weak subjects. Instead, the narratives presented in this chapter illustrate how Aram keeps struggling to *be themself* as they navigate this oppressive and violent system and, in doing so, transform their surrounding environment and communities, disorient the legal and medical authorities' rigid and essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality, and ultimately unsettle our normative assumptions about queerness and refugeeness.

Finally, Aram's relentless queerness has unsettled my writing, too. One unforgettable moment was when I was working on the conclusion of this chapter. Sitting in front of a long list of notes that were supposed to help me categorize, reiterate, and summarize all the things Aram's queer refugee narratives reveal, unsettle, and transform, I suddenly began to write a long poem to Aram. In addition to reminding me how much love and admiration I have for Aram and their struggle, this unsettling poem-writing experience also made me realize, in the most literal way, how queer refugee lives push the boundaries of prescribed narratives and genres, resist categorization and simplification, and disrupt the comfort of coherent conclusions.

> your whole existence
> is a big middle finger to this system
>
> your every laughter, every haircut, each piece of skin and body you show or hide,
> and every step you take in those parks, on those streets, at all those places you quickly and beautifully make yours,
> is a middle finger to this system.

## Notes

1 For those who embody Womxn, Life, Freedom
2 The UNHCR has been operating in Turkey since the 1960s. Its mandate includes various legal and humanitarian issues, including distributing humanitarian aid to refugees and facilitating their resettlement to host countries.
3 Hyndman and Giles, *Refugees in Extended Exile*; Sarı, "Unsafe Present, Uncertain Future"; Walia, *Border and Rule*.
4 Jenicek et al., "Dangerous Shortcuts," 643; Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 388.
5 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*; Espiritu and Duong, "Feminist Refugee Epistemology," 558; Luibhéid, "Migrant and Refugee Lesbians."
6 Luibhéid, "Migrant and Refugee Lesbians," 58; also see Murray, "The (Not So) Straight Story," 452; Phu and Nguyen, "Something Personal," 5.
7 Directorate General of Migration Management, with its full name, is Turkey's main asylum and migration authority.
8 Murray, "The (Not So) Straight Story," 453.

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