

## Résumé

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### Differentiating the image of the 'migrant woman' in Switzerland

This study examines the ways in which sexuality and migration constitute each other through an analysis of biographical narratives of queer migrant women in Switzerland. Although recent shifts in Swiss immigration and asylum policies and practices have facilitated entry for certain homosexual people, this 'group' of immigrants has received hardly any political or academic attention to date. Instead, political discourses, the media, and research continue to be organized around the assumption that migrants are heterosexual. One chief concern of this research is to differentiate dominant images of immigrant women by making visible the experiences, self-conceptualizations, everyday practices, and social positionings of queer immigrant women living in Switzerland.

The study specifically addresses migrant women who are same-sex oriented and who are perceived as racialized *Ausländerinnen* (foreigners) in Switzerland based on social markers such as language, surname, or skin color. Drawing on insights from the queer and postcolonial critique, the term 'queer' is deployed here as a conceptual umbrella term for the variety of same-sex sexualities research participants brought to this study. The sample included participants who identify as lesbians, bisexuals, or homosexuals; participants who identify with non-Western female same-sex identities (such as *pengkids* or *tomboys*); participants whose sexual identities do not align with their sexual practices (for instance because they identify as heterosexual while at the same time engaging in same-sex relationships); and participants who understand their sexualities in terms of a practice rather than an identity.

### Transnational configurations of desire

Apart from making visible the experiences of queer migrant women in Switzerland, the objective of this study is twofold. On the one hand, it establishes an understanding of transnational configurations of sexualities. Specifically, it examines how queer migrant women navigate diverging and often contradictory perspectives on sexualities, conflicting loyalties, and the multiple mechanisms of exclusions they face on account of their gender, sexuality, and immigrant status in their daily 'doing' of identities. Understanding these processes of identification and the attendant efforts to create a sense of home and belonging are a chief focus of the analysis. On the other hand, this study exam-

ines the production and disruption of normative sexualities. The key question in this regard has been how queer migrant women's self-conceptualizations and practices are enabled and disciplined by dominant discourses around sexuality, and how, in turn, queer migrant self-conceptualizations and practices reiterate or subvert these sexual norms.

By engaging with the subject position and experiences of queer migrant women in Switzerland, this study has drawn mainly on three bodies of scholarship and has extended these literatures by addressing some of their knowledge gaps. The first of these scholarships are the *geographies of sexualities*, which examine the spatialities of sexualities and the sexualization of space. Until very recently queer geographies have only rarely engaged with cross-cultural and transnational formations of same-sex intimacy and heteronormativity. Second, this research engages with and contributes to *queer migration studies*. This emerging scholarship explores the interlinkages between migration and sexuality but has produced scant ethnographies addressing queer migrant women. Both of these scholarships have moreover hardly engaged with contexts outside North America and the U.K. Lastly, this study converses with *feminist migration research* in Switzerland, which has largely remained organized around the assumption that migrants are heterosexual. This study enriches this scholarship by applying a queer/postcolonial perspective on migration, demonstrating how sexuality structures the migration experience (of *all* migrants), and how, in turn, migration shapes how we think about sexualities, and how we perceive ourselves as sexual beings.

### A 'field without sites'

The study is based on biographical interviews with 28 queer migrant women, conducted in Switzerland between 2005 and 2013. Seeing that in this period there were hardly any designated spaces for queer migrant women to be acknowledged in their being queer, migrant, and women all at the same time, this was a 'field without sites.' Accordingly, finding research participants and 'experts' on the issue was a challenge. To this date the Swiss organizational and institutional landscape is largely organized around *either* sexuality *or* immigration, and hence there was no obvious place in which to 'do' participant observation or look for expertise. In a lengthy sampling process, participants were eventually found through a multiplicity of channels. In terms of expertise, limited knowledge could be excavated especially among LGBT and immigrant rights advocates, immigration authorities, and scholars. When expert perspectives could be found, they were mostly restricted to queer asylum and (more rarely) immigration procedure.

The data corpus encompasses recordings and transcripts of 47 interviews with 28 self-identified women originating from a total of 22 countries in Asia, Northern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in Eastern, Southeastern, and Southern Europe. This cultural diversity, impressed on the project by the 'field,' became both a source of strength and a challenge: On the one hand, it allowed, to a certain extent, for the acknowledgment of certain issues and patterns that occur across the postcolonial world, as well as for an assessment of commonalities within queer migrant women's experiences in Switzerland. On the other hand, the cultural diversity of research participants rendered impossible the completion of an in-depth contextualization of specific

transnational and postcolonial configurations of desires in research participants' home countries and in specific diasporic communities in Switzerland respectively.

Whenever possible, two interviews were held with each participant. The first was a semi-structured narrative interview that focused on research participants' migration biography. The second interview was inspired by the reflexive photography method and centered on photographs that participants had taken for the research of "places that are important to you in your everyday life." Interviews were often complemented by site visits and, whenever possible, participant observation, and were contextualized by expert interviews with representatives from LGBT and immigrant organizations, immigration attorneys, and government officials.

### Negotiating multiple exclusions

Interviewees' narratives reveal that queer migrant women's positionality and experiences within Swiss society differ significantly from those of their heterosexual counterparts. As landscapes of multiple marginalization, almost all of their everyday spaces and places represent sites of negotiation, contestation, and exclusion. This restricts access to many of the resources and spaces that feminist and queer migration scholars have identified as vital for a good life in the diaspora, such as the family of origin, the diasporic community, the lesbian community, meaningful work, or child rearing. This often leaves queer migrant women in precarious situations that produce a multifarious set of concerns, such as social isolation, deskilling, exploitative working conditions, unemployment, or bullying at work, all of which frequently cause health issues such as depression, stress, burnouts, or nervous breakdowns.

On the other hand, a range of everyday spaces and places emerge as crucial sites for the negotiation of home and belonging. With regard to the *family of origin*, it is shown that, to queer migrant women, the family as a 'basic unit' of solidarity and security in the diaspora (which is how the family has been described by feminist migration scholars) is not available in the same way as it is to their heterosexual counterparts. Although no interviewees had been 'disowned' by their families, as sexually non-conforming subjects, their sexual choices and hence their place in the family often remains contested, regardless of whether the family lives in Switzerland or in the country of origin. The family therefore emerges as a central locus in the production and enforcement of heteronormative 'culture' and 'tradition.' At the same time, due to affective dependencies, often grounded in precarious life situations in the diaspora, family ties are never fundamentally questioned. As a result, the family of origin emerges as a permanent transnational site of negotiation through which queer migrant women struggle to reclaim their national, ethnic, and cultural identities as queer women.

Relationships to the *diasporic community* in Switzerland are experienced as equally ambivalent. Parties and other events organized by diasporic communities are mostly perceived as markedly heteronormative or even homophobic. This frequently results in at least a partial withdrawal from these spaces, and this withdrawal in turn often creates a sense of lacking or detachment from 'home' culture. Hence, as in the case of the family, queer migrant women only have restricted access to the resources diasporic

communities offer heterosexual migrants both as an emblematic locus of homeland nostalgia and, importantly, as a bulwark against racism and xenophobia.

By contrast, the Swiss *lesbian community* predominantly represents a site of identification. As an *imagined community*, it was sometimes (if rarely) named as an explicit ‘pull-factor’ in the decision to migrate. However, as an *everyday space* and resource, it remains highly contradictory. Experiences of exclusion in lesbian spaces – especially in the initial stages of the stay in Switzerland – belie the myth of the universal ‘queer family’ and expose lesbian spaces as intrinsically white and Western. However, although perceived by many queer migrant women as ‘ghettos,’ lesbian spaces in Switzerland are often still deemed to be the best places to socialize among an overall deficit of options.

*Work* emerges as both a site of identification and integration and a site of exclusion and personal crisis. Deskilling and unemployment in the initial phases of migration are not always followed by professional catch-up and successful integration within the Swiss labor market. At the same time, becoming a housewife and mother as a strategy to evade work-related problems is not available to queer migrant women in the same way it is to heterosexual migrant women: Where the latter win social recognition within their families, their diasporic communities, and society at large, the former often harvest more rejection, at least in the early (planning) stage of their ‘baby projects.’ Lastly, the biographical narratives once more expose the ‘aggressive heterosexuality’ of work environments in Switzerland, which creates its own exclusionary effects in the form of both overt and covert rejection.

### Claiming home

Queer migrant women’s efforts to create a sense of belonging testify to their ‘*homing desires*’ – the desire to (re)appropriate spaces in order to gain a sense of ontological security within the migration context. These homing desires are manifested in the form of imaginations and actualizations of what I term ‘*queer homes*.’ Queer homes are conceptualized as spaces which reconcile aspects of the Self that in most other spaces are experienced as irreconcilable, and hence enable queer migrant women to be ‘whole in one place.’ Such homing desires are for instance mapped onto one’s dwelling place, onto the bodies of queer compatriots, or onto one’s own queer core family (by having children). At the same time, ‘queer homes’ can also be fleeting moments carved out in spaces that are hegemonically inscribed as *either* lesbian *or* migrant. The importance attached to queer homes as real and imagined spaces challenge the presumption that moving queer bodies become detached from their moorings, or do not desire such moorings. At the same time, queer migrant women’s homing desires and practices upset notions of ‘home as origin’ that continue to haunt much of migration scholarship.

### Negotiating sexualities transnationally

The migration biographies generated in the context of this project show that sexualities always become reconfigured through migration, in ways that, for the sake of analytical distinction, I divide into three (overlapping) trajectories: The first addresses women who did not engage in relationships with women or did not consider their same-sex practices in terms of an identity before migration, and who have only come to identify

as lesbians in Switzerland; the second addresses women who had established a same-sex identity and were embedded in a sexual minority subculture prior to migrating, and who in the diaspora face subcultural divergences that lead to a reconfiguration of their sexual self-conceptions; and the third addresses women who tend to understand their sexuality as a practice rather than an identity, and who continue to reject the lesbian label after migration, defying simplistic equations of silence/invisibility with 'being closeted.'

Queer migrant women's reinventions of their sexual Selves represent creative practices that expose and upset normative ideas about both 'our' and 'their' sexual and national/ethnic/cultural identities. At the same time, these personal developments are closely tied into relations of power. Successful integration in Swiss society as a woman-loving woman hinges upon adopting a normative lesbian identity organized around specific lookings, thinkings, and doings. In queer migrant women's narratives, this process of 'becoming a good lesbian' often figures as a narrative of self-realization and liberation. Assuming a lesbian identity also emerges as an effective strategy to integrate into Swiss society: Because 'good lesbians' are assumed to be 'Swiss,' the performance of good lesbianism veils to a certain extent the fact of being a 'foreigner,' thereby mitigating exposure to racism and xenophobia. However, since 'good lesbianism' is intrinsically Western and white, identification remains partial, and moreover often comes at the cost of dismissal or denigration of homeland culture, sexualities, and experiences, which are constructed as contradictory to the former.

### **Sexuality as a transfer point of state power**

With respect to the normativization of sexualities, the study furthermore examines how state discourses, regulations, policies, and practices combine in a *system of surveillance* that disciplines and controls migrant sexualities. Importantly, in the case of queer migrants, this disciplining happens through the legal frameworks and attendant practices regulating the formalization of same-sex partnerships and immigration/asylum. As is exemplified by the analysis of some participants' experiences with asylum procedure, these disciplining processes are productive of *homonationalist* discourses. Aiming to secure Western hegemony, these discourses pit a gay-friendly Switzerland/West against a homophobic Global South or Orient. Asylum procedure forces the migrant to construct a narrative that presents her country of origin as the place that has failed her as a homosexual, and Switzerland as the country which can now save her. Hence queer asylum claimants are tied to a Eurocentric logic that frames them as oppressed homosexuals desiring to live a liberated homosexual life in the West. Only claimants who reproduce this narrative can present a case that is considered 'credible.' As is shown, such homonationalist discourses erase non-Western sexual cultures and configurations of desire, while failure to produce the requested narrative effectively bars queer migrants from entry into the country. These discourses further outsource homophobia to non-Western countries, obliterating persistent homophobia within Switzerland (and hence also hindering a domestic critique thereof). As is furthermore shown, even LGBT rights discourses perpetuate such discourses, which is manifested for instance in the tendency of some LGBT organizations to frame immigrant cultures as homophobic.

Queer migrant women's narratives debunk this myth of the homosexual migrant desiring Switzerland. While sexuality-related reasons indeed figured centrally in many participants' motivations to migrate, they mostly did so in ways that the dominant narrative fails to address. One cannot, for instance, explicitly migrate on the basis of one's same-sex desire if one cannot think or name it. This simple insight raises fundamental questions regarding immigration, asylum, and 'integration' policies and practices from the point of view of Switzerland as a receiving nation-state.