Situation queer migration: displacement and a sense of belonging in Georgian queer migrants

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"You have two hearts,
I am unaware of which one to sing to
eternally,
I have two homes,
I am unaware of which one to protect."[1]

I hum the lyrics and begin an academic contemplation. Identifying myself as a queer woman from Khashuri, Georgia, located fifty kilometers from Tskhinvali the conflict zone between Russia and Georgia, I share empathy with individuals and communities perceived as 'the other'.

Over the years I have found myself heavy with personal stories of marginalized queer individuals from Georgia, the former Soviet Union (FSU) and a post-socialist region (Eastern Europe) attempting to find refuge in spaces where they can embrace the complex nature of multiple identities. There have been made countless efforts of living and sometimes only existing in a home country, but it continues to be met with only violence and hatred. Some manage to gather all their resources left and remain, and some reached the limit of their resistance and were not given any other choice but to leave their home countries.

Contemplating how Georgian queer migrants negotiate displacement and a sense of belonging in-between home and host countries, this case study is an illuminating example of a study of queer subjects. The country's geopolitics, Soviet past, and European stance together with relatively progressive but restricted antidiscrimination legislation (Sakellaraki 2014) add

1 Chikhladze and Chikhladze 1976 (own translation).

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an authentic contribution to a limited body of literature on queer migration from Georgia as part of Eastern Europe and FSU(Pearce 2019; Mole 2019; Novitskaya 2021). Examination of my interlocutors' experiences gives a platform to marginalized migrants' (un)seen identities across borders.

Migration manifests in an endless journey between two or more worlds. Accordingly, the multiplicity of selves tries to navigate between these spaces and distinct personal and social identities (Upegui-Hernandez 2009: 129). Being in a process of constant negotiation of multiple identities, double consciousness, a concept coined by W.E.B. Du Bois, and the mestiza consciousness (Martinez 2002: 166) coined by Gloria Anzaldúa, become central notions for me to think with. The commonality between these two concepts provides an insightful interpretation of what it is like to be a Georgian queer migrant. I refer to self-identified queer individuals who had no other choice but to leave Georgia as migrants (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2016). Some of them migrated to host countries to seek asylum while others left for education and labor purposes. What is important to note is the shared struggle of finding refuge in host countries where they can embrace their true selves. This research encourages nuanced investigation of migration paths different groups go through and introduces themes that could be further explored. When I unfold the experiences of participants of my research, I interchangeably engage with umbrella terms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and Intersex + (LGBTQI+) and queer individuals. Contemplating conceptual and practical understandings of queer migration, I describe this journey as a 'quest for identity' symbolizing "an embodied search for sexual identity – an individual search which can be materialized at differing, multiple scales and paths of relocation" (Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha 2016: 3). Considering the sensitivity of the research and the safety of my participants, their names and other personally identifiable information are anonymous.

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1. The practice and politics of queer migration

1.1 Contextualization

Georgia, the country at the border of 'East' and 'West', has been undergoing social, political, economic, and cultural transformation since the declaration of independence from the Soviet Union on April 9, 1991. As a post-Soviet state, the country is "at once its nation and its struggles are in some ways emblematic of those of other post-Soviet states" (Barkaia and Waterston 2018: 7). The process of an ongoing transformation is largely shaped by the "Western project of modernization, with its newly made liberal subjects and neoliberal capitalism political economy" (Barkaia and Waterston 2018: 9). During this process, sexual minorities have been attempting to claim personal, social, and political spaces.

Participants of the interviews I conducted frequently mentioned May 2013 and July 2021 events. May 17 is the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT). May 17, 2013, marked the loudest violent homophobia by counter-protesters reported to number in the thousands, including priests (Amnesty International 2013). The government failed to protect queer activists (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022: 39). Actions spoke louder than words, and the Georgian Dream (GD) government allowed violent attacks on peaceful protesters. According to media reports, the attackers were accompanied by religious authorities from the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) (Amnesty International 2013). The interlocutors recalled the death of Alexandre Lashkarava, a thirty-seven-year-old cameraman working for the independent station TV Pirveli, during a protest against an LGBTQ+ Pride march in July 2021 (Agence France-Presse 2021). More than fifty journalists were attacked that day by far-right assailants during the protest. This was a tragedy indicating a grave violation of human rights and mishandling of the safety of not only a sexual minority but also the freedom of media and journalists. The horror brought back public and international attention to the unseen and unheard discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, which especially deteriorates during the Pride month every year.

My findings are based on interviews with ten Georgian queer individuals, who have spent six months to eight years and a half in host countries, by the time of conducting research in spring 2022. While it is not represen-

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tative of other Georgian queer migrants, it analyzes shared experiences of displacement and a sense of belonging in-between 'home' as origin and destination. Shared feelings of guilt and fear were present when participants of the research recalled experiences of social exclusion and push factors influencing the decision to migrate. Living in Belgium, Sweden, the UK, Germany, and the US, they continue their journey toward self-exploration and engage with practices of freedom, familiarity, attachment, isolation, separation, and loss.

1.2 Theoretical grounding

Firstly, I pay respect to my interlocutors, Georgian queer migrants, towards whom I carry the responsibility of writing a piece that speaks to individuals, communities, and the broader public. I try to move from and with the discipline of International Relations (IR) and allow space to express the pain, trauma, anger, happiness, joy and hope of marginalized individuals and communities. I intend to achieve this through the medium of narrating personal stories, (re)thinking and (re)writing practical applications of theories I have been working with.

I aim to contribute to claiming a space in the IR discipline for the personal stories of (un)seen marginalized individuals. Moving from and with feminist IR, what is relevant to question is the primacy of the nation-state as an international, and the boundaries between international, national and local (Enloe 1989: 3). Zooming in on my research, I ask a question about whether Georgia as a nation-state allows queer citizens to claim personal, social and political spaces to live free and secure life guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations n.d.). Questioning the primary position of the nation-state, it is important to understand what the positionality of the self as a citizen is. According to Eleanor O'Gorman and Vivienne Jabri, when the private comes into confrontation with the public, "the self as citizen comes under scrutiny" (Jabri and O'Gorman 1999: 2). The confrontation of the private with the public is apparent when we look at LGBTQI+ experiences worldwide. A clear target of discrimination becomes their queer identity, an integral part of oneself as an LGBTQI+ person. "Identity requires specific social affiliations for its survival" (Booth 1994: 5). Social interactions and recognition of identity contribute to the acknowledgement of individuals' presence in society. According to Judith Butler's vital contri-

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bution to a feminist discussion of identity, there is a need to replace the fixed notion of identity and adapt its rather fluctuating and fluid discursive forces (Hekman 2000: 289).

How can queer migrants born in Georgia navigate between the experiences created in their home countries and current host countries? My interlocutors during interviews often mentioned phrases such as travelling back home, "nothing compares to my Georgian friends" and "I have my closest friends in Georgia". Origins and local cultural contexts are always part of individuals and the need of belonging to a national community as well as 'national love' can be individually and communally recreated, reclaimed and felt.

2. Migration experiences in-between home and host countries

2.1 Migration in response to social exclusion

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, migration developed into a noticeable tendency in Georgia. In the first years of independence, international labor migration "became a major survival strategy for many Georgian households" (Barkaia and Waterston 2018: 181). While in the first years of independence, migratory flows consisted of mostly men migrating, primarily to Russia in the early 2000s, later on, more women began migrating to the European Union, Turkey, Israel, and North America (Barkaia and Waterston 2018, 181). Although the feminization of emigration from Georgia influenced the formation of a new body of scholarship focusing on gender and migration in Georgia (Zurabishvili and Zurabishvili 2010; Hofmann and Buckley 2013), there is no comprehensive data produced about minorities, specifically about Georgian queer migrants. Consequently, I mainly rely on general migration data and my conversations with participants of the interviews and members of prominent queer organizations in Georgia, Equality Movement and Tbilisi Pride.

The migration of sexual minorities from Georgia differs from general migration tendencies. Firstly, unlike economic hardship which is a prominent reason for general migration from the country, Georgian queer citizens decide to leave for personal safety and security. Radio Freedom, a prominent media platform in Georgia, published an article in 2021 addressing the

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reasons for Georgian citizens leaving the country. Tamaz Zubiashvili, an expert in migration studies, reported that more and more people emigrate from Georgia and the main reason often is economic difficulties (Topuria 2021). Regarding queer migrants, according to my interlocutors, discrimination-based exclusion plays the most important role. Secondly, a general migration flow from Georgia is significantly affected by a Georgian diaspora worldwide (Topuria 2021). However, in the case of queer migrants, based on my interviews, they count on informal networks instead of the Georgian diaspora. As a result of data collected from my interviews and conversations, Georgian queer migrants often receive a residence permit as a result of a successful asylum-seeking application, education purposes and employment.

Throughout interviews, experiences of migration brought up points of reworking lived experiences across borders. Anger, fear, sadness, happiness, and hope were present in all conversations. While my interlocutors acknowledged their privilege of safely continuing their journey toward self-exploration, they also reflected on the feelings of separation and loss they have been experiencing.

2.2 Movement out of place

According to my research, the personal journey of queer 'quest for identity' for Georgian queer migrants comes to light with (re)working displacement in their home country, the help of queer individuals' informal networks and perception of 'home-as-familiarity' (Fortier 2001: 407). Searching for alternative ways of being, my interlocutors found themselves physically distant from familiar marginalization, expectations of tight-knit family, kinship and community relationships and reinventing their everyday lived spaces and their meanings (Gorman-Murray 2007: 112). Although distancing from the familiar, some of them found themselves keeping in contact with the familiar environment by settling in places that remind them of home. Engaging in the movement away from a home country, informal networks played an important role. While queer diaspora is more widely referenced in academic articles (Mort 1994; Puar 2001; Sinfield 2008). it did not come up during the interviews. Instead, stories about informal connections and friendships with Georgian queer migrants having left the country were shared.

Although COVID-19 restricted travel, the most explicit destination that is and would be frequently visited by my interlocutors is Georgia. For in-

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stance, Participant 9 (P9) travels home twice a year. Similar to other interlocutors' wishes, she wants to become a citizen of her host country and later on, perhaps return to Georgia for a certain period. Although the wish has been present ever since she left, she is afraid of being legally dependent on Georgia and, on the one hand, finds her ontological and emotional security in frequent visits and, on the other hand, the safe space she has created for herself in Sweden.

Having extended on migration experiences of Georgian queer migrants, movement manifested in temporary or permanent relocation practices in host countries and frequent visits to Georgia leads to the core of my research, double consciousness and the mestiza consciousness, tying together the building blocks of the article.

2.3 Finding refuge in double consciousness and the mestiza consciousness

While I have attempted to pay respect to the courage and vulnerability of my interlocutors' authentic stories that moved me to the core, plenty of insights, emotions and experiences remain (un)told, with us, with me. My research finds refuge in double consciousness and the mestiza consciousness. Although Du Bois and Anzaldúa resonate with experiences of oppression in African Americans and Latina/os in America, the commonality between these two concepts ties together my research. Du Bois deals with race and class issues and Anzaldúa additionally focuses on gender and sexuality (Martinez 2002: 159). In order to showcase the connection between the concepts and the topic of my article, I introduce them in the context of my interlocutors' experiences.

According to Du Bois, "experience of the double consciousness ¬means to be both split apart from one's self and connected to one's self, to be at tension with one's self and ease with one's self" (Martinez 2002: 170). Referring to P5's story, he recalled that when he was a kid, he would go to the sea in his hometown. He would always feel that across the horizon there is a different universe and he wished to be there. "I thought I would feel good in a place, where I am a stranger." This wish originated from the experience of aggression he has been receiving from people in this universe perhaps because of the reason that they recognized him. After arriving in Germany, he liked the feeling that he was a stranger to everyone. However, he noted

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that it is very difficult to be a nobody and have no sense of belonging. P5's experience is an instance of the twoness of double consciousness, in which neither self is abandoned or rejected (Martinez 2002: 170). It also manifests in his self-esteem. On the one hand, he believes he is smart and can make it. On the other hand, at times his self-esteem drops. One example influencing the fluctuation is his experience at a public service office. After sharing that he is a refugee, he was asked if he has finished school. P5 was struck by the expectation that refugees are uneducated.

Anzaldúa resists the multiple axes of race, class, gender, and sexuality with her oppositional/mestiza/border consciousness (Martinez 2002: 166). She reflects on the experiences of queer individuals emerging from multiple determinants of the matrix of domination. Border consciousness is a concept she uses to map out a sense of "the plurality of self" (Yarbro-Bejarano 1994: 11). What is equally essential to note is her background as a Chicana lesbian of the working class. Anzaldúa extends on this in her project "Belonging" nowhere, depicting her multiple identities always prohibiting her from feeling completely "at home" in any one of the many communities she is a member of (Yarbro-Bejarano 1994: 13) Resonating with my interlocutors' experiences, P10 shared that she does not feel well in the UK, or in Georgia. "There is no guaranty I would feel better somewhere else." While constant yearning for friends, family and memories from Georgia is present, she tries to negotiate her safety and life with her partner and often visits Georgia.

2.4 Transgressing displacement and a sense of belonging

Unfolding closer observations on displacement and a sense of belonging across borders, the experiences of my interlocutors show the liminality of emotions and physical movements between home and host countries. Accordingly, double consciousness and the mestiza consciousness of queer migrants transgress binary conceptual and empirical practices of migration and encourage further research. One direction of research could be exploring the relationship between migration and transnational queer activism. For instance, while my interlocutors go through the phase of double consciousness, they express the will to continue and/or renew engagement in Georgian queer social movements after they make peace with identities rooted in multiple spaces. The turning point for marking this new phase

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seems to be becoming a citizen of host countries to always have a home as origin in Georgia and a home they created for themselves.

Reconciling differences in understandings of sexuality and gender identity, migrant inflows increase the tendency for queer social movement organizations to orient their focus beyond the state, often manifesting in the promotion of queer rights in migrants' home countries (Ayoub and Bauman 2018: 2759). One of the most successful cases of showcasing the potential and importance of queer mobilization is Polish transnational queer activism. Polish example reflects the feeling of guilt, moral responsibility and social obligations to the homeland (Ayoub and Bauman 2018: 27761), similar to what my interlocutors' have been experiencing. Most queer individuals I spoke with had been actively involved in Georgian queer organizations and the political scene in Georgia and have the wish to find ways of continuing participation.

Conclusion

Approaching the finishing lines of my academic contemplation, I continue humming the lyrics and I feel the rush of melancholy, fear, anger, happiness, and hope. This article engaged with conceptual and empirical analysis of how Georgian queer migrants negotiate displacement and a sense of belonging in-between home and host countries. The study of Georgian queer migrants' experiences contributes to an understudied topic of queer migration from Georgia, as part of Eastern Europe and FSU.

Describing spaces conceptually and geographically, my interlocutors continue to negotiate multiple personal and social identities in the physical sites of home and host countries. Experiences of displacement and a sense of belonging of Georgian queer migrants examined throughout the article finds refuge in double consciousness and the mestiza consciousness. Continuous navigation of liminal spaces calls for recognition of multiple ways of being.

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