

# **QUE(E)RYING ASYLUM**

## **AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON THE DISCURSIVE AND NON-DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF LGBT ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE UK**

Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
At the University of Leicester

By

Maddalena Tacchetti  
School of Business  
University of Leicester

September 2018

## **Abstract**

In recent years people seeking asylum in the UK on the ground of their sexuality has become a topic of heated debate in UK politics and law, fuelled by considerable coverage in the media and academia. Several investigations carried out by the UK government and NGOs expose the unfair treatment of LGBT asylum applicants, who struggle to provide evidence of membership to the LGBT social group, the key requirement for getting leave to remain in the UK in this type of asylum claims. Studies in the emerging research field of queer asylum scholarship have tried to unpack the identity category of the LGBT asylum seeker as constructed in major discourses and practice (i.e. at the level of law, government, media and support organizations), to expose how they tend to rely upon a homonormative conception of sexuality, which overlooks its intersection with other aspects of the individual identity and their respective struggles such as race, class, legal status and gender. This research aims to contribute to this body of inquiry from the standpoint of my situated experience of activist and researcher of the grassroots organization for the support of LGBT asylum seekers, which constituted my field of activism and research. The proposed methodology is an activist ethnography, which is overtly on the side of, that is to say partisan to, the chosen social group. Ethnographic observations will be coupled with discursive data analysed according to conventions in Discursive Psychology (DP), to understand how identity is discursively constructed in communicative exchanges and written texts. To read through the intricate world of LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters, I propose a poststructuralist framework, which accounts for the non-discursive and discursive elements in their interrelation. Ultimately the study explores the ways in which support organizations working with asylum seekers contribute to their silencing, whilst attempting to create an environment that helps to give voice to them.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people that I would like to thank one by one for their support, contribution and love that have made possible the completion of this research project. First, I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Steve Brown and Dr Matthew Allen, for they have always supported me throughout each step of my PhD journey and deeply inspired my work and critical thinking.

The confidentiality agreement made with participants of this research is aimed at ensuring the highest degree of anonymity, which includes their anonymization. Participants of this research are people looking for asylum on the ground of their sexuality and their supporters. Above all, I want to thank all the participants for without them this research could have not been possible. Thank you for what we have shared and created together: you have been a constant inspiration for my life, research and activism.

So, I have decided to anonymize my acknowledgments too and leave only mine and my supervisors' names, who could not be anonymized anyway. There is only another person who I want to thank by name: Dr Marco Checchi. Thank you, Marco, for being the way you are and always there for me. I also hope you are happy there is someone that can still spell your name correctly.

I would also like to thank my flatmate Martel for being a great friend and flatmate. My love and deepest gratitude goes to my family in Italy especially to the joy of our lives, our special one year old. I want to thank all my friends in the UK, Italy, the Netherlands and around the world. Thank you for the fun and support! My life would be very sad without you. Finally, I want to thank all the students and workers of the Critical Management and Business School of the University of Leicester and all those that took part in the UCU industrial actions in February 2018. We did something great. I will never forget it.

## Contents

Abstract.....	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	2
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	17
2.1.    LGBT Asylum Seekers of the UK and Their Assessment.....	22
2.2.    Queer Migration Studies on the Construction of LGBT Asylum Seekers Identity.....	26
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	37
3.1.    Research Field and Participant Group.....	40
3.2.    Methods of Data Gathering and Analysis .....	44
3.3.    Behind the Scenes of the Research Process: my Entry and Participation in the Research Field .....	48
3.4.    Ethical Issues .....	53
3.5.    Notes on Terminology.....	57
Chapter 4: Hyde and Seek.....	60
4.1.    Gathering Together Dispersed LGBT Asylum Seekers.....	61
4.2.    Hiding in the Country of Origin .....	66
4.3.    Hiding in the Host Country.....	70
4.4.    Persecution in the UK.....	76
4.5.    Looking for a Hidden Sanctuary .....	82
4.6.    Conclusions .....	88
Chapter 5: Coming Out .....	92
5.1.    Coming Out as Constitutive Feature of LGBT Asylum Seekers .....	93
5.2.    Coming Out as a Constitutive Organizational Feature.....	97
5.3.    First Coming Out Rite of Passage .....	97
5.4.    Individual Coming Out Rites of Passage.....	100
5.5.    Group Coming Out Rites of Passage .....	103
5.6.    Coming out as Pastoral Technology of Power .....	107
5.7.    Coming Out as LGBT Asylum Seekers Support Organization .....	117
5.8.    Conclusions .....	121
Chapter 6: Constructing (Credible) LGBT Asylum Seekers.....	123

6.1. Acceptable Overwhelming Evidence of (Fear of Persecution on the Grounds of) Sexuality? .....	126
6.2. Writing and Telling Credible LGBT Asylum Stories: The Personal Statement and The Mock Interview .....	127
6.3. Other Evidence: Pictures and Support Letters.....	133
6.4. Queer LGBT Asylum Seekers .....	145
6.5. Conclusions .....	147
Chapter 7: (In)credible LGBT Asylum Claims.....	150
7.1. Case Study 1: An Incredible LGBT Asylum Claim.....	152
Summary of the Applicant’s case .....	153
Failure to Disclose her Sexuality at the Screening Interview .....	155
Failure to Disclose her Sexuality at the Substantive Interview with Appropriate Terminology .....	161
Failing to Provide a Credible Account on How She and Others Found Out She Was a Lesbian in her Home Country.....	164
Failing to Provide a Credible Account on How She Came Out to Others in her Home Country.....	165
Failing to Provide a Credible Account on Why She Had Not Approached Other LGBT People or Organizations in the UK.....	166
Conclusions .....	167
7.2. Case Study 2: A Credible LGBT Asylum Claim .....	170
Analysis of the Applicant’s Personal Statement .....	171
Adherence to Eurocentric Linear Models of Sexual Development.....	178
Other Supportive Evidence .....	181
What must be said and what ought to be left unsaid.....	182
Chapter 8: Conclusions.....	185
Reference .....	197

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Before the building, they have different walls, walls, walls, you understand? So, there's no way you can escape it. You can't. The moment we got there... Finally, we got there! This gate would open, another gate would open, and another gate would open, ah! Gates, gates, gates... [Penelope]

These are the words of a participant of this research in her journey to become a lesbian asylum seeker. The extract is part of a much broader description of her trip to Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, in Bradford, UK, aboard a big police van from which she could observe the exterior. Before reaching the prison building, at which she peered into the distance, she would have had to cross several walls, which stood as to demonstrate the solid impossibility of an escape from that place. Once she got to the actual building, however, a similar succession of blocking gates was repeated inside. Before she could reach the reception and the prison cells, she would have crossed a gate only to discover another gate and yet another gate, in an exhausting but inevitable succession of openings towards the ineluctable destiny of being locked up in prison. Right from there she would apply for asylum on the grounds of her homosexuality, which will allow her to be freed from Yarl's Wood. The description of the journey to the prison and the indefinite yet inexorable crossing of various blocks and openings dramatises a powerful instance of her journey in England, which begins well before applying for asylum and which will continue during and beyond the asylum application. The description of the trip to Yarl's Wood, indeed, is part of an even wider story of her life as a migrant since she arrived in the UK, a few years before her arrest, with a regular tourist visa, at the expiring of which she did not return to her country of origin, Nigeria. Instead, she continued to reside in England irregularly for several years, whilst attempting to find a way to regularize her status. One day, two immigration officers knocked on her door, arrested and kept her in police custody for one night. The next day she was loaded by other officers into the van that would bring her to Yarl's Wood. The reason for the arrest would become clear to her only once she arrived at the removal centre. Her application for civil partnership with her partner, a European man, had been refused on the grounds

of what it was discovered during the visit of the immigration officers at her apartment, which led to her arrest. In fact, they had found, in the only bedroom of the residence, the personal belonging of another man, a Nigerian national, who was believed to be her ex-husband. This was taken to undermine her credibility with respect to the claimed relationship with the European man; hence, their application for civil partnership would have been rejected. As a consequence, given her current status of irregular migrant, she had no right to reside in England. Thus, she was kept in detention pending deportation to Nigeria. It was in these circumstances that she applied for asylum on the grounds of her homosexuality, which she had hitherto kept hidden from the authorities, but not to her European partner, who, despite being aware of her sexual orientation, had decided to help her residing legally in England by filing a civil partnership application on her behalf (i.e., without her knowledge), in the hope of being able to change her and be so reciprocated in his love. Her release from the detention centre, however, does not represent the end of her journey in England, but a continuation within another system, that of LGBT asylum, as she herself describes it at another point in the interview, “I know I’m outside, I’m outside detention, but then, hum, it affects me, because my journey is still there, yeah, my journey is still there. I have not completed mine”. There is no outside, just a different relation to the ever-moving machines.

The story briefly summarized above projects us in the messy world of LGBT asylum seekers. From the moment of her arrival in the UK, the protagonist of this story seems to be moved from one side to the other, between physical places (e.g., from inside to outside the prison) and categorizations (e.g., regular or irregular migrant, criminal, asylum seeker, heterosexual or lesbian), by a migration system that she does not understand, yet it seems inevitable. This research aims to retrace the journey of LGBT asylum seekers in England, which does not start, nor does it end with the mere act of submitting an asylum application on the grounds of sexuality. Rather, it seems to fit into other journeys and movements that affect the individual before, during and after registering an LGBT asylum application. Moreover, it does not refer only to spatial movements within the host country, between, that is, typical asylum spaces, such as, for example, the assigned accommodations, the headquarters of organizations and support groups, prisons or governmental offices. Nor does it necessarily refer to coherent and well-defined subjectivities. By law, LGBT asylum seekers are defined as LGBT individuals fleeing their country of origin for fear of being persecuted for their sexuality.

Indeed, to get leave to remain LGBT asylum seekers must understand and comply with government's assessment criteria. Yet, as the case above briefly, but clearly, illustrates, the woman shows an identity that seems to escape from such rigid categorizations. Indeed, her asylum claim was rejected on the grounds of failing to demonstrate to be a lesbian. Her past heterosexual relations were taken by the judging authorities as key evidence of her fake lesbian identity. She is currently still living her journey of becoming a "credible" LGBT asylum seeker in the UK, a *botched* becoming, whereby asylum seekers have to keep modifying themselves to mirror the system.

The present research, therefore, aims to explore the process of becoming LGBT asylum seekers within the UK asylum system. But how can we follow LGBT asylum seekers in their journeys within such intricate paths? The UK asylum system can be accessed by indefinite and multiple entries, each with its own rules of entry and exit, and with the participation of various characters, like the government officers, who oversee the process, as the story above illustrates for a single particular case. A concept that can help us in trying to explore this journey and system is that of 'assemblage', developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1986; 1987), which can be briefly defined as complex constellations of discourses and bodies that come together for varying periods of time with material affects. In *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari (1986) use the work of Franz Kafka to illustrate and refine their notion of assemblage. In fact, according to the authors, Kafka's novels such as *The Trial* and *The Castle* contain most of the features of the assemblage concept. *The Trial*, which unlike many unfinished works also has the concluding chapter, follows the surreal and sinister vicissitudes of a bank employee, named Josef K., who, on the day of his thirtieth birthday, receives a visit to his apartment of two unknown men. They are there to inform him that an arrest warrant has been issued against him, for which a trial must take place. In the course of the novel K. will discover that he was accused by a mysterious court for having committed an unspecified crime. Thus, the protagonist of the story finds himself in the absurd condition of having to defend himself against an indistinct but ineluctable accusation. *The Castle*, on the other hand, is an unfinished novel, where K., the protagonist, is the land surveyor of a village, of which it is known for certain that it is governed by the lords of a Castle. When K. arrives at the village, he will find himself constantly hampered in the exercise of his profession by the inhabitants and especially by the slowness of the bureaucratic apparatus of the Castle. K. cannot tolerate such a situation and decides to reach the Castle

to question those who owe explanations. The Castle is clearly visible from the village but, when K. tries to reach it, he discovers that no street leads to the imposing building for they always cross an obstacle, like the interactions with villagers or officials of the Castle or the intricate path of its bureaucracy. In these two novels, everything seems connected to everything else: objects, places and characters are intertwined in a way that seems to make sense at a certain moment, only to collapse in the next instant and configure once again in new unexpected realities. In these novels, the described system - i.e., *The Trial* or *The Castle* - is what sets things in motion by creating a desire that is as constant as apparently unachievable (i.e., reaching the Castle or the end of the Trial), except by deeply immersing oneself in the system, through temporary blocking situations and increasingly intricate openings. The protagonists of Kafka's novels are so continually frustrated by the unexplained arrests and decelerations in the succession of events and their unpredictable developments, which determine the impossibility of achieving the desired goal. The answer seems to be always next door, in the next office, guarded by this or that individual, who know nothing but simply participate in the organizational composition of the assemblage. The latter is therefore the dominant organizational principle, which yet remains incomprehensible. The protagonists of *The Castle* and *The Trial*, therefore, continue to look for elusive accesses to the Castle or to the absolution from the unknown instance of the Trial. Crucially, in so doing, they become more and more entangled in the assemblage, thus turning themselves into accomplices of a system they wished to understand in order to escape it. Deleuze and Guattari (1986, p.7) thus define Kafka's works as 'writing machines' that have no 'privileged point of entry', like the concrete social structures forming the bureaucratic and legal machines portrayed in the novels above described. Hence, at the beginning of the work on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari (Ibid., p.3) question themselves about how to enter Kafka's works, like *The Castle* that has multiple entrances without knowing what are the laws that regulate its use and connections or *The Trial*, with its continuous re-directing in the labyrinthine bureaucratic system that should bring ever closer to the trial, but which instead seems to move more and more away from it. Hence, the authors explain that we could enter from any point, since there is no one that is worth more than the other; no entry, in fact, is main or secondary. The entry that Deleuze and Guattari then chooses to get in Kafka's work is the concept of 'minor literature' and 'minor language'; according to the authors, 'a minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language' (Deleuze &

Guattari 1986, p.16). Kafka uses the major language and literature, German, but makes “a minor use” of it. Thus, in Kafka’s work, German is ‘deterritorialized’; i.e., it is de-functionalised by its primary functions (Deleuze & Guattari 1986; 1987). A major language is corrupted, worked from within by a minority. Kafka makes the major language, German, a minor use in various ways. The major language is the official language, the language of the State and those in power; Kafka, instead, is attracted to ‘minor lives’. His stories prefer servants, employees, officials: a collectivity thwarting the figure of the one heroic protagonist, which is a typical character of a major literature. Kafka, instead, experiments an inextricable interweaving, a continuous passage between the author and the characters, and between the characters themselves, so that instead of the traditional categories of protagonist and antagonist, narrator and narrated, we witness continuous chaining. Ultimately, Kafka’s work is the example of a minor literature, which is revolutionary because it escapes from every reading in the key of a major literature, in order to carry out a continuous experimentation<sup>1</sup>.

If they cannot be interpreted by a dominant code, how can we approach Kafka’s works? According to Deleuze and Guattari (1986), Kafka’s works must be seen as a description on the functioning of assemblages and as an attempt to capture life in its movement, beyond the process of fixation to which each interpretative representation conducts. From this point of view, for example, the law that mysteriously governs the vicissitudes of K. in *The Castle* or in *The Trial* is unknowable not because it hides a transcendent order, but because it is always in the next office, always in the next door. In this continuous transition from one to the other element - series of steps, blocks, characters, postponements of the trial or the meetings with the castle’s officials, transfers from room to room, from office to office - the law is contiguous and moving, it is not known but experienced (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, p.45). Justice, guilt, punishment are themes of a major literature that are also enunciated in Kafka’s novels, but to be questioned, dismantled and reassembled, and chained in a new experimentation.

---

<sup>1</sup> In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari (1986) explain other ways in which the major language, German, is deterritorialized in Kafka’s works. For example, he wrote in German, but influenced by Czech, his native tongue, which produces syntactically incorrect sentences, and whose vocabulary is thin and dried up. Hence, by ‘minor language’ the authors do not mean the dialect, or the language spoken by a minority, but the creative treatment that a minority makes of a major language.

From this point of view the law is not the domain of knowledge but the dominion of an absolute and practical necessity. In other words, Kafka literally portrays the law, power and bureaucracy as *processes*, which seem dysfunctional or mysterious but in fact represents a 'minority struggle'. Therefore, according to Deleuze and Guattari, it is completely useless to look for a theme in a writer, without first asking ourselves how this theme works in the work of the writer (Ibid.). In this sense, Kafka witnesses the dismantling and re-assembling of a whole series of processes and machines, which are decoded and reconverted so as to no longer have a regular operation.

The journey within the LGBT asylum system resembles such an immersion within a Kafkaesque world as described above in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage (1986; 1987). LGBT asylum seekers, in their attempt to be granted leave to remain on the grounds of their sexuality, hence in trying to escape from the asylum system, find themselves increasingly trapped within its complex networks of entities forming it. The overreaching aim of the thesis is navigating the complex assemblage of the LGBT asylum system from the standpoint of my situated positionality as researcher and activist of the chosen research field; i.e., a support grassroots organization for LGBT asylum seekers. Thus, I have tried to guide the reader through the movements, power relations, discourses, bodies and organizations and other entities making up the intricate journey of becoming LGBT asylum seeker. I therefore propose a qualitative study of the co-construction of LGBT asylum seekers in the UK, which acknowledges the role of discursive and non-discursive practices and their interplay in (re-)producing knowledge and power within and through organizations. By looking at how the individual and collective identity of LGBT asylum seekers are discursively and non-discursively collectively constructed by the intricate networks of the heterogeneous entities participating in the support organization constituting the main research fieldwork, the latter emerges as an assemblage (re-)producing normalized queer identities, whilst offering shared space for the creation of 'lines of flight' or 'movements of deterritorialization' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.3) subtracting themselves from crystallization. By navigating how the identity category of the LGBT asylum seeker and its components are built into major discourses and practices or major interpretative codes (i.e., the social interpretative codes of the academy, law, media, support organizations and other assemblages participating in its construction), I will describe how these are re-chained in a continuous interaction and experimentation in the minor lives of LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters. Hence, I have

also tried to explore the minor literature of LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters which feature as participants of this research project, by describing how discursive elements found in major discourses are deterritorialized in various ways. The attempt is to face the chaos of the everyday lives within such a complex assemblage by giving it an order that does not distort its continually transforming status. In other words, the aim is to map the intricate networks composing this assemblage, that is to define how the social structures composing it work and how the heterogeneous entities that interplay are continually moved by the power, law and bureaucratic technologies in place.

The thesis therefore is structured according to different possible entries within this assemblage, which allows us to explore various movements of becoming LGBT asylum seeker from different points of view and constellations of participatory entities and social structures. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature aimed at exploring the context of LGBT asylum in the UK and the main theories in poststructuralist, migration and queer studies, which constitutes the theoretical framework of this thesis. First, the chapter reviews the work of poststructuralist scholars to define the working concepts by means of which I have attempted to navigate the LGBT asylum assemblage in a way that accounts for its discursive and non-discursive components in their interrelation and dynamicity. The literature review is also aimed at sampling the major discourses or dominant codes of LGBT asylum, at the level of law, government, support organizations, media, and academia. In the first section, I will provide an overview of the context of LGBT asylum in the UK by reviewing the main reports, legislations, policies and investigations produced by the government and NGOs that are informative of the composition of the social group at stake and evolution of their assessment methods. Particularly, I will account for the current model of assessment of LGBT asylum claims endorsed by the UK among other European member states; i.e., the Difference, Stigma, Shame and Harm (DSSH) model and how it seemingly allows for Western linear (mis-)conceptions of sexual development and stereotypes of what it means to be LGBT and apply for asylum to play a great role in the evaluation of such asylum claims. The second section is a review of main studies in queer migration scholarship, which have attempted to deconstruct the identity category of the authentic or credible LGBT asylum seeker (and the inauthentic or incredible LGBT asylum seeker), as produced in circulating discourses in the government, law and support organizations, in order to expose its underlying and intertwining power technologies, discourses and practices, which make LGBT asylum seekers (visible as) distinct individualized others.

Chapter 3 outlines my journey into the Kafkaesque assemblage in order to describe not only the methodology adopted for its study, but also to critically reflect upon my participation in the assemblage in my double role of researcher and volunteer of the support group for LGBT asylum seekers, Free and Proud Refugees (FPR), which for two years constituted my activist and research field, from which the LGBT asylum seekers participants of this research were recruited. The methodological approach chosen to account for the dual role I have played is activist ethnography (Charles R. Hale 2006). The latter entails a reflection on the relationships of power within the field, especially the recognition that the more deeply a researcher is involved in a social movement with an established long-term relationship with participants, the more pressing the ethical issues become. Hence, I will provide an overview of the ethical issues encountered throughout my fieldwork, particularly those originating from my active involvement in the field, and ways to tackle them. Furthermore, activist ethnography invites researchers to rethink their role as knowledge producers; hence, I will reflect on my role of researcher as a constituent part of the very same research field that I aimed to investigate. Ultimately, the proposed research is in line with a politically and ethically engaged form of research, which deliberately takes the side of the marginalized group of participants and seeks to facilitate social change (Brook & Darlington 2013). Hence, I will explain my contribution to the group at stake in facilitating the co-understanding and co-creation of LGBT asylum seeker collective and individual identities, in a way that makes them credible in front of the Home Office, hence worth it being awarded refugee status. Crucially, a critical assessment of such research engagement exposes not only my active participation in the object of investigation; but also my role as volunteer of an organization that, with the aim of helping its members to create credible, hence successful, LGBT asylum narratives, reproduces, rather than dismantles, state conception of sexuality, which are often based on stereotypes and Western neoliberal conceptions of what it means to be LGBT and looking for asylum in the UK (Berg & Millbank 2009). The chapter then goes on to examine the participant group, research field, and methods of data gathering and analysis. I will rely upon an extensive dataset comprised of different types of discursive material coupled with ethnographic observations. The discursive material comprised of a wide range of texts (e.g., transcripts of the research

interviews with LGBT asylum seeker participants and of their Home Office interviews, asylum rejection letters, Home Office policies on the assessment of such claims, flyers and guidelines produced by support organizations, individual and group support letters) and conversations gathered from different social occasions and settings (e.g., casual talks, interviews and formal and informal meetings). The various forms of the empirical material will be analysed according to conventions in Discursive Psychology (DP) (Wetherell 1998; 2007), to understand how identity is discursively constructed in communicative exchanges and written texts. Moreover, queer theory is used to unpack the normalization process by means of which the discursive category LGBT asylum seeker is created as a stable identity yet deviating from homonormative understandings of what it means to be LGBT. Importantly, recent developments in queer theory are used to inform research reflexivity, particularly the (re-)negotiation of my activist, research and sexual identities within the field and its influence in the research process (McDonald 2013; McDonald 2016; Rumens et al. 2018).

Chapter 4 marks the beginning of the empirical part of the research. The main theme of this chapter is the movements of hiding and seeking, of being seen and of escaping, in the hope of reaching a shelter, which characterizes not only individuals seeking asylum, but also their groups and organizations of support. The chapter begins with a description of the formation dynamics of Free and Pride Refuges (FPR) as a spinoff of Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SforRA), a main charity supporting asylum seekers and refugees living in Newtown. The accounts of the main initiators of the FPR project, the SforRA coordinator and the chair of the members committee, will be analysed along with the textual analysis of the first FPR flyer developed by them. In these accounts, the beginning of FPR is described as a hunt for potential hidden members, whereby LGBT asylum seekers are constructed as individuals who hide their sexuality for shame and trauma connected to it, which originate in their past and countries of origin. Hence, the latter are constructed as homophobic and in direct opposition to the UK, as a country promoting LGBT rights and offering shelter, thus reinforcing humanitarian and homonationalist narratives (Raboin 2017a; 2017b). This type of construction is also observed in the accounts of LGBT asylum seeker informants. Particularly, transnational communities of belonging in the UK are constructed as an extension of the home country, thus perpetuating the

persecution associated with coming out as LGBT in the UK. Moreover, the chapter explores the construction of the Home Office as another main persecutory force in the UK for its harsh assessment methods of this type of asylum claims. Hence, I will explore how participants try to make sense of contradictory accounts of the host country as promoting LGBT rights, rescuing LGBT asylum seekers and yet persecuting them. Finally, the chapter looks at how Free and Pride Refuges, in order to accommodate this type of subjectivities, is constituted as a support group hidden from others, which has implications for the choice of the location to host its office in a hidden place within the city.

Chapter 5 explores in more details the movement of coming out, which refers precisely to the public disclosure of one's LGBT sexuality. First, the chapter explores how coming out is constructed as a constitutive feature of LGBT asylum seekers; that is, as a struggle, a personal need of the individual but also as a key requirement for being regarded as LGBT asylum seekers. The chapter then moves on to consider coming out at an organizational level. The construction of LGBT asylum seekers as individuals struggling to come out is linked to one of the main forms of support observed within FPR; i.e., helping its members to come out. Various coming out 'rites of passages' (Van Gennep 1909) are described within FPR, by means of which individuals become members of the group. The coming out function performed by volunteers of the organization is thus explored. On the one hand, through care and compassion, FPR members feel confident and reassured to disclose their sexuality to FPR volunteers. On the other hand, the latter help them to understand and interpret the disclosed sexuality. The underlying power relation that so comes to be constituted between members and volunteers is best described according to Foucault's (2007) pastoral technology of power, whereby individuals are constructed as particular subjects in need of help with disclosing and understanding their sexuality, hence subjected to volunteers endorsing the role of the confessor; i.e., the recipient and interpreter of their sexual confession. The last section of the chapter describes "FPR's coming out", that is the first public event that FPR participates in as an official LGBT support organization, which seems to (re-)produce observed humanitarian and homonationalist discursive constructions of the home and host country.

Chapter 6 addresses the movement of becoming a credible LGBT asylum seeker, which points at two main issues for prospective LGBT asylum applicants and their

supporters. First, being able to come out with others and particularly with British authorities. Second, knowing the asylum procedures, particularly pulling out a *credible* LGBT asylum claim. Hence, the chapter looks at how FPR trains members to come out as credible LGBT asylum claimants. Particularly, the chapter explores two main articulations of the coming out function introduced in Chapter 4; i.e., the collective drafting of the personal statement by FPR members and their assigned caseworkers, and the so-called “mock interview”, whereby the asylum interview is staged between an LGBT applicant and two volunteers performing the Home Office. Crucially, these activities are not only functional for training FPR members to come out, but also for producing supportive evidence for their claim, such as the personal statement, whose underlying narrative is performed during the mock interview to facilitate remembering it during the asylum interview, which constitutes another evidence. Hence, the chapter looks at how FPR helps members produce further evidence to support their asylum claim, such as the individual and group support letters as well as pictures attesting participation in public LGBT events in the UK, for instance at gay pride parades and LGBT clubs. Importantly, these collective activities supporting members with coming out and producing evidence lead FPR to implement different forms of control and bureaucracy, such as a register to record attendance and feedback for participation in LGBT events supported by FPR. Ultimately, in its attempt to combat the Home Office, FPR seemingly takes on their forms of assessment and control, hence effectively subcontracting their work, which highlights the intricate interplay with the Home Office as a main interlocutor and decision-making body and the role of support organizations and groups in interpreting and complying with state conceptions of what it means to be LGBT asylum seeker in the UK.

Chapter 7 aims at exploring in greater details what has been discussed throughout the previous chapter by relying on a close analysis of two case studies. In the first case study, I will look at an incredible asylum claim, where the applicant has been refused leave to remain for failing to convince the authority of her claimed sexuality. I will look at her personal statement, letter of appeal, Home Office and First-Tier Tribunal rejection letters to expose the issues that I encountered as a volunteer of FPR in trying to assess the way her case and sexuality have been assessed. Hence, the analysis of this case study contributes to the work of activist researchers who tried to expose the ways in which LGBT claims are assessed according to stereotyped

conceptions of sexuality, which tend to overlook the ways in which it intersects with other important aspects of the individual identity. The second case study, on the other hand, looks at a credible asylum claim. I will analyse in detail how the personal statement has been co-constructed by the applicant and the assigned FPR volunteer in a way that is in line with governmental criteria, especially the DSSH model, and linear conceptions of sexual development (Cass 1979; Coleman 1982). Crucially, downgrading constructions of his life in the UK as an asylum seeker, which emerge throughout his research interview, are silenced in his personal statement and asylum interviews. In the latter, on the other hand, it emerges the construction of the UK as a country of freedom in opposition to the homophobic country of origin. Finally, FPR emerges as an organization that helped him to deal with his homosexuality.

Chapter 8 concludes the empirical analysis with a review of the main points explored throughout the thesis in order to provide a concise description of the emerging LGBT asylum assemblage. From the point of view of my situated experience the LGBT asylum system appears to be an assemblage constituted by a constellation of multiple, indefinite, heterogeneous entities, such as objects, bodies, spaces, institutions, organizations, discourses, silences, which together compose and recompose the assemblage into which they participate. Ultimately, becoming LGBT asylum seeker describes the movement of a life of escape. In other words, asylum seekers in England seem to be moved by the desire to escape from the asylum system itself in which they found themselves trapped in. In this attempt to escape from the system, however, they find themselves increasingly entangled in it and participating in its perennial and indefinite reproduction, thus becoming accomplices of what they would like to escape from. Similarly, support organizations in their efforts to help LGBT asylum seekers with pulling out a credible LGBT asylum claims become constituted as production machines of evidence, according to governmental criteria and fixed identity categorizations, and, in turn, of normalized LGBT subjectivities. Nonetheless, the thesis has also attempted to show that even within such an intricate interplay of constraining forces and entities, spaces of resistance continuously emerge through the creative recombination of discursive and non-discursive elements, which subvert power relations, categorizations and interplay of forces.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The outreaching aim of the study is to explore the ways LGBT asylum seekers navigate within the LGBT asylum system. But how can we enter their messy world in a way that accounts for its discursive and non-discursive components in their interrelation and dynamicity? Following the poststructuralist work of Deleuze and Guattari (1986; 1987), the concepts of ‘territorialization’ and ‘deterritorialization’ may help to read through the chosen unit of investigation (i.e., the assemblage), to understand how it operates. Brown (2001) concisely and clearly describes the formula underlying a potential conception of territorialization as a complex process, whereby a certain quality is isolated and extracted from a non-discursive mass, then it is reformulated as a discursive statement, finally the latter is used to guide the reorganization of the mass. Brown (Ibid., pp. 27-28) exemplifies how this process works in the case of a type of environmental illness called Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS). First, a quality, such as a sensation (e.g., feeling of chronic fatigue or absent-mindedness) or physical affliction (e.g., spasms or rashes), becomes isolated. Then, the quality is judged to be distinctive; i.e., out of the ordinary. This atypical quality is extracted from its context and becomes the subject of a discursive interrogation, which may involve others, such as doctors, friends or colleagues. During this discursive interaction, the quality is taken as an expression of something and it is in turn reformulated as the symptom of environmental illness. Brown explains how the latter is

recontextualised within the body of the person. What was once a troubling phenomenon now becomes deeply intertwined with a recognisable threatening entity. Relationships to the environment become reformulated. Daily routines and conduct are organised along the lines mapped out by the discourse of environmental illness. The illness has effectively territorialised the individual (2001, p.28).

In this way, Brown (Ibid.) provides a description of how the complex assemblage of environmental illness territorializes the individual by dynamically interrelating its composing fields of the discursive (or field of sayability) and what researchers in the tradition of discursive psychology (i.e., the method of discourse analysis employed in this research, which I will describe in more details in the following chapter) have often neglected; i.e., the non-discursive (or field of visibility).

The thesis thus aims at exposing how LGBT asylum seekers, to borrow Brown's words (Ibid, p.28), 'stylize' features of the world (being it discursive or non-discursive) in interplay with the non-discursive and discursive elements found in the major code of LGBT asylum, from the standpoint of my situated experience of activist and researcher of the grassroots organization constituting my field of activism and research. The other sections of the literature review are aimed at outlining what I have called the major code of LGBT asylum (i.e., the social interpretative codes of the academy, law, media, support organizations and other assemblages participating in its construction), sampled from a review of main legislations, policies, reports produced by the government and NGOs as well as main studies in queer migration. As we will see in more detail in the following literature review sections, LGBT asylum seekers, in order to be granted leave to remain, must demonstrate to be 'authentic or credible LGBT asylum seekers' before the authority. Nonetheless, scholars have exposed how such a construction often relies upon stereotypes and preconceptions of what it means to be LGBT, which have a negative impact on the assessments of this type of claims (Berg & Millbank 2009; Millbank 2009; Ammaturo 2015; Jung 2015; Dawson & Gerber 2017). Thus, stylizing their lives according to a normative understanding of what it means to be 'authentic or credible LGBT' becomes key for LGBT asylum seekers. Hence, in the thesis, I have tried to expose how, at the level of discourse, the identity category of the LGBT asylum seeker and its components as constructed in major discourses or major codes are recontextualised and embodied in the collective discourses and non-discursive practices within the organization at stake and individuals comprising it. That is, I have tried to describe how discursive elements found in major discourses and practices territorialize the individuals falling within this category and their supporters in their everyday collective practices and discourses. In addition, I have tried to explore the field of sayability in another way; i.e., to expose how LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters collectively deterritorialize the category of the LGBT asylum seeker and its components as constructed in major discourses and practices. As noted in the introduction, deterritorialization involves detaching a sign from its context of signification and making it function in a different way (Deleuze & Guattari 1986; 1987). From this point of view, Kafka's work is a minor literature, which deterritorializes the major language and literature, German, by defunctionalizing it from its main functions. Similarly, I have attempted to outline aspects of the minor language of LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters which

feature as participants of this research project, by describing how discursive elements found in the major language are deterritorialized by this minority. Moreover, I have tried to account for the non-discursive ordering of bodies, through forms of power technologies and administration, and how they contribute to territorialize the individual into the figure of the authentic or credible LGBT asylum seeker. For example, by drawing on Foucault's (2007) notion of pastoral power, I will expose how such power technology operates within the social relations between volunteers and LGBT asylum seeker members of the organization at stake and how it is expressed in organizational practices and material artefacts, which contributes to the (re-)construction of the particular identity category; i.e., the authentic/credible LGBT asylum seeker.

Another aim of the thesis is to travel various forms of becoming that are observed within the intricate networks of the assemblage, so to account for its dynamicity. One form of becoming is the one briefly explored in the introduction, which I called botched becoming, whereby LGBT asylum seekers try to imitate the system and become credible LGBT asylum seekers to be granted asylum. On the other hand, what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as 'becoming' is a generative process. For example, in the becoming minor of the major language, elements of the major language are removed from their original functions and bring about new ones in a process of influence rather than resemblance. Yet, how to account for the non-discursive becoming? A working concept that might help to explore the becoming is 'liminal experiences', developed by Stenner and defined as

Experiences that happen during occasions of significant transition, passage or disruption. (...) We experience liminality when the forms of process (socio-psycho-organico-physical) that usually sustain, enable and compose our lives are, for some reason, disrupted, interrupted, transformed or suspended. (2017, p.14)

Stenner (Ibid., p.15) refers to the rites of passage defined by van Gennep (1909) to further exemplify the concept of liminal experience. Van Gennep (Ibid., p. 9-10) describes rites of passage as those rituals that 'accompany a passage from one situation to another, or from one cosmic or social world to another'. Rites of passage might be of different kinds but often refers to ceremonies surrounding events such as childbirth, puberty, coming of age, marriages, or death. Thus, they all serve the same purpose: to detach individuals

from a former situation or social group and prepare them to their re-entry into a new one. Moreover, rites of passage may also serve to bind individuals with others who are going through the same process or already belong to the new social world. The phase in-between a former group or position and another is one of 'liminal experience' (Stenner 2017, p.14). LGBT asylum seekers found themselves within different liminal experiences during their journey. Lewis (2007, p.103) defines the process of claiming asylum as 'a prolonged ritual', 'limbo status' and a 'liminal period' towards being granted or rejected refugee status, which construct the category of asylum seeker as 'someone who has recently left 'there', but who is not yet allowed to be fully 'here''. Patricia Hynes (2011, p.23), drawing on Lewis (2007), further investigates liminality in the asylum system in the UK and observes that the state imposes liminality through policy and legislation, hence it deliberately places asylum seekers in a liminal space of waiting for a decision on their claims. In my thesis, I will hence explore different liminal spaces of becoming within the researched organization. Particularly, in Chapter 5, I will describe what I have called, drawing on Van Gennep (1909), coming out rites of passage. The expression coming out generally refers to the transition phase from inside to outside the closet; that is, the passage from hiding to disclosing one's homosexuality to others. As such, a coming out rite of passage marks the beginning of a new phase in the life of a homosexual who has been since that point hiding his or her sexuality. Similarly, coming out in the context of the organization under scrutiny refers to those rites that enable its members to disclose their sexuality within the group. I have been able to observe two types of coming out rites, which often occur one after the other. First, individual coming out rites (i.e., whereby a member of the organization discloses his or her sexuality to one or two designated volunteers) and then group coming out rites (i.e., when the member comes out to the whole group of members and volunteers of the organization). Individual coming out rites can be viewed as confessional rites, whereby a volunteer endorsing the function of the confessor extracts the truth about sexuality from the LGBT asylum seeker confessing it. Foucault (1988, p.61) describes confession precisely as 'a ritual of discourse', aimed at extracting the truth and which unfolds within a power relation between the confessor and the confessant. In Chapter 5, I will describe the power relation in place between the confessing-LGBT asylum seeker and the confessor-volunteer as pastoral (Foucault 1988). Crucially, coming out rites of this sort do not necessarily mark the transitional change to the individual sexual status, but they also serve to chain the

individual to the new group: through coming out individuals become official members of the organization. In turn, as we shall see in more details in Chapter 5 and 6, the coming out story and membership to the social group through coming out are employed by LGBT asylum seekers in their asylum claims as evidence of their claimed sexuality. Hence, they are deterritorialized from their primary function (i.e., publicly disclosing the individual sexuality and becoming part of the LGBT group) because they come to function as a strategy to substantiate their asylum claim. In this way, they simultaneously become reterritorialized within the LGBT asylum assemblage as functional parts of its assessments logics.

Furthermore, I have observed other liminal spaces of becoming, which individuals of the researched organization seemingly occupied in their collective efforts of queering dominant understandings and practices, in a way that destabilizes them. As Rumens et al. (2018, p.4) notice, 'queer is a polysemic term', which might refer to a noun (e.g., LGBT individuals are defined as queer), an adjective (e.g., to describe something as odd or strange) and a verb (e.g., to queer or to engage in a queering activity). A queering activity is thus one that deconstructs what is considered normal (which is often based on hierarchical or binary oppositions), to open up new possibility of critical investigation and social change (Seidman 1997; Sullivan 2003). I have tried to explore the liminal spaces of resistance against normative understandings and practices as well as the (re-)negotiations of various identity categories and their interplay within the researched organization. During these liminal experiences members and volunteers of the organization questioned the meaning of social and sexual categories with which everyone had been labelled or self-labelled and tried to collectively imagine new possible identities and creative ways of interrelating. I have tried to highlight the political importance of such liminal experiences by drawing on the (in)famous similar practices of 'autoscienza' or 'self-awareness group', whereby the Italian feminists in the seventies collectively exposed and shared their experience of subjugation in the patriarchal society, whilst exploring new ways of being woman and of collectively organizing to subvert the normative order and bring social change (Vacchelli 2011, p.770).

The rest of the literature review is organized in two sections aimed at sampling what I have called the major code or major literature on LGBT asylum. In the first section, I will look at the legal context of LGBT asylum. By reviewing the main legislations, policies and investigations issued by the governments and NGOs, I will try

to describe the composition of the LGBT asylum seeker social group in the UK and (the evolution of) its methods of assessment of such asylum claims, particularly the current assessment framework; i.e., the Difference Stigma Shame and Harm (DSSH) model. In the second section, I will review main studies in queer migration scholarship, which have tried to queer or deconstruct the identity category of the authentic or credible LGBT asylum seeker employed in the UK law and governmental policies in order to expose its underlying power technologies, discourses and practices, which make LGBT asylum seekers visible as distinct individualized others and perpetuates their exclusion.

## **2.1.LGBT Asylum Seekers of the UK and Their Assessment**

Whereas there has been some progress in recent years in UK law in terms of LGBT equality (such as equal marriage or parenting), people claiming asylum in the UK on account of their sexual orientation still face enormous challenges, casting doubts on the alleged role of the UK in advocating for LGBT rights. In recent years, several investigations carried by the UK government and NGOs exposed the unfair treatment of LGBT asylum applicants. In 2010, an investigation by the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (UKGLIG 2010), a leading charity promoting equality and dignity for LGBTI people seeking asylum in the UK, revealed that LGBT asylum cases had higher failure rate than others based on different reasons for seeking refuge. According to the study, from 2005 to 2009, around 98-99% of LGBT asylum seekers had been initially refused asylum and communicated to go back to their home countries. In 2012, Stonewall, the largest LGBT rights charity in UK and Europe, published a report on how LGBT asylum seekers experienced the asylum system and how decisions were made on their cases (Miles 2012). The results of the investigation suggested that misjudgements in the assessment of LGBT asylum claims made by UK Border Agency staff and judges seemed to be due to stereotyped presumptions based on Western understandings of what it means to be LGBT. In 2014, Theresa May, the UK Home Secretary of the time, commissioned John Vine, the then Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, to investigate the treatment of LGBT asylum seekers by the Home Office (Vine 2014). The results of the investigation exposed that a tenth of asylum interviews contained intrusive questions likely to elicit a sexual response and a fifth contained stereotypes on sexual orientation and gender identity (Ibid.). Another remarkable

research, published in 2016 by Stonewall and UKLGIG, showed that LGBT asylum seekers have been detained for indefinite periods of time in UK detention centres, where they have been abused, bullied and harassed (Bachmann 2016).

Up until 2015, it was hard to have a clear picture about the composition of the LGBT asylum seeker social group in the UK, since the Home Office did not use to record the information of the ground of any asylum claim. It was only on the 30th of November 2017 that the Home Office released an official report containing experimental statistics about asylum claims where sexual orientation formed part of the basis for the claim, comprising the period between July 2015 and March 2017 (Home Office 2017). The statistics suggest that a total of 3,535 of asylum claims where sexual orientation had been raised as part of the basis for the claim were made in the UK (amounting to roughly 6% of the total asylum claims), of which more than two third were rejected. The nationalities with the highest number of asylum claims on the grounds of sexual orientation were Pakistan (1000, 20% of Pakistani asylum claims over the period), Bangladesh (454, 14%) and Nigeria (362, 18%). However, the nationalities with the highest proportion of total asylum claims were Uganda (67%), Cameroon (38%), and United Republic of Tanzania (32%). The highest volume of grants (233) were awarded to nationals from Pakistan, but the report suggests interpreting this data as due to the large volumes of claims based on sexual orientation. In fact, the nationalities with the highest proportion of grants were Uganda (55%), Iran (52%), and Jamaica (37%); whereas Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam and Albania all had a grant rate of less than 1%. To be more precise, not a single applicant from India or Sri Lanka, where homosexuality is a crime, was accepted – despite 82 and 48 applications were submitted, respectively. The majority of asylum seekers from Iraq, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Jamaica were also turned away. The highest number of appeals was raised by Pakistani nationals (530), of which 39% were granted. On the other hand, the highest proportion of appeals was allowed to Ugandan nationals (54%).

Article 1 of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines the five grounds on which refugee status can be granted; i.e., race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2011). In 1999, the LGBT social group was officially included in particular social group, nearly 50 years after the 1951 Refugee convention was signed. Asylum claims on the grounds of membership of a particular

social group (MPSG) are generally assessed according to the following criteria. First, the social group should exist and be perceived in the home country as a distinct social group. Indeed, LGBT asylum applicants are often from countries where discrimination against LGBT people is widespread and reinforced by anti-sodomy laws or other legal provisions criminalizing homosexuality (including fines, incarceration, life imprisonment or death penalty). However, it was only in 2013 that the Court of Justice of the European Union – in the Joined Cases C-199/12, C-200/12 and C-201/12, X, Y and Z v Minister voor Immigratie en Asiel ('XYZ') - ruled that 'the existence of criminal laws, (...) which specifically target homosexuals, supports the finding that those persons must be regarded as forming a particular social group'. Second, MPSG asylum applicants must prove their membership to the claimed social group and associated fear of persecution. In the above mentioned 2013 ruling by the Court of Justice of the European Union, it was stated that the very existence of discriminatory laws and practices against LGBT people in their home country may also be used to support LGBT asylum applicants' claims of a well-founded fear of persecution in their homeland for their claimed sexuality. Yet, LGBT asylum seekers must prove their membership to the LGBT social group too.

By law, the burden of proof is on the asylum seeker applicants. Preparing persuasive supporting materials might be and often is a challenging task for any asylum applicant. The UK government does not provide official and detailed guidelines on the sort of documentation needed to support an asylum case. In the official webpage of the UK government on how to claim asylum in the UK, we can read that applicants can provide 'anything they think will help their application' and 'all the evidence they have of their persecution'(GOV.UK. 2018). Moreover, for any type of asylum application, it may prove difficult to retrieve the evidential documentation once the host country has been reached. In the case of LGBT asylum claims, the task of providing evidence to support the application for membership of the LGBT social group is even more complex as there are no official documents attesting the sexuality and gender of a person that can be retrieved in the country of origin or in the host country. Unlike other types of MPSG asylum claims, membership to the LGBT social group cannot be proven solely by means of official documents. For example, a Baptism certificate might be used as evidence of being Christian, a party membership card might prove belongingness to an oppositional and oppressed political party, a medical examination might demonstrate that a person is a victim of torture. On the other hand, no one arrives in the UK with an official certificate

attesting their sexual orientation, gender identity or belongingness to ‘the LGBT social group’. There is no medical test for sexuality or gender identity either.

Thus, people applying for asylum on the grounds of their sexuality have been often left to desperate stratagems, such as submitting photos or video tapes of sex (even upon a solicited request of their assigned Home Office Case workers) with same sex partners as supportive evidence or answering intimate and explicit questions about their sexual activities (Lewis 2014). Despite in December 2014 the European Court of Justice, in the case of ABC, prohibited questioning on sexual practices and the employment of sexually explicit material as evidence (since they do not necessarily have probative value and, by their nature, they infringe human dignity), such cases have been reported in the UK press even after the ruling (Hernando 2016) and I had myself witnessed it while reviewing the Home Office interview transcripts of some of my interlocutors.

Ultimately, in the case of LGBT asylum much weight is put on the *credibility* of the applicants’ account with respect to their claimed sexuality, gender identity and related (fear of) persecution. Indeed, the key element in the decision-making process of any asylum application is that of assessing the validity of any evidence and the credibility of the claimant’s statements, at a low level of credibility - i.e., a reasonable degree of likelihood - and through various credibility indicators (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2011). The Home Office, in fact, adopts a structured approach to the assessment of credibility. After reviewing all the evidence produced by the asylum applicant and keeping in mind the relatively low standard of credibility, the applicant’s statements and other evidence of established facts can be accepted if they are of sufficient detail and specificity, plausible and consistent internally and externally with information about the country of origin and with other evidence too. As noted, LGBT asylum applications are assessed on the grounds of membership to the LGBT social group. Therefore, ascertaining the LGBT background of the applicant is crucial and essentially consists of a credibility matter. That is, it is a question of how (in)credible it is that the applicant is LGBT. The latter, in turn, becomes a question for individuals and support organizations about what it means to be LGBT in the UK and of what kind of sexualities and gender identities are these individuals expected to endorse to be accepted in British society.

Up until 2010, the personal account and other evidence in LGBT asylum claims could be assessed to establish whether it was considered reasonable for the applicants to

be ‘discreet’ about their sexual and gender identity if returned to their home country. The ‘discretion test’ certainly constituted a significant problem for, and discriminatory practice against, LGBT asylum seekers (Millbank 2009). Ultimately, many asylum claims were refused because the country of origins was deemed to be safe for a life in the closet. In July 2010, the Supreme Court established - for the joint cases HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon) v Secretary of State for the Home Department - that hiding one’s own sexual or gender identity to avoid persecution is to deny fundamental rights. Nonetheless, scholars have observed that the dismissal of the discretionary test has not necessarily resulted in an improvement in the assessment of LGBT asylum cases; rather, it seems to have progressively led to a greater attention and weight placed on the requirement of proving membership to the LGBT social group (Millbank 2009; Gray & McDowall 2013). That is, the shift has been towards ‘disbelieving’ the applicants’ claimed sexuality and gender identity (Anderson et al. 2014). Moreover, as observed by Millbank (2009) for the Australian and UK contexts, the assessment of LGBT asylum claims heavily depends on decision makers’ understanding of what it means to be LGBT, which is often based on stereotypes and preconceptions. Millbank’s (Ibid.) observations seem to be sustained by similar findings documented by Vine’s report (2014) commissioned by the UK government as noted at the beginning of this section. As a result, in order to avoid stereotyped assessments of LGBT asylum claims, the report recommended that the Home Office adopted and provided more training on the Difference, Shame, Stigma and Harm model (DSSH), an internationally best practice model supported by the UNHCR, to interview asylum seekers about their sexual orientation (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2012, p.15). In a nutshell, the DSSH model teaches interviewers and decision makers that discovering sexual orientation or gender identity is a complex and gradual process, especially in countries where LGBT people are persecuted, but fundamentally characterized by feelings and perceptions of difference, stigma, shame and harm with respect to sexuality and gender identity by the candidate in the country of origin.

## **2.2. Queer Migration Studies on the Construction of LGBT Asylum Seekers Identity**

According to Eithne Luibheid (2008, p.169), queer migration scholarship denotes ‘an unruly body of inquiry’ across multiple fields and disciplines, including precisely

migration *and* queer studies (as well as feminist, racial, ethnic, postcolonial, public health, and globalization studies, among others), which share its overarching aims and queer approach. Studies in this tradition typically focus on queer migrants to explore how ‘overlapping regimes of power and knowledge generate and transform identity categories’ (Luibheid 2008, p.170), such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, citizenship status, and geopolitical location, and their intersections. Scholars in this tradition typically employ queer theory to expose how queer migrants’ identities are constructed in different (normalised) ways so to expose exclusionary practices, which tend to overlook other important aspects of the individual identity. This problem refers to a concept widely used in the queer field, that of ‘intersectionality’, developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) to show that no aspect of identity and oppression associated with it (such as race, gender, sexuality, class etc.) can be considered separately from others, otherwise it risks obscuring the struggle of particular intersected identities. Crenshaw (Ibid.) had come to this conclusion drawing on the work of black feminists who had been preoccupied with demarginalizing the intersection between race and sex, by showing how the struggle of women of colour was not represented or experienced by the white dominant feminist movement.

The LGBT asylum seeker is a relatively recent social category in the UK, since, as observed in the review of legislations in the UK asylum system, asylum claims on the grounds of sexuality came to be recognised only in the late nineties. Since then, as noted, various reports and investigations have been produced by the government and non-governmental organizations that have led to an increased attention to the issues faced by LGBT asylum seekers, which have triggered the development of different legislations. At the same time, there has been a progressive media and academic attention to the field of LGBT asylum. In the field of the queer migration scholarship, in fact, several studies have started focusing on the figure of the LGBT asylum seeker. In a recent study Giametta (2018, p.2) notes that the latter has come to light in recent years as ‘a prominent avatar for refugees’. In this way, we come to witness the progressive emergence of a body of enquiry within the queer migration scholarship, which we can call *Queer Asylum Scholarship*, one that is focusing precisely on the identity category of the LGBT asylum seeker and how it is constructed to expose dominant power relations and discourses, which organize and exclude masses and individuals according to this category. Some studies in this identified tradition have pointed out

that in order to get leave to remain, LGBT asylum seekers must demonstrate to be authentic or credible LGBT asylum seekers (Murray 2014; Giametta 2018). As observed in the previous section, the law regulating the LGBT asylum system seems to depend on a conception of gender and sexuality as a truth, innate and stable, which can be assessed by decision making bodies through interviews and other evidence and must be demonstrated by the asylum applicant with the aid of appropriate supportive evidence. Indeed, as pointed out by Foucault (1988), sexuality in the nineteenth century became conceived as something ‘we are’ rather than something ‘we do’; that is, as a truth that could and ought to be extracted and explained. Moreover, as noted in the previous section, asylum applications on the basis of sexuality are assessed on the grounds of membership to a particular social group (MPSG). In general, decisions regarding MPSG asylum claims are based on a certain type of ‘immutability’ or ‘fundamentality’ standard as the basis for determining the particular social group. In the case of LGBT asylum, sex, sexuality and gender are thus defined as immutable or fundamental characteristics of the person or of a group that is constituted on the grounds of sex, sexuality or gender (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2012). Consequently, such a conception of sexuality as truth and immutable or fundamental characteristic leads to the construction of a binary opposition on the principle of authenticity and credibility of the claimed gender, sex and sexuality of the applicator: the authentic (or credible) LGBT asylum seeker VS the inauthentic (or incredible) LGBT asylum seeker.

Hence, studies in queer asylum scholarship have concentrated on deconstructing the component categories of this binary. In other words, they have tried to answer the question: what are the characteristics that (in the law, government media and organizations discourses and practices) define an authentic/inauthentic or credible/incredible LGBT asylum seeker? As observed in the context of the LGBT asylum described above, several governmental and NGOs investigations showed how the assessment of LGBT asylum applications is indeed often based on stereotypes and preconceptions of decision-making bodies on what it means to be LGBT, which inevitably leads to the exclusion of several LGBT asylum applicants, since it underestimates other fundamental aspects of the person’s identity. Thus, studies in this tradition have also tried to deconstruct such stereotypes and preconceptions to expose how decision-making bodies have systematically misjudged LGBT asylum claims by overlooking different ways in which the sexuality of LGBT asylum seekers intersect with other

aspects of their identity. Finally, a group of studies have focused on the role that organizations and humanitarian discourses play in sustaining exclusionary discourses and practices as perpetuated by the government, law and media. In a crucial way, the deconstruction of the identity category LGBT asylum seeker not only allows us to critically assess how minor sexualities (i.e., sexuality of minority social groups) are constructed, but also to elucidate how dominant sexualities are constructed<sup>2</sup>. In the rest of this section, I will first review main studies in this newly individuated field of research, which I have called queer asylum scholarship to outline key findings and working concepts and then I will turn to the contribution my thesis attempted to make to this field drawing on the reviewed literature.

A pivotal study in queer asylum scholarship, which focuses on the UK context, is *Logics of Citizenship and Violence of Rights: The Queer Migrant Body and the Asylum System* by Mariska Jung (2015). The author explains that the asylum system functions as a disciplinary power that assembles and (re-)produces sexual subjectivities in highly normative ways. In particular, she notes that migratory regulations of the asylum system in the UK construct only a certain type of dominant category of the LGBT asylum seeker who may be eligible for refugee status - i.e. 'the homonormative queer asylum seeker' (Jung 2015, p.312)<sup>3</sup>. LGBT asylum seekers are precisely among those categories of non-heterosexual people

---

<sup>2</sup> Once again, I use the term "minor" following Deleuze and Guattari's (1986; 1987) terminology. For instance, they explain that "Women, regardless of their numbers, are a minority" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.106). That is, women can be regarded as a minority because although they represent the numerical majority they are not the dominant one.

<sup>3</sup> In her article *Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinary*, Susan Stryker (2008) notes that the terms "homonormativity" was already employed by transgender activists to explain the way in which gays and lesbians became the first identity categories associated with LGBT movements of the 1980s and 1990s, thus exposing them as other components of the acronym (i.e., bisexuals and trans) were inevitably neglected. On the other hand, Lisa Duggan (2002, p.179) defines "a new homonormativity" as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption". Hence, Duggan's definition of "new homonormativity" depends on the definition of "heteronormativity", a term coined by the queer theorist Michael Warner (1991) to describe the dominant system of norms, discourses, and practices that construct heterosexuality as natural and superior to other sexualities. Warner (1991) uses this concept to expose the way in which sexual minorities are marginalized and excluded in social and relational structures, including religion, family, education, the media, the law and the state. The concept of "new homonormativity", hence, is used by Lisa Duggan (2002) to explain how it works in a new fashion to reinforce heteronormativity through the redefinition of gay equity in terms of the civil rights agenda (e.g., gays too have the right to marry and adopt) and the neoliberal access to the market (e.g., there are commodities that target gay people only). Despite this approach has led to the exposure and destruction of discriminatory barriers for LGBT people (such as equal marriage, the right adopt but also equal access to the workplace), it has also triggered a revitalization of homonormativity, as introduced by Stryker, which

who are systematically excluded because they cannot adhere to the hetero- and homo-normative standards in force (Jung, 2015). Thus, she unpacks the construction of the ‘homonormative queer asylum seeker’, to expose how decision-making bodies evaluate LGBT asylum seekers as authentic or credible only if they adhere to the criteria of such identity construction. For example, she observes that authentic LGBT asylum seekers - i.e., ‘homonormative queer asylum seekers’ - are expected to be ‘out and proud’ upon arrival in the host country and manifest these feelings in social practices that refer to a capitalist and neoliberal conception of homosexuality, expressed ‘in a particularly recognisable way associated with white middle-class Western-style commercialism and consumerism’ (Ibid, p.312). That is, one that is in line with consumerist and commercial styles of the typical homonormative western liberal subject, like attending gay clubs or participating in gay pride parades. Arguably, such expectation is not only a normative generalization that LGBT people may not share, but also one that cannot be easily satisfied by LGBT asylum seekers. For instance, at an economic level, many asylum seekers in the UK rely on a maintenance grant of about 36 pounds per week (often in the form of vouchers to be spent only in certain supermarkets and for food and soft beverage only), which makes it hard to find the money to go to a local gay club. Moreover, racial discrimination might constitute another deterrent in joining predominately white gay communities in the host country. Most importantly, in the case of LGBT asylum seekers, the disclosure of their sexuality is often a painful and difficult process for it cannot be expected that they will be ready, willing or able to explore and enjoy the public queer life in the UK upon arrival (Berg & Millbank 2009). Indeed, LGBT applicants have supposedly been persecuted and traumatized in their respective home countries precisely because of their sexuality and gender, which had to be hidden. Hence, being open about their sexuality might not be possible for they have just fled persecution and reached the country of asylum. Alas, there have been cases of LGBT asylum seekers whose claim has been rejected precisely for failing to mention their sexuality immediately upon arrival at the port of entrance in the UK (see Chapter 7, case study number 1, for a detailed example of this).

---

finds new ways to exclude some non-heterosexual categories; that is, those who cannot be assimilated and conform to such heteronormative structures. For example, same-sex marriage may not be important or a priority for some LGBT people who may be instead trapped in other types of struggle, such as combating racism or austerity (Conrad 2014).

Kimmel and Llewellyn (2012, p.1088), in the context of US LGBT asylum, contend that the latter is ‘an opportunity to understand how the neoliberal state understands sexuality’; that is, ‘the state is the normative discursive agent’ defining and deciding what counts as acceptable sexual identities. In their study, the authors further observe that the main criterion in US LGBT asylum is gender performance, whereby ‘femme lesbians’ and ‘butch macho’ stereotypically deviate from the LGBT spectrum and therefore are often excluded from US asylum (Ibid, p.1092). Similar observations are made by Morgan (2006, p.137), who further observes that the US LGBT asylum system is not only based on culturally specific presumptions of homosexuality that focus on gender performance, but it also ‘discriminates against asylum applicants who do not conform to racialized sexual stereotypes and behavioural white gay norms’. Ammaturo (2015) draws similar conclusions for the European context. The author analyses the context of European LGBT asylum to expose European political practices aimed at the implementation of the ‘Pink Agenda’, which creates the prototype of the ‘European LGBT citizen’ in opposition to LGBT citizens of other countries (Ibid., p.1152). The ‘European LGBT citizen’ is defined as a ‘queer subject’, which is often portrayed as white, male, married, child-rearing, tax-paying, allowed to serve the army and citizen of a nation. As such, he is perfectly integrated as a member of the neoliberal state. Such a construction, hence, works to create oppositional identities and suggest a difference between a ‘queer-friendly West’ and ‘homophobic non -Western countries’. The Pink Agenda draws upon the famous concept of homonationalism, coined by Puar (2007) by merging together the terms ‘homonormative’ and ‘nationalism’, which denotes the emergence of ‘national homosexuality’ as a regulatory mechanism not only of normative homosexuals but also of national and racial norms that support these sexual subjectivities (Ibid., p.38). Homonationalism is thus employed to expose the ways in which normalized homosexual identities can be mobilized to reinforce the neoliberal agenda of nation-states, such as the war on terror against so-called homophobic terrorist states and migrants. Drawing on the concept of homonationalism, Raboin (2017a; 2017b) analyses the key function of public discourses on LGBT asylum to (re-)produce queer liberalism in the UK, for they are organized around the relationship of the neoliberal state and liberal LGBT citizens in opposition to LGBT asylum seekers and refugees. Particularly, he investigates how in public discourses on LGBT asylum the UK is constructed as a ‘queer heaven’ (Raboin 2017a, p.13), which is accessible only to LGBT citizens and cruelly promised to LGBT asylum seekers.

The cruelty of such promise lays in the fact that it actually functions to perpetuate the exclusion of LGBT asylum seekers from the queer heaven, which inevitably becomes an 'impossible future' (Ibid., p.17). The construction of the UK as a queer heaven (re-)produces sexualized subjectivities: victimised LGBT asylum seekers coming from a homophobic countries and liberal LGBT citizens of the UK. Crucially the affective form that is thus created between these two subjectivities is of illuminated liberal queers rescuing wounded LGBT asylum seekers.

Other studies have deconstructed the category of the authentic or credible LGBT asylum seeker to expose the type of sexual development that decision-making bodies expect in LGBT asylum applicants. For example, Berg and Millbank (2009, p.197), drawing on a large set of LGBT asylum cases from all the available tribunal and court decisions from Canada, Australia, the UK and New Zealand and over a 15 years period, observed that the ways in which LGBT asylum claims have been assessed were 'heavily influenced by Western conceptions of the linear formation and ultimate fixity of sexual identity'; particularly by 'the staged model of homosexual identity formation' developed by the Australian psychologist Vivienne Cass (1979). Hence, Berg and Millbank (2009) observe that, for example, in several of the reviewed asylum cases on the grounds of sexuality making up their research corpus, decision makers tried to assess the applicants' familiarity with the 'gay scene' in the host country by interrogating them about the locations and names of gay nightclubs in the city of reception. Dawson & Gerber's (2017) study is the first to critically investigate the way LGBT asylum claims are assessed on the grounds of the DSSH model. The authors observed that, although the model supposedly constitutes an improvement in the way LGBT asylum claims are assessed, it continues to produce a linear and stable construction of sexuality, which ultimately excludes certain individuals, with women being a key example. For example, they authors observe the prevalence of different stereotypical expectations associated with the model, such as that of recognizing and associating with the LGBT community as well as the expectation of not living a heterosexual life, which are particularly challenging for lesbian asylum seekers. Particularly, according to Dawson & Gerber's (2017, p.312), 'women are much less likely to participate in public activities, let alone those relating to their persecuted sexual orientation', hence it might be difficult for some women to proactively seek membership to LGBT groups or participate in public gay events. With respect to the expectation of not living a heterosexual life, the authors highlight that many lesbian

asylum seekers have been (forced) married with or without children at the time of applying for asylum, which might constitute a further issue in proving the claimed homosexuality.

Other studies in the tradition of queer asylum scholarship have tried to critically investigate collectives, grassroots and more institutionalised organizations in the field of queer asylum activism. Another important contribution made by Jung (2015) was to critically assess the role of activists in contesting the exposed normalizing constructions and power regimes that systematically misrepresent LGBT asylum seekers and exclude them from society. A similar aim guided Siobhán McGuirk (2016) in her doctoral research, where she exposes how the category LGBT asylum seeker has been constructed in US legal discourse to sustain border maintenance regimes. In their studies, both Jung (2015) and McGuirk (2016) have been active within their researched activist's groups and collectives in support of queer asylum seekers. McGuirk (2016) has worked closely with asylum seekers and service providers of US non-profit organizations, whereas Jung's research has been based on her experience of activism within one of five UK-based collectives and NGOs she researched, and she has been particularly involved with campaigning for one LGBT member. The authors drew similar conclusions for their respective context of research, whereby they observed that despite activists and supporters tried to contest discriminatory practices and borders regime, they unwillingly contributed to their (re-)production and reinforcement. Particularly, McGuirk (2016, p.116) highlights the role of non-governmental actors to sustain such regimes by promoting a 'moral economy of LGBT asylum' made of 'expert saviours and passive victims'. On the other hand, Jung (2015, pp.333–334) contends that although activists 'can and do alter the meanings' of normalized constructions and border regimes, 'they cannot completely opt out' of them and are hence left with the struggle and dilemma of overcoming them. Finally, Giametta (2018, p.6) notices 'a type of protection/control binary' that operates in support structures for LGBT asylum seekers in the UK. The author observes that service providers' practices varied substantially across and within organizations of support, whereby individuals felt that they were free to provide help as they wanted (Ibid.). Nonetheless, the line of action seemed to swing between two main positions. A group of service providers seemed to be committed to protect any service user, regardless of the authenticity of their claims, whereas others seemed to be willing to help only those who they believed were genuinely LGBT and looking for asylum on that ground. In the latter case, a logic of control seems to be in place, whereby service

providers systematically judge and select service users on the grounds of whether they are truly LGBT asylum seekers, which seems to be triggered by the desire of maintaining a good reputation for the organization. Hence, Giametta (2018, p.13) observes that such underpinning logics ‘show how effectively the border can be pushed down, from the border control authorities to those support groups whose *raison d’être* is to provide assistance to migrants’.

My thesis has been informed by this new body of inquiry and it aimed at contributing to it in different ways. First, I have tried to expand the findings of the mistreatment and systematic exclusion of LGBT asylum seekers in the UK. That is, I have tried to document the struggle of LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters at the level of the researched grassroots organization in trying to stylize their lives according to the figure of the authentic or credible LGBT asylum seeker. Moreover, I have tried to observe how the categories deconstructed in the reviewed studies play out in the specific context of my research field. As noted, a number of scholars have unpacked different identity categories (which are often sexualized, racialized or nationalised), which are seemingly endorsed by different agents in the LGBT asylum domain, such as ‘the homonormative queer asylum seeker’ (Jung 2015, p.312), the ‘European LGBT citizen’ (Ammaturo 2015, p.1152), or ‘expert saviours and passive victims’ (2016, p.116). Other scholars, on the other hand, have focused on homonationalist constructions of the UK in opposition to homophobic countries of origin, whereby the UK emerges as a ‘queer heaven’ (Raboin 2017a, p.13) for LGBT asylum seekers. Moreover, a group of studies have exposed neoliberal and discipline power technologies underpinning the LGBT asylum system. Finally, there has been a recent critical focus on the current increasing emergence of queer asylum support organizations and activism, which seemed to be aimed at uncovering their role in reproducing logics of border controls (Jung, 2015; McGuirk, 2016; Giametta, 2018). Hence, the studies reviewed so far have undoubtedly contributed to the effort of deconstructing linguistic constructions and discriminatory practices in the emerging field of queer asylum scholarship and activism. Importantly, they have focused on different and particular geographic areas or support organizations and showed how the observed categorizations of the various identities or countries of provenance and asylum, but also power relations, vary depending on the place and dynamics that are established between the participating agents.

With my study I want to contribute to this multiplicity, by exposing how the reviewed categorizations and power relations territorialize in the particular English context and the support organization that I studied and in which I participated as an activist for the whole duration of my two years of fieldwork. The importance of this activity was inspired by Brown's (2012, p.1065) paper, where he outlines his 'problem' with both 'Homonormativity (the theory)' and with 'homonormativity as an assemblage of specific social changes in a range of countries over the last two decades'. The author explains that as Homonormativity has increasingly gained popularity, homonormativity and the homonormative has progressively been represented in the field of activism and academia 'as a homogeneous, global external entity that exists outside all of us and exerts its terrifying, normative power on gay lives everywhere' (Brown 2012, p.1066). The problem, hence, with such theorizations is that it ultimately tends to 'overlook how (...) these social relations—capitalism, neoliberalism, homonormativity—are reproduced through the everyday practices of millions of people. Second, they tend to overlook the many other practices that exist that foster alternative ways of relating' (Brown 2012, p.1066). Arguably, the emerging field of queer asylum scholarship risks to undergo a similar problem, whereby the figure of the LGBT asylum seeker, as noted at the beginning of this section, has come to light in recent years as 'a prominent avatar for refugees' (Giametta 2018, p.2).

My thesis, hence, aimed at destabilizing this normalisation through queer theory. In other words, I tried to expose processes of deterritorialization of queer discourses as produced by LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters in the researched organization. In a recent paper, Rumens et al. (2018) have observed that in management and organization studies queer theory has been established as a theory mainly employed to focus on minorities and how hetero- and homonormativity shape them. Whereas this is certainly an important practice, the risk, the authors argue, is that queer theory is normalizing as well, hence losing its capacity for disrupting what is normal. Thus, according to Rumens et al. (2018, p.7) 'maintaining queer theory's capacity to rupture the normal requires at times a concern with questioning the normativities queer theory scholarship can itself produce'. In the context of queer asylum scholarship and activism, I therefore argue that the reviewed categorisations, in particular the figure of the LGBT asylum seeker, are at risk of being normalized.

Hence, throughout my thesis I have tried to queer the reviewed categorizations and theorizations and look at how different participants in the research project come to take up different subject positions in different ways to serve different strategies. Importantly, whereas I was able to observe the endorsement of the reviewed identity categorizations, in particular the ‘homonormative queer asylum seeker’ (Jung 2015, p.312), these seem to be endorsed by LGBT asylum seekers mainly when it is functional to pull together an asylum claim. What complicates the picture in the particular case of the organization under scrutiny is that LGBT asylum seekers, in their role of not just service users but service providers, have come to endorse other reviewed identity category, such as ‘the expert saviour’ (McGuirk 2016, p.116) or to borrow Foucault’s terminology (1988, p.67) ‘the master of truth’, which the literature seemed to observe for only non-asylum seeker agents. Hence, I have tried to expose the movement of occupying different identity categories for reaching different goals, which destabilizes dominant understandings. Similarly, I have looked at how participants describe their country of origin and asylum in an oppositional way so to (re-)produce homonationalist constructions (Raboin 2017a), yet they seem to produce new ways to relate to the host country which disrupt the binary oppositions ‘homophobic home country/pro-LGBT host country’ and collapse the meaning of national borders. In particular, in Chapter 4, I will show how in their accounts LGBT asylum seekers construct transnational communities of belonging in the UK, which move ‘the homophobic’ countries within the host country. Finally, as noted in the introduction to countries the present chapter, I have tried to expose those ‘liminal experiences’ (Stenner 2017) during shared spaces of ‘self-awareness’ (Vacchelli 2011), where individuals contested and (re-)negotiated their individual and collective identities.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This research aims to enrich understanding of the LGBT asylum system in the UK by investigating LGBT asylum seekers' role in discursively and non-discursively co-constructing their individual and collective identity with other circulating discourses and practices as produced by non-asylum seeker agents. Particularly, the study explores the ways in which support organizations working with asylum seekers contribute to their silencing, whilst attempting to create an environment that helps to give voice to them. Hence, I propose a qualitative study of the discursive and non-discursive co-construction of LGBT asylum seekers in the UK, which acknowledges the role of discourse in (re-)producing knowledge and power within and through organizations. The main research questions are thus formulated as follows:

- What are the discursive and non-discursive elements by means of which the individual and collective identity of LGBT asylum seekers in the UK is co-constructed by the individuals falling within this category and their supporters?
- What everyday discourses and practices are they indicative of?
- How do these discursive constructions and practices contribute to rethinking the categories used to understand this social group?

The proposed research is ethically and politically in line with a 'left radical organic public sociology of work in which the researcher is overtly partisan and active on the side of the marginalized and labour' (Brook & Darlington 2013, p.233). As such, partisan scholarship goes beyond criticality and academia by critically and actively engaging with social movements beyond academy in order to bring social change. In following Brook & Darlington (2013), I have been openly and critically taking the side of my participant group, that is, people looking for a refugee in the UK on the grounds of their sexuality and sought ways to facilitate social change. A common criticism against partisan scholarship, however, is that it might fail to be objective, for its partisan alignment with one social group and political ideology. Although Brook & Darlington (2013) acknowledge that any research is partisan in a way (i.e., either on the side of the dominant class or scholarship or on the side of the marginalized groups), and that impartiality and objectivity claims are therefore impossible to achieve, they

also recognize that partisan scholarship should aim at being as rigorous as possible. Thus, they continue, for the impossibility of being neutral, partisan scholars shall try to be as transparent about their ideological position and involvement in the research field as possible, by relying upon methodologies that rigorously implement research reflexivity in their design. Brook & Darlington (2013) hence suggests relying upon the established methodological tradition of action research, especially its emancipatory-oriented variant; i.e., participatory action research (PAR), which seemingly allow research to be rigorous through being reflexive and relevant to participants' struggle. Indeed, PAR approaches are not based on a mere consultation with research participants, but on their active involvement in any aspect of the research project, according to their skills, expertise, needs and desires (Kemmis 2006; Ellis et al. 2007). Particularly, PAR studies with asylum seeker participants encourage to actively involve them in the development of the research methods and confidentiality agreements, in the discussion and interpretation of the findings and in the choice of desirable outcomes and possible impact (Halilovich 2013). In this way, typical vulnerable individuals in an unequal power relation with the investigator are deemed to be empowered through their active engagement in the research project (Krulfeld 1998). However, for my study I have not employed a PAR methodology for two main reasons. First, it might be argued that PAR produces unneeded additional research fatigue to research participants, hence undermining their empowerment, which is particularly problematic for vulnerable participants such as asylum seekers (Clark 2008). Moreover, I was concerned with the additional research fatigue that a PAR approach might have produced to me as a researcher. Particularly, having met my participant group only after having started my PhD program, I was afraid that redesigning my research project within a PAR framework would have inevitably lengthen the research process. Especially for the academic settings I found myself in during my PhD, giving the many demands and requirements that academia places on the scholar, young academics in particular, beyond the completion of a research project. Instead, I have adopted another methodological orientation within the action research tradition; i.e., a type of politically engaged ethnography known as 'activist ethnography'. In a pivotal work, Hale writes

by activist research, I mean a method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results (2006, p.97).

Throughout my fieldwork I have been involved in the co-creation and co-organization of a grassroots organization of support for LGBT asylum seekers and refugees based in a multicultural city in UK, which I will refer to as Newtown. As I will further explain in the following sections, the question of anonymity is of key importance for the participants of this research, which indeed often deliberately tried to hide their sexuality in the UK. I have therefore decided to anonymize to the best I could participants in this research by making up a pseudonym for each of them, and to strengthen anonymity I have also decided to invent a name for the organization at stake, which from now on I will call Free and Proud Refugees (FPR), and for the larger organization from which it emerged, which I will refer to as Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers or (SforRA). I have also provided different names for other organizations and institutions based in the city of Newtown but kept the original names of well-established UK organizations and movements, such as British Red Cross or Movement for Justice, a London-based movement fighting against racism on the side of migrants. Free and Proud Refugees (FPR) is a grassroots organization entirely run by (forced) migrants and British volunteers, whose aim is to support LGBT asylum seekers in a variety of ways, including pulling out a credible asylum claim in order to be granted leave to remain in the UK. In my role of volunteer and activist of this group I have thus facilitated the supportive activities designed to meet this end. On the other hand, as researcher, my study aimed at increasing understanding of this social group in a way that exposed its downgrading discursive constructions and practices as perpetuated by the government and law, but also support organizations, whilst exploring empowering alternatives. Drawing upon detailed and diverse accounts of activist-scholars, an edited collection compiled by Jeffrey Juris and Katie Khasnabish (2013), *Insurgent encounters: Transnational activism, ethnography and the political*, seeks to assist researchers exploring the challenges faced by ethnographers working with social movements in negotiating a path between activism and scholarship. As for Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches, the various contributors to the collection advocate that activist ethnography should rely upon reflexivity as a way to be as rigorous as possible within such a partisan methodological design. Particularly, in her contribution to the collection, Desai (2013) stresses the importance of

rethinking the role of researchers as knowledge producers; that is, recognizing that researchers too are a constituent part of the same research field that they aimed to investigate. On the other hand, in order to be ethically and politically on the side of the social movement of study, another contributor to the collection, Hess (2013), recognizes the importance of reflecting on the relationships of power within the field and ethical issues associated with it; particularly, he contends that the more deeply a researcher is involved in a social movement with established long term relationship with participants, the more pressing the ethical issues become.

In the following sections, I will provide an overview of the chosen activist ethnographic methodological design, by describing the research field, participant groups and methods of data gathering and analysis and critically reflecting on my position and practice in the field study, particularly on my dual role of activist and researcher within the FPR group. Given the impossibility to write objectively, I will try to disclose the relationship with the research field and participants to inform of my deep involvement. As noted, an activist ethnographic research design acknowledges the role of ethnography in actively engaging with research participants to facilitate social change. Moreover, within this methodological framework, ethnography is understood not in terms of explaining or representing reality, but rather as translating and weaving it by recognizing the roles of each participant, including the researcher, in the crowded research field of knowledge production. Hence, in the last two sections of this chapter, I will critically reflect on my dual role of researcher and activist of FPR. First, I will account for my ethical and political commitment to FPR in light of the contribution I have made as knowledge producer. I will then conclude with an overview of the ethical issues associated with a research design with asylum seeker participants, particularly those arising from my twofold role of researcher and activist within the research field.

### **3.1. Research Field and Participant Group**

I collected data over two years between September 2015 and October 2017 at one site, Free and Proud Refugees (FPR), a social enterprise based in Newtown entirely run by (forced) migrants and British volunteers that provides support and advice to LGBT asylum seekers and refugees whose claim rests on their LGBT status. The project was born when some (forced) migrants and British activists volunteering at the drop-ins of

Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SforRA), a leading charity for refugees and asylum seekers in Newtown, began to realize that as more individuals came to Newtown and UK in general, many sought asylum specifically for their LGBT identity and needed special support. Free and Proud Refugees (FPR) became constituted as an independent support group that worked with but was not part of SforRA. The main aim of FPR is to connect LGBT individuals living in Newtown and Newtownshire, who are seeking asylum in the UK on the grounds of their sexuality, for mutual support, information sharing and campaigning for the rights of LGBT asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. FPR offers a variety of social and support activities for its members, such as running weekly drop-ins, helping them to draft their personal statement to attach as evidence to their asylum application, accompanying them to court hearings and Home Office interviews, attending Gay Pride Parades and other public LGBT events, organizing outings in LGBT clubs, fundraising parties, university conferences to raise awareness on LGBT asylum and finally a yoga and running club. In January 2015 the first meeting of FPR took place at the office that SforRA was renting at the Centre Against Racism Exclusion and Discrimination in Newtown (CARED), a voluntary organization that provides support and advice to groups and organizations from racial minority backgrounds. The number of FPR members and volunteers would have grown considerably since the first meeting, where five LGBT asylum seekers and two volunteers were present. During the first year of the project (2015-2016), FPR had about twenty members and five main volunteers. After two years, the number of members would have exceeded forty and the number of volunteers that registered with FPR was fifteen. Of the latter, eleven were British citizens, two came from Italy, the majority identified as LGBT (two bisexuals, four lesbians, one transsexual male to female and one gay man) and four as (questioning) heterosexual. This certainly constitutes a small sample to draw upon, hence generalisability of the findings is inevitably limited, although generalisation has never been the aim of the research. Rather, the present project should be considered as an attempt to ‘think through’ the asylum system from my situated experience in the field in interaction with other agents, objects, spaces, bodies, discourses and their interplay. As such, it is also an opportunity to look at the formation dynamics of grass-roots organizations and the ways they become part of the assemblage by performing certain functions and allowing particular power relations among the individuals comprising them. Hence, although a small organization, it serves as a

kind of crack into the assemblage as a whole, from which we can travel through many places, people and experiences.

It is difficult to provide more precise information regarding the number and origin of FPR members. Each member registered with FPR had a folder with their personal data stored in the archive in the CARED office. Furthermore, the organization had a register of members' names, surnames and current immigration status, for example if they had applied for asylum or were in the process of doing so, if they had obtained refugee status or if they had been deported. On the register, no other information was recorded, not even the country of belonging or sexual orientation. The most recent register dates to April 2017, with a total of forty registered members, but new members would have joined FPR even after this last update and exceeded fifty units. I had known almost all the members and interviewed sixteen. This allowed me to notice that the clear majority came from Uganda, while a considerable group came from Cameroon. I had met other members who came from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Malawi and finally from Ghana. Among the Africans of the group, only two were Muslim while the majority were Christian. Of the forty registered members, only five were from non-African countries, i.e. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates. Since the beginning, the catholic and African group has been the main in FPR to the point that it will soon become known as a Catholic African community of LGBT asylum seekers, despite it has never been officially instituted and promoted as such. On the one hand, this has helped to form a solid group of members from the same (African) communities. On the other hand, other LGBT asylum seekers coming from different communities, especially the Asian and Muslim ones, were welcome to join FPR but often sought support elsewhere and were referred by FPR to other support groups for LGBT people, whose members were majority Muslims. Moreover, fourteen of the forty registered members at FPR were female, of which two self-identified as bisexual. Most members were men and gay. There was no transgender woman or man, bisexual men, nor other types of sexuality or gender identities among the registered members of FPR, which included only gays, lesbians and bisexual women. As for the age groups, at the end of my fieldwork in September 2014, two members were underage (both seventeen years old), two above sixty, few in their twenties or fifties, while the majority was between thirty and fifty years old. Several asylum seekers members of FPR have experienced detention throughout their lives as migrants in the UK. In 2016, 46% of people entering detention have sought asylum at some stage during their immigration

processes (The Migration Observatory 2018)<sup>4</sup>. The reviewed literature on asylum seekers and detention mainly focuses on the experiences of destitute asylum seekers, those who are awaiting deportation following a failed application, or those who are awaiting a decision on their asylum claim, who constitute the largest category of immigration detainees. Asylum seekers awaiting decisions on their asylum claims or destitute asylum seekers may be held in ‘Immigration Removal Centres’ (IRC), previously known as ‘Detention centres’<sup>5</sup>. The name was officially changed to ‘removal centres’ under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 to ‘reflect the part played by detention in the removal of failed asylum-seekers and others’<sup>6</sup>. Importantly, I have met only one LGBT asylum seeker in FPR who had spent a period of time in a IRC as a destitute asylum seeker before being deported back to her home country; whereas three participants in this research and other members of FPR have experienced detention in the UK before claiming asylum for other migration irregularities, mainly for irregularly residing in the UK with or without fake papers (e.g., VISA, passports or residence permit). Hence, they had been regarded as another category of immigration detainees; i.e., Foreign National Offenders (FNOs), and therefore held in Immigration Removal Centres but also category B and C prisons. There are no official figures of the numbers of asylum seekers, who had been detained as FNOs before claiming asylum from detention. It is nevertheless important to notice that participants in this research have mainly experienced detention in other structures than IMRCs. Despite the heterogeneous compositions of FPR members, everyone shared a commitment to be on the side of LGBT asylum seekers and actively campaigning for them, whilst trying to help them with their asylum applications. As I will show in more detail throughout the thesis, the ways in

---

<sup>4</sup> The Migration Observatory is Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. It aims at providing “impartial, independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues” (The Migration Observatory 2018).

<sup>5</sup> There are currently ten Immigration Removal Centres in the UK: Brook House (Gatwick), Campsfield House (Oxfordshire), Colnbrook (Middlesex), Dungavel House (South Lanarkshire), Harmondsworth (Middlesex), Larne House (Antrim), Morton Hall (Lincolnshire), Pennine House (Manchester), Tinsley House (Gatwick), and Yarl’s Wood (Bedfordshire). There are no detention centres currently operating in Wales.

<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Malberg (2004) contends that the linguistic passage from ‘Detention Centres’ to ‘Immigration Removal Centre’ creates a sense of legitimacy of the practice of detention of so-called ‘bogus asylum seekers’.

which this activism was carried out differed across individuals and sub-groups, which led to the emergence and development of two main activist threads. A main thread since the beginning of the FPR project was a pastoral type of support, often supported by neoliberal logics, which I will explore in detail throughout the empirical part of the thesis. A second thread has emerged in shared spaces of contestation and (re-)negotiations of normative individual and collective categorizations and ways of organizing, which has contributed to the formation of another independent group of support for LGBT asylum seekers, entirely run by them, from FPR. This second thread has not been explored fully as the separation occurred at the very end of my research field. Nonetheless, in Chapter 6 I have dedicated one section to explore these shared spaces of contestation and creativity.

### **3.2.Methods of Data Gathering and Analysis**

To investigate how LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters, in the context of the support organization for LGBT asylum seekers who made up my research field, collectively (re-)employed discursive elements circulating in various discourses to (re-)construct their collective and individual identity, I will rely upon an extensive dataset comprised of different types of discursive material coupled with ethnographic observations. The latter were made during my two-years long fieldwork across several different settings, such as during FPR weekly drop-ins, informal outings in LGBT clubs, gay pride parades and other LGBT public events alike, as well as during a court hearing, when I was called to witness the sexual orientation of a participant of FPR. The discursive material, on the other hand, comprised of a wide range of texts, which I summarize in what follows:

1. Transcripts of semi-structured research interviews with 16 LGBT asylum seeker participants and 5 volunteers of FPR and Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes)
2. Personal Statements of 3 LGBT asylum seeker participants
3. Transcripts of Home Office asylum interviews with 4 LGBT asylum applicants members of FPR
4. Home Office and first-tier tribunal rejection letters of 4 LGBT asylum applicants members of FPR

5. Textual material produced by FPR and other support organizations, such as advertising material, guidelines on how to pull together an LGBT asylum claims, individual and group support letters and relative templates

To understand how identity is discursively constructed in communicative exchanges and written texts, the various forms of the empirical material will be analysed according to methods within the epistemic position of Discursive Constructionism (DC). The latter is an approach to the study of language which is poststructuralist by definition, since it rejects the idea of a truth to be discovered beyond language, and instead recognizes its role as a fundamental means of human action in which different versions of the world come (re-) produced (Potter & Hepburn 2008). In this tradition, language or discourse is no longer conceived as a neutral medium conveying existing meanings, rather it is also regarded as a process of meaning construction through talk and text (Oswick 2011)<sup>7</sup>. Particularly, I will employ conventions in Discursive Psychology (DP) (Wetherell 2007), which similarly conceives language not as a mere reflection of cognition, mental states or external reality, but as a means to construct a meaningful reality and achieve goals. Therefore, DP analyses naturally occurring conversations and other forms of communicative interaction to understand how psychological issues and objects (such as memory, emotions, motives, attitudes, identity and so on) are constructed, understood

---

<sup>7</sup> Potter and Hepburn (2008, p.277) distinguish "two senses of construction" within which DC operates. On the one hand, they recognize that discourse *is constructed* within a system formed by different discursive elements and their interplay, including words, categories, silences, grammatical, stylistic structures or non-verbal communication. Hence, discursive constructionism critically studies how conversations and texts are assembled. For example, a constructive approach in this sense questions which discursive elements and their interplay are used in an ordinary and non-problematic way to reveal how they were constructed and crystallized in fixed patterns in talks and texts. On the other hand, discourse *is constructive* of reality, in the sense that these systems of discursive elements found in various forms of discourse put together and crystallize different versions of the world and social practices. Thus, DC asks how such (systems of) discursive elements found in texts and conversations work to create actions. Hence, the study of discourse becomes key to studying the mind, social processes, and organizations. Another important aspect of discourse is that it is situated within social practices; i.e., within the sequential interaction of every linguistic exchange, hence within a spatial and temporal context. From this perspective, for example, DC takes into consideration the institutional and organizational placement of discourse; i.e., how every discourse is situated within institutions or organizations. The relationship between discourse and institutions or organization is of mutual interdependence: discourse gives form to institutions and organizations, but the latter also provide the interactional ground of discursive possibilities. Crucially, DC has therefore a strong reflexivity component since it takes into consideration the epistemological position not only of the object of study but also of the researcher in interaction with it. In other words, discursive constructionism studies the discursive practices through the positions of the participants in the linguistic interaction.

and displayed by individuals engaged in a communicative exchange. In a pioneering work, Wetherell (2007) employs DP to investigate issues of identity construction in discourse. Therein, DP is used to investigate in conversations the discursive elements and patterns that are indicative of the various ‘subject positions’ speakers endorse during a particular interaction. In other words, any discourse makes available certain ways of describing ourselves and others (i.e., subject positions), which are employed by individuals according to their understanding of the discourse and of the interactional and broader context of any particular communicative exchange. On the other hand, DP is used to sample the social, power, institutional and historical discourses and their interplay which make possible the very existence of the various subject positions in every conversational encounter. Crucially, according to Wetherell (2007), DP also allows to investigate silences in the flow of a conversation as the argumentative threads which are not part of the participants’ sense-making. In other words, silences are informative of those subject positions which are not in play (perhaps because actively avoided) during a conversation. DP lies at the intersection of two main methods of language analysis: Conversation analysis (CA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) operates at the macro-level of language analysis and aims at identifying the (often masked) ways in which discourses work to (re-) create, maintain and challenge power relations by conveying a particular ideological message (Van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 1992). In other words, CDA studies the ways the ideological discourse conveyed in talks and texts reveals competing narratives which are indicative of social relations and power struggles and how discourse works to constitute and reconstitutes the social and power arrangements it conveys. On the other hand, CA approaches language from a micro-level perspective (e.g., words choice, argumentative structure, stress, intonation and the organization of turn-taking in conversation). Specifically, it studies the arrangements of verbal and non-verbal communicative elements in situated everyday social encounters (Schegloff 2007; Levinson 2013). CA’s focus on the organization of naturally occurring conversations explains the choice of the type of empirical material, which is usually in the form of audio and possibly video recordings of casual talks. Hence, written texts are deliberately excluded from this type of analysis. here are some issues in relying solely on either CA or CDA. In a pioneering article, one of the founding fathers of CA, Emmanuel Schegloff (1997) warns against CDA as a method that risks imposing the researcher’s theoretical standpoint on data analysis. That

is, by looking for something (such as identity and power relations) which might not be informative of the actual individuals' orientations during a natural conversation, the discourse analyst is in danger of imposing her/his categorizations into the analysis of conversational data. In other words, any text should be first analysed in its own terms, rather than according to broader contextual and ideological interpretations. According to Schegloff, CA is precisely that method that highlights the conversational details which are relevant to participants of that precise fragment of conversation, rather than what is relevant for the researcher. Nevertheless, Wetherell (1998) observes that the very same kind of critique that Schegloff moves against CDA might be turned it against CA itself. In fact, the employment and position of certain discursive elements in a naturally occurring conversation should be explained also in terms of its 'genealogical context' (Ibid: p.25), rather than only according to participants' orientations. In fact, by purposefully ignoring broader contextual features, the CA researcher risks to miss important elements which contribute to the explanation of the presence, position and organization of the various discursive elements that come into play in natural conversations. Moreover, by selecting and analysing only fragments of conversations extrapolated from broader communicative interactions, CA analysts are restricting the contextual spectrum and therefore selecting what is relevant for participants in that piece of conversation. Thus, Wetherell concludes that by relying solely on CA 'we do not seem to have escaped the imposition of theorists' categorizations and concerns' (Ibid.: p. 22). On the other hand, DP by employing both CDA and CA possibly guarantees more methodological rigor, derived from a fine-grained scrutiny of both discourse and contexts.

In this project DP will be employed to explore processes of (personal and collective) identity construction in asylum seekers' accounts. That is, I will investigate how different categorizations and trends relate to those found in other circulating discourses (as produced by non-asylum seekers, what I have called 'the major code, see literature review). Likewise, I will explore how being silent (as opposed to being silenced) works as a discursive strategy underpinning different social practices and representations. Particularly, CDA has been employed to sample the institutional discourse of authority bodies, support organizations, media and law around migration and, particularly, LGBT (and) asylum, to explore which recurrent narrative themes are used to represent LGBT asylum seekers as a social group across different contexts.

Therefore, conventions in CA will be employed to scrutinize the transcriptions of recorded conversations gathered from different social occasions and settings (e.g., casual talks, semi-structured interviews and formal and informal meetings), with the aim of identifying recurring micro-linguistic elements and patterns, including silences, which might be relevant for the identification of the subject positions endorsed by the participants of a communicative exchange. Crucially, I will investigate how the migrants creatively reemploy the discursive elements and categories found in the CDA of hegemonic and marginalizing discourses to challenge them and to construct alternative representations of their social identity. Likewise, I will explore how silence works as a discursive element and strategy in the process of identity construction.

### **3.3. Behind the Scenes of the Research Process: my Entry and Participation in the Research Field**

My experience at FPR begins before its beginning in January 2015. In September 2013 I left the Netherlands and moved to the UK to join my partner who was already living there. Soon thereafter I started a few odd jobs with the hope of being able to join a doctorate program sooner or later. From September 2013 I started meeting on a regular basis with my doctoral supervisors to develop a PhD project on the discursive construction of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. In the meantime, I had started attending Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SforRA), one of the main support organizations for asylum seekers and refugees in the city of Newtown, which organizes weekly drop-ins, where migrants could meet for a hot meal and a chat. I decided to start attending SforRA drop-ins as I was seeking ways to continue my activism on the side of forced migrants and because I wanted to get to know better the everyday lives of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK in view of the PhD research proposal that I was developing. Hence, since the very beginning of my research and activist experience in the UK, the two started being deeply interconnected, which allowed me to critically interrogate myself on my twofold role well before starting my PhD. I still remember the first day I arrived at SforRA drop-in, which was then held in an underground space of a municipal building for cultural meetings, in the heart of the city centre, next to the main cathedral. When I entered, I was struck by an explosion of colours, voices, and bodies scrambling through the various tables and at the cafeteria to get food and drink. I felt lost, I did not know anyone, I did not know what to do. I was soon greeted by a volunteer from the centre who quickly directed me to a long table on the left-

hand side of the large room that had been set up to receive arrivals. At the table sat four volunteers gathering the signatures of visitors on two large register books. The first was used for the collection of signatures of the volunteers, the second for the collection of signatures of asylum seekers or refugees. I do not know if it was for my not so English appearance or my not so fluent English, but I was invited to sign in the register of asylum seekers and refugees, only after a few months I would have realized that for all that time I had signed in the wrong register. This detail would have allowed me to go unnoticed within SforRA and to know more about different migrants. Moreover, later on when I started my project, I would remember my involuntary covert experience at SforRA, which allowed me to reflect on the importance of reminding my participants of which role I was endorsing - i.e. the activist, volunteer or researcher of FPR - while I was engaging with them, especially with new members, who did not know me since the very beginning and could therefore get confused as to my identity. It was during the first months I attended SforRA drop-ins, between April and September 2014, that I met the British coordinators of SforRA, Ellie, Sami and Luke, and two British volunteers from SforRA, Vanessa and Katie, who would become among the main volunteers of FPR. Also, in that period I met Luke, who would initiate the FPR project as main coordinator. Luke was a prominent personality within SforRA. He seemed to know everyone and to be the point of reference for several migrants and volunteers. Ugandan, gay and asylum seeker, Luke had started talking to Sami, me, Vanessa and Katie about his idea to start a support group for LGBT asylum seekers, who attended SforRA, but who needed more targeted help. Hence, Luke told me about his difficulties as a gay asylum seeker in England and his idea of creating a support group exclusively for this category of migrants. Luke knew how to impress and engage people, he really convinced me to become part of his project, which would start in January 2015. In April 2014, I was awarded a PhD scholarship at the University of Leicester Critical Management School, now renamed Business School, which would begin in September 2014. The PhD training programme within the Critical Management School would have introduced me to critical perspectives in management studies and contemporary critical management scholars (some of them have deeply informed my project and feature as key authors in this thesis), who formed the Critical Management School of Leicester University, before its dissolution in 2017 due to the Business Turn, that would have led to the departure of many critical members of staff. The experience at the

former Critical Management School had undoubtedly marked my way of approaching academia, management and my own research project. Particularly, I had begun to reflect on my role as a researcher who wanted to study a particular group of migrants in a power position subordinate to mine, hence on how to conduct a rigorous yet ethical research on their side.

With the beginning of my participation as a volunteer of the FPR project in January 2015, which over time would become more and more engaging, it seemed natural to me to focus my PhD research on the discursive construction of asylum seekers in the UK on this particular group of migrants (i.e., LGBT asylum seekers and refugees) and support group (i.e., FPR), which I have helped initiating and of which I was one of the main volunteers. For nearly three years, between January 2015 and October 2017, FPR became my daily life, as for many other volunteers, asylum seekers and refugees who were part of the project. The relationships that would be established with some members of the group would also have exceeded the relationship between volunteer-member or researcher-participant, and would have developed into real friendships, which persist today. To be honest and concise, I was not able to separate my role as researcher from that of activist and volunteer of FPR. There was no clear distinction between the world of activism and that of research. Whenever I took part in group meetings as a volunteer, I could not help observing and annotating interesting aspects for my research. On the other hand, whenever I was looking for something on the research topic, I often found some material or made observations that would be useful for the FPR group too. Moreover, for my role as a volunteer I could participate into two free training courses that would have greatly helped me both for the support of FPR members and for my research. First, at the beginning of 2015, I took part in a training organized by SforRA in partnership with British Red Cross. The training group was formed by several volunteers affiliated with SforRA with the aim of helping asylum seekers to put together a convincing asylum claim about their persecution in the country of origin and to look for evidence that could support it. During the training, in addition to an overview of the legal asylum system in place in the UK, real asylum cases were shared with the aim of collectively determining how to build strong asylum narratives considering the (lack of) evidence that could support them. Then, in 2016, I took part in two intensive training courses of the Frontline Immigration Advice Project (organized by Refugee Action, a support

charity for asylum seekers and refugees based in London), which offers free ongoing training and resources to charities and community organizations to enable them to provide advice and information on immigration, appropriately regulated. The two training courses, in fact, were in preparation to sustain the OISC (Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner) exams level 1 and 2 to become an official legal adviser. Although I have never sustained the final examinations, the OISC training helped me gaining knowledge on many legal aspects of claiming asylum in the UK, including asylum applications, general appeal practices and procedures, immigration detention, removal and deportation. On the other hand, thanks to my role as a researcher affiliated with a British university, I would have been able to organize and participate in academic events with members of the FPR group who featured not only as participants in my research project, but also as invited speakers or co-researchers. One of the most vitalising stories of friendship within the group, in fact, was having helped a FPR member with his asylum application first and then with his doctorate application. Within a year, he would not only have been granted leave to remain, but also a PhD position at a British university with a research project that similarly focused on LGBT asylum seekers in the UK. Together with him, we carried out an intense research activity, which greatly co-informed our respective research projects. Together we also organized two events in main universities in the UK during the LGBT history month, which consisted in the screening of the documentary film *Call Me Kuchu*<sup>8</sup> followed by a panel discussion with members of FPR as invited speakers. Moreover, once he was finally granted refugee status in the UK, which allowed him to freely move within the EU members states, we organized a Workshop in the Netherlands for a conference which aimed to bring together lawyers, NGOs, researchers, activists, policy makers and LGBT refugees to discuss the legal and social challenges, developments and improvements that have occurred in the LGBT asylum field in Europe. Drawing on our joint personal experience as activists and volunteers of Free and Proud Refugees (FPR) as well as researchers, our workshop aimed at increasing awareness of the challenges associated with setting up from scratch a support group for LGBT asylum seekers. Hence, we described our journey towards becoming the main organization supporting LGBT asylum seekers and refugees in Newtown and

---

<sup>8</sup> *Call me Kuchu* is a 2012 American documentary film directed by Malika Zouhali-Worrall and Katherine Fairfax Wright. The film explores the struggles of the LGBT community in Uganda, focusing partly on the murder of LGBT activist David Kato in 2011

Newtownshire and provided guidelines for LGBT asylum support, which we had developed together based on our joint experience at FPR. This conference was also important for inserting FPR within a larger social movement of organisations that support LGBT people who are seeking asylum or have refugee status in the UK. The movement was set up and facilitated as a virtual platform by one of the invited speakers of the conference, part of the UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG, a charity promoting equality and dignity for LGBT people who seek asylum in the UK), with the aim of sharing information (e.g. events and publications) on LGBT asylum and coordinating in influencing the Home Office.

As a volunteer of FPR, I was involved with providing the various social and support activities for its members, which have been briefly mentioned above and will be described in more detail throughout the thesis. Particularly, I will discuss those support activities aimed at helping members with pulling together a credible asylum claim in order to get leave to remain. Crucially, to help its members achieve refugee status, FPR volunteers, including me, have tried to interpret and meet the government assessment criteria of this type of asylum claims, which often rely upon Western stereotypes, linear models of sexual development and neoliberal homonormative conceptions (see the literature review in the previous chapter). Hence, in our attempts to fight against the LGBT asylum system and bring social change, we inevitably found ourselves trapped within it, hence supporting it. On the other hand, the collective efforts of understanding government evaluation criteria in this type of asylum cases has not only helped many LGBT asylum seekers in getting leave to remain, but it has also brought members and volunteers together in challenging the facade of neutrality implicit in such preconceptions and biased constructions; that is, to use Butler (1990) famous phrasing, ‘troubling the boundaries’ of sexual and gender imposed constructions. Ultimately, such a collective deconstructing activity has seemingly led to the creation of spaces of cohesion for the development of alternative modes of (re-)thinking individual and collective identities. The whole thesis can therefore be considered as an exercise in critical reflexivity. In defining the collective dynamics of discursive construction of the individual and collective identity of FPR, I will unmask its (and mine) complicity with downgrading constructions of the individual and collective identity of LGBT asylum seekers, whilst trying to deconstruct them. Moreover, I will provide more details on the sharing spaces that have led to collectively (re-)imagining

and (re-)negotiating identity and sexuality constructions, which have emerged throughout the FPR project and even within the same support activities that had seemingly supported rather marginalizing static constructions. Furthermore, due to the particular nature of the project based on the (de-)construction of sexual and gender identities, I will rely upon recent developments in ‘queer reflexivity’ as a method to critically reflect on how the (re-)negotiation of my sexual, gender, researcher and activist identities to the group of study has contributed to knowledge production within the research field (McDonald 2013; 2016; Rumens et al. 2018). Particularly, McDonald (2013, 2016) expands the work on queer reflexivity by extending the ‘closet metaphor’, which is usually used to describe when LGBT people believed to be heterosexuals publicly disclose their sexuality as non-adherent to heteronormativity, to all social relationships, including heterosexuality and research identity. In other words, according to McDonalds (2013) in every social interaction individuals (re-)negotiate which aspects of themselves can be closeted and how this closeting impacts any aspect of a research project. Hence, McDonalds (2013; 2016), by relying on the autoethnographic research tale method, describes the process of (re-)negotiating his (hetero)sexual and research identities during his fieldwork in an academic institution he had perceived as homonormative, that is, where every person was taken for a homosexual, unless otherwise declared. Thus, I will explore similar ‘identity dilemmas’ (Rumens et al. 2018, p.13) that I have encountered during my fieldwork. In the following section, I will look at how I managed to disclose my research identity to my participants, which was not always clear for my dual role of researcher and activist within the organization of study. Throughout the thesis, on the other hand, following McDonalds (2013, 2016), I will describe the way I managed to disclose, closet and (re-)negotiate my sexual identity with the participants of my study, to expose the way it has impacted upon the collective construction of (alternative) sexual identities. Arguably, in this way, I will also manage to democratize the relationship with my research participants, whose sexuality has been exposed. That is, rather than overtly talk about others’ sexuality as an alleged external and neutral observer, who closets her identity, I will come out the closet too in order to stress my participation in the crowded research field of knowledge production.

### **3.4.Ethical Issues**

The research involves asylum seeker participants who are regarded in research ethics conventions as vulnerable people. Asylum seekers in the UK are legally defined as people who have fled their homeland, asked the government for refugee status and are awaiting a decision on their application (UN General Assembly, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951). Asylum seekers living in the UK have often escaped from violent and oppressive situations, including torture and persecution and from countries that have ongoing severe conflicts such as Syria and Sudan (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). If we consider other groups of vulnerable people, such as mental health service users, asylum seekers are likely to be capable of making informed decisions themselves; unless they are experiencing mental health problems perhaps due to any past or present traumatic experience related to their refugee identity, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, or their sexual or gender identity, as they might struggle to cope with it even in the host country (Berg & Millbank 2009; Giametta 2017). Moreover, the institutions that represent/administrate asylum seekers at times undermine their capacity of autonomy, which in turn might undermine their well-being and mental health, and therefore make them more vulnerable. Particularly, people who are seeking refuge in the UK are not entitled to the same social and economic rights of UK and EU citizens, for example they are not generally allowed to work (and so forced to rely on basic state support or contract illegal work), or struggle to access (higher) education while their application for asylum is being considered. Finally, journalists, politicians and policymakers but also members of migrant support organizations and academics often talk about asylum seekers in misleading ways that perpetuate and possibly heighten their vulnerable and marginalized social condition in the host country (Baker et al. 2007; Tyler 2006). Therefore, asylum seeker participants are most likely in an unequal power relationship with the researcher and other members of society.

In the proposed study, LGBT asylum seeker participants were members of FPR, hence I met them through my involvement within FPR and they were invited or they expressed their interest to take part in a one-to-one interview on their everyday life in the UK, with a focus on how they construct their individual and collective identity and on how they see others contributing to this construction; i.e., on their everyday

experience as LGBT asylum seekers in the UK and how they perceived constructions of their individual and collective identity as made by others affected their daily lives. Although the focus of the interview was not on the personal story of persecution and current life difficulties, these had in few occasions become part of the conversation and induced psychological stress to participants. To mitigate this<sup>56</sup> risk, my role as a volunteer and collaboration with other service providers was crucial. On the one hand, as participants are identified through FPR where I used to volunteer, any member with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder or manifesting psychological distress was excluded from the research interview. On the other hand, if during the interview the participant manifested any psychological discomfort on any particular topic that originated throughout the conversation, I was able with the help of other volunteers of FPR to refer them to professionals who could offer appropriate assistance on specific issues associated with their refugee and LGBT identities. Indeed, FPR worked in partnership with other organizations working in Newtown, such as Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, British Red Cross, LGBT Centre, CSPA (a centre for people affected with HIV), food banks and lawyers working within the legal aid scheme as well as sensitive to and specialized with LGBT asylum issues. Finally, it should be noted that many LGBT asylum seeker participants saw the research interview as an opportunity to let off steam all their problems, including memories of the traumatic past in the country of origin, despite I had made clear to them that that was not the focus of the research and I had deliberately avoided asking questions about it. Arguably, my double role of researcher and volunteer of FPR had led to such an outcome. In fact, several participants regarded the research interview as a way to share problems with someone who was trusted (i.e., a volunteer of FPR) and could potentially help them with. Indeed, several studies have stressed the positive effect of storytelling on refugee participants and the therapeutic function of engaging in research interview exchanges (Rosenthal 2003; Horsley 2007).

As observed, a study with asylum seeker participants might involve the disclosure and discussion of personal, confidential and sensitive information, such as the traumatic past experience or the social, economic, physical and psychological troubles faced in the host country. The access to personal and delicate information exposes the researcher to further ethical challenges, besides the discussed psychological

stress that might be induced to participants of research interviews. First, as investigator I also experienced psychological stress, but I was able to deal with it through the support of other volunteers of FPR, who faced similar issues in their everyday support to FPR members. Any member and volunteer of FPR had signed a confidentiality agreement, whereby people agreed not to share any information of any individual in FPR. On the other hand, to facilitate case support, FPR members agreed their information to be shared in a confidential way among FPR volunteers, in order to compare case studies and come up with common strategies to improve support. Although it might be argued that this approach had inevitably drawn a difference between volunteers and members in terms of access and management of sensitive information, it also allowed for improvement of the offered service. Moreover, it shall be noted that within FPR, several members, for their previous education or trainings as support workers with vulnerable people, became volunteers of FPR, whilst applying for asylum on their case. Hence, this latter aspect might have reduced power differential between members and volunteers. Second, in the case of asylum seeker participants, ensuring that personal information will never be disclosed is not simply a matter of protecting their privacy. In fact, in extreme cases, carelessness with information could put in danger the participants' lives and/or that of their families and/or acquaintances. For example, giving too many details about the participants risks making them identifiable and possibly reachable by their persecutors. Besides my researcher role, I had access to high level of confidential information due to my role of volunteer of FPR. Hence, to allow protecting participants' identity, it was decided to anonymize them to the best I could by changing their names and country of origin as well as avoiding including any picture in this research. Moreover, prior to the recruitment of participants, to safeguard that the information was mediated accurately, comprehensively and accessibly, participants were invited to meet and a) discuss the study and the nature of their participation (including a comprehensive explanation of the tasks they were requested to perform and of their rights, particularly the right of withdrawing at any moment) and b) agree on a clear and systematic confidentiality scheme, whereby they could choose to not having their research interview recorded, by signing an informed consent form. Similarly, de-briefing sessions with them were organized at the end of the study to discuss the results, in order to resolve incongruities in interpretation or confidentiality and anonymity issues.

Another ethical issue that could have originated throughout the research was associated with participant observation (PO) methods parts of the methodological design. Arguably, POs guarantee a higher degree of scientific neutrality in an ethnographic research design and, at the same time, allow for a privileged point of view on research participants without exposing them to excessive research fatigue (Lupton 1985). For example, a researcher investigating asylum seekers' lives might choose to adopt the role of participant observer by means of volunteering in the aid organization where participants normally meet. PO has the advantage of allowing the researcher to alternate between the role of participant and participant observer (Bell & Thorpe 2013). Nonetheless, this approach may lead to additional ethical issues. On the one hand, the researcher is positioned in a superior power relation to the research participants (i.e., that of the omnipresent observer) regardless of the covered role undertaken (e.g., volunteering for the research participants). Particularly, researchers should ensure confidentiality for the information gained while covering the insider role. On the other hand, participants might be confused about the researcher's dual role and should therefore be often reminded about it. To tackle the issue, I often reminded my participants of my double role of researcher and volunteer of the organization and ensured that the identity of observed participants would be anonymized in the research thesis. Finally, informed consent was sought with non-asylum seeker participants too, such as volunteers of Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SforRA) and Free and Proud Refugees (FPR). Particularly, they were debriefed about the aim and nature of the research project, reassured about confidentiality and informed that they would be anonymized by using pseudonyms and avoiding sharing personal information that could give away their identity.

### **3.5. Notes on Terminology**

Throughout the thesis I have employed the acronym 'LGBT asylum seekers', which is a problematic terminology to adopt at several levels in light of my critical and activist commitment. First, in the literature review, I have pointed out how the uncritical use of categories such as L-G-B-T might contribute to the construction of normalized identities, which people might fail to fit in. Moreover, in the present chapter, I have

noted how in the organization under scrutiny there were only asylum seekers members who self-identified as L, G or B. Hence, the employment of LGBT to refer to their group is not appropriate either. Nonetheless, I have decided to use the expression ‘LGBT asylum seekers’ throughout the thesis because this is the one employed by the law and the government, and this thesis is also about exposing and unpacking the figure of the authentic or credible LGBT asylum seeker. I have been tempted to employ the adjective “queer”, but because of the theoretical claims I am making I wanted to use ‘queer’ only in ‘queer terms’, that is as a tool to deconstruct categories and destabilizing normative constructions (Rumens et al. 2018). In the last section of Chapter 6, I indeed discussed the becoming queer of LGBT asylum seekers, precisely to highlight this difference. Hence, my choice of employing LGBT is functional to its deconstruction and for the sake of clarity. Moreover, I have decided not to employ the expression ‘Sexual or Gender Identity’ or ‘SOGI’ to refer to asylum claims on the grounds of sexuality and gender identity, which is often employed in the literature, for all participants in my research have claimed asylum on the grounds of their sexuality only. On the other hand, I have highlighted issues of intersectionality with respect to gender and sexuality throughout the thesis, particularly in Chapter 2 and in Chapter 7, Case Study 1. Another issue with terminology is the employment of the wording ‘asylum seeker’, which in my experience has constituted even a greater issue at the level of academia and activism. Researchers in migration studies have often pointed out that using ‘asylum seeker’ to refer to people looking for a refugee in the UK carry a negative connotation, whereby they are separated from the group of refugees and might hence trigger the idea that they are not legal people as refugees are. For example, RAPAR (Refugee and Asylum Seeker Participatory Action Research), a Manchester-based aid organization working with asylum seekers and refugees, has developed a set of guidelines on how to carry on Participatory Action Research (PAR) with such asylum seekers participants (Temple & Moran 2006). The RAPAR guidelines also invite to critically rethink academic writing as a tool for changing linguistic and social inequalities. For example, the term ‘asylum seeker’ is deliberately replaced with ‘refugee’ or ‘refugee people seeking asylum’ to point out that individuals under both categories are all seeking refuge from persecution, regardless of which stage they are in with respect to their asylum application (Temple & Moran 2006). Arguably, this is not

merely a stylistic choice. Rather, it means taking the side of asylum seekers by breaking linguistic conventions which ultimately perpetuate forms of marginalization and exclusion (Bell & Thorpe 2013). Similar objections have been raised during the meetings at Free and Proud Refugees, whereby asylum seeker members of the group refused to be referred to as ‘asylum seeker’ or ‘refugee’. Hence, it was decided to adopt the linguistic convention of calling those asylum seeker members of the group as ‘members’ and the non-asylum seeker members of the group (being refugees, British or European nationals) as ‘volunteers’. This is the terminology that I therefore tried to employ throughout the thesis, although most of the times I have been forced to use the expression ‘LGBT asylum seeker’ for the sake of clarity. I have also sometimes used the expression ‘asylum applicant’, which arguably carries less negative connotations. Finally, in the extracts of the research interview I will employ the name “Lena” to refer to myself, because that was the name people used to call me in FPR.

## **Chapter 4: Hyde and Seek**

The central focus of this chapter is the movements of hiding and seeking in the hope of reaching a shelter, which characterise not only LGBT individuals seeking asylum, but also their groups and support organizations. The chapter analyses the formation of Free and Proud Refugees (FPR) within Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SforRA) from the day Ellie and Luke, respectively the SforRA coordinator and chair of the members committee, had met to discuss the possibility of creating a support group for LGBT asylum seekers. In their accounts, the beginning of FPR is described as a hunt for potential hidden members. In fact, Luke seems to be the only LGBT asylum seeker open about his sexuality, while others attended SforRA, but hid their sexuality, with shame being a key factor. I observed this construction manifest initially in the first FPR flyer, through the presentation of the UK as a welcoming country in contrast to a persecutory home country of origin (compare Raboin 2017a; 2017b). In the course of this chapter we will find LGBT asylum seekers are constructed as invisible individuals, scattered within the host country and communities of welcoming, such as Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, because of the shame connected to their sexuality. The latter supposedly originates from a biography of persecution in the home country and constitutes the main reason for fleeing. Hence, a main function of FPR since its inauguration is gathering dispersed LGBT asylum seekers to comfort them. In this way, contradictorily, the humanitarian narrative endorsed by SforRA seems to sustain exclusionary discourses that we might otherwise suppose they ought to fight.

The chapter then goes on to consider how participants construct their home and host country in relation to their sexuality, which seems to reinforce an observed humanitarian and homonationalist framework (Puar 2007; McGuirk 2016; Jung 2015; Giametta 2018; Raboin 2017b; Raboin 2017a). The chapter also explores participants' accounts of their everyday life in the UK, which provides insight to justifications for hiding within their community of belonging in the UK. The UK is constructed in opposition to their home countries as a "human right country", yet LGBT asylum seekers do not seem to be able to have access to it. Ultimately, there seems to be a continuum between the home and host country. In fact, LGBT asylum seekers in the UK still have to hide their sexuality and fear persecution compounded by members of their communities and British government. Hence, the chapter looks at how the Home Office

is constructed as a persecutory power able to decide on the life and death of LGBT asylum seekers (Mbembe 2003). Taken together these constructions inform the ways in which FPR is constituted as a hidden sanctuary in the UK at the intersection of other support organizations for asylum seekers and LGBT people. They are also indicative of the function FPR ought to perform, which will be fully explored in the following chapters. On the one hand, gathering together dispersed LGBT asylum seekers and refugees to support them with their sexuality. On the other hand, helping them in dealing with the harsh ways the government assesses their claims.

#### **4.1. Gathering Together Dispersed LGBT Asylum Seekers**

In an interview with Ellie, Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers' (SforRA) coordinator at the time, she explained how Free and Proud Refugees (FPR) emerged within SforRA thanks to the initiative of a gay asylum seeker from Uganda, Luke, who wanted to create a support group for LGBT asylum seekers and refugees:

Extract 4.1.

Free and Proud Refugees is a spinoff of Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, and it started because one asylum seeker who was himself gay, came and talked to me and said that he was interested in doing this. And we talked about it, and I said: "Well, yes it's a great idea" [Ellie]

The meeting between Ellie and Luke described in the above extract took place in early January 2015. At the time, Luke enjoyed certain notoriety and trust within SforRA. He was well-known by the service users and service providers of the organization and seemed to have a key role as an intermediary between them, that is, between the world of asylum seekers and refugees and that of the volunteers and managers of SforRA. He was not just a frequent visitor to SforRA, but he was actively involved in organizing and delivering its various social initiatives of support. Moreover, he was part of SforRA Steering Group, the main decisional and organizational body within SforRA, as the chair of the Members Committee, which was made up exclusively of asylum seekers and thus represented the User Group. I recall how difficult it was to engage Luke during the drop-ins of SforRA; often he would be surrounded by people from the African community especially Ugandans. Moreover, routinely he would sit at the SforRA volunteer table to

welcome and register new asylum seekers to the organization. He did not keep his homosexuality hidden and even spoke openly about it to everyone, as he himself emphasises in an interview extract:

Extract 4.2.

In the whole of the Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers I was the only gay person who was out (...) everyone was aware, everyone knew about me [Luke]

Thus, FPR did not emerge from the spontaneous organization of several LGBT asylum seekers who came together to form a group. Rather, it originated from the personal initiative of one single asylum seeker, member of SforRA, openly gay, who played an important role in the organization and easily obtained the approval and support of the SforRA coordinator to launch a support group for asylum seekers, who, like him, were applying for asylum on the basis of their sexuality. However, as Ellie explains in the interview, neither her nor Luke knew how many other members of the organization were LGBT and could be interested in the project. After all, Luke was the only known gay asylum seeker within SforRA. Thus, they agreed to design a leaflet to promote the initiative and in turn assess whether there were any members of SforRA, who identified as LGBT and needed a bespoke form of support. The flyer would be distributed a week after at SforRA drop-in, which used to be held on Thursdays.

On a cold day of January 2015, I was on my way to St Francis House to attend the SforRA drop-in. As usual, I arrived an hour early before people began to crowd the centre, to help setup tables for lunch that would be served starting at 1pm. The round tables were typically placed in the middle of the large room, where the migrants would sit down to consume their meal. On the left side of the room, the long rectangular table stood, where the volunteers of SforRA would sit down to register new members and collect the signatures of visitors on two large register books, one for refugees and asylum seekers and the other for volunteers. On the right side of the room, instead, there was the kitchen where SforRA asylum seekers, refugees and volunteers from UK and Europe were already at work since a few hours to prepare lunch and food service. The atmosphere was seemingly warm, as people arrived at the drop-in greetings and hugs were exchanged and people seemed to enjoy being gathered together for a chat and a meal. At the same time, however, the sharp division lines constructed by the disposition of tables and

material artifacts, such as the register books, functioned to remind of the different roles and positions endorsed by the various individuals crowding the centre. I remember how on that day Luke had come to meet me as I entered St Francis House. He was very excited by “his new project” (as he used to call Free and Proud Refugees before the official name was coined) that he had mentioned to me only a week before. He spoke to me in a very enthusiastic manner and asked me if I could help him spreading the leaflets of the project between the drop-in tables, which would soon be occupied by asylum seekers, refugees and volunteers from SforRA. He gave me a bunch of flyers on white paper, A3 format, with a very simple design. Luke’s delegation of task was made directly and in a way that made me feel uncomfortable declining it. Since the day he spoke about “his project” he counted on my support, as I showed interest and offered my help. This was the very first “official” task I was going to perform for FPR; i.e., advertising the new project of support. I hoped that I would have been involved in the development of the project’s aim and allocation of tasks and responsibilities since the beginning and certainly before being asked to advertise it. However, I decided to not voice my disappointment and carry on with the tasks he asked me to do. After all, I was a European volunteer, he was an asylum seeker and that was “his project”: I did not want to sound patronizing by telling him how the project should have been collectively developed. At the time, I could not know that this would become Luke’s typical leadership style within the FPR group, one based on delegation of tasks without any or little prior collective discussion, which inevitably led to frictions within the group, as we shall see in more detail in the unfolding of the chapters. On the flyer, reproduced in the figure below, an image of a rainbow stood out, occupying the top and centre of the leaflet, and underneath the rainbow a few lines of text:

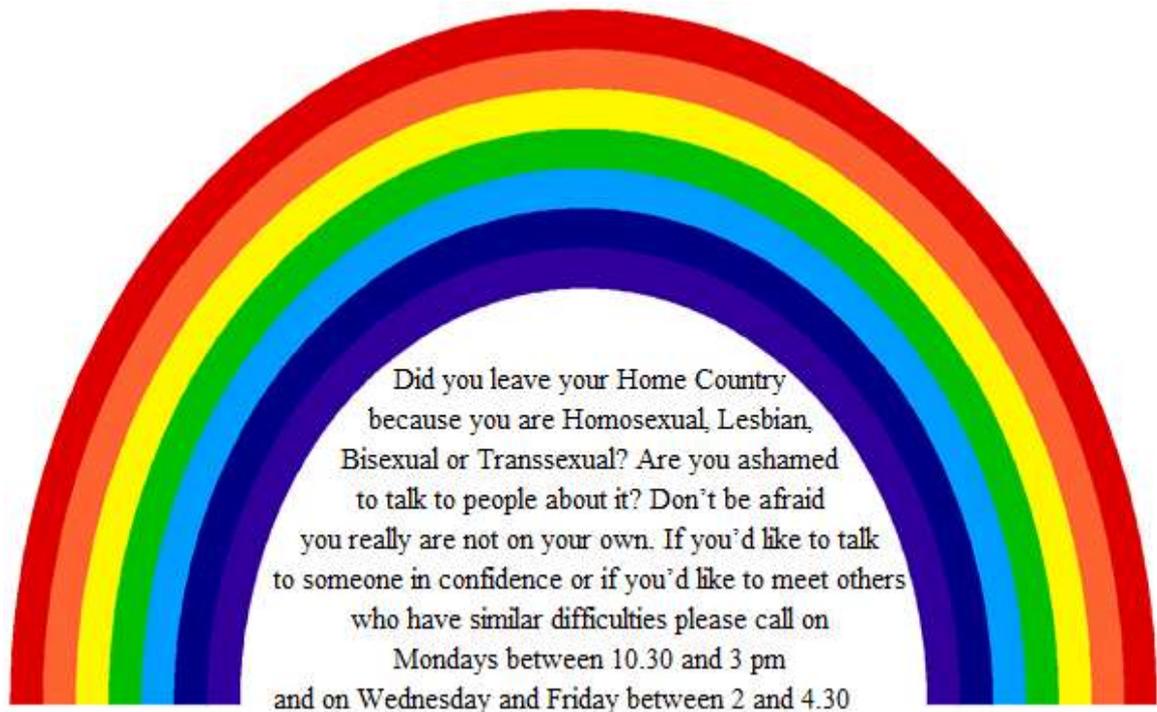


FIGURE 1 FIRST FLYER OF THE SUPPORT GROUP FOR LGBT ASYLUM SEEKERS; I.E., FREEDOM AND PRIDE FOR REFUGEES

Under the text were Luke's phone numbers, the ones he himself called his "private and public numbers". Noticeably, Luke's name did not appear anywhere on the flyer. The leaflet poses some questions to its perceived audience from which we, as reader, are invited to take up the profile of the addressee. Interrogating certain linguistic features of the SforRA flyer in more detail reveals the kinds of subjectivity LGBT asylum seekers occupy in its institutionalised discourses. The second person singular creates a direct referential link to the addressee, whereas the impersonal use of the pronoun is used to refer to a more comprehensive set of recipients whose properties are listed and attributed to the addressee. First, it is not directly addressed to asylum seekers, nowhere do these words appear on it. The leaflet rather talks about/to people who have had to leave their country of origin for being "Homosexual, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transsexual" and are "ashamed" to talk about their sexuality to others. Hence, sexuality as one dimension of LGBT asylum seeker identities stands out from their legal status and it is constituted as the main reason to flee their countries of origin. The latter are thus constructed as places of persecution of LGBT people where shame for their sexuality originates. In turn, shame is what triggers their isolation, worries and difficulties, in the host country. The leaflet goes on with a message of hope and comfort (i.e., "Don't be afraid you really are not on

your own”). Finally, an invitation to make a telephone contact “to talk to someone in confidence” or “to meet others in similar difficulties” is made. Hence, the sexual acceptance of the host country is placed in contradistinction with a home country that is therefore demonised as homophobic and persecutory (Raboin 2017a; 2017b). Accordingly, LGBT people must escape their countries of origin because of their sexuality while, in contrast, the host country accepts, welcomes and gathers together LGBT asylum seekers. The image of a welcoming host country is reinforced by the employment of categories (i.e., Homosexual, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transsexual) and symbols (i.e., the rainbow flag) of an imagined universal LGBT community (Heinz et al., 2002; Laskar et al., 2016). Sexual identities are thus mobilized to construct sexualised others whose sexuality is described in extremely negative terms as linked to escape, shame, worries, difficulties and secrecy. At the same time, they are indicative of the subject position of the support group that was going to be formed. Since the very beginning, FPR is thus constituted as a support group for people who had to flee their country of origins for being LGBT and are ashamed to talk about it. They are therefore constructed as invisible, scattered individuals who live in a state of secrecy and isolation within the larger group of asylum seekers and refugees in the host country and in the SforRA community. FPR’s primary function, therefore, seems to be gathering together dispersed LGBT asylum seekers and comforting them. Moreover, the leaflet seems to suggest that the main discomfort of LGBT asylum seekers, for which a support group ought to be constituted, lies in the shame of talking about their sexuality, which triggers their state of isolation. They seem to need to get rid of that weight, that is, to finally be able to reveal to someone in confidence their secret. Moreover, the need to find a host community that can accept people facing such difficulties seems to be a constituent of these subjectivities. Ultimately, the way in which LGBT asylum seekers are thus constructed in the institutionalized narratives of SforRA is in line with humanitarian discourses, depicting them as a marginalized group of powerless victims in need of help (Zembylas 2010). In this way they also sustain exclusionary discourses they ought to fight (Agamben 1995). In what follows, I will analyse the accounts of LGBT asylum seeker participants to explore how they construct their home and host country in a way that bears continuities with the analysis of the flyer above, that is in contrast to one another and in relation to the issues associated with being open about their sexuality. The analysis of the various interview extracts thus makes it possible to explore the way in

which the secrecy with respect to one's sexuality begins in the countries of origin and continues in the host country.

#### **4.2.Hiding in the Country of Origin**

This section addresses the ways in which LGBT asylum seekers construct their country of origin in relation to sexuality and in opposition to the host country. This is achieved through various strategies, which show similarities across the four examples that will be analysed. The spatial marker “there” is used when talking about the country of origin, while “here” to talk about England. Moreover, the country of belonging is described as a place where one's sexuality cannot be openly said or manifested, for fearing of being persecuted and killed. Death can come in several ways, such as through mob justice, police or laws that impose incarceration or the death penalty. Many therefore relate to sexuality as something to douse in secrecy. One cannot even conceive or speak of sexualities that deviate from the heterosexual norm, except in extremely negative terms or derogatory words. The rejection and criminalisation of homosexuality affects all levels of society, i.e. the continent, the state, the community, the church, the family and tradition. In the first of these examples, when asked about differences between UK and country of origin, Alice's describes her lesbian life in Uganda and explains why homosexuality must be hidden.

##### Extract 4.3.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, it's [laughing] totally different! Yeah, it was, yeah, oh my God, you can't even, in there, you can't say (...) you know, you can't, in a pub, that I'm a LESBIAN, and put hum a sign that you are a lesbian, put wear t-shirt that is saying I'm a gay, hum, because (...) people are [like] “get out! get out!” (...) you know, (...) my badge [showing the rainbow badge and t-shirt she is wearing at the interview], I'm gay, I'm a lesbian (...) oh, oh, Uganda, you can't, you can't, you can't, you can't. (...) They can kill, they kill you, exactly, they kill you. (...) you fear, you fear, you fear, that I'm a lesbian, you can't [whispering]. You can't there, yeah, you can't, you have to HIDE it SECRETLY. (...) oh, oh, oh, oh, you can't even tell your sister (...) once your sister knows, your friends, you have to run away, out of the country [Alice]

The extract begins with a direct question about Alice's opinion of the difference between Uganda and UK which is immediately met with a very negative appraisal. Alice then articulates her answer in more details explaining that "there", in Uganda, homosexuality cannot be said or openly shown. The reference to "here", in UK, is implicit in the reference to typically English public places, such as pubs, where she used to go and openly manifest her homosexuality through, for example, wearing visible "signs", such as t-shirts or badges with rainbow colours, like the ones she was wearing during the interview. On the contrary, she feels threatened with physical violence if she were to enter a public place in Uganda dressed in such a way. This fear is what drove her to "secretly hide" her sexuality and not reveal it to anyone, because in the moment that even a single trusted person like "a sister" had come to know about it, the rumours would have spread and, therefore, the only chance of surviving would have been to escape. Hence, sexuality in the home country is constructed in extremely negative terms as linked to silence, secrecy, fear and death. Ultimately, in the place of origin being a lesbian is not a possibility, this is conveyed throughout the extract by the use of the expression "you can not" next to the spatial marker "there". In the following extract, Jason provides a similar account.

Extract 4.4.

In Cameroon it's a taboo, like an outcast, something that is not allowed by the tradition... and the people respect that custom. A lot people don't even have that in mind, like it supposed to exist, just like it is here, there it's not accepted (...) being homosexual, or lesbian, transgender, LGBT in general, or any activity of LGBT, yeah. (...) No, you can't, you can't, it's deadly, it's deadly, seriously, you have the whole community on you, they'd break the whole place... oh my God you can't even do it, how can you? It's [laughing sarcastically] I mean, (...) where I come from, if you live in Cameroon. [Jason]

Jason explains that in Cameroon being gay is not a possibility for several reasons. We find homosexuality is described as a taboo, outcasted, that is, something that is considered and proscribed by tradition. Further, he explains how in Cameroon for many people homosexuality is not even conceivable as something that can exist. To explain this point, he therefore refers to "here" in England where homosexuality exists, is practiced and is socially accepted. The extract concludes with a reference to the danger of manifesting

one's own sexuality in the country of origin. Taking part in "any activity of LGBT" would mean facing certain death since the whole community would know about it and would therefore destroy the place where this is happening.

Extract 4.5.

In Malawi, you always have to be hiding. Because it's different to here, because here, people don't (...) really care. But in Malawi, it's... People, they don't really care here if you're gay, that's what I've seen. Gay bars, you don't have that in Malawi. People ban that thing. Yeah, it is illegal... If the police don't arrive in time, people beat you up. And then the police beat you up and then arrest you. And it's 14 years in prison. (...) And then with the church as well. When you go to church, they talk about gay people. And not the word gay, because people don't really ... when I was there, people didn't really use the word gay. (...) Some other names, like dirty people. [Fabian]

In the third example, Fabian makes similar claims. First, the idea that in his country of origin, Malawi, sexuality must always be hidden due to its criminalised status. This point is articulated through the contrast with "here", in England, where people "do not really care" if someone is gay and where there are "gay bars", which are banned in Malawi. The extract continues with reflection upon the consequences if someone is caught in homosexual acts, to which Fabian replies by explaining that the police can beat, arrest and detain you for 14 years. Moreover, "if the police don't arrive in time", Fabian continues, even ordinary people could violently assault a person. The description of the unacceptability of homosexuality on the part of the community is reinforced by the reference to the church community; Fabian in fact explains that when he was "there", in church, "they" were talking negatively about "gay people". Moreover, he explains that actually "they" do not even use the word "gay", but some other words with an extremely negative connotation such as "dirty people". The idea of exclusion from the community is therefore reinforced by drawing a separation line between "they" and "gay people". The third-person plural pronoun "they" is associated with the idea of community and church, hence with purity, which stands in sharp contrast with the use of the expression "dirty people" to refer to "gay people", who are ostracized by the community. In the following extract, all the previously seen points are articulated in more details and generalized to all of Africa as opposed to England by Micheal. The spatial marker "in Africa",

indeed, is repeated throughout as to underline that the observations he is making about sexuality are common to all Africans.

Extract 4.6.

In Africa, (...) everybody knows (...) automatically you're straight. Automatically, they don't need to ask you. They know you're straight. (...) if you're sitting with your partner, you can't even hold the hand, you can't go closer. You need to keep a bit of distance, like you don't need to make them even suspect you. So, it's very difficult, because you always live like a double life all the time in your life. You keep asking like hundreds of questions... am I going to live like this the rest of my life? Is this right that I'm doing? Is my parents happy about this? Your parents keep talking to you and ... there are some times the parents will tell you, "You need to get married and get kids" But you can't tell to your parent, "No. I'm not like this". Because the moment you say that, is the moment your life ends. If you voice that, definitely your life is gonna end, sure. Yeah. (...) Because it's not here, in Africa there's mob justice. You can't control mob justice. When people just break and start beating you, even the government can't protect you, even the police. (...) Because when the population is beating you, there's nothing you can do. (...) It's illegal. (...) When I say I was living a double life, when I got into a relationship, that's when I started the double life, because I can't express it. But basically, I need to show my parents I'm a different person, like the person they want me to be, that's what I'm going to be. But deep in me, I'm not (...). In Africa, the pride of the family is very difficult... Like if I come out today gay, my family know I'm a disgrace, and they think the only thing they can do to erase that is to cut me off all relationship, or even to kill me, so that they can wipe out everything about you and then just forget about you. (...) It's not only the pride of the family. The family is forced to take that responsibility, because the community is mounting pressure on your family. Sometimes in church, they reject you in church if they know you're homosexual. [Michael]

The extract opens with the observation that in Africa being homosexual is not even conceivable to the point that people consider each other “automatically” as heterosexuals. Given these assumptions, any deviation from the heterosexual norm can be viewed with suspicion and, therefore, in order not to be discovered, homosexuals must adopt acceptable public behaviours, such as not taking each other's hands or being too close

when in public. Hence, they must “live like a double life all the time”. The extract continues with an introspection on how difficult it is to live such a “double life”. Michael lists the questions that he kept asking himself during his double life in Africa. The questions reveal not only the personal concern of living such a state (i.e., “am I going to live like this the rest of my life? Is it right what I am doing?”), but also in relation to his family (i.e., “is my parents happy about this?”). Hence, he gives voice to the parents, who used to urge him to get married and have children, while he could not explain to them that he is not “like this”. In fact, if he “voiced” his homosexuality to them, his life would end. Hence, homosexuality is again linked to secrecy and silence, as we have observed in the previous examples. The extract continues with an explanation regarding why his life would end if he had to disclose his sexuality. This is largely achieved by opposing “Africa” to “here”, England. The explanation takes up the points seen in the previous extracts. In short, if you publicly declare your homosexuality in Africa your life would end due to mob justice (which even the police cannot safeguard against) and state justice (since it is illegal). The extract concludes with a detailed explanation of the “double life” that he had been forced to live. In fact, Michael had tried to make his parents believe that he was what they wanted him to be, that is, a heterosexual man, by starting a heterosexual relationship. Therefore, he explains how, in Africa, family pride is important, and how coming out would be difficult since it would mean a “disgrace” for the family, which will have to “cut him off” or even “kill”, in part because of pressure from the church community where they preach against homosexuals, being an example.

#### **4.3.Hiding in the Host Country**

As noted in the previous section, for LGBT asylum seekers, being open about their sexuality turns out to be impossible in their countries of origin since it is often illegal, and it can lead to severe penalties, such as imprisonment or even the death penalty. Furthermore, many individuals find it difficult to come out to their families because of shame or being exposed to mob justice. This sort of problems does not seem to vanish once the country of asylum is reached. In fact, the stigma, shame and persecution for being LGBT, which trigger silence, secrecy and isolation, seem to characterize their life in the country of asylum too. In this section, further data extracts will be explored in which participants describe their daily life in the communities they belong to in England.

Crucially, the way participants describe their present in England is similar to how the country of origin is constructed in the extracts previously discussed. Ultimately, being open about their sexuality in the host country is difficult for fear of persecution and rejection within the host country too by people originating from the same social, ethnic or family group and society at large. Moreover, there is also the fear that the news of one's own LGBT sexuality could travel back to the country of belonging and compromise the lives of their family members who still live there and who were perhaps unaware of that. The first two extracts describe the difficulties of living an openly homosexual life in England for fear of the judgment and reaction of their host communities. Then two examples will be analysed, whereby participants explain their fear linked to the possibility that the news of their homosexuality could travel from the community of belonging in the UK to that in the country of origin. The section concludes by exploring participant fears of disclosing sexuality in public places in the UK.

Extract 4.7.

When I moved to London, I was living in south-east London, in an area dominated by Africans. I was living in Thames Smith, around Thames Smith, um, Woolwich area, an area dominated by Africans so that to come out fully about my sexuality it was still very difficult. It was, it is still very difficult because at times they all invited me at Churches [laughing]. When I go to churches, they are preaching against homosexuality, I am just at the back in the middle I say, "Oh my God!" [laughing] [David]

In this extract David states that once he arrived in England he had initially lived in an area of London "dominated" by Africans. David explains that, precisely for this reason, being completely open about his homosexuality turned out to be "very difficult". The use of "still" suggests a certain continuity between the condition of the past in Africa and that of the present in England in the African community of belonging. This last aspect is even more evident when David uses "still" and the verb in the past and present tense - "it was, it is still" - to describe the difficulty in being openly gay even in reference to the church in London, where the Africans of his English community used to go to and where they preached against homosexuals. In the following extract, when asked to reflect on nostalgic sentiments towards life in their country of origin, Martin provides a more

detailed account of the inability to disclose his identity to his family and to the community he belongs to in the UK.

Extract 4.8.

In my life I must say I miss my mum and dad, they are all dead, never got closer to see where they are buried, never got to say goodbye to them... I've got my family in here but not that close...and as well like, <SIGH>, I'm too stuck with my identity as well. My identity is like LG member, but I'm still trying to cope with it... understand it, as I told you before. Like last year I told Vanessa... (...) if I'm going to tell my aunt...that I'm bisexual...I'm gay, that's when they are going to kick me out of the house. I'm not able to stay there, because (...) I can't say it to anybody, I can say it to you guys in this group, I can't tell my brother and all that stuff, 'cos he is from Africa... if I tell my aunt, whatever, only, but it will spread into the whole of Newtown, like wood fire...and it means all the people I know will start alienating me and, you know, people got a big mouth they can't help themselves... Newtown is so small and everyone knows everybody (...) I can't even walk to that corner there without finding someone who I know. Imagine, everyone listen to you starts judging you... and I'm seen like somebody, a person who is not good... I'd got to put a draw for the places where I go and volunteer, I know that CSPA [a Newtown-based charity, providing support for people affected by HIV] they wouldn't mind, but CSPA there's where my aunt is always down there, so I can't say anything to them that much as well because it might slip somebody's mouth and goes and end up somewhere.

[Martin]

The extract begins with pathos, Martin sadly sighing that he was certainly missing his mother and his father, now dead, to whom he had not even been able to participate in their funerary rites. This image of pain for the loss of his family in Africa leads him to reflect on his family in the UK. In the extract he talks about an aunt and a brother and explains that not only are they not so close to him, but also that he could never talk about his sexuality with them. The reason why this is not possible lies in their African origins “‘cos he is from Africa”. If he had revealed it, in fact, he would certainly have been cast out from the house and the news would have spread throughout Newtown “like wood fire”. Hence, the people who knew him would have alienated him. Martin also explains that he had been able to reveal his sexuality only within FPR, for example to Vanessa, one of FPR volunteers, and that it had proved difficult to reveal it even to the psychologist he had seen for a year. The confessional dynamics of this disclosure within FPR will be

the theme of the next chapter, for now it is enough to observe how FPR is constructed in this account as a safe place, the only safe place within the English community of belonging. As Martin explains, in fact, he could not have disclosed his homosexuality even within the organizations where he used to volunteer, which overtly supported the LGBT community, such as CSPA. In fact, CSPA was a place that the aunt used to attend, hence she could have learned about the sexuality of her nephew from other people there to whom he had disclosed it. Hiding, therefore, is not only from people but also within places in the city, Newtown, which is “so small and everyone knows everybody”. This aspect, as we shall see in the last section of the chapter, will be of crucial importance in choosing the location of the FPR office in a hidden place of the city.

Extract 4.9.

Here you get help, and then you socialize a lot, (...) and you get help, you get counselling. Because (...) it's not easy for somebody with our culture to be open here, it's not easy. (...) Yeah, because with the way how we grow up, it's sort of like... it's not allowed in Malawi. They think they can cure gay people. (..) It's like a disease. And then with the culture as well, people always talking about it on their radio, on TV, or even you go to a bar, people will be talking about it like it's very... that's a no, you know? (...) Yeah. I lived there almost all my life there, and then to switch, you can't just easily get into being free here, you see? Because I'm still thinking, someone from Malawi might see me here and report me to people in Malawi, that'll be embarrassing, and then it'll be embarrassing to the family as well. Yeah, so it would be embarrassing to the family. And if it's embarrassing to the family, it might affect people, like my family in Malawi, that, "Oh, their son is gay", and people might not talk to them, you see? [Fabian]

In the above extract, “here”, the UK, is built in positive terms as a place where “you socialise” and “get help and counselling”. Fabian goes on to explain that this kind of help is important because it is very difficult for people from his culture to be open about their sexuality. Hence, the country of origin is constructed in contrast to England. In Malawi, homosexuality is considered a disease to be treated, “it's a no”. In England, on the other hand, it is hiding one's own sexuality that is considered a problem that requires psychological help. Moreover, England is associated with the possibility of being free

about their sexuality, a possibility which, however, people like him cannot yet enjoy. In the next chapter, the therapeutic function that FPR plays in helping members to come out will be analysed in more details. Another reason to hide his sexuality in England is the fear that someone from his Malawian community in England could spread the news to his community and family in Malawi. Shame, therefore, does not simply refer to the personal shame of freely and publicly communicating one's sexuality, but also to the shame brought on the family back in Africa, which would lead to their ostracism. Similarly, in the following extract, Amir describes the fear that the news of his homosexuality could reach the family and community of origin, which is described as the main reason to conceal it from individuals of his own community in England. While he seems concern about the consequences that its unveiling might cause to his family back home, he does not seem to be ashamed of his sexuality.

Extract 4.10.

I remember there (...) was a guy, (...) we grew up together. He was like my friend since I was in Iraq... his mum knew my mum... and they are like... they're half British, something like that, so he came to England when I went to UAE (...). So, we were separated when we were so young... and I saw his Instagram and from it I can tell he's...gay friendly. (...) So, I was like, good, but at the same time, I couldn't have connection with him (...). I SO WANTED to get in touch with him, but then I felt like... no, I don't want to... get anything that it's connected somehow to my mum or to my parents because it will get into some certain sort of drama in the end... I just want to prevent that. (...) I don't know the reason why I'm hiding from this specific people... (...) I don't really care what they think, but (...)I don't want to connect to my family and then cause some problems back between my family. Yeah, so... otherwise I don't really care about what they even think about me... (...) because it can get very serious between my family back home (...) between my parents or their families. So, I was like, why should I risk it? (...) I actually... sort of... stop getting in touch with all of my old friends... when I got 19 and then took my decision... and I made a new Facebook account (...) to have like certain privacy [Amir]

In this extract, Amir tells how once he reached the UK and realised he was a homosexual at the age of 19, he had ended the relationships with all his old friends, especially with a boy he had been friends with since he had lived in Iraq as a child before moving to UAE

and then to the UK. Amir explains that they had been separated when they were young, but that he was able to track him down through his Instagram profile, from which he had learned not only that he was currently living in England, but also that he was “gay friendly”. Amir goes on to explain that although he “so wanted to get in touch with him”, he would not have done it for fear that disclosing his sexuality to him could then create problems to his family and between their families back home. Amir does not seem to be ashamed of his sexuality nor does he seem to care about what other people might think about it. However, he must keep it hidden to prevent “some sort of drama” in the country of origin. Another interesting point to observe in this extract is that hiding does not take place only in physical, but also virtual, communities of belonging. In fact, Amir exposes that since the day he finally realized he was a homosexual, he cut off all his old friendships that could lead him back to his country of origin, for example, by creating a new Facebook account. The question of respect for and the right to privacy, as we will see in the following section, represents a constituent element of FPR, which aims to help its members come out in private settings. The following extract by the participant encountered in the last section provides insights into other issues associated with being open about his sexuality in the UK.

Extract 4.11.

Back home I was being rejected. I don't see my family. I can say I don't have a family because I don't talk with them anymore. Yeah. But here, same here, people do reject you if you happen to be open. People will reject you, not behind your back, but in front of you. People will tell you in front (...) without you even saying anything, people just say how they feel about gay people, like it's a taboo. (...) If you hear people talking about, I don't think you'll still go to say, "Oh, I'm one of this." The atmosphere makes me to stay quiet... even here, if you want to mingle... because when you come here you want to mingle, but when you start to mingle, you hear when people start to talk about gay and lesbian in there, where you are, you wouldn't want to take a step ahead. You wouldn't want to tell anybody, because they say only things that are gonna scare you. So, the best thing to do is, I think just isolate myself. You stay back, and if I want to drink, I can go to the shop, get a drink, get back home. [Michael]

In this extract the fear of rejection by the community, due to his homosexuality, leads the participant to hide it; significantly this is clearly considered as a common aspect between the

country of origin and the country of arrival. The way people talk about gay people in the host country is similar to that in the country of origin. That is, homosexuality is a “taboo” and must be “rejected”. The rejection by his family in his home country is therefore perpetuated in the host one, where he cannot “mingle”, but just “isolate” himself. In fact, the fear of being rejected by the host community leads Michael to adopt evasive behaviours, for example by avoiding communicating his sexuality, but also avoiding drinking in public places and preferring to do it at home alone. As we shall see in the next chapter, the loss of his family and the need to “mingle” are important aspects, which trigger the search for a community that can finally welcome him and that he will find in FPR.

#### **4.4 Persecution in the UK**

In the previous section we looked at some of the difficulties that LGBT asylum seekers may encounter in being open about their sexuality, which trigger their state of isolation in the host country and constitutes one of the main reasons for setting up a supporting group dealing specifically with LGBT asylum seekers. Another main reason ought to be found in the way LGBT asylum seekers are maltreated by the Home Office as Ellie, SforRA coordinator, explains in the following extract:

Extract 4.12.

Because one of the horrible things about seeking asylum because you’re gay, is the way that you’re treated in this country by the government. Well, how can you prove that you’re gay? [Ellie]

According to Ellie, the main reason why LGBT asylum seekers have a “horrible” life in the UK is the way they are treated by the government, which forces individuals to prove their sexuality in order to be granted asylum. In what follows, Luke’s account will be analysed, which provides more details about this issue and how it constitutes a key element in FPR. The section will conclude with an exploration of participants’ accounts. The construction of the Home Office as main persecutor in the host country has consequences in the way the latter is constructed in opposition to a persecutory home country as we have observed in the previous section. The following extract, which is the very beginning of the interview with Luke, is the setting for a long

explanation on how he conceived his idea of a support group for LGBT asylum seekers and managed to make it happen:

Extract 4.13.

**Lena:** Can I ask you how did FPR start?

**Luke:** Well FPR started from my bedroom, that's what I can say. In fact, it is not even from my bedroom. It started from my shower, when I was still living in NASS accommodation. That was after my interview from the Home Office (...) was declined, but I had a chance to go to court and then it was declined [again]. (...) The reason wasn't convincing because they did not have a conclusive reason why they had to decline granting me the status.

I do not know if it was for the reference to such intimate places, or because I expected a more articulate answer inherent to the collective dynamics of formation of FPR, but I must admit that I was surprised and felt slightly uncomfortable when Luke replied straight away that FPR had started from his bedroom, actually from his shower. Later in the interview he explains that he has his best ideas when asleep or while he is taking a shower. At least the message was clear: FPR was Luke's idea. In the above extract, he explains that he started thinking about it while he was applying for asylum. At the time he was living in a National Asylum Support Service (NASS) accommodation (a section of the UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) division of the Home Office responsible for accommodating people seeking asylum while their cases are being dealt with) and his "interview from the Home Office" had been declined twice, for reasons that did not convince him. By reflecting on his first-hand experience, Luke starts developing his idea of creating a group of support for LGBT asylum seekers, who might face similar difficulties, which seem to lie in the Home Office assessment methods of such claims. This is explained in further details in the following extract

Extract 4.14.

I wanted someone who can give their time to dig deep so they can get to know how LGBT asylum seekers are affected by the system, yeah, and why it is so hard for them to get their papers. Because (...) if you identified yourself as an LGBT member and you were claiming asylum people were bullied, there was clear bullying by the Home Office. They've been bullied because you had to prove to

them that you are LGBT member (...). And people went to an extra length of producing lots of materials, many people were producing videos, visual materials, yeah, about them having sex with their partners, you understand? To prove that they are who they are. But again, the Home Office was turning them down. So, this is what I mean, most of the LGBT centres or groups, we are fighting to make sure that the Home Office can change because everyone is entitled of their own privacy, yeah, what happens in your bedroom or my bedroom, it stays with me, yeah, I can choose to have sex tonight, I can choose not, I can choose to have sex in any angle, but I don't have to tell publicly that "oh this was how, what I did last night", you know what I mean? But even then, it came to a point that the Home Office were not even well I mean, it was very hard to prove to them until they think that "ah ok we tortured him enough now let us grant them", you understand? So, I said "no, we need to fight" but we are not going to fight with the whole crowd we need to identify a group of armies, yeah, that group is the one which is going to put on that fight, yeah, I know during the fight many of them will be killed but the survivors will have an impact on the community, yeah. [Luke]

In this extract, LGBT asylum seekers are constructed as victims of the Home Office's bullying. Unlike other reasons for seeking asylum, they must demonstrate their sexuality to the authorities with their unacceptable assessment methods. For example, there have been cases of LGBT asylum seekers who have produced visual and video material of their sexual intercourses to include as evidence in their asylum applications. Cases as such, according to Luke, represent an unacceptable violation of privacy, as a person should not be forced to share their sexual orientation and practices to anyone. While in the previous sections we observed the issues associated with being able to openly disclose their sexuality, here the struggle of LGBT asylum seekers seems to be opposite. On the one hand, the problem is to finally be free to be open about their sexuality. On the other hand, the problem becomes that of being LGBT without having to declare it publicly. The Home Office violates the privacy of LGBT asylum seekers because they are forced to expose and prove their sexuality, often by relying on desperate attempts, such as producing visual material of their sexual encounters. Crucially, not even such explicit evidence is enough to demonstrate the declared sexuality, which leaves LGBT asylum applicants harmless. The Home Office is therefore constructed as a cruel and unpredictable "bully", who decides to set his victims free only when they "have been

tortured enough”. Against this bully, a real army must be opposed, which will fight to defend the powerless victims. During the fight, “many will be killed” (i.e., their asylum applications will be refused, they will be deported and will face persecution and, ultimately, death), but “the survivors” (i.e., those who will get leave to remain) will have an impact on the whole community. In Luke’s narrative, studded with rather mystical-religious overtones, the Home Office emerges as a sadistic superpower against which LGBT asylum seekers will succumb if left on their own. Hence, a “group of armies” must be identified to stand the fight; i.e., “someone who can give their time to dig deep so they can get to know how LGBT asylum seekers are affected by the system, yeah, and why it is so hard for them to get their papers”. Luke is ready to put himself in charge of this squadron, but he needs fighters and armaments and that is what motivates him to seek help from the various organizations that were already supporting him at that time, as we shall see in the next section of the chapter.

For the purpose of this section, it is important to note how persecution in the UK as perpetuated by the Home Office is articulated within participant accounts. In the extracts that will be analysed in what follows, participants seem to struggle with accommodating contradictory accounts on the host country. Although the UK is constructed as a “human rights” country (in opposition to the persecutory home country), as we have seen in the previous section, simultaneously the persecution perpetuated by the Home Office constructs the host country as denying fundamental human rights. Moreover, the Home Office is constructed as a form of sovereignty with the power and capacity to dictate over life and death (Mbembe 2003). In the following extract, Martin clearly and concisely explains this contradiction:

Extract 4.15.

That’s why asylum seekers and refugees have come to this country for they are fleeing persecution.... They are fleeing persecution, and guess what? They are coming to Britain and they get persecuted by the Home Office as well [Martin]

Martin’s expectation of a life free from persecution are not met in Britain where the Home Office persecutes asylum seekers. The linguistic rhetorical feature “and guess what?” invites the listener to take an active part in the construction of the Home Office and heightens the “irony” of the situation – seeking asylum into the hands of a punitive “sanctuary”. The contradiction between home and host country is overt in the following

extract too, where Penelope talks about being unhappy in the UK in relation to her asylum status.

Extract 4.16.

That is the meaning of asylum (...): to treat us fine. They supposed to take care of us, but they are maltreating us so there's no one who can be happy. When you flee your country, how can you be happy? Everybody is happy within their country, no matter how bad it is. (...) You think I'm happy? ... I can't do what I wanna do... I'm here (...), I fear for my life, because for anything they can turn me away. (...) you want me to go back there (...) to die? Yes, I'll be killed... so obviously how can you be happy? Of course, I want to be here, because here, I believe, my human right is respected (...). Not now, no, no, not now. Now it is not respected. (...) I came here because I know here my sexuality, my human right is respected. Because of my sexuality I said to come here, because I believe in this country they push hard on human rights, though they don't practice it. They don't practice it, they don't practice it. [Penelope]

The extract begins with a consideration on the supposed meaning of asylum, which is to “treating fine” and “taking care” of asylum seekers. Hence, Penelope explains how this is not the case as “they maltreat” asylum seekers so that no one can be happy. The extract continues with a reflection on the meaning of happiness. She explains that everyone “is happy within their country, no matter how bad it is”. Hence, fleeing one’s own country triggers unhappiness. What is more, she cannot be happy “here”, in the UK, since her life as asylum seeker lacks freedom (“I can’t do what I wanna do”) and is characterized by fear for her life. The latter is due to the fact that the government has the power to deport her back to the home country, where she would be killed. The home country is thus constructed in opposition to her host country, as a place where human rights and sexuality are nominally respected, but liberties are curtailed. The extract concludes with the unresolved contradiction that, although “in this country they push hard on human rights”, yet we find “they don’t practice it” with asylum seekers. In the following extract, the way LGBT asylum cases are assessed by the Home Office has been identified as the main cause of distress and unhappiness for them:

Extract 4.17.

The government (...) should try to (...) consider we LGBT, 'cos someone like me now I don't have any hope. If the Home Office says that I am not granted asylum status, I'm going to kill myself, because I prefer to die in England than going back where they are going to kill me with stones. Yeah, it is not wrong how this government is treating LGBT people, yet it is not right. Yes, (...) they are recognising us, and they are not recognising us, which is not good. This is human right country, everybody has the right to fight for his own right, you understand? So (...) they have to temper justice on us and see how they can be assisting us especially LGBT people. (...) [T]he first time I came to the UK, I've seen lots of freedom, because I've seen lots of threatening in my country. When I came to UK my lifestyle changed, I sleep very well, I go out any time I like. But the only thing (...) making me harder mental now is that...how government is treating LGBT people revisioning their application... especially from Africa, which is not good. What I see is that there are some England citizens don't like black people, which is not good everybody we are one... and in my country in Nigeria we are colonised by this British government... yeah! We are colonised by the British government. So, they have to (...) consider us, especially African people, not only all those white people. They have to consider we are human beings like them. [Omar]

The above extract begins with Omar talking about his faded hopes for the future, in which he admits that he is not currently happy because of the treatment of LGBT asylum seekers by the British government. According to Omar, the main issue that LGBT asylum seekers face after reaching the UK is precisely that of having their claims put on a hold because of the continuous “revisioning” of their application. Here Omar is referring to the indefinite and usually long time of assessing asylum claims. At the time of the interview, Omar had claimed asylum six months prior, but he was still awaiting an answer from the Home Office, which caused him considerable distress. Both the home and the host country are constructed as places of persecution and death. In the host country persecution is perpetuated by the Home Office, which has the power of deciding not only on the individual life but also on their death. Ultimately, the only choice that Omar seems able to make is that of choosing where and how to die; i.e., by lapidation in his home country or killing himself in the UK. Thus, the host country is constructed in opposition to his home country, where he was subject to “lots of threatening”. In UK, instead, he saw “lots of freedom” upon arrival, which helped him to improve his everyday life. However, his

first-hand experience with the asylum system has made him redraw his expectations on England as a “human rights country”. This contradiction is overtly expressed: “it is not wrong how this government is treating LGBT people, yet it is not right”. The contradiction finds a resolution at the end of the extract, where Omar explains that the treatment of the government towards LGBT people differs according to the LGBT group at stake. English citizens can enjoy the rights that England is promoting. On the other hand, LGBT asylum seekers are persecuted by the British government with its long and unfair methods of assessment. The two types of sexual identities so mobilized in the participant’s discourse are also racialized and de-colonized: “England citizens” are “white people”, while LGBT asylum seekers are “Africans” and “black people”, which must be equally considered. This line of reasoning is inextricably bound to the country’s historic status as a former colonial power: *the British government should recognize the human rights of everyone*, “England citizens” and “human beings” coming from the former colonies (see Farrier 2011).

#### **4.5.Looking for a Hidden Sanctuary**

The ways in which participants describe their home and host country in relation to their sexuality seems to reinforce SforRA institutional discourses which construct them as individuals hidden inside the host country and communities due to the impossibility of openly revealing their sexuality. Such construction of these subjectivities no doubt shapes the decision-making process of determining an appropriate place to gather members; this provides the focus of this section. During the interview, Luke explained that initially he considered the LGBT centre in Newtown, which he used to attend as a service-user and as a volunteer, as a possible place to host his support group for LGBT asylum seekers. However, he realized that there were two main issues with it. One reason was purely economic: there were not enough funds to create a branch for the exclusive support of LGBT asylum seekers. Luke outlines the second reason in the following extract:

Extract 4.18.

But again, there was another obstacle (...) I tried to introduce a couple of people to The LGBT Centre but because of where it is, it is on the main street, which is in Bellingdown street, and again (...) on the outside there is a flag, our LGBT flag, the LGBT flag, so it (...) proved to be very hard for people to walk through their doors.

They can walk in, but coming out (...) was very hard [Luke]

Luke tried to introduce some LGBT asylum seekers to Newtown LGBT Centre, but he noticed a twofold problem. People entering The Centre can be seen by anyone, suggesting that they are members or associates of the LGBT group. Indeed, the Newtown LGBT Centre is located on a main road (Bellingdawn Street) and at the entrance the LGBT rainbow flag is clearly visible. Furthermore, exiting The Centre presents an additional problem since, for many, coming out is a thwart prospect. Another participant described how difficult it could be for LGBT asylum seekers to enter and exit the LGBT centre and the techniques employed to get unobserved:

Extract 4.19.

So, someone has to go the other side of the street, walk the other side, then coming up, or just walk so near and up walk together, just enter very quickly. And coming out is sometimes... it is not easy (...) to step out of the building [Daniel]

Many try to go unnoticed as they cross the entrance of the LGBT centre, they try to hide behind other people and walk very fast. Nonetheless, they will still have to deal with coming out from the centre, which metaphorically represents the transition from inside to outside the closet. While entering and exiting the LGBT centre is seen as problematic for LGBT asylum seekers, Luke does not seem to have such a problem:

Extract 4.20.

So, it was a struggle. It was only for the brave like me, who went in, went out also, who were free, feeling free, 'cos for me, I was free to go out and say, "this is who I am". (...) So, we want to create that sense that everyone should be out, live free, regardless of their nationalities, regardless of their families, or setting up, or anything, yeah, anyone should be free... [Luke]

In his account, Luke occupies a subject position that differentiates the majority of LGBT asylum seekers. In fact, he is "the brave", who is free to be who he truly is. He is also the one who sets others free by accepting and welcoming them in FPR community, which stands in contrast to their countries and communities of origin where they have been rejected. Hence, Luke decided to suggest the project to SforRA, which could provide a

free space to hold meetings in an office in a more discrete location than the LGBT Centre, that is, far away from a prejudice gaze. At the time, SforRA was renting an office space at the Centre Against Racism, Exclusion and Discrimination (CARED). CARED is a voluntary organisation that was established in the nineties with the aim to actively promote and seek to implement a racially just, fair and equitable society. One of the main areas of work at CARED is thus supporting the development and maintenance of key voluntary sector groups, which address interest within racial minority communities, hence the partnership with SforRA supporting the refugee community of Newtown. CARED is located only five-minutes walking distance from St Francis house, where SforRA drop-ins for asylum seekers and refugees used to be held, therefore, it would have been easy for SforRA LGBT members to reach CARED after the drop-ins. Most importantly, going to CARED would not have raised any suspicion about the sexuality of LGBT asylum seekers, who could go there for other reasons than looking for support on their sexuality.

Before talking to Ellie, Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SforRA) coordinator, about the possibility of using the office at CARED for his support group, Luke turned to another prominent personality in the organization, the SforRA co-coordinator at the time, Sami. In his account, Luke's proposal is greeted with great enthusiasm:

Extract 4.21.

And then I spoke to someone called Sami he was coming to pick me up, I spoke to him on the way to town, and I told him "You know what? I need support. I want to put together a project for LGBT asylum seekers, but I want it to be under the Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers" (...) and he said "You know what? You better do it, yeah, that would be great!" (...) I said, "oh yeah that's good"  
[Luke]

In an interview with Sami, I asked about that conversation with Luke and he told me that he did not remember it. What he remembered well, however, was that himself and Luke had been among those at SforRA who had pushed for renting an office at CARED. According to Sami, Luke's intervention in influencing SforRA's decision to use part of its funds to rent an office at CARED had been crucial. In an interview published in the Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SforRA) bulletin, Sami, the newly

appointed co-coordinator of SforRA, explains how the idea of renting an office at CARED emerged thanks to Luke's crucial role:

Extract 4.22.

About the recent opening of the new office, could you please tell us more about how it was made possible? [SforRA]

The opportunity came about through the chair of our Members Committee, who was volunteering here at CARED and mentioned that we should inquire into receiving office space. I then followed that up and now we have an office! We suggested it throughout the organisation and everyone was positive and as of Tuesday two weeks ago the new Board of Trustees voted and now we have an office space! [Sami]

From the above extract, we learn how the very idea of renting an office at CARED had been suggested by the SforRA "chair of the members committee", namely Luke. The interview goes on to explain how the new office would be used to facilitate the collaboration between SforRA and other support organizations, such as CARED, as well as the internal collaboration within SforRA. For example, a function of the office would have been to host the Steering Group and Trustees meetings of the organization. In addition, other SforRA volunteer groups could have used the space, such as student groups and a training group of researchers affiliated with Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers helping asylum seekers writing their persecution story and assembling other evidence to include in their asylum application. Therefore, it seems that Luke had pushed for SforRA to lease an office at CARED to improve its external and internal collaboration, and the general support for asylum seekers and refugees. Even so, nowhere in the bulletin is mentioned the idea of using the office to host a support group for LGBT asylum seekers. The SforRA bulletin in which Sami's interview appears was published online almost two months before the meeting between Luke and Ellie was held, where Luke had suggested his idea to create a group of support for LGBT asylum seekers, which was described at the beginning of the chapter. Thus, it was only after the CARED office was officially approved by SforRA that Luke finally went to Ellie to propose his idea, as he explains in the following extract:

Extract 4.23.

that office specifically was to do Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers jobs but behind it... it was like I wanted an office for this project. So, straight away, [Ellie said]: "the office is there we are not using it Luke if you are willing to use it use it with your group" I said "oh come on! Yeah!" [Luke]

Hence, before the meeting with Ellie, Luke had already started developing imaginaries about a support group for LGBT asylum seekers and looking for an institution that could physically host this project in a suitable place. To these, Luke adds more managerial and institutional motivations:

Extract 4.24.

Because Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers is a collection of refugees and asylum seekers. That's one of the organizations which are looking after asylum seekers and refugees. I could say, apart from Red Cross, which is dealing with all the issues, Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers is next in line to those organizations, which are offering support, yeah. Although they don't go for too much support, at least they bring together asylum seekers and they meet every once in a week too as asylum seekers, yeah, which I think very few organizations in Newtown are doing that. Cause when you look at the numbers, they are going high. The last time I checked, it was 149, yeah. But now we have 1059 asylum seekers who're dispersed in this area and still more are coming, do you understand? So, we still need more organizations, anyway, to do the same, yeah, but Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers is flying the flag (...) together with Red Cross and other organizations. I know there are other organizations, we have CARED, which is also supporting people who got their papers. It is helping them to integrate (...), they are doing a good job. There are also other organisations, I am trying to do some bit on the side, we need to all come together, yeah, because this is a cause which is not going away for them, in a few years' time, it's still going on, so we need all to come together. [Luke]

In the above extract, Luke defines Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SforRA) as an organization that, like others, such as Red Cross, provides support to asylum seekers and refugees. However, unlike Red Cross, "which is dealing with all the issue", SforRA offers more limited help. On the other hand, SforRA is distinctive for gathering together

asylum seekers by providing a meeting space, such as the weekly drop-ins. Therefore, SforRA is viewed as “a collection of refugees and asylum seekers” from which to draw potential service users for Luke’s project. To this observation is added the statistics of the drastic increase in numbers of asylum seekers dispersed in Newtown, for which an increasing turnout at SforRA is expected. Finally, Luke explains that SforRA “is rising the flag”, that is the LGBT flag, which means that it officially supports the LGBT community. What has been observed so far makes SforRA the appropriate institution to implement Luke’s project at an organizational level too. It is interesting to observe how in this extract asylum seekers are completely depersonalized and reified through various linguistic strategies. They are a collection, they are numbers, very precise, calculable numbers, which are going up, from “149” to “1059”, they are “more and more”, they are dispersed, they are something that must be managed at the organization level (see Baker & McEnery 2005; Baker et al. 2007; Gabrielatos & Baker 2008; KhosraviNik 2010). Luke, in this extract too, does not position himself in the asylum seeker subject position. Rather, he uses “they” to refer to asylum seekers and refugees. Luke uses “they” even when he talks about other organizations in Newtown, like Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, Red Cross and CARED. It makes evaluations about “them”: Red Cross deals with all the problems, Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers does not do much in terms of support but at least it is a regular meeting point for asylum seekers and refugees, and finally CARED does a “good job” because it helps people who have got their papers to integrate. Luke uses “we” in reference to Free and Proud Refugees, “We, at FPR”. In fact, it must be noted that the interview with Luke was conducted one year after the formation of Free and Proud Refugees. Moreover, at different points in the interview, Luke defines himself as “the coordinator of Free and Proud Refugees”, and he clearly assumes this subject position. As in this extract, it is with topics of an institutional and organizational nature that Luke seems to endorse his institutional role of representative and coordinator of FPR. Luke is giving the interview as FPR coordinator to a university researcher and project volunteer. The use of managerial talk is evident in the linguistic register employed throughout the extract. He is FPR, positioned at the intersection of various Newtown-based organizations that help asylum seekers and which support “the LGBT cause” too. Luke-FPR urges these organizations to “all come together” to support the cause of LGBT asylum seekers. Despite their commitment to tackle this common enemy, the various support organizations, such as Sanctuary for

Refugees, Red Cross and The LGBT Centre do not seem prepared to protect LGBT asylum seekers, who remain defenceless against the brutality of the Home Office. The clear final statement of the importance and inevitability of “the cause” makes Luke-FPR indispensable for these groups. The exhortation/observation “we need all to come together” is reiterated at the end of the extract. The only moment where Luke speaks with the first-person singular is precisely when he claims that, like other organizations, he (i.e., Luke-FPR) is trying to do “some bit on the side”.

#### **4.6.Conclusions**

Throughout the SforRA institutional discourses and participants’ accounts explored throughout the chapter, the figure of the LGBT asylum seeker emerges with specific characteristics. People falling within this identity category are primarily constructed as invisible, scattered individuals who live in a state of secrecy and isolation within the larger group of asylum seekers and refugees in the host country and in the SforRA community. Ultimately, what prevents them from being open about their sexuality is the shame and trauma connected to it, which originate in their past and country of origin. Hence, the host country is constructed in direct opposition to the persecutory home countries, as “a human rights country” (compare Raboin 2017a; 2017b). The symbols of the LGBT community are territorialized, deterritorialized and reterritorialized, constituting different fields of visibility that organize bodies and discourses accordingly. On the one hand, LGBT categories and symbols, such as rainbow colours, are built within the accounts of the participants but also in the institutional speeches of SforRA and FPR, as symbols of a universal community that welcomes every LGBT person regardless of the country of origin. In addition, LGBT colours are embodied by LGBT asylum seekers once in the UK, who wear them in the form of rainbow shirts or bracelets, as we saw in Alice’s case; but also, they are employed in their support organizations, as in the case of the rainbow flag, symbol of the LGBT community, which embraces the message of the first leaflet (see figure 1). Finally, these perform the function of strengthening homonationalist constructions of the country of origin and of the receiving country. For example, Alice explains that while in England she is free to wear rainbow shirts and bracelets, in Uganda that would surely have triggered mob justice. Furthermore, as noted in the analysis of the first leaflet, the country and the host organizations are built in

opposition to a homophobic and persecutory country. However, the LGBT flag is also deterritorialized from these configurations, since it begins to play a threat function even within the host country, England. In fact, LGBT asylum seekers who would like to attend the LGBT centre of the city, instead avoid it because they fear to be discovered by members of their communities who are not aware of their sexuality. The LGBT centre is indeed located on a crowded road of the city centre, where a large rainbow flag hangs at its entrance, so as to reveal to any possible observer the non-heterosexuality of those entering. This type of relationship is manifested in practical organizational choices, such as the choice to constitute the support centre of FPR in a hidden place within another organization, therefore without LGBT colours or symbols at its entrance. In turn, this organizational tactic contributes to practically forming the group of Newtown LGBT asylum seekers as a group hidden from others. In this way, we witness a process of reterritorialization where the rainbow flag returns to function as a symbol of a universal community, but at the same time serves to create sub-groups within it, that of LGBT asylum seekers who must hide for fear of revealing their sexuality. Therefore, the LGBT flag helps to build what Raboin (2017a, p.13) describes as the "queer heaven": a universal LGBT community in England as much desired as unattainable. Another type of deterritorialization is observed in the construction of the countries of origin and reception. As noted, these are built in opposition to each other; i.e., the homophobic country of origin versus England as a human (LGBT) rights country. At the same time, however, the host countries are deterritorialized in a territorial sense (forgive me the confusion of the terms), as they no longer designate a specific place and time (i.e., the persecutory past in the country of origin), but they also manifest within the host country. In other words, we can see the formation of transnational, physical and virtual, communities, made up of ethnic, religious, family or friendship groups, which are reterritorialized into homophobic constructions. In the course of the chapter we saw, for example, how David was hiding in the community of the first reception church in London, or how Martin had to hide from people of his African community and family in England, but also Amir who decides to create a fake profile on social media and not to connect with people from his community of origin. Thus, these constructions also refer to practices that influence individuals in their everyday lives. We can thus observe a distortion of the concept of national border, whereby the home country collapses within the borders of the host country. The deterritorialization of the countries of origin within the UK supports the formation of

internal borders, which serve to isolate more and more LGBT asylum seekers in England. Importantly, there is also a flow of power between LGBT asylum seekers and members of reception communities in the UK, which configures in a panoptic surveillance system (Foucault 1978) observing and controlling individuals at any time. Moreover, the UK is also deterritorialized from its human rights country position, whereby LGBT asylum seekers struggle to enjoy their everyday life in the UK in various ways.

On the other hand, other LGBT asylum seekers seem to endorse other subject positions than the one outlined so far. For example, the story that emerges from the interview with Luke constructs him as a hero figure, who successfully tackles all the issues he encounters in the realization of his project. At the beginning of the chapter we observed how Luke stood out from other LGBT asylum seekers for he was the only one openly and (in his terms) fearlessly gay in the whole of SforRA, whereas others had to shroud their sexuality in secrecy. Similarly, he overtly adopts a subject position of “the brave”, who is free to be open about his sexuality, hence to go in and out the LGBT centre. Moreover, Luke celebrates his managerial skills. Thanks to his role within the various organizations, Luke persuades key people to approve and fund his project. In fact, he manages to mobilize these organizations to his advantage to support and fund his project for LGBT asylum seekers. The latter, ultimately, are deprived of any type of agency and across his interview extracts they are often presented as victimised and reified. Luke occupies the same status as other organizations: he is not a member of FPR, he is the coordinator of FPR, he is FPR. Luke-FPR is an agency, in every sense of the word; i.e., a business or organization providing a particular service on behalf of another business, person, or group. Ultimately, Luke-FPR endorses two main functions, to assist people, on the one hand, to come out, and on the other to prove their sexuality to the Home Office, which will be fully explored in the following chapters. Thus Luke-FPR gathers and welcomes LGBT asylum seekers, who struggle to come out. As observed throughout the chapter, LGBT asylum seekers struggle to come out because of issues of shame and fear of persecution. Hence, Luke-FPR’s function is helping people to come out. The following chapter will explore in detail the dynamics of such coming out, which seems to be a constituent part of these subjectivities and in turn of FPR as organization. In fact, LGBT asylum seekers, in order to be considered as such, must disclose their sexuality to British authorities. Moreover, as observed in the present chapter, Luke explains that “to prove that they are who they are”, asylum seekers are exposed to bullying

by the Home Office. This expression conveys the idea of an individual truth associated with sexuality, which will be unpacked in the next chapters. Luke-FPR, therefore, with his care will help people to extract this truth, which must be demonstrated to the authorities. Thus, another function of Luke-FPR is that of protecting LGBT asylum seekers against the Home Office bullying by helping them to pull together a strong asylum case, which will be the main theme of Chapters 5 and 6.

## Chapter 5: Coming Out

This chapter further explores a dynamic that has featured in prior analysis, namely the ‘liminal experience’ (Stenner 2017) of coming out. The expression coming out refers precisely to the public declaration of one’s homosexuality, which in the case of LGBT asylum seekers has different implications and refers to different actors and institutions. For example, as observed in the previous chapter, the first FPR leaflet seems to suggest that the main discomfort of LGBT asylum seekers, for which a support group ought to be constituted, lays in the shame of talking about their sexuality, which triggers their state of isolation. In the first section of the chapter, we will consider in depth how coming out is constructed as a constitutive feature of LGBT asylum seeker subjectivities, as a fundamental need of these individuals, which in turn has implications for the type of support that FPR ought to offer them. One of the main functions of FPR, which we found initially and primarily endorsed by Luke, is precisely that of helping individuals to come out. The latter does not simply refer to being able to disclose the sexuality to someone, but also to understand it. Hence, the chapter interrogates this coming out function performed by FPR as a support organization. On the one hand, this can be regarded as a therapeutic-caring function; i.e., through care and compassion, FPR helps individuals to finally feel confident and secure to disclose their sexuality. On the other hand, it seemingly refers to a hermeneutical function; i.e., FPR helps individuals to understand and interpret the disclosed sexuality. The underlying power relation between members and volunteers is helpfully interpreted with reference to Foucault’s explanation (2007) of a pastoral technology of power, whereby individuals are subjected to Luke and other volunteers endorsing the role of the confessor; i.e., the recipient of their coming out. Thus, coming out becomes constituted as a key organizational feature, whereby FPR prospective members become officially recognized as such by means of a series of coming out ‘rites of passage’ (Van Gennep 1960). That is, prospective members are invited to disclose their sexuality first with Luke and/or another volunteer, on registration forms and finally within the whole FPR group. The last section of the chapter describes FPR’s coming out, that is the first public event that FPR participates in as an official LGBT support organization, which seems to be in line with humanitarian and homonationalist discourses explored in Chapter 3. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main

points explored so far and in relation to what will be discussed later on regarding how they will be implemented in asylum applications.

### **5.1. Coming Out as Constitutive Feature of LGBT Asylum Seekers**

In the previous chapter, we observed how LGBT asylum seekers were constructed in their accounts and in SforRA's discourses as invisible, scattered individuals, living in secrecy and isolation within the larger group of asylum seekers and refugees in the host country and in their welcoming communities. Ultimately, this seems to be framed by the struggle of being able to openly talk and socially perform sexuality, with shame being a key factor. In the following extract, Luke further elaborates on this point:

Extract 5.1.

People (...) are struggling to come out ... yeah, they are struggling (...) to come out...they are also seeking asylum (...) they are looking for that place of sanctuary, where they can go, and someone says, "okay ... sit here, don't worry, you are who you are" [Luke]

In Luke's account we find LGBT asylum seekers live a real struggle because they are not able to "come out" and because "they are also seeking asylum". These two aspects - i.e., coming out as LGBT and claiming asylum - are strictly connected. In fact, to get leave to remain, LGBT asylum seekers must first disclose their sexuality to the UK border agency authorities as the reason for holding a well-founded fear of persecution in their country of origin. As noted in the previous chapter, in the first FPR flyer, the sexual aspect of LGBT asylum seekers stands out from their legal status. That is, LGBT asylum seekers are regarded primarily as LGBT people ashamed of talking about their sexuality. This seems to be reinforced in the above extract, whereby they are constructed as people "struggling to come out", who are "also seeking asylum" and looking for "a place of sanctuary", where they can finally reveal to "someone" their sexuality. Being able to get rid of that secret - i.e., coming out to someone - seems to be portrayed as an essential need of the individual. However, as observed in the previous chapter, coming out cannot happen everywhere but in a "sanctuary" within a sanctuary; i.e., Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers. Only in such a safe space they can finally open-up to someone, who will welcome them for what they truly are (i.e., "you are who you are"). For LGBT

asylum seeker coming out is thus described as a struggle, but also as a constitutive feature of the individual holding an inner truth that must be brought out and confessed (Foucault 1988; 2007). As observed throughout the extracts of his interview, Luke occupies a different subject position to the majority of LGBT asylum seekers, who are struggling to come out. In fact, he takes upon the subject position of “the brave”, who is free to be who he truly is (see Chapter 3, extract 20). In the above extract too, Luke takes upon a different subject position than the majority of LGBT asylum seekers. He registers “they” who are struggling to come out and need to tell “someone” their secret. We find that “someone” is Luke, who will welcome and comfort them by receiving their confession nonjudgmentally. Another reason why LGBT asylum seekers struggle to come out is presented as inherent in their inability to recognize or understand their own sexuality. This is conveyed in Ellie’s account, SforRA coordinator, as we can see in the following extract:

Extract 5.2.

A number of people joined the group who are new seeking asylum, but I didn’t know why. (...) There are quite a number of people who came to Free and Pride Refuges who are very uncertain about acknowledging their sexuality. So that was quite interesting, was quite an eye opener. [Ellie]

In the above extract, Ellie explains how she was surprised about some new members of SforRA who had joined FPR apparently without a clear reason. In fact, they were registered at SforRA as asylum seekers on grounds other than sexuality. Nonetheless they seemed “very uncertain about acknowledging their sexuality”, and that is why, according to Ellie, they had started attending FPR. In the following extract, Luke explains in further details this point, when he describes the different types of FPR service users:

Extract 5.3.

A [FPR] service user should be someone who is under the umbrella of LGBT (...) someone who’s not an LGBT shouldn’t be using our services because they are not and at the end of the day you see that now that one is faking it... I know there might be some smart ones but again it’s not our job to screen people (...) that’s why I always encourage that people should... write their story. It is through that story that you get to know... there is an element of you being who you claim to be

and there is an element of you not being... how do we work it out? Where is your heart? Where do you stand when it comes to the case? So (...) first bring out what is in their heads and in their hearts. Where are they dwelling? Where is the biggest percentage of their life falling? 'Cos I have seen people were trying everything in life, yeah, we call them "the lifestylists" ... the lifestylist is someone who is always trying this and that, and that, and that, yeah, at the end of the day, you might be trying something not knowing you are activating the senses in your body which have been there [Luke]

In the above extract, Luke mobilises a categorical work of *sorting out* and dividing FPR members according to three categories. First, members who are "under the umbrella of LGBT". Second, those "who are not LGBT" and are "faking it". Third, "the lifestylists", who are uncertain of their sexuality and gender identity. Luke claims that while only those who are truly LGBT should use FPR services, "some smart ones", who pretend to be LGBT, equally benefit from FPR. Hence, in the above extract the figure of the authentic/inauthentic LGBT asylum seeker overtly emerge along with the moral distinction of the deserving/underserving (Murray 2014); that is, only authentic LGBT asylum seekers deserve to be supported, *whereas* "someone who's not an LGBT shouldn't be using our services". In subsequent chapters we will consider how these dichotomies unfold in the LGBT refugee determination process and construction of credible LGBT asylum narratives. For the purpose of the present discussion it is sufficient to note that, although Luke is able to establish whether a FPR member is an authentic or inauthentic LGBT asylum seeker (i.e., "at the end of the day you see that now that one is faking it"), his role is not "screening" people. That is, Luke-FPR's role is not that of applying the law and judging whether a member is an LGBT asylum seeker or not, which is the Home Office's role (i.e., the use of the word "screening", indeed, recalls the Home Office screening interview, which is the first Home Office interview in the asylum process). Instead Luke-FPR performs both a therapeutic-caring and hermeneutical function as he comforts and helps scaffold members understanding of who they truly are in order to come out. That is, not only does he help individuals who struggle to come out to "bring out what is in their heads and in their hearts" through care and compassion (i.e., therapeutic-caring function), but he also helps them to interpret it, to understand who they really are (i.e., hermeneutic function). This is indicative of the efforts to avoid becoming a proxy of the Home Office, whilst at the same time reproducing some of its strategies;

as we shall see in more details in the following section, the relationship that is established between Luke-FPR and individual members seem to be a form of pastoral power (Foucault, 2007), which subjects them to the one providing care and protection. Therefore, there is an implied idea of an inner truth that ought to be extracted, which is often deliberately hidden from others by the individual who is struggling to come out. What is more the “true sexuality and gender” may be hidden from the individual self too. The “lifestylists”, as Luke’s defines them, are struggling to prove who they are to themselves. That is, among FPR members, there are not only people who know to be LGBT but struggle to come out for the reasons we observed earlier. The implication here is that there are also people who still do not “know” and understand which moment in a liminal unfolding they occupy. The “lifestylists” are people who have tried “this and that”, that is, different sexual experiences. Indeed, most of my LGBT asylum seekers informants claimed to have had issues with accepting and understanding their sexuality and they had often tried to repress it or to lead a heterosexual life (see Chapter 3, extract 6). According to Luke, in trying “this and that”, something in the body is often “activated”, something that “has always been there”, but that they struggle to understand for it had been always hidden from others and the individual self too. Luke’s role is, therefore, to help the lifestylists not only to disclose their sexual experiences deviating from the heterosexual norm, but also to understand their real meaning. That is, to understand whether they are manifestations of an authentic LGBT identity. It is through self-examination and confession that individuals will come to understand who they truly are. In fact, Luke always encourages FPR members to tell and “write their story” because it is through storytelling that they might realize the contradictions inherent in their asylum case on the grounds of their sexuality. That is, there might be “some elements” that seem to support their declared sexuality, while others might contradict it. So, Luke’s function is to help them understanding “which side” they really are on, which is functional not only for the individual need of finally coming to term with their sexuality but also for the

In this section I tried to underline how, starting from a construction of LGBT asylum seekers as individuals who are struggling and need to come out, one of the main support functions of FPR comes to be. That is, Luke and FPR volunteers make sure that members can come out, through comfort and their knowledge; that is, they help them not only to accept and externalize their sexuality, but also to understand it for what it really

is. Thus, Luke and the volunteers take the position not only of “caring consolers” (i.e., therapeutic-caring function), but also of “experts in subjectivity” (i.e. hermeneutical function), “expert saviours” (McGuirk 2016, p.116) or “masters of truth” (Foucault 1988, p.67). In Chapter 6, we will see in more detail how Luke and other volunteers performed this therapeutic-caring and hermeneutic function, with the aim of assembling credible and therefore winning asylum claims.

## **5.2.Coming Out as a Constitutive Organizational Feature**

In the previous section we observed how coming out seems to be constructed as a key feature of the individuals looking for asylum on the grounds of their sexuality. In this section, we look at coming out as a constitutive organizational feature of FPR. Particularly, we will attend closely to how the members came into contact and registered with the organization by means of several coming out “rites of passage” (Van Gennep 1960). That is, through the “coming out rite of passage”, prospective FPR members becomes official members of FPR. Initially through the first telephone contact with Luke individuals are brought to disclose their sexuality at a one-to-one confidential appointment with him or another volunteer. Whereas the first group meeting encourages members to unveil their sexuality to all the other members and volunteers of FPR. As we shall see in the next chapter, the symbolic and spatial area of transition (i.e. from inside to outside “the closet”, and from outside to inside a group of LGBT asylum seekers) during these coming out rites of passage accompanies and is functional to the passage from one social position to another; i.e., from hidden and/or irregular migrant subjectivities to openly LGBT asylum seekers. In what follows, by drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews with my LGBT asylum seekers informants, I will present in greater detail how these rites are established within FPR throughout its history, from the first flyer and meeting and throughout the duration of the project.

## **5.3.First Coming Out Rite of Passage**

From its formative beginnings FPR is constructed in the first flyer as a kind of telephone helpline to contact, on specific days and times, to request a confidential appointment or to receive more information on how to meet other LGBT asylum seekers and refugees.

The flyer thus establishes a point of contact with dispersed individuals in order to gather them together and to offer a confidential space. Therefore, the confession of one's own sexuality, i.e. coming out to someone, represents a fundamental aspect of FPR since the beginning. A week after the SforRA drop-in when the first FPR flyer was given out, the first FPR meeting took place in the office that SforRA was renting at CARED at the end of January 2015. I had been informed about the meeting over the phone by Luke, as I had shown interest in helping with the project. He had not given me many details except that we would meet around 2pm after the SforRA drop-in. When I finally reached the office, Luke had invited me to join the round table where other people were already sitting. Besides me, Katie (another volunteer of SforRA) and Luke, there were four other people I had seen before at the drop-ins of SforRA, but I did not personally know them as potential service users of FPR. Luke had opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and suggesting starting with a round of presentations in which everyone should have said their name and their sexual orientation. He reassured all those present that they could feel confident to share that information in such a protected space. He then broke the ice with a big smile: "Luke, gay". No one seemed to resist the invitation to introduce themselves and reveal their sexual orientation. As the round of presentations was coming to my turn, I felt strangely uncomfortable. I had never been in a situation where my heterosexuality was not taken for granted. On the other hand, coming out as heterosexual did not seem right to me. As a woman in a heterosexual relationship, educated according to a heteronormative model, who had only had heterosexual relationships and only partially explored sexual attraction towards people of my same sex, I could have chosen to declare myself heterosexual. However, I rejected any heteronormative categorization that the heterosexual term could evoke. On the contrary, I embraced an anti-categorical approach to sexual identities. Moreover, declaring myself heterosexual or not providing an answer would inevitably have placed me in the category of the other, the heterosexual, within the group. Finally, there were aspects of my identity that I could not conceal and that placed me in any case in the category of "the other": the white, the volunteer, the researcher. In fact, at the meeting, apart from me and the other English volunteer, nobody was white, with a British or European passport and with 'free' access to education and work. It seemed to me safer in those circumstances, therefore, to use the "bisexual" identifier, because, although it constituted a category, it still seemed more open and less restrictive than that of "heterosexual". Furthermore, it would allow me to find at least one clear

starting point for cohesion with the group at least at the level of sexuality. It was the first time that I publicly declared my sexuality as bisexual and from a certain point of view it seemed liberating. However, it was as if I had decided to definitely put a dominant part of my sexuality, my heterosexuality, inside the closet (McDonald 2013; 2016). There would be other opportunities to share these “identity dilemmas” (Rumens et al. 2018, p.13) with group members and volunteers, and reciprocally renegotiate our identity categorizations, which I will explore in more details in the next chapter.

After the round of presentations, Luke distributed a form to fill-in with personal details, including name, surname, sexual orientation and country of origin. On the form, there was also a space to indicate if a person was a volunteer, asylum seeker or refugee. Before closing the meeting, Luke explained that from that day onwards we would be gathering every Thursday after the SforRA drop-in, in that same office, to start the support activities facilitated by himself as the coordinator and the present SforRA volunteers, Lena (myself) and Katie. He also mentioned that details of the type of support would be communicated at due time. Finally, it showed the office facilities at our disposal – an archive with lockers to securely keep members and volunteers forms, a computer station and a kettle for free coffee and tea – and gave us a brief tour of other two adjacent smaller rooms, which could be occasionally booked via the centre reception for one-to-one meetings. Thus, on the day of the first meeting, the SforRA support group for LGBT asylum seekers was ratified. It did not have a name yet, but seven members in total: five asylum seekers (Luke, two lesbian women from Uganda and Cameroon, Alice and Joy, and two gay men from Iraq and Zimbabwe, Ahmed and Martin) and two European citizens (Katie, bisexual, English and Lena bisexual, Italian). At the first meeting, FPR composition and structure began to take shape, despite roles and responsibilities were not discussed in detail. Luke, chair of the Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SforRA) members committee, had led the meeting and introduced himself as the “coordinator” of the new project of support for LGBT asylum seekers hosted by SforRA. On the other hand, Katie and I, volunteers of SforRA, were introduced as the main “volunteers” or “case workers” of the project. Finally, the other asylum seekers attending the meeting were officially registered as “members” of FPR.

#### **5.4. Individual Coming Out Rites of Passage**

Some of the aspects observed so far will remain key in FPR for the entire duration of my fieldwork. For example, Luke will remain the official point of contact for prospective members: his telephone numbers will be the only ones to get in touch via telephone with FPR. In addition, to officially register at FPR, new members would have a first assessment with Luke; that is, a private confidential meeting with the main group coordinator, in order to explain their story and the reasons that prompted them to request help at FPR. Luke would then decide whether the candidate could become a member. Usually, self-declaration of one's sexuality was sufficient to evaluate an individual as suitable for being part of FPR. At the first assessment, members were requested to fill out the registration form, which maintained the original design (i.e., asking to disclose personal details including sexual orientation and gender identity). Moreover, the new member was provided with information about the support that could be offered at FPR. Finally, the registration form was then printed and stored in a personal folder in the archive of the office, whose keys Luke was the exclusive holder. Usually, the meeting place of the first assessment was the office at CARED. In some cases, however, public places, such as cafes, were chosen as meeting points. The newly registered members were then invited to participate in group meetings, but this collective participation will never be considered mandatory. With the increase of members and volunteers, Luke would begin to delegate some of his initially exclusive tasks and responsibilities to designated volunteers, and copies of the archive keys would be given to them. After a successful assessment with a prospective member, for example, Luke could delegate a volunteer to proceed with the official registration; i.e. printing, filling-in and storing the application form. In other cases, other volunteers could do the first assessment and register new members, whereas Luke would meet them and review their case at a later point. After the first assessment with Luke or other volunteers, a member was then invited to join the weekly drop-ins of FPR at the office at CARED. The first meeting with the FPR group constitutes a further coming out rite of passage within the organization, which I will explore in more details in the following section. Several FPR members used to meet privately with Luke and their designed case workers, but they would never come to the group drop-ins. The reasons were different. Some did not have the opportunity to participate because they had other commitments, such as attending college, or because

they lived in other cities (such as London or Birmingham). Others were not comfortable meeting other LGBT members of the same African communities, for reasons as observed in the previous chapter.

In what follows I present extracts from three participants, whom we met in the previous chapter, where they tell how they came to know FPR and disclosed their sexuality to become members. The extracts are also important because they provide us with insight into the different backgrounds and places of origin in the UK of the participants. In the first of these examples, Amid describes the dynamics of the first assessment, while in the last two David and Michael tell about their different experiences of the first group meeting.

Extract 5.4.

**Lena:** when did you get to know FPR?

**Amir:** FPR hum so was in December 2015. When I figured it out... I went to UAE then for holiday during new year. I came back and then I was like... I've made up my mind: I will do it... So, in the beginning of January, there was... hum... a guy that I dated before, he is a volunteer in the LGBT centre. I've messaged him and told him I want to do this and he got me in touch with someone called Daniel (...) and he gave me... a brochure that has "FPR" and he told me to go to you guys (...), yeah, and there were like two numbers and one of them was... he told me "call this one, this is Luke, speak to him, to Luke, he knows everything" and I did.

**Lena:** So, then you called Luke. What did he do? Did he invite you?

**Amir:** yeah, he did so I became a member

**Lena:** how did you become a member?

**Amir:** so, when I went, he was like "you need to become a member". So, I told my whole story. He was like "sure we can do"

**Lena:** who was listening to your story?

**Amir:** so, it was Luke and then Daniel came (...) and Luke was like... he assigned Daniel as my case worker

Amid is a young man from Iraq, who had lived most of his life with the family in UAE. He had moved to England in 2012, when he was only sixteen years old, with a regular student visa to continue his A-levels. After successfully completing his studies, he started a bachelor programme at the University of Sheffield and at the time of the interview he was completing his third and last year with an industrial work placement. In the interview,

Amid talked extensively about similar experience and feelings of independence and freedom during his period of study abroad. He also explained how, when he was nineteen years old, he could finally get to grips with his homosexuality. In England, he had started dating other boys and had his first romantic relationships. He was convinced that the family back home, especially his father, would never accept his homosexuality and would rather try to “correct” it. He also knew that in UAE he could not be open about his homosexuality as he was in UK, because it is forbidden by law and culture. However, his period of study was coming to an end and he would have to return to UAE as he had agreed with his family. He was therefore looking for a way to continue to reside legally in the UK after his student visa had expired, a way that would allow him to be economically independent without having to confess his homosexuality to the family. As he explains in the interview, he started looking online and came across the UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG) website, a leading charity that promotes equality and dignity for LGBT people seeking asylum in the UK. On their website he understood that he met the requirements to apply for asylum on the grounds of his sexuality. He figured out about this possibility in December 2015, just before going back to UAE to spend the Christmas holidays with his family, as he explains in the above extract. When he came back, he had finally made up his mind to apply for asylum. At the time, he was dating a volunteer of the LGBT centre in Newtown. Amid told him about his intentions of applying for asylum and he put him in touch with Daryl, the Project Manager of The LGBT Centre. Daryl will give Amid a FPR brochure and encourage him to contact Luke, who is described as someone who “knows everything” about such asylum applications. In the above extract, Amid tells of his first telephone contact with Luke, when he invited him to a meeting to “become a member”. When asked how he became a member, Amid said that he told his story to Luke and Daniel, the volunteer that Luke had appointed as his “case worker”. Thus, in this extract we see a clear example of the first coming out rite of passage in private confidential settings in order to become a member of FPR. This is a different kind of coming out rite than when he first came out to himself and others once he arrived in the UK. In this context, in fact, coming out works as a rite of passage to become member of FPR. The individual coming out rite usually took place in one of the rooms next to the main office, where FPR drop-ins used to take place. The rooms were very small and equipped with a table, a computer and chairs. A chair stood on one side of the table facing the computer screen, another one was placed across the table toward

the back of the computer, while other chairs were found in bulk at the back of the room. The way in which the furniture and the objects were arranged, therefore, recalled that of a support service office, where the service-provider would sit on the side of the computer and the service-user on the other side of the table. The room and the arrangement of furniture, objects and bodies could also recall those of asylum interviews where asylum seekers are questioned about their past by the authorities. I remember once I had a first private meeting with one prospective member, Penelope, together with another assigned case-worker, Giulia. As we entered one of the rooms above described, Penelope seemed nervous: the atmosphere was visibly tense. Hence, I decided an alternative arrangement of furniture, objects and bodies in the room to help alleviating the tension. I wanted to create a more welcoming environment. Giulia helped me arranging the chairs in a small circle. I thought that, in this way, we could create a more comfortable atmosphere and thus relieve some tension. I had decided then to start the meeting by trying to reassure her. I told her that she was in no way forced to share anything with us. That she could have stopped at every moment of the meeting to take a break or to end it. Unfortunately, even that kind of approach was terribly similar to the incipit of asylum interviews, which typically opened in a similar fashion. So, I asked her if she wanted to be registered with FPR and what kind of support was she looking for. Penelope had mumbled something, settled on the chair, laughed hysterically and finally said "yes, I want to be registered because I'm a lesbian". She had then burst into tears, covered her face with her hands, apologized for she was ashamed and could not say that sentence serenely. We all hugged each other. It was an instinctive reaction. I too was terribly ashamed, for the role I was covering and for the violence I felt I had subjected her to. Hence, I suggested that the meeting should be interrupted and that we would be able to see her again later when she felt calmer and only if she wanted to. The shame and discomfort of the moment disappeared, Penelope firmly stated that she was feeling fine and absolutely wanted to continue with the registration.

### **5.5.Group Coming Out Rites of Passage**

In this section we will look at another coming out rite of passage within FPR; i.e., the first group meeting. The latter typically took place during the weekly drop-ins of FPR in the main office. People would sit around the two big round tables, whereas on other

smaller desks there were the food and drinks brought by members and volunteers. It was a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, music sometimes was played, and people danced, other times organizational matters were collectively discussed, as we will see in the next Chapter. In what follows, I will discuss two examples of group coming out rites of passage.

Extract 5.5.

**David:** Back in my country I was expelled from the church, so I was frustrated. I was looking for a church that would accept me. So, I went online. I saw... an article regarding the Church of England talking about gays. I said: “wow... that means I have a chance too”. So, I decided to write to one of the reverends there... She gave me a reply, she called me, we had a chat and she later advised. I explained my problems to her she later advised me to seek for asylum. She’s the one who (...) referred me to Red Cross and Free and Pride Refuges. (...) The reverend gave me the address, (...) and on that address the name “Luke”. (...) I met Luke (...) and then Luke told me I’m welcome and everybody is welcome. I met Daniel and... everybody was happy to see me in the group and they gave me lots of courage and... EVERYBODY... it was really a friendly environment

**Lena:** did you like your first impression was it good or...

**David:** super good

David arrived in UK in 2012 with a student visa to study in a two-year diploma programme at “a global school of management in London”, as David refers to in his interview. He could not complete his studies as the school’s licence to operate was soon to be revoked. He decided to move to Newtown then, in January 2015, to a friend’s house who encouraged him to move there. He was looking for a church that could welcome him despite his homosexuality, which was why he had been expelled from his church and community of his home country and forced to flee to the UK. However, as we noted in the previous chapter, he did not feel comfortable in the African and church community he was part of in London, because he could not be open about his homosexuality (See Chapter 3, Extract 7). On the other hand, once he moved to Newtown he did an online search and he came across St Joseph Church website, where it is highlighted how they are proud to be an inclusive church of people who are male and female, straight and gay, of all backgrounds and situations. Hence, David wrote to the reverend, who called him,

so he “explained his problems to her”. He was finally referred to FPR, which he joined in June 2016. After the private meeting with Luke, David would join the FPR drop-in, where he met Daniel, who, together with Luke, would have supported him as his “caseworkers”, and the members and volunteers attending it. In several interviews, participants described the first meeting with the group in similar way as David: a “happy”, “welcoming” and “friendly” environment. I have also personally witnessed several first meetings of new members with the group and many went in a similar way as David’s. In these group coming out rites of passage, people did not need to verbally declare their sexuality. New registered members of the group by participating at the drop-ins and introducing themselves as “new members” would convey their LGBT sexuality. In other cases, however, the first impression was not such a pleasant experience, as Michael explains in the following extract:

Extract 5.6.

**Lena:** How did you get to know about Free and Pride Refuges? How did you come into contact with us? Maybe we can start from there.

**Michael:** I was just browsing the internet. (...) I was just checking any LGBT place around Newtown. Because I was too ... a bit lonely, and I was home all the time, so I just said ... I was just checking. So, when I check, I saw Free and Pride Refuges (...) and I got to Luke. I rang Luke. Luke gave me how I will get there, and he gave me when the meeting is, and then took my number and my name, and then he said he was gonna call me to tell me how to get there. So, he actually directed me how to get there. (...) I spoke to Luke twice, and the first day we were supposed to meet, it seems there was no meeting. There was no drop-in. (...) I called Luke, so Luke said, “Next Wednesday”. (...) So, when I came there, I didn’t even know who Luke was. (...) My first impression was not quite comfortable. I was shy. I didn’t know what anybody was thinking. I didn’t know who I’m meeting. I didn’t know everybody. I didn’t trust anybody at that moment, at that second. So, the only person I wanted to talk to was just Luke. (...) Because (...) I met you, I met Katie, I was not comfortable. That’s why I was just sitting. Even to help you people, I was not even comfortable with that. So, I was just sitting quietly until I spoke to Luke. I didn’t trust people because I’ve never been open to people, and actually, I was coming to (...) meet one person, Luke. I didn’t know I’m gonna meet many people. And I didn’t know it was a drop-in. I just know it was just a meeting between me and Luke (...). So, I didn’t think I’m just coming to meet

many people at the same time. I was actually in a shock mode and I was tense, and I was just quiet and thinking too much. When I came in, I met you people, and I think it was Daniel that registered me. After Daniel registered me, Luke came in a bit late and said, "I'm Luke." And I was shocked, because I thought Daniel was Luke, because... I was confused, honestly. If you see me, the first day on that meeting, I couldn't look at you like this. I was always looking on the floor, and I didn't understand anything that's going on. And I was just... the shock was too much. The only way to absorb the shock was just to stay quiet and don't stare at people. Just be quiet and silent.

In this long extract, Michael describes in detail his impressions and feelings of the first meeting with the FPR group. Michael contacted Luke by phone, who informed him about the Wednesday drop-ins at CARED and suggested to meet there for a private meeting. Hence, Michael did not expect to meet other people on that day. Michael described the first FPR group meeting he attended in rather negative terms; i.e., "My first impression was not quite comfortable". He was "shy", "quite", "confused", "tense", "uncomfortable", "shocked", "thinking too much". I was at the drop-in too and I could see that he was not feeling comfortable. When he entered the room he appeared confused, he introduced himself by whispering his name and ran to sit at a corner. I was struck by his curved posture and his gaze fixed on the floor. When other volunteers and members tried to talk to him, he was struggling to maintain eye contact and talk. In the extract, Michael highlights several times that he "did not trust anyone" at the drop-in. That is, he did not trust sharing the reason why he was in that place with anyone in the room. Moreover, he did not expect "to meet many people at the same time", he had gone only and exclusively to meet one person named Luke, who would help him with his situation. When Daniel arrived, he told Michael that he would register him with the organization. Hence, Michael thought he had finally met Luke, to find out soon thereafter that he was talking to Daniel, which contributed to distress him even more. Luke would finally arrive a short while later apologising for the delay. Luke and Michael would then go to one of the other two rooms next to the office, where the drop-in was held, for a private meeting. In the following extract, Michael describes the private meeting with Luke and how he was relieved afterwards:

Extract 5.7.

And then after Luke came, he asked me, “How are you? How have you been living?” And stuff like that. (...) Luke told me like, “It’s good you came here. We all have suffered the same trauma you’ve gone through, and we’re able to share your burden, and we’re here to support you. And we’re gonna give you guide on how you can be strong again”. And to be honest with you, when Luke spoke to me and I came back to that room, I was not the same. I was a bit relieved, because you know you can still have people that are out there that feel the same thing like you. After you’ve been rejected, and you see people like open up to you and embrace you and say we’re here to stand by you, we’re here to support you, it was quite an encouragement. So, when I left that room and came back I was a bit relieved. [Michael]

In the extract above the private meeting with Luke is described in a positive way, like a “relief” and “encouragement”. The function of Luke-FPR is described here by Michael as “welcoming”, “guiding”, “sharing the burden”, “supporting”, “embracing”, “standing by”. As noted in extract 5.1, FPR members seem to look for that “place of sanctuary” where someone can welcome and comfort them for what they truly are. In this extract too, we can observe the desire to find a community of people who have “suffered the same trauma”, “feel the same thing”, and can therefore understand, welcome and support him, after having been rejected. Ultimately, such negative experience of group coming out reinforced the idea and practice of having an individual meeting with a prospective member before meeting the whole group.

### **5.6. Coming out as Pastoral Technology of Power**

The notion of a pastoral technology of power (Foucault 2007) brings a helpful optic to specify the power relationship between FPR members and volunteers performing Luke’s function of confessor as above outlined. In what follows, I will demonstrate how the subjectivities, internal organizational dynamics and their interplay so far observed can be best described according to Foucault’s pastoral power, which he describes in depth during his lectures at the Collège de France *Security, territory, population*, between 1977 and 1978 (Foucault 2007). Therein Foucault developed the notion of pastoral power by drawing on the Judeo-Christian tradition of the shepherd leading and caring for his flock.

Pastoral power has, according to Foucault, some fundamental characteristics. Unlike sovereign power, which is exercised over a static territory, pastoral power is practiced over a flock, “a multiplicity on the move” (Foucault 2007, p.171). The very existence of a flock is determined by the presence and action of a shepherd: the flock is formed when dispersed sheep are gathered together by a shepherd; conversely, the flock ceases to exist when there is no shepherd to keep them together. Free and Pride Refuges is formed precisely when Luke starts gathering together dispersed LGBT asylum seekers attending the drop-ins of Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers. The first FPR flyer with Luke’s numbers on it is like the whistle of the shepherd that gathers together his sheep. From the beginning, Luke becomes the point of reference for the LGBT community of asylum seekers within SforRA. He is also a member of this community, being himself a gay asylum seeker. However, he does not seem to share the same constitutive features of LGBT asylum seekers, rather quite the opposite. LGBT asylum seekers live in a state of isolation and shame, while Luke is openly and proudly gay within SforRA and Newtown. Indeed, he is “the brave” who can walk in and out the LGBT centre, whereas LGBT asylum seekers typically fear to be seen and recognised by an accusatory community (see Chapter 3, extract 20). Luke is the promoter of the LGBT group of asylum seekers, while they are unable to spontaneously meet and organize on their own. He not only brings together dispersed individuals, but also comforts them individually and collectively.

Hence, another fundamental characteristic of pastoral power is that it is a benevolent form of power according to which the duty of the pastor is the safety and salvation (i.e., the French *salut*) of the flock, to the point of self-sacrifice (Foucault 2007, p.172). First, I will look at the aspect of salvation and then I will consider that of safety. The theme of salvation and sacrifice is highly and overtly present in Luke’s narrative. At different moments during his interview, Luke describes his role as leader (e.g., “I am the person who’s leading the group”), saver (e.g., “we could have saved so many people and we can save so many people”) and of “setting people free” (see chapter 3, extract 20). What does salvation refer to in the case of LGBT asylum seekers? What is the danger and the threat they should be saved from? What is the ultimate direction of their movement? What is the “Promised Land”? We can outline two main types of threat, movement, salvation and “Promised Land”; one referring to the legal aspect and the other to the sexuality and gender identity of LGBT asylum seekers. On the one hand, LGBT asylum seekers are threatened by the Home Office, hence they need help with preparing their

asylum case (See Chapter 3, extracts 12, 14, 15, 16 and 17). In later discussions we will consider the ways Luke-FPR helps members to pull together their asylum claims in order to get leave to remain. For now, it is enough to observe that in this case the movement at stake is that from one legal status (i.e., asylum seekers) to another one (i.e., refugees). Moreover, the promised land is the “human rights country”, the UK, as described in Chapter 3; i.e. a country of the future wherein LGBT individuals, who are granted leave to remain, will finally enjoy the same rights as LGBT British citizens (compare Raboin 2017a). Even so the main struggle for LGBT asylum seekers lies in the noted inability to come out. Hence, the desired transition is from inside to outside the closet, from invisibility to visibility. Luke, who is openly and (in his terms) proudly gay, goes ahead, shows the path towards salvation i.e. coming out through his own example; he is not fearing other’s judgments because he feels free to be who he truly is. Nonetheless, he is aware of the danger of such a mission as he knows that “many will be killed during the fight” (see Chapter 3, extract 14). In this case, the Promised Land coincides with spaces where LGBT asylum seekers can safely come out. For example, we saw how the office and FPR group are described as “a place of sanctuary”, a sheepfold where the struggling individuals, “regardless of their nationalities, families and setting-ups”, can finally feel free, accepted and as belonging to something (see Chapter 3, extract 20). This view resonates in participants’ accounts too, as it can be seen in the following extract:

Extract 5.8.

**Lena:** Let’s talk about Free and Pride Refuges so hum right what is it? For you?

Can you...

**Martin:** summarize it?

**Lena:** yeah

**Martin:** I think it’s heaven. A place where I am safe, happy, free to be who I am.

(...) here it’s where there’s just love, and I can just be myself for what it is. (...)

Around this place you feel at home, but for me it gives hope in me. (...) I like it here for people like us, yeah.

In the previous chapter (see extract 8), we had already met Martin and saw how his life in Newtown was marked by the discomfort of not being able to come out anywhere for fear of being discovered, except in FPR. In the above extract, therefore, we observe how FPR is built in his account as “heaven” counterposed to the everyday persecution he faces

in the UK as perpetuated by his community of belonging and by the Home Office too (see Chapter 3, extract 15). Only in FPR, in fact, he is finally free to be what he is. Feelings of “safety”, “love”, “happiness”, “freedom” are employed to describe his experience at FPR, which thus becomes constituted as a “home” welcoming people like himself.

The role of the shepherd is not just that of leading to salvation, but also keeping his sheep safe. “Luke the pastor” comforts and takes care of struggling individuals. The shepherd does not exercise his power by displaying his superiority and strength; rather “the shepherd is someone who keeps watch” (Foucault 2007, p.172) of any possible misfortune that can threaten the flock. Hence, the direction of the flock towards salvation involves a constant monitoring, care and management of the movement and activities of the flock and of everyone in the flock. That is, pastoral power is at the same time ‘*omnes et singulatim*’, totalizing and individualizing, directed towards the whole flock and each single sheep (Foucault 2007, p.173). The shepherd goes ahead, shows the direction and leads the sheep towards salvation, whilst taking care of all and each of them, to the point of self-sacrifice; for individuals and the group to earn their salvation they must follow the shepherd. Thus, a relationship of submission of each and all the sheep to the shepherd is established, although the shepherd experiences his role towards the sheep as a service to them. In the journey towards salvation, there are intermediate ends. The shepherd conducts the flock from one place to another, he knows where fertile fields are, which are the best paths to take, the good places for resting and when it is time to get back to the fold. While the shepherd directs the flock towards salvation, he takes care of it in several ways. He conducts the flock to the good pastures, he makes sure that each sheep is nourished and well-rested to keep moving, he cures those who are sick or injured, he plays them music and gives order to lead them to certain paths, and so on. During my fieldwork at FPR, I noted that Luke’s and volunteers’ tasks exceeded those of helping people with coming out or with assembling their cases. For example, Luke often organized barbecues at his place, he visited sick people at the hospital, and he provided food and money. In what follows, I will analyse three extracts from my LGBT asylum seeker informants, whereby they describe this caring function that Luke, and other volunteers seemed to endorse.

Extract 5.9.

**Lena:** what does Luke do for the organization? What's his role?

**Alice:** yeah, he is the boss... he's a good guy, yeah, he's a nice guy. (...) If I don't know anything, he knows, helps me understanding... he... buys me drink and, yeah, he takes care, yeah, he's taking care.

In the above extract, Alice describes Luke's main functions. First, he is leading the group (i.e., "he is the boss") with care and love (i.e. "he's a good guy", "he's a nice guy", "he takes care", "he's taking care"). Moreover, he is described as someone who knows, hence he is able to guide others in arriving at their own understandings of anything. Finally, the type of support that he offers includes also that with more trivial needs (i.e. "he buys me drinks"). In the following extract, Penelope explains how, after she had helped during a FPR drop-in with organizing an event, Luke had given her some money as a reward:

Extract 5.10.

And at the end of the day he (...) emptied his pocket and gave me all the coins. He gave me the money like, "this is for your job, well done" [Penelope]

As can be seen in the extract above, Luke often helped FPR members from an economic perspective also by giving them money as a "reward" for their work within the group. The language used by Penelope to give voice to Luke builds him as the good leader, who helps and rewards the most willing members with his own money. In the following extract, instead, Michael expresses his gratitude for all that he claims to have been able to do thanks to FPR, Luke and the volunteers:

Extract 5.11.

Katie, Luke, I come here, you know I'm gay, and you say, "If you want coffee" and "you're welcome here". But some people wouldn't even open their door to you. And when you go to drop in, you discuss, you laugh, you see people the same like you and you see you can make a party. You can relax with people and feel free. (...) You make me talk like this. If it weren't for you, for Katie, or for Luke, that I can start talking, I won't be able to come out and talk. So, you make me talk like this. So, I need to say thank you as well. (...) I can give an example what I've benefit. One, the advice you've given me. And the other thing, I came here, you gave us food, and Luke gave me like a suit when I was going to Croydon. [Michael]

In the above extract, Michael performs the subject position of the gay asylum seeker (i.e., “I came here, I’m gay”), who is different from other people. The latter are divided into two main categories. “Some people” are not welcoming (i.e. “they wouldn’t even open their door to you”). Other people, like Luke and other FPR volunteers, are different insofar as they welcome and support LGBT asylum seekers. This is achieved by providing a sanctuary space where LGBT asylum seekers like Michael (i.e., “people the same like you”) can “discuss”, “laugh”, “make a party”, “relax” and “feel free”. Moreover, Luke and volunteers alike perform the coming out function; thus, they helped Michael to “come out and talk”. In fact, as we have observed Michael had issues with accepting his sexuality, which led him to conduct a “double life”, hence pretending to be heterosexual (see Chapter 3, extract 6). When Michael claims “you make me talk like this”, he is referring to the fact that during the research interview with me he managed to talk through his history of persecution and sexuality, whereas at the beginning of his life in UK, and at FPR, he could neither talk nor look at anyone, as observed in extracts 5.6 and 5.7 of the present chapter. On the other hand, Luke and other FPR volunteers took care of him in other ways, such as offering “coffee” or “food”. Michael also remembers that time when Luke gave him “a suit” to wear at his screening interview at the Croydon unit in London. Finally, Michael seems to endorse the subject position of the grateful migrant, whereby he claims, “I need to say thank you as well”.

The pastor not only guides to salvation but prescribes the law. To save each and all individuals in the flock, the shepherd must make sure that they submit to the law. According to Luke, in order to reach the Promised Land of the UK, whereby LGBT asylum seekers will be granted the same rights as LGBT British citizens, they must submit to the law of the asylum system. In the following extract, Luke explains how he managed to be granted refugee status by complying with the system, rather than opposing it.

Extract 5.12.

**Luke:** I was not fighting the system, I was working with the system. (...) You don’t have to fight it, work with it! If you work with it, you get the best out of it (...). Because (...) if you oppose the system, (...) it comes back with a heavy hand. (...) I saw many people were fighting (...) ‘cos they see the system is not fit for them and I say, “okay, you fight it. I am not gonna fight it... I work with it...”.

Yeah, they say, “jump!” I say, “how high?” ... if I see that it’s too much, “can you cut it down?”, but I have to accept it (...)

**Lena:** but do you recognise that some other people were put down by the system?

**Luke:** yeah, because they don’t want to work with it (...). I don’t blame the system as much as I blame the people themselves.

**Lena:** so, you feel like that one of the roles of Free and Pride Refuges is also to make members understand this and try to work WITH the system?

**Luke:** yeah, you have to work with the system (...). We know things are not good, but we don’t have to approach it with heavy hand, we can approach it... with logic and intelligence

The above extract gives us an idea of how, according to Luke, asylum seekers should approach the asylum system in order to “get the best out of it”: one must “work with the system” instead of “fighting it”. In this case too, Luke teaches by his example how to reach the promised land, to get refugee status. Unlike others who see that the system is not good for them and so they fight it, Luke “works with the system”, to the point of accepting any request i.e. if they say “jump!”, he asks how high and only if it is a request beyond his reach, he kindly asks if it is possible to make minor adjustments. According to Luke, this has been the way he managed to win his asylum case. Differently, those who have been failed by the system, according to Luke, gain this status because they did not comply with the system’s requests. In the previous chapter we had observed how Luke built the Home Office as a super power that ought to be fought against since it persecutes LGBT asylum seekers with its assessment methods (see Chapter 4, extract 14). Nonetheless, the way to fight the system and to win one’s asylum application is not to oppose it but to approach it with “logic and intelligence”. In the next chapters we will consider what this type of strategy means in practice. For now, it is enough to note that the law prescribes a particular truth about the self. LGBT asylum claims are assessed on the grounds of membership to a particular social group. The latter is generally understood, at least *de jure*, as an identifiable group of people sharing an innate common characteristic that is so fundamental to their individual identities that members cannot (be expected to) change it. Hence, Luke-FPR will help its members to extract this truth and to articulate it in the language of the law.

In prescribing the law, the pastor does not turn into ‘a man of the law’ (Foucault 2007, p.230), who imposes it and judges according to it. Rather, his role is more similar

to that of a doctor, who takes care of his patients by diagnosing their illness and prescribing ways to treat it. As a doctor cures sick people, Luke helps the “lifestylists” to understand where they really belong to. That is, he directs individuals to examine their conscience, actions, temptations, bad thoughts and so on. Through the examination of conscience, ‘a particular discourse of truth on the self will be formed’ (ibid.: 218), which binds and subordinates the individual to the director of conscience – the pastor - whose role is that of, precisely, extracting and interpreting the truth. Hence, another role of the pastor is to teach the truth about the self and to exercise ‘spiritual direction (*direction de conscience*)’ (Foucault 2007, p.237). Thus, the technique of the confession is central to the exercise of pastoral power. Confession is that process by means of which the individuals transform their hidden desires and thoughts into discourse, so that the pastor is then able to reveal the truth that up until that moment was hidden within and from the individual. As we have observed, since the beginning, a fundamental aspect of FPR is the incitement to confession to expose the individual real self. The flyer urges prospective members to get in touch by phone to talk about their sexuality. The first FPR meeting starts with a round of confessions: everyone is invited to say their name and to disclose their sexuality. To officially become a member of the organization, prospective members must first meet with Luke and fill out the registration form, hence disclosing their sexuality orally and in written forms. Moreover, Luke encourages people to write their own story to detail their impulses and desires. According to Luke, this is how various elements of the individual life story emerge, which might support or not the self-claimed sexuality and gender identity at the core of their asylum claim. Finally, the space available to FPR at CARED is also organized in a way to facilitate the practice of confession. Initially there is the main office (used for group meetings) and then there are two other adjacent rooms, which are smaller (they can only comfortably accommodate a maximum of two or three people), where Luke or other volunteers can hold the first assessment with prospective members and regularly meet them privately once registration has been finalized. Luke is not a man of the law, the Home Office personnel who must screen people and judge them to sentence them. Rather he welcomes individuals and helps them to understand whether they are who they claim to be. That is, he helps people to bring out and interpret the supposed inner truth that had been hidden from the individual and others. By giving the necessary care to each one in the group, he helps them understanding who they really are and conducts them to salvation.

This type of construction of Luke as a pastor assumes even more significance by observing a crucial aspect of Luke and FPR; i.e., religion. Luke was a member of St Joseph Church; an inclusive church of people whose worship is in the liberal Catholic tradition of the Anglican Church. Luke is not only a member and a volunteer of the Church, but he had also started a formation programme to become deacon. He was therefore in close contact with the priest in charge of St Paul, to whom he had left his personal contact details in case other LGBT asylum seekers had approached her to ask for support. Indeed, several FPR members were referred to FPR by the Reverend, as we have observed in the case of David (see extract 5.5). As previously noted, FPR was officially established and advertised as a non-religious organization. Despite this, most members were openly Catholics and various religious initiatives within the Catholic faith will be supported also during the weekly drop-ins, such as prayer groups, as we will see in more details in the following chapters.

Extract 5.13.

I always say to people that God works things in a mysterious way. (...) people used to say “oh, (...) being an LGBT is the worst thing! God doesn’t like it!”. But when I read in the Bible somewhere it says, “he came to the world to save everyone”. He knows who we are, he knows we are homosexual, we are adulteress, we are whatever, but he’s here for us, OK? He never said, “I wanted to stop whatever you are doing” but he says, “I know you”. And that’s the reason why I am here. (...) Nobody choose to be gay... it is how you are created... so, if you wake up one morning and feel like, “oh God I want to kill myself because I think I am not...”. No! It’s the wrong idea! You have to get rid of it! Make sure that you are what proves who you are. [Luke]

Significantly the above extract begins with Luke’s statement “I always say to people”. This linguistic formation opens his own discourse on God and resembles that of the religious preacher. Luke is speaking to an audience and not just me, the interviewer; he simultaneously addresses all LGBT asylum seekers and FPR members. As explained in the above extract, these people used to complain that being LGBT is the worst thing that could have happened to them, since “God doesn’t like it”. Hence, Luke consoles these people and teaches them the true word of God, which he learned by studying the Bible. Luke perceives his role as a real divine investiture i.e. “this is the reason why I am here”.

Hence, he teaches the word of God, who “came to the world to save everyone”. God knows everyone and does not prevent anyone from continuing to exist for what they have been created. Hence, being homosexual is not a choice, but a divine truth that Luke is able to extract, understand and interpret. Crucially, the incitement to confession and examination of conscience through story-writing (see extract 3), focusing on the notion of the struggle of the soul, is typical of Christianity and begins precisely in the origins of Christendom (Foucault 2007). Luke’s implied role, therefore, is to profess the true word of God and to console LGBT people afflicted by the fear of not being well liked by God because of their sexuality to the point of nourishing suicidal thoughts. According to Luke, the latter ought to be substituted with a different attitude “making sure that you are what proves who you are”, which is part of the strategy to approach the Home Office “with logic and intelligence” (extract 5.12) and that will be fully explored in Chapter 6. This type of religious spiritual direction seems to be key for many FPR members who were themselves religious and needed help with accepting and understanding their sexuality from a religious point of view too. The following extract further exemplifies this:

Extract 5.14.

**Jason:** Me becoming LGBT... is something I didn’t know, and I didn’t love. I never liked it. It’s a different life than what I planned... but (...) I am unable to see what is coming in front of me, which means life has been predetermined... do you understand the argument? So, that’s the way I believe: I believe that everything that has happened is being planned...

**Lena:** by whom?

**Jason:** by the almighty

The above extract invites us to reflect on how a pastoral technology of power coincides with people who already hold a religious vision of life. Jason, for example, believes that his life has been predetermined by God, hence his homosexuality too. While God knows everything, he cannot know that he would become homosexual. Moreover, it is a different life from the one he had planned, a life he does not like and that he hates for the problems associated with it. Therefore, to be welcomed by someone who can help him to extract, accept and understand this divine truth, becomes of fundamental importance.

### **5.7. Coming Out as LGBT Asylum Seekers Support Organization**

In the previous section, I have described coming out as a relationship of pastoral power between LGBT asylum seekers and Luke, or other volunteers, who endorse the same function of the confessor, the one who helps individuals to come out (i.e. to extract the truth about the self) by welcoming and comforting (i.e., therapeutic-caring function), but also by helping them to understand their true sexuality (i.e. hermeneutical function). It is worth highlighting now how these functions are implemented in the organizational apparatus of FPR. In fact, through the coming out rites of passage in private and group meetings, LGBT asylum seekers become official members of FPR. Therefore, I turn now to discuss coming out as a movement at a broader organisational level. We noted in the previous chapter that, in order to welcome dispersed LGBT asylum seekers who in turn fear to reveal their sexuality, FPR is originally constituted as a hidden sanctuary within a larger one, that of Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers. Meanwhile a parallel movement of coming out as a formative gesture for this group of migrants in Newtown can be observed at the outset of the organisation. During the first year of the project, FPR would have experienced a rapid expansion, going from 7 to 20 members to reach over 50 in the final phase of my fieldwork, which coincided with the third year of FPR. At the basis of this expansion there is also the progressive visibility that FPR begins to enjoy within the city of Newtown thanks to the intense networking activity that has led it to become the reference organisation of LGBT asylum seekers in Newtown, as well as the only one to support exclusively this group of migrants. FPR's coming out takes place first within the antecedent partner organisation, Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, considered and branded within FPR as "the mother organization", which in addition to the physical space of the office will provide also a virtual space on its web page to publicise the new support group for LGBT asylum seekers. Among other partner organisations, which since the beginning of FPR history have become part of its support network, we also find groups and aid organisations for LGBT people (e.g., the Newtown LGBT Centre), for asylum seekers and refugees (Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers and Red Cross), but also religious institutions (such as the inclusive Church of St Joseph), or health support organizations (the CSPA, for people affected with HIV, and the Sexual Health First for LGBT people). The role of these organisations will also be

that of redirecting their members, who have characteristics compatible with those of (potential) LGBT asylum seekers, to FPR.

The rite of passage that consecrates FPR to the group of other LGBT support organisations operating in Newtown occurs a few days after the FPR initial group meeting. During the LGBT history month, which is usually held every year in the month of February, Newtown City Council typically organises a public event, whereby members of different LGBT support organisations and groups operating in Newtown are invited to attend presentations and debates and participate in the conclusive ritual of raising the rainbow flag at the City Hall building, as a symbol of the city and county's commitment to its lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens. In 2015 the event took place in February, and Luke, Katie and Joy will participate as representatives of FPR. It was during this event that they met Daniel, who since that day will become a member and key volunteer of FPR. In the following extract, Daniel remembers that day.

Extract 5.15.

**Lena:** How did it start with FPR?

**Daniel:** When I found Luke, they had already started it (...). I went to present for MASS the gay Catholics, it was the LGBT history month in February (...) at the town hall. (...) I suddenly initiated the conversation (...) at the City Council hosting the [LGBT] flag. (...) Yeah, there's where I met even Katie. (...). Yeah, so he directed me where the office is. So, I was like, "OK, I will try to find my way there".

Daniel had been an LGBT rights activist in Uganda, before reaching England to claim asylum on the basis of his homosexuality. In Uganda, despite having always had to hide his sexuality, he secretly visited and supported victims of homophobic attacks and participated in clandestine groups to raise awareness and support for LGBT rights. Once he reached England, Daniel would continue his activism by volunteering, among other organizations, at the LGBT Centre, CSPA and MASS, a charity, which provides pastoral support to LGBT Catholics. Daniel was also a member of St Joseph Church and contributed to introduce new members to FPR coming from the Church and the other organizations. Daniel attended the raising of the rainbow flag at the City Hall in 2015 and gave a presentation on his life experience as an LGBT asylum seeker and member of MASS. In the following extract, Luke describes that day:

Extract 5.16.

**Luke:** On the second of February (...) we went to the ceremony at the Town Hall. That was the raising of the flag and on that same day I met someone called Daniel.

**Lena:** Can you describe that day?

**Luke:** It was very good. It was a rainy day, it was raining too much we were running like crazy people in Newtown! Then I rung Lena, she was coming to the office as I told the others we should meet at the office, we don't have to miss this one, we have to go!

**Lena:** But I didn't come

**Luke:** You didn't come and then Katie came I also called her she said, "yes, I have to be there". She was always there in everything. Whatever you want, Katie [snap of fingers] is there. And then we went to the Town Hall with Joy

**Lena:** But what was it about?

**Luke:** It was raising the flag at the Town Hall. (...) It was organized by the City Council together with the LGBT Centre. (...)

**Lena:** How did you know about that?

**Luke:** 'Cos I am always in contact with The LGBT Centre, yeah, they told me (...). So, we went. We went to raising the flag! In fact, I went to The LGBT Centre, from there they told me, "everyone is at the Town Hall!". I run quickly.

**Lena:** and there you met Daniel

**Luke:** Yeah, Daniel was there. (...) So, the flag was raised, we took pictures, it was a good day. (...) Joy was there, 'cos we wanted a few members to be there (...). So, we went and then we met Daniel (...). So, we started talking. I told him, "yeah, we have an organization, I mean, a new group for LGBT asylum seekers, it is blah blah, I give you the details, if you want after here you can come to the office". So, we went upstairs had coffees, then we came downstairs (...) 'cos they called us to have the pictures. I called Katie and I said, "You know what? Let's go get the pictures, 'cos we need this". So, we went downstairs [snap of fingers], took the pictures, (...) they are the first pictures on our Facebook and on our site. So, we took the pictures and after that we walked to the office. (...) Daniel (...) rung me, (...) I directed him where it is, (...), he came to the office he joined us from that day (...). And then members were coming one by one without even knowing.

In the above extract, Luke tells about the day he had participated in the event organised by the Town Hall along with Katie and Joy. He explains that he had learned about the event from the LGBT Centre at the last moment. Hence, he tried to contact FPR members

and volunteers to participate. He tried to contact me too, but I could not go, while Katie and Joy had managed to join him. Hence, they run all together “like crazy people in Newtown” to reach the Town Hall building. From the story we can see how for Luke the event is very important; i.e. “we don’t have to miss this one, we have to go!”. The LGBT Centre told him that “everyone” was going to the Town Hall, whereby “everyone” stands for the representatives of other LGBT organisations operating in Newtown. For instance, as observed, Daniel was coming to the event to present for Quest and since that day would join FPR as one of the leading volunteer-figures together with Luke. The importance of participating in the event does not seem to be directly functional to the support of FPR members, who were attending it, such as Alice. On the contrary, Alice seems to be there to support FPR. In fact, as Luke explains in the extract, he wanted some members to attend the event: “Alice was there, ‘cos we wanted a few members to be there”. Participating in the event does not even seem to be primarily functional to meet other LGBT organizations operating in Newtown either. Rather, in several points of the extract it seems that the main aim of attending the event is to take pictures during the raising of the LGBT flag ritual: “Let’s go get the pictures, ‘cos we need this”. The pictures would in fact be used on FPR website and Facebook to document FPR’s presence at the raising of the rainbow event at the Town Hall, which is the first public event of FPR. Hence, in a way this represents the institutional baptism of FPR, which consecrates it to other Newtown LGBT organizations. Crucially, the rainbow flag waving from the building of the English municipality may be regarded as symbolising the patriotic unity between LGBT rights and England. Hence, it is reminiscent of the humanitarian and homonationalist discourses before analysed (see Chapter 4), of which FPR becomes so complicit. In the following chapters, we will see in more details how FPR encouraged its members to endorse a patent British patriotism and acknowledgment of the role of Britain in protecting and promoting LGBT rights within their personal statement and other evidence to include in their asylum case. While this seems to be part of the strategy to approach the Home Office “with logic and intelligence” (extract 12), by performing the figure of the grateful migrants who yearns for the promised land of LGBT rights, it inevitably seems to support the very same power they ought to fight. Moreover, posting these first pictures on the official FPR webpage and Facebook group contributes to advertise FPR online, which enables to reach a wider audience of potential members who

since that moment started “coming one by one without even knowing”, as it was for Michael (see extract 5.6).

## **5.8. Conclusions**

In this chapter we have considered, from the very beginning of its formation, FPR is constituted upon a pastoral technology of power (Foucault 2007) through which Luke becomes a prominent figure, whose role is first that of gathering together dispersed LGBT asylum seekers within SforRA. LGBT asylum seekers are constructed as struggling individuals for reasons related to their sexuality. Precisely, their struggle lays within their incapability of coming out for what they truly are. Luke-FPR’s role is precisely that of welcoming them and receiving the confession of their inner truth, which had been hidden up to that moment from others and sometimes from the individual self too (i.e., the therapeutic-caring function). Hence, another function is that of helping individuals to interpret the truth about themselves (i.e., hermeneutic function). In the following chapters, we will see in more detail what kind of truth is ultimately constructed through the hermeneutic function of the confession and story-telling. That is how Luke and other volunteers, endorsing the confessor function, interpret and shape the personal story they receive from LGBT asylum seekers, members of FPR, according to specific modes of individualization, which are functional to the success of their asylum application. In the previous and present chapters, we have already seen important aspects of this type of truth and how it draws on discursive elements observed in broader humanitarian discourses around LGBT asylum seekers and refugees. The truth about LGBT asylum seekers is a truth about sexuality, which cannot be unlocked by the individual alone, who needs the care and expertise of someone else. That is, on the one hand, sexuality is depicted in extremely negative terms, so individuals need a caring figure to trust in order to be open about it. On the other hand, it is a type of sexuality that must be expressed according to Western modes of categorizations (LGBT categories) and symbols (the rainbow), for which individuals need an authority who can teach them the language through which sexuality can be expressed and help them to work out contrasting elements in a coherent and linear narrative. Confession of one’s own sexuality represents from the very beginning a fundamental aspect of FPR’s organisational machine. It is at the core of the reception and follow-up of individual members and the physical arrangement of the

office space is organized accordingly. Indeed, becoming a member of FPR occurs through a series of coming out ‘rites of passage’ (Van Gennep 1909). At the first telephone contact or via email, prospective members are invited to a private face-to-face appointment with Luke or other volunteers to assess their case. Hence, they are invited to share their story of persecution and reasons for looking for asylum. Then Luke or other volunteers would go on to register them, by filling out an entry form with their personal details, including their sexual orientation. Finally, during weekly drop-ins, members are invited to disclose their sexuality to the whole FPR group. As we shall see in more details in the following chapter, these rites of passage are preliminary rites functional to and executed during a broader transitional stage from one social position to another; e.g., from illegal migrants, to asylum seekers, to refugees or destitute asylum seekers (Lewis 2007; Hynes 2011). That is, coming out within FPR seems to be functional to coming out with British authorities, which is the prerequisite to being legally considered as LGBT asylum seekers. Finally, the traditional ritual of the waving of the LGBT flag at the Town Hall in which FPR takes part is indicative of the institutional position it endorses as LGBT organizations supporting LGBT asylum seekers and adhering to Western, patriotic and homonationalist motives. In Chapters 6 and 7, we will explore how these are implemented within their personal statement and other evidence to include in their asylum case.

## Chapter 6: Constructing (Credible) LGBT Asylum Seekers

The Chapter's main focus is on the support activities within FPR aimed at constructing credible LGBT asylum seekers subjectivities. In order to be legally regarded as such, prospective LGBT asylum seekers must submit an asylum application on the grounds of their sexuality. Hence, they must disclose their sexuality to British authorities as a reason for fearing persecution in the home country. This in turn refers to two main issues. First, in order to do that, individuals must be able to come out to themselves and others, which, as we have seen throughout the previous chapters, might be an issue for some. Moreover, they must know how to apply for asylum. This does not simply refer to submitting an asylum application, filling out forms or participating in the various interviews and other possible steps that may constitute the normal bureaucratic and legal processes to be officially registered as asylum seekers. In fact, it is also about becoming *credible* LGBT asylum seekers. As noted in the introductory review of the policies and laws on the assessment of LGBT asylum applications, these are assessed on the grounds of membership to the LGBT social group. Therefore, ascertaining the LGBT background of the applicant is crucial and essentially consists of a credibility matter. That is, it is a question of how (in)credible it is that the applicant is LGBT. The latter, in turn, becomes a question for individuals and support organizations about what kind of sexualities are these individuals expected to endorse to be accepted in British society.

Hence, the chapter looks at how FPR helps its members to come out as credible LGBT asylum seekers by co-producing credible evidence, under governmental assessment criteria. Here, I deliberately use the term *co-production* of evidence rather than *search* for evidence. In such asylum cases, indeed, evidence cannot be strictly *searched* because a genuine proof of sexuality does not exist, hence it cannot be *found*. On the other hand, production should not be understood in this context as a criminal practice of making fictitious evidence. Rather, I use the etymological meaning of the verb "to produce", from the Latin *producere*, "to bring forth". That is, to cause something to happen or be seen or known. Thus, the co-production of evidence in this context refers to the collective practices between members and volunteers aimed at determining and creating the things to bring forth (i.e., what are the things to show and which ought to be left hidden), which are bound by what decision making bodies expect to see in (in)credible narratives. A theme that emerges throughout the chapter is the collective

efforts within FPR in the attempt of understanding what counts as valid evidence and how to assemble it in a credible narrative. Several group discussions around the issue took place in FPR, which have led to the development and implementation of specific guidelines for each type of evidence. During weekly drop-ins, volunteers and members shared information found online, issued by other support organizations, the government, their lawyers, or provided by friends who were in similar circumstances. The Home Office refusal letters have often been shared too, which were especially important to understand the governmental assessment of such cases. In fact, when the probative material was evaluated, explicit considerations were often made on why it was not deemed acceptable. Hence, the chapter also highlights the intricate interplay with the Home Office as a main interlocutor and decision-making body and the role of support organizations and groups in interpreting and complying with state conceptions of what it means to be LGBT asylum seeker in the UK.

The chapter is structured in such a way as to take into consideration the various main evidence in LGBT asylum cases and how they are produced collectively by asylum seekers and their supporters. Asylum seekers must be ‘good storytellers’ (Ammaturo 2015, p.1155), for leave to remain ultimately depends on applicants’ skills in producing a credible account on their fear of persecution in the home country. This is particularly true for LGBT asylum seekers. As noted in the review of the main laws and policies regulating LGBT asylum, individuals applying for asylum on the grounds of their sexuality, credibility of the personal account becomes the key evidence for such claims. Hence, the first section of the chapter looks at two main support activities within FPR aimed at boosting storytelling skills, namely the drafting of the personal statement and the so-called “mock interview”. The former refers to the meetings between FPR members and their case-workers aimed at writing their story of persecution and related reasons for claiming asylum in the form of a personal statement, which may be used as evidence in their asylum application. The mock interview, on the other hand, is an activity whereby the asylum interview is staged between the case workers and the asylum applicant. These two activities are an example of how the coming out function described throughout Chapter 5 is implemented within FPR. Through collective talking, writing and enacting of the personal story, members progressively learn to disclose their sexuality to others (i.e. caring/therapeutic function) and to interpret it (i.e., hermeneutic function). Crucially, with the help of the assigned case-workers (i.e., the confessors), the disclosed sexuality

is interpreted and reinterpreted according to governmental credibility criteria, recalled events from the past and personal understandings. Moreover, these activities seem to help remembering the story, which is crucial in asylum applications. On the one hand, asylum interviews and court hearing might be threatening settings affecting applicants' ability to recall dates and details of the past. On the other hand, the information provided during asylum interviews and court hearings is cross-checked with that provided in the personal statement and other supportive evidence.

The chapter moves on to consider what other evidence might be included by the applicant to support their asylum claim, such as supporting letters provided by FPR and witnesses and photographs taken during LGBT activities and events promoted by FPR and other support groups and organizations, or at LGBT clubs and gay pride parades in Newtown and the UK. Crucially, the production of such evidence has triggered the introduction of other organizational practices within FPR. For example, in order to help members demonstrating membership to FPR, different ways to monitor their frequency and level of participation in drop-ins and other LGBT activities and events were introduced, such as the attendance register and feedback forms. Furthermore, the photographic documentation produced in such occasions was employed not just as evidence in asylum claims but as advertising material of FPR. This is another example of the efforts to avoid becoming a proxy of the Home Office, whilst at the same time reproducing some of its strategies. Indeed, the implementation of these forms of support reinforce state forms of control through bureaucracy and the construction of a particular subject position – i.e., the 'authentic or credible LGBT asylum seeker' – to meet governmental criteria. Thus, in order to combat the Home Office, FPR takes on their forms – i.e., effectively subcontracts the work.

The chapter concludes with an exploration of another sort of becoming other than the described botched becoming a credible LGBT asylum seeker (i.e., one that meets governmental requirements and expectations) or the organizational becoming a proxy of the Home Office. I will explore other liminal spaces of becoming, which occurred in which we can observe different ways of interacting and organizing in FPR, which flee dominant practices and identity constructions.

## 6.1. Acceptable Overwhelming Evidence of (Fear of Persecution on the Grounds of) Sexuality?

Before moving on to consider other evidence, I would like to draw the attention to an instance of what we can consider as a very rare but strong evidence in such claims. The following is an example of a document used as evidence in a successful LGBT asylum claim of one of the participants of this research:

<p>Republic of Cameroon Council Area T. Office of the Quarter Head J.T.</p>
<p>Certificate of Excommunication</p>
<p><u>To Whom It May Concern:</u></p>
<p>I, the undersigned quarter head J.T. and auxiliary of the municipality do hereby certify having received on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1013 a report case of homosexuality by Mr K.S. born on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1985.</p>
<p>This is to prove that Mr K.S. has been excommunicated in and within the community for committing a crime and sin of homosexuality against The State and human kind.</p>
<p>In respect of our custom and tradition in the land, any defaulter of this crime has been punished as follows:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Ban from all social activities</li><li>- Ban from all public activities and manifestation in and within the community</li><li>- Never to contest vote or voted to hold any post of responsibility in the area</li><li>- Stay and work in the traditional shrine for an underlined time, for cleansing the gods</li></ul>
<p>Consequently, upon the report I now issue this attestation to Mr K.S.</p>
<p>Done on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Signed by the Quarter Head J.T.</p>

As noted in the review of the legal context of asylum, it is generally difficult for asylum seekers to retrieve official documents from the country they escaped from. Moreover, for LGBT asylum seekers it is impossible to produce any official certification of sexuality, such as the results of a medical test, since it does not exist. On the other hand, the above seems to constitute an official evidence of persecution on the grounds of sexuality, which the applicant had managed to retrieve. The document is an official certificate of excommunication from the African community in Cameroon, where the applicant, Scott, came from, for having committed “a crime and a sin of homosexuality against the state and mankind”. This official document was drafted by the quarter head and auxiliary of the municipal affiliation of the individual in question following the receipt of a “report case of homosexuality”. The certificate, stamped and signed, listed the activities in the community from which the excommunicated individual had been banned from all social, public, religious, work and political activities. The “criminal” had managed to keep a copy of the certificate of expulsion and to attach it to his asylum application in the UK along with other supporting evidence, such as a medical report of the torture perpetrated by members of his community upon discovery of his homosexuality and other supporting letters obtained in the UK from the inclusive church he had joined and from LGBT organization, including the one I have researched. It is not possible to access the way in which the Home Office has evaluated this evidence. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that his asylum application would be accepted in the first instance within three months from submission, which is the fastest time I ever witnessed during my fieldwork. Thus, what constituted an official document of expulsion from one community is now turned into an evidence to seek inclusion in another one.

## **6.2. Writing and Telling Credible LGBT Asylum Stories: The Personal Statement and The Mock Interview**

As observed in Chapter 5, to be officially registered with FPR, prospective members were made disclosing their sexuality in individual and group coming out rites. Moreover, they were encouraged to tell and write their own story (see Chapter 5, extract 3). Through story-telling and story-writing individuals might realize the apparent contradictions inherent in their sexual narrative and determine on which side they really belonged to. On the one hand, the activity of telling and writing the personal statement helped individuals to disclose their sexuality to others (i.e., caring-therapeutic function). On the

other hand, it enabled them to understand it and interpret it with the help of one or two volunteers assigned as case workers (i.e., hermeneutic function). In this section, we will look in more details at how this collective activity of story-telling and -writing is carried out by members and volunteers and how it is also functional to their asylum application.

The meeting sections with assigned case-workers were aimed at producing a final written document, the personal statement, which they could choose to include in their asylum application. The personal statement should outline the reasons for fearing persecution in the home country in relation to the claimed sexuality and gender identity and constitutes the main evidence in LGBT asylum claims. Writing a personal statement represented not only a main activity in the meetings between case workers and their assigned members, but also a topic of heated discussion during weekly drop-ins. The problem at stake was determining what counted as a credible narrative. In fact, the issue was not merely helping with typing the story as told by members (some members at FPR indeed did not know how to write in English or type on a keyboard), but also determining what were the things to bring forth in a credible narrative (i.e., what are the things to say and what are those that ought to be left unsaid?), as expected by decision making bodies. During private and collective meetings members shared their rejection letters, whereby the Home Office or judges made explicit considerations on what was (un)reasonable to expect in their account. Moreover, governmental assessment policies and guidelines on how to outline a credible narrative issued by non-governmental support organizations and groups were shared among members and volunteers. Taken together these materials informed members and volunteers on the criteria under which drafting their personal statement.

First, one of the main governmental criteria seems to produce an as detailed as possible and internally coherent narrative. For example, in several rejection letters applicants were asked very specific questions on key dates and information, which ranged from what exactly they had in their bags on the day of their escape, to the name and date of birth of all their past lovers, but also more intrusive questions were posed, such as whether they had any intimate relationships with people of the same sex. In many cases, failing to provide detailed and coherent answers on such questions was detrimental for their credibility and in turn for the success of their asylum claim. The sharing of rejection letters hence was also key to understand that, despite the governmental recommendations of the 2014 investigations (Vine 2014) to avoid asking questions that could elicit intimate

response, these continued to be posed. Therefore, the first activity of the writing-up sessions of the meetings with case workers was to reorder in chronological order the events of the past in the most detailed and coherent way. Moreover, the Home Office's endorsement of the Difference Stigma Shame and Harm (DSSH) model in the assessment of LGBT asylum claims represented a further criterion for drafting a credible narrative. Ultimately, for a claim to be successful the applicant's narrative must be in line with a decision maker's understanding of the world (Berg & Millbank 2009; Dawson & Gerber 2017). Hence, the personal statement was deliberately constructed under DSSH model criteria. That is, a narrative was created with the aim of eliciting a linear, detailed and coherent story on the gradual recognition of the applicant's sexuality, which outlined experienced feelings of 'Difference', 'Shame', 'Stigma' and 'Harm' (DSSH) with respect to the heteronormative and heterosexist societies they were coming from (see literature review for more details on the DSSH model). Finally, the narrative ought to be supported by and externally consistent with other evidence, including what had been declared during the asylum interviews or in court hearings, since the information provided is cross-checked across evidence. Hence, being able to remember and enact a detailed and coherent narrative as outlined in the personal statement is key in asylum interviews and court hearing, which for some constituted threatening settings that might have affected the answers provided. Indeed, Berg and Millbank (2009) observe that the individual's state of mind during asylum interviews may well be of inner confusion and denial, hence undermining their capacity of remembering in these circumstances.

The activity of telling and writing the personal story seemed to be functional to these ends. Another supportive activity, the so-called "mock interview" was implemented in FPR precisely with the aim of tackling the issue of remembering and being able to say what has been written in the personal statement in asylum settings. The mock interview was basically a stage of the asylum substantive interviews, whereby one or two volunteers were playing the role of Home Officers asking questions to a FPR member, playing the role of the LGBT applicant. The type of questions asked during the mock interview were taken from the transcripts of the Home Office interviews shared by FPR members and adapted on the case at stake, with the aim of exposing possible contradictions with the information provided during the play, in their personal statement and in other evidence too. During the mock interview, whenever a FPR member fell into contradiction, a timeout was called by the volunteers who momentarily left their role of Home Officers

and resumed their volunteer roles to explain where the contradiction was found. Similarly, members could call the timeout anytime they needed support with remembering, understanding the questions, getting feedback on their answers or in case they felt distressed. In this way, the emerging story was actively and collectively shaped into a narrative internally and externally coherent with other evidence, particularly with the personal statement, and it was functional for memorizing it too. I have participated in two mock interviews and it was neither an easy nor a pleasant experience. In both cases, the mock interview lasted for more than two hours, several timeouts and breaks were called, for volunteers and especially participants experienced psychological distress and fatigue. During the mock interview I could witness my and other volunteers' role in correcting responses according to our understanding of what the Home Office could expect to hear, particularly in relation to the DSSH model. For example, in one case one volunteer suggested to highlight the link between the FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) of the participant and her sexual development in a way that was in line with the DSSH model. The participant had claimed that during childhood she was attracted to girls. Moreover, she disclosed that since she had been subjected to FGM at the age of twelve she had lost interest in men and women. Hence, it was suggested to narrate the FGM event as a measure enforced by family members in the attempt of correcting her early manifestation of sexual difference. In this way, feelings of difference, stigma and harm could be elicited in a credible narrative, which could have also been supported by medical evidence. Thus, FGM becomes deterritorialized (Deleuze & Guattari 1986; 1987); i.e., it starts functioning in another way. It becomes entangled with the territory of the LGBT asylum system and becomes a sign of sexual development, which seemingly explains the biological foundation of her homosexuality. In other words, FGM becomes recontextualised within her body: it now becomes deeply intertwined within a "credible narrative" of "linear (homo)sexual development" and an evidence to support her asylum claim on the grounds of the claimed sexuality (compare Brown 2001). Similarly, in the second case, during the mock interview the participant explained that he realized his homosexuality during his upbringing as he preferred to do "girl things", such as helping his mother cooking and tidying up. At this point of the mock interview, a timeout was called by a volunteer who was concerned with the fact that his sexual recognition was apparently based upon a gender stereotype that might have been called into question by the authorities. Hence, it would have been better, the volunteer explained, to provide a

more detailed narrative on how he came to recognize his difference from others with respect to his sexuality, for example by focusing on his attraction to others of the same sex. In both occasions I remained silent. I thought that the people who made these suggestions were more experienced than me: one volunteer had many years of experience as support worker with vulnerable migrant groups, whereas the other was a LGBT refugee, hence someone who had been successful through the LGBT asylum system. This is an example of how silence can become intertwined in discourse and practice to (re-) produce them (Johnson 2011).

In what follows, I will look at two extracts of FPR members where they describe how the process of telling and writing their story had helped them with their asylum application. In the first of these examples, David describes the two main issues with applying for asylum on the grounds of his sexuality. First, being able to come out with other people and in particular with figures of authority in interrogation formal settings. Second, knowing how to apply for asylum.

Extract 6.1.

Free and Pride Refuges... I can say they helped me a lot. They gave me the confidence. You know, your case, you are the one to explain your case to them... I explained it to Luke and Katie, yes, so they tried to advise me and gave me the courage. Because, you know, I and some others, we've never been to any official interview... so it is another battle. So, any official interview, we've been living in very poor community... so we've never been in any official interview, right, so when we have this, at time people get nervous. So, I was. I am very happy, proud, with Free and Pride Refuges they helped me a lot... they gave me a lot of materials, gave me a lot of um courage, tried to tell me about the asylum process, because honestly, I didn't know about the asylum process. They gave me a lot of courage before I went to the screening and bit by bit again I was more confident as the day was going by, so I'm super happy [David]

In the above extract, David provides interesting insights on how knowing how to perform in formal settings might be problematic for people coming from “very poor community” who have “never been in any official interview”. Hence, the role of FPR in advising, encouraging and training members on story-telling in formal settings becomes key. In the next extract, another participant explains how the talking with his assigned caseworkers

and the collective drafting of his personal statement had enabled him to outline his story of persecution and remember it.

Extract 6.2.

**Michael:** I did well because I told Katie, I explained a bit of it to Luke. And the more you explain to people, the more you talk out, the more the problem subsides.

**Lena:** Do you think that kind of thing is good also in your interview? I mean, thinking about your substantive interview, do you think that helps? These talks...

**Michael:** Yeah, yeah. It helps a lot, because from my interview, and the pre-interview, I didn't ... I wasn't fluent. But when I started talking to Katie and become a bit strong, and now I just see anything and at any point (...). The only thing to my statement is like I need to check some dates. (...) There are some dates you can't forget. The problem with my statement is like ... Katie just sent it to me, but I think if I read my statement two times or three times I'll be fine. It's like I couldn't remember the proper dates. Because you know, it's like we're going to school (...). Yeah, we're just like we're studying. I think Katie sent me ... she sent me the statement. I'll finish the statement with Katie. The last time we met was just to iron the date and to know the date. Well, to know the date will not be a problem. The problem is to remember.

In this extract, Michael explains how the success of his asylum interview depended on telling his story to Luke, Katie and other people. In the previous chapter we observed the problems of Michael in coming out. In this extract, he mentions the issue with respect to being “fluent” in talking about his sexuality. That is, he explains how the conversations with Katie and Luke had helped him to become stronger in knowing and telling any aspect of his story. Now he can “see anything at any point”; that is, he knows all the important aspects and when they occurred, although he still struggles remembering some dates. Crucially, he refers to the activity of telling his story and drafting the personal statement as “going to school” and “studying”, which is indicative of the efforts LGBT asylum seekers put in the drafting of their personal statement. The latter becomes a school essay, bound by the criteria of the assignment set by the examiner (i.e., the Home Office), which the scholar (i.e., the applicant) drafts with the help of knowledge practitioners (i.e., the caseworkers) and submit with the hope of getting a pass (i.e., leave to remain).

### **6.3. Other Evidence: Pictures and Support Letters**

In addition to the activities seen in the previous section, FPR promoted social outings at local LGBT clubs and groups as well as the participation at Gay Pride Parade and other LGBT events, such as conferences on LGBT topics, with the aim of helping members to come out. Daniel describes participating to Gay Pride Parades as follow:

Extract 6.3.

Going to Pride is liberating, celebrating the “me” the “us” who didn’t have the freedom to do it in our respective homophobic countries. Pride is also therapeutic in its own right because it helps members shed off layer(s) of vulnerability, marginalization and little by little help them accept who they are after seeing many people who are like them. [Daniel]

In the above extract Daniel highlights the empowering and therapeutic function of participating to Gay Prides in helping members to accept themselves “after seeing many people who are like them”. The country of origins is described as “homophobic” in contrast to UK, where people are free to celebrate their “pride” and LGBT asylum seekers can participate to the celebration of the community they were looking for. Moreover, participating in Gay Pride Parades was also seen as a way to build up vital evidence to prove their sexual orientation and gender identity to the Home Office. During my research and activism at FPR, it became apparent that for many of my LGBT interlocutors seeking asylum in the UK, pictures taken at Gay Pride marches, LGBT clubs and other LGBT events or places alike were perceived as core evidence in their asylum claims for proving membership to the LGBT social group, the key requirement for the success of LGBT asylum applications. This belief was not entirely unjustified. Indeed, rejection letters were shared by FPR members during the weekly drop-in, whereby the case had been refused on the basis of, among other things, not being able to explain why the applicant had not tried to socialize with other LGBT people or being part of LGBT groups or organizations in the UK. Hence, support letters from LGBT individuals and organizations in the UK were also believed to be key evidence for the success of their asylum application. Some LGBT asylum seekers, hence, felt it was important to collect as many support documents as possible from LGBT groups, organizations and individuals. Penelope, for example, had collected letters from several LGBT organizations she sought membership to in

London and Newtown (including London Out & Proud African LGBTI (OPAL), Newtown LGBT Centre, and FPR) and had taken a large number of photographs depicting her at their events and meetings as well as individual support letters as to fill in a whole hand luggage.

The desire to obtain an LGBT organization or group support letter was one of the incentives to regularly attend their drop-ins and events of LGBT organizations and groups, which established a minimum period of participation before issuing a membership certificate or a support letter, such as Out & Proud African LGBTI (OPAL) in London, as Penelope explains in the following extract:

Extract 6.4.

Out and Proud said you must be with them six months...for they can give you a letter (...). They will tell you that the attendance is important, and they have to know you because some people would just go to interview and tell them "I'm a member of Out and Proud". Home Office calls them...yes... they'll call them, they'll call, they'll call, "do you know this person?" and if they say "NO" ...that is the end... So, you need to attend... [Penelope]

According to Penelope, there had been cases in which the Home Office had contacted Out & Proud African LGBTI (OPAL) about asylum applicants who had declared to be members, although they were not well-known or unknown by the organization, as she seems to suggest. This is an indirect reference to the category of the inauthentic LGBT asylum seekers; that is, those asylum seekers who pretended to be LGBT and therefore used LGBT groups and organizations to boost their LGBT claim for asylum. According to Penelope, that was the reason for OPAL to set a minimum period of participation of six months before issuing a support letter so to prove the genuine involvement of the LGBT members they supported. The issue of not being taken by the Home Office for genuine LGBT people, and instead deemed to be using LGBT organizations and groups as a cover up to bolster their asylum application, had been debated during several FPR meetings. For instance, at one FPR drop-in, Jane, a Zimbabwean national applying for asylum on the grounds of her homosexuality, shared 10 pages printed document - "Advice on putting in an asylum claim" - among FPR members and volunteers. She said that she got the document from Red Cross, although it was not clear who had drafted it as there was no official logo, stamp or signature placed on it. It was not unusual for members to

share similar material that they thought would help in preparing their asylum applications. Sometimes they could bring books or official documents provided by support organizations, other times, simple printed documents, passed by friends, lawyers or supporters, as the document at stake. The latter provided valuable information and suggestions, which served as the basis for a discussion on how FPR could have tackled the issue of pulling together a credible asylum claim. Particularly, section five of the document - "Other Evidence" - stated that asylum applicants could use their activities or meetings in the UK as evidence supporting their claims. The document then described in more detail that participation in a single meeting of a group could not be considered sufficient proof by the Home Office. On the contrary, it could have been regarded as a self-serving activity; that is, an activity or meeting an applicant had attended with the purpose of producing a fake evidence to bolster the asylum claim, rather than a genuine evidence of membership to such groups. Hence, the document invited asylum seekers to consider important questions that the Home Office may have asked with respect to such evidentiary material, such as: could the applicant be identified at the meeting? What was the applicant's position at the meeting? Was the applicant an influence or important figure at the meeting? Could the applicant be persecuted on return to their home country as a result of these meetings or activities in the UK? During the discussion, members shared how other LGBT organizations and groups that they attended had addressed the issue. In what follows, I will report an extract taken from Penelope's interview, where she recalls the discussion that happened at that drop-in. In the interview she explains how, drawing on her experience and observations at Out & Proud African LGBTI (OPAL) in London, FPR could tackle the issue in a similar way as OPAL did; that is, by implementing a guest sign in book to register applicants' attendance at the drop-in as well as taking pictures at any meeting and event, which could then be used as evidence of their involvement in the support organization.

Extract 6.5.

You remember when I first came [to FPR] ... attendance, there's nothing like attendance but people just come and go. I told you and I said, "NO"... every time you go to these meetings [at Out & Proud African LGBTI in London] (...) everybody would write their name (...) to know how many times you've been attending, because Home Office... if you don't attend... then, I mean, there are people that comes often, do you understand? So, they would be able to know how

many times you go. (...) And the picture they take! EVERY MEETING there are pictures. They need to see your pictures, that you're attending... because they are beginning to believe that people are really not LGBT, you understand? They are using them, they are using LGBT to cover up. So, all these pictures... they need. The Home Office wants to SEE, you know, they want to see FACTS... so your attendance is good... comment as you attend the meetings. I had my own attendance record and (...) when I go to Out and Proud, I write. I go everywhere, I write (...). I have my own attendance, I need the time I joined them... the months... you understand? [Penelope]

In the extract, Penelope remembers how, from the very beginning of her participation in FPR, she had noticed that no system for recording attendance at the meetings was in place. According to Penelope, this could have been a problem since, in this way, the Home Office could not check the attendance frequency in order to establish the type of involvement of the member. The Home Office, Penelope explains, could not rely on asylum seekers' self-claimed sexuality and gender identity, but reasoned according to the language of "facts", which had to be evidenced. That is, evidence of the frequency and nature of involvement to LGBT organizations, groups and events had to be provided in the form of official documents attesting, for example, the number of times members had attended the meetings of the organization, supported by their signatures and written feedback on a register as well as photographs that depicted them during each meeting. Ultimately, the reason why the Home Office needed to verify the actual participation and degree of involvement was to determine whether a member was a genuine LGBT. The dichotomy authentic/inauthentic LGBT asylum seeker is used here to describe the Home Office's logic of assessment of LGBT asylum cases. Authentic LGBT asylum seekers are those who can present evidence of participation and involvement within LGBT organizations or groups, while inauthentic applicants are those who use them as cover up. A person who had presented evidence of having participated in a single meeting of an LGBT organization, for example, would have been regarded as less credible than those who had demonstrated active and lasting participation and involvement through tangible evidence such as photographs or list of attendance signatures.

The discussion that ensued would have led to the implementation of a series of measures to record the attendance of members to FPR drop-ins and other events, such as a register to collect signatures, dates, time of arrival and departure as well as feedback on

each meeting. A Support Work Member Sheet was created for each member too, whereby case workers would have record of each individual meeting and outcome with the assigned member. As for the photographs to be taken at any group meeting to prove participation, however, not all the members agreed to be included in the pictures. Some wanted to maintain a certain degree of anonymity within their UK membership communities. Others feared that their photographs could have reached their country of origin, and hence their family and persecutors, who could, in this way, learn not only their sexuality and gender identity but also their place of residence abroad. Hence, it was decided to implement a photo consent form to be signed by each FPR member and volunteer, whereby FPR was authorized to collect group photos during meetings and events that could be used as evidence within the various asylum applications. For those who did not want to be recognizable, on the other hand, it would have been possible to obscure the face or cut them off the picture. Moreover, pictures taken during LGBT outings and events were often shared by members to be used as FPR advertising material on flyers, posters and online platforms. Finally, for each member a personal electronic and paper folder was created which included all the pictures taken at meetings, gay pride parades and fundraising events as well as their attendance record at FPR drop-ins and support work meetings, which could be included to their asylum application as further evidence. A template format of the FPR support letter was created too. The latter was written on letterhead paper bearing the SforRA and FPR logo. The support letter constituted an official registration document to FPR and included personal data of the applicant, such as, for example, the Home Office identification number and the dates of birth, first arrival in UK, asylum application and FPR registration. Furthermore, the declared sexuality and gender of the applicant and of the relative fear of persecution in the country of origin was reported together with a brief description of the condition of LGBT persons living there and reference to the relevant punitive laws. Each letter should have been signed by Luke as a FPR coordinator or on his behalf by other volunteers. Unlike other LGBT support groups, such as OPAL as above observed, FPR had decided to provide any registered member with a support letter, regardless of how long they had been registered with FPR and had attended its meetings. This was decided with the idea of helping any member to demonstrate membership to an LGBT group (i.e., FPR), including those for whom it would have been difficult to participate to the meetings. Some members, in fact, were volunteers at other organizations and could not take part in FPR weekly drop-ins for time

clashes with their other volunteer commitments, others kept only a private bond with Luke or other FPR volunteers because they did not want to participate in group meetings, finally there were people who registered at FPR shortly before their substantial interview, where they should have brought their additional supporting evidence. However, a group of FPR volunteers pointed out a potential issue associated with such a solution, which related not only to the individual credibility, as observed above, but also to the credibility of the support letter and in turn of the organization issuing it and the individuals it supported. That is, if FPR had to support any member, regardless of the registration period and attendance (therefore, regardless of whether they were well known to the organization or not), doubts could have been casted on the credibility not only of the individual applicant, but also of the support letter itself, and, in turn, of the organization and (other support letters issued for) other members. By the time I left FPR at the end of my research-activism, the discussion had not lead to a final decision on the matter. A group of members and volunteers wanted to implement the rule of providing support letters to any registered member, whereas another group felt it was important that a member was well-known in FPR before issuing one. The fear was that by helping anyone approaching FPR, “fake LGBT asylum seekers” could have taken advantage and registered too. In turn, that could have jeopardised the organization’s credibility and integrity and damaged “genuine LGBT” asylum seekers (compare Giametta 2018).

Another type of support letters that asylum seekers can choose to include in their asylum application are those written by witnesses, who know the applicant well and want to testify in their favour. Witnesses can be either people who come from the same country as the asylum applicants and/or have witnessed their persecution, or individuals residing in England who can in some way provide a testimony to support their asylum application. In either case, the support letter must be signed by hand as well as dated and a copy of the witness’s ID should be provided too. If the witnesses are from another country, for example from the same country as the person they are writing about, and they still live there, they must send their statement by post, with a copy of their ID, since the envelope is part of the evidence too. The signed statement and ID should be faxed or scanned and sent as an attachment to an email. These requirements generally hold for any witness statement for law.

In this case too, FPR members and volunteers discussed what could be the best format for witness support statements in LGBT asylum claims. At first, we did an online

search and found countless help sites on how to draft a generic witness support letter for asylum claims. However, it was not possible to find online any kind of detailed information on individual letters of support for LGBT asylum seekers. Hence, a group of FPR members brought the “guidelines for writing a statement in support of someone claiming asylum as a gay man, lesbian or bisexual” issued by Movement for Justice (a group based in London that fights against racism and defends the rights of asylum seekers in detention), of which they were part. The document was amended by volunteers at FPR and in the following, I will analyse the final template structure of the witness support statement using an example from an individual support letter that was written by one of FPR volunteers for one of its members.

First, the support statement should be dated, and it should specify that it is a statement in support of the person’s claim for asylum as a LGBT person, hence the applicant’s full name, Home Office number and home address should be stated too. The support statement should start by introducing the witness, hence providing the full name, date of birth, home address and other details such as type of work or studies. The following is the incipit of the individual support letter that Rachel, one of FPR volunteers, had written for Sally, a lesbian lady in her fifties from Uganda, who had been one of the very first members of FPR:

Extract 6.6.

I am writing in support of Sally’s asylum application. I am a British National who now works as a freelance consultant working across Social Care, Health and Housing (...), the NHS and local government. [Rachel]

The guidelines suggested to continue the statement by clearly stating whether the witness is a lesbian or gay man, and this is precisely how the support letter at stake continued, “I am a lesbian living with my partner Karol”. Then it is recommended to state how the witness had become acquainted with the applicant and the nature of their relationship. That is, it should be explained as precisely as possible how the witness got to know the applicant, where and when it was. If they were with a group of people, it should be specified what sort of group it was and who else the witness remembered being there. Moreover, witnesses should describe how they found out that the claimant is LGBT by providing some details, for example seeing them with a partner, with LGBT friends, out clubbing, and so on.

Extract 6.7.

I have known Sally since I moved to Newtown in 2015 and became involved with Free and Pride Refuges (FPR), a small charity supporting with LGBT asylum seekers. I met Sally and her partner, Donna, at a fundraising meal where we sat at adjacent tables. Karol and I held a party on New Year's Eve which she also attended with others from Free and Pride Refuges and where she met our friends – lesbians, gay and straight. [Rachel]

The witness should then say why they believe the applicant is LGBT and may wish to include how and when the applicant has informed them that they were LGBT. If they are based in the UK, they might want to say how their lifestyle choices reflect their sexuality.

Extract 6.8.

Along with Sally and two other women being supported by FPR, I travelled to Nottingham to attend an event looking at the specific issues facing lesbians seeking asylum on the basis of their lesbian identity. The event was (...) organised by a group of lesbians, friends of mine, in Nottingham. She has also been to my home for coffee, so that I could learn more about her experiences. Personally, I feel she was very at ease with her lesbian identity; at our party, she seemed very at home in the company of my lesbian friends, dancing with us. She was also very keen to meet other lesbians at the event [in Nottingham and] to hear about other lesbian social events locally and we have talked about her attending (...), a Nottingham lesbian disco/social event, with Karol and me

Finally, the witness does not need to know the applicant's situation in the previous country. However, in case the applicant has spoken about that, it was recommended that the witness mentioned it and said why they believed them:

Extract 6.9.

Sally has told me something of her history. She has told me about the attitudes of Ugandan people to the issue of sexual orientation, (...) of her own experience of forced marriage, having children, her lesbian relationship when in Uganda and her beating of her and her lover by her husband when he found them together. I recognise my role is not to test Sally's sexual orientation, however I have never

doubted this. She strikes me as someone who, aside from the stress of the asylum process she is going through, to be very at ease with herself and confident about her identity. She has been very open with me about her identity as a lesbian in all our discussions and has seemed very confident in disclosing this to me. I have never had reason to doubt what she has told me. Sally has been very clear in her discussions with me that, although she misses her children, she feels she cannot be open about her lesbian identity with them. She has told me they do not know where she is. She has advised me that she will most likely be killed if she returns to Uganda because knowledge of the circumstances leading to her fleeing the country, being caught with her female lover. Although I have not known Sally very long, I am very willing to provide oral evidence to the Immigration and Asylum Chamber, if this would assist consideration of her application [Rachel]

The above described template of the individual support letters shows how the given testimony follows a clear and linear narrative. The sexuality of the applicant is described in a linear fashion and in terms that adhere to neoliberal Western styles of commercialism and consumerism of what it means to be LGBT; e.g., going to a “lesbian disco/social event” (see Jung & Jung 2015; Millbank 2009; Berg & Millbank 2009). To this respect, it is interesting to note that the guidelines warn against providing general opinions on the alleged sexuality of the applicant; rather, they advise to sustain them with details explaining how the witness knows that the applicant is LGBT. That is, the witness should refer to demonstrable facts, such as seeing them with a partner, with LGBT friends or out clubbing, that are not necessary conditions to be LGBT, neither can they be expected from someone coming from a different (LGBT) culture and experience. For example, Rachel explains that she had talked to Sally about her homosexuality and that they had taken part in some lesbian events in Nottingham organized by a group of Rachel’s lesbian friends and how Sally was perfectly at ease with them chatting and dancing. On the other hand, a different scenario could occur, where the applicants had not always been at ease with their sexuality. Hence, the guidelines suggested the supporter to describe the applicants’ progress/personal development in the UK since coming out; e.g., ‘the applicant used to be very shy, he did not talk to many people but now I have noticed he is more open and free to be himself. He has started going out more and engaging with people’. The description of these events also contributes to supporting the dichotomy between, on the one hand, England as a place where LGBT people can be free to express

themselves and socialize in public, and on the other hand, the country of origin, Uganda, where LGBT people are persecuted and forced to hide their true sexual and gender identity (Raboin 2017a; 2017b).

Another very important aspect emerging from the analysis of the witness support letter is the ethos or authority with which Rachel seems to be giving her testimony. Rachel speaks as an expert in subjectivity; that is, as a lesbian judging Sally's claimed homosexuality. Although Rachel acknowledges that her "role is not to test Sally's sexual orientation", she explains how her observations, about how Sally behaved with her, her partner and her lesbian friends, and how she felt "very at ease with her lesbian identity", confirmed her belief about Sally's sexuality. This observation seems to be in line with the guidelines, which distinguishes between different types of testimony and degree of credibility depending on whether the witness is LGBT or not. On the one hand, it is suggested declaring at the very beginning of the statement whether the witness is LGBT. On the other hand, if the witness is not LGBT, it suggests mentioning it at the end of the statement. This aspect had great consequences within the FPR group. In particular, this had helped creating the belief that receiving a support letter from an LGBT person was better than receiving it from a heterosexual person. Thus, several asylum seekers within the group deliberately sought to obtain an individual support letter from gay or lesbian volunteers. For example, several people had asked me to put in a good word for them with homosexual volunteers so that they could write an individual letter of support as they would prefer it to, for instance, mine since I was in a heterosexual relationship. Nonetheless, there was a potential credibility issue associated with having individual support letters written by the same LG volunteers. This issue was indirectly pointed out to me by the barrister of a FPR member just before her appeal court hearing, where I should have witnessed in her favour. Before the appeal hearing began, the witnesses, the defendant and the barrister had gathered in a special room to briefly review the case. In these circumstances the barrister had asked me if I would have testified for any of FPR members and I had replied without hesitating that I would certainly have done so. At that point, the lawyer had pointed out to me implicitly - explaining his vague and indirect way of expressing himself with the fact that he could not explicitly influence the witnesses - that such an answer could weaken my position as a witness. It would have been better, in fact, to declare that for that member only would I testify, precisely because, unlike others, I knew the applicant well and I had reasons to believe her. Another problem

was the availability of volunteers to write individual letters of support. Not everyone, in fact, felt comfortable writing a support letter if they did not know an asylum seeker well. Moreover, although at FPR there was the unspoken rule of not judging anyone's self-declared sexuality, this judgment occurred any time a volunteer refused to individually support someone. In private discussions with some volunteers, in fact, it emerged that they did not believe the declared sexuality of some members and therefore they did not feel comfortable with testifying in their favour (see Giametta 2018).

The guidelines provided by Movement for Justice did not only distinguish between different types of testimony and degree of credibility depending on whether the witnesses were LGBT or not; but also, on the legal status of the LGBT supporters. Particularly, in case the witness had obtained refugee status on the grounds of sexuality, it was recommended to clearly state that, especially if leave to remain was granted without an appeal hearing in tribunal, which should have been mentioned too. Moreover, if the witness was from the claimant's own country, it was suggested to say what the supporter feared would have happened to the applicant if deported back home. Similarly, if the supporter was living in Britain, had claimed asylum and was waiting for a decision on the claim, that ought to be mentioned too together with the ground for claiming asylum, whether it was on the basis of sexuality or something else. Finally, the guidelines suggested that anyone who wanted to write a support letter, but whose legal situation was irregular, for example if they had not yet applied for asylum or whose visa has expired, should have refrained from doing so. The reasons for this discrimination between, on the one hand, asylum seekers who had been granted leave to remain or were awaiting a decision on their claim, and, on the other hand, irregular migrants, seems to lie in different degrees of credibility that could be attributed to witnesses. For instance, a person who had obtained refugee status on the basis of their sexuality could be considered more reliable than those who were still waiting for an answer on their asylum application for similar reasons. In fact, the testimony of LGBT asylum seekers in support of other LGBT asylum seekers might have undermined both their credibility, due to the suspicion that they had tried to help each other. For example, I had witnessed in an appeal hearing where similar insinuations had been made and both cases were dismissed for this among other reasons. In the following extract, Vincent explains how the Home Office had not believed his partner's testimony, who was himself an LGBT asylum seeker:

Extract 6.10.

**Lena:** Did you have any evidence for your claim?

**Vincent:** Yes, I had evidence, yeah. I went with my partner. They didn't believe that. They said why we were not living together. Because I was living with my friend, and he was living with his cousin, but they say, "Why don't you live together?" And they also say that after I moved to Newtown, why didn't I ask Home Office to give us a house together. I didn't know I could do that. (...) I haven't seen the Home Office giving two men a house, like a one-bedroom house. They only give two people with children, married people, most of the times. But yeah, that's mainly the reason. Yeah, that's another reason, they say, why I didn't find out about this possibility.

**Lena:** So, what about your partner, did he get rejected?

**Vincent:** No, he's not been to the interview. Not yet. I think maybe in two months. (...) Yeah, in a few months. (...) He's from Malawi. (...) Yeah, it's not easy.

Although we cannot ascertain the veracity of what is communicated by the Home Office, Vincent's testimony is indicative of the fact that, used as evidence in a LGBT asylum application, same-sex relationships with other LGBT asylum seekers must be demonstrated through facts other than their testimony.

It is difficult to establish how the Home Office accurately judged these supporting letters. In fact, sometimes the cases in which the supporting letters and photographs were attached were accepted, other times they were not. In what follows, I will analyse the cases of two members of FPR, where the Home Office rejected their sexuality on the grounds of negatively judging, among other evidences, the letters of support. It should be noted that, on the other hand, it is not possible to analyse the ways in which the Home Office has positively judged the support letter for they typically do not provide detail of the reasons of acceptance of an asylum application, but they just communicate that leave to remain has been granted. On the one hand, when considered in the rejected applications, the support letters are deemed to merely prove the applicants' participation or membership to such groups or organizations but could not constitute legitimate evidence of their sexuality. In what follows, we can look at the extracts of the Home Office rejection letter from two cases, which exemplify what has been just observed:

### **Case 1**

**Home Office:** Your documents have not been viewed in isolation. This means that they have been considered as part of all the available evidence that they relate to. (...) Given the concerns surrounding your attempts to gain leave in the UK, caution must be taken when assessing such photographs and as such no weight is placed on the photographs. In relation to the letters of support, it is noted that all the letters post-date your claim for asylum

### **Case 2**

**Home Office:** The intention behind appearing in such photos and associating in such groups cannot be demonstrated, as outlined above you have been inconsistent about your sexuality. (...) It is therefore considered that although you may be attending these groups, the intention behind this cannot be demonstrated, and it is not evidence of your sexuality.

There are two very different lines of reasoning being pursued here – one is a discourse of coherence, the other of intentionality. In the first case, the credibility of the asylum seeker regarding her sexuality and the related asylum application had been questioned for she had already tried to reside legally and illegally in England through other means than asylum on the grounds of her fear of persecution in her own country for being a lesbian. Moreover, in order to support their questioning, the Home Office observed that all the submitted supporting letters post-dated her asylum application, thus suggesting that it was not a genuine LGBT claim, but a further attempt to stay in England after others had not been successful. In the second case, on the other hand, it was observed that it was impossible to establish “the real intention” behind participation in such LGBT groups, especially in light of the fact that the asylum seeker had been deemed inconsistent in explaining his sexuality.

## **6.4. Queer LGBT Asylum Seekers**

During the various support activities of FPR described so far, aimed at putting together a credible case before the law, there were spaces for sharing between members and volunteers of the group for the re-negotiation of their own identity. During these sharing spaces we questioned the meaning of the social and sexual categories with which

everyone had been labelled or self-labelled. Often it emerged that everyone felt to occupying an uncomfortable position within the category used to present themselves publicly and even before the law. Starting from the personal experience of "divergent others", we collectively sought to imagine, discuss and bring out new definitions of sexuality and other aspects of our individual and collective identity, in a creative way, which ran away from linear fixed narratives and categories of what it meant to be LGBT asylum seeker, European heterosexual researcher, British transsexual or any other intersection of categories that every individual within FPR could hold. The importance of these sharing spaces, which initially emerged spontaneously and sporadically, had been recognized by me and other volunteers and FPR members. Therefore, we tried to facilitate these collective moments during drop-ins or in smaller groups, that is, aimed at sharing the personal experience of one's own sexuality outside the language or social patterns perceived as restrictive. This interactive sharing space can be read in a feminist key through the concept of "self-awareness", a political practice born within the first Italian feminist collectives between the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies. Vacchelli (2001, p.770), describes the concept of self-consciousness as follows, 'Autocoscienza, as well as more contemporary experiences of self-exposure in a relational space, comprises reciprocal narration as a political practice geared toward building up a collective struggle'. During these relational spaces, women exposed their personal experience by telling and de-structuring the social and sexual roles imposed, such as family or functionality to male sexual pleasure. In this way, the Italian feminists rediscovered the possibility of a new discourse on their bodies outside the dominant language and patriarchal and sexist practices. The identification and collective analysis of forms of oppression and subordination and of personal and collective ways of combating them highlights the political value of the instrument of self-consciousness. In a similar way, during the sharing spaces at FPR one exposed oneself in the reciprocal narration and shared different ways of being that which presented itself to us (e.g., the heterosexual researcher or volunteer) or we had to present ourselves before the law (e.g., the gay asylum seeker or witness). Thus, queer profiles emerged, fleeing from categorizations and normativity imposed. Several individuals rejected categorizations such as those of heterosexual or LGBT to describe their sexuality or other categories, such as gender, asylum seeker, refugee, (European, economic, irregular, regular, expat) migrant, British citizen, and so on for other aspects of the intersectional identities that

populated FPR. In these interactions where we negotiated what we wanted to show or conceal from our personal and collective identity, new forms of cohesion emerged on the basis of diversity. This aspect had been recognized, discussed and approved by FPR members and volunteers as one of the FPR principles:

Extract 6.11.

Both non-LGBTQ as well as LGBTQ-migrants and citizens recognize how it feels to be framed as the divergent ‘other’, and this provides new alliance, representations and spaces for community cohesion [Free and Proud Refugees]

The above extract, despite using binary categories to categorize the individuals of FPR (i.e., non-LGBTQ / LGBTQ, migrant / citizens, and their intersections), represents a call to a return to diversity, understood not only as a practice of segregation operated by categories and practices imposed, but also as the possibility of creating new realities and alliances. However, the political potential of such interactional exchanges was continually confronted with the need to work on the main support activities of FPR, which were functional to putting together a credible LGBT asylum application according to governmental understandings, including stereotypes. Learning the imposed language and learning to talk about one’s identity in those terms and publicly was an urgent and primary need for several LGBT asylum seekers. For others, it was also important to implement different organizational models and forms of support. This need was also shared by a group of volunteers, including myself, while others seemed to favour a more neoliberal and pastoral support style. This internal clutch led two FPR members, a pair of lesbian asylum seekers, to split from the group to start a new support group for and by LGBT asylum seekers, based on group meetings to share their experiences within the LGBT asylum system and identity diverging from established models. The project is still in its infancy; however, it is an example of how new queer configurations of identity and organizations can be formed from the meeting and recognition of diversity.

## **6.5. Conclusions**

In this chapter I have described the support activities that FPR implemented in order to help members to come out and produce evidence for their asylum application; for example, the writing sessions between members and volunteers aimed at drafting the

personal statement, the mock interview to prepare members to come out in formal settings and consistently with the outlined story of (fear of) persecution, and finally the participation in gay pride and other LGBT activities and events to support them coming out publicly and to generate photographic evidence of membership to LGBT groups. The personal statement, pictures taken at LGBT events, individual and group support letters are all possible evidence that may be attached to an asylum application on the grounds of sexuality. Throughout the chapter, I have tried to highlight how members and volunteers of FPR have shared and discussed official guidelines provided by the government, lawyers, LGBT and asylum support organizations and groups, but also members' rejection letters in the collective effort of making sense of what counts as a credible LGBT asylum narrative and evidence. Ultimately, in trying to meet governmental criteria, volunteers act as experts in subjectivity, by filtering the material from their Western understanding of what it means to be LGBT in the UK (i.e., out and proud) and in countries of belonging (i.e., in the closet and victimized). The participation at Gay Pride parades and outings at LGBT clubs are indicative of Western neoliberal conception of what it means to be LGBT (i.e., out and proud in commercialized settings), hence they contribute to the (re-)production of the "homonormative queer asylum seeker" (Jung 2015, p.312).

Crucially, the sharing of the extensive documentation and group discussions have contributed not only to the creation of guidelines and templates of group and individual support letters, but also to the implementation of a system of control and recording of attendance, recorded through the adoption of a sign-in register and archive of members' meetings and pictures. Moreover, a photo consent form was introduced, whereby members and volunteers gave their authorization to include their pictures as evidence in members' cases but also as advertising material for FPR. Taken together these observations are also indicative of the process of becoming a credible support organization for LGBT asylum seekers, with the implementation of organizational forms of support, registration, control and marketing. Therefore, in the attempt to assist LGBT asylum seekers in the creation and assembly of further evidentiary documentation to be attached to their asylum applications, FPR had implemented a series of measures of control and assessment of these sexualities, which reflects and reinforces those perpetuated by the government.

Finally, I have explored queer spaces of becoming which emerged even during the various support activities of FPR described so far, aimed at putting together a credible case before the law. During these shared space, individuals came together and (re-)negotiated the various identities they have been occupying and experimented other ways to organize. I claimed that these spaces might be read according to a feminist framework, specifically the self-awareness or autocoscienza groups initiated by Italian feminists, where women self-exposed their everyday experience in the Italian patriarchal society and discovered new possibilities to talk and act outside the dominant language and patriarchal and sexist practices (Vacchelli 2001, p.770).

## **Chapter 7: (In)credible LGBT Asylum Claims**

The Chapter aims at exploring in greater details what has been discussed throughout the previous chapters by relying on a thoughtful analysis of two case studies. The first looks at an ‘incredible’ LGBT asylum claim, where the applicant was refused leave to remain on the grounds of her sexuality. The applicant had come to the UK and claimed asylum at the port of entry, hence prior to becoming a member of FPR. She was not able to disclose her sexuality to the British authorities during screening but only at the substantive interview, for she was fearful and ashamed to talk about it upon arrival. However, failing to do so was taken as one of the reasons undermining the credibility of being a lesbian fearing persecution in her home country, hence her case was rejected twice and without a further possibility of appealing. The second case study, on the other hand, tells the story of a ‘credible’ LGBT asylum claim. In this case, the applicant had been supported by FPR since the beginning of his application and got leave to remain after the substantive asylum interview. As noted in the previous chapter, the main support activities in FPR were aimed at helping its members build credible LGBT asylum cases. So, I described the collective efforts within FPR in trying to determine the expectations of decision-making bodies with respect to these cases. Furthermore, I pointed out how difficult it is to establish the ways in which successful asylum applications had been assessed, since in these cases, only the communication of the success of the application was given, but no detailed reasons were provided as to why it was considered credible. On the other hand, when an asylum application is refused, the government provides details on the reasons that were deemed to have undermined credibility. In the first case discussed, therefore, I tried to show what kind of evaluations the government can make about the declared sexuality of an LGBT asylum seeker, and what are the reasons for which it is considered incredible. By drawing on the applicant’s personal statement, the Home Office assessments, her letter of appeal and the judge of the first-tier tribunal’s reasons to definitively reject her LGBT asylum application, I tried to show some of the difficulties that LGBT asylum seekers may encounter in presenting a credible account. As noted, this type of critical reading of the refusal letters had also been the basis of discussions within FPR on how to build credible LGBT asylum cases in a way that met any possible governmental expectation. Particularly, the analysis of the incredible case demonstrates the importance of providing a coherent and detailed narrative of sexual

development and related persecution, which is in line with the Difference, Stigma, Shame and Harm (DSSH) model. Crucially, the various criteria of the models (i.e., the feelings forming the acronym) seems to be expected in a certain fashion depending on the circumstances she found herself in and whether they occurred in the home or host country. Hence, I will expose how the Home Office reproduces homophobic constructions of the home country as opposed to the UK promoting LGBT rights, and how these conceptions were key in the evaluation of the sexuality of the case at stake. Furthermore, the latter is important for it shows how other important aspects of the applicant's individual identity and persecution, such as a gender-based persecution, which might be key in the evaluation of her sexual-based persecution, seem to have been overlooked. It also highlights the importance of a holistic approach to the assessment of LGBT asylum interviews, whereby the answers to the interview questions might be found in other points of the interview or in silences or other nonverbal signs, which in the case at stake seem to have been ignored. Finally, as noted, the case at stake was rejected on the grounds of having failed to come out with British authorities, among other reasons. Hence, it demonstrates the importance of being able to do so, despite recent implemented governmental guidelines recommend that in LGBT asylum claims, applicant might not be able to be open about their sexuality for several reasons, including feelings of shame or fear of authority figures. Hence, the review of cases rejected on this ground reinforced the belief in FPR of the importance of the coming out rites and trainings to prepare individuals to disclose their sexuality in asylum settings and in a credible way. Thus, the analysis of such an incredible case is also in line with an activist form of research and adds to the work of scholars which aimed at showing how LGBT asylum seekers are systematically exposed to stereotypical evaluations that lead to the dismissal of their claims, despite the implementation of governmental guidelines that recommend case workers to avoid being driven by stereotypes and misconception in their assessments in such type of claims.

The chapter concludes with a detailed analysis of the second case study; i.e., a story that was deemed credible. In this case, the personal statement had been deliberately drafted according to the DSSH model. Ultimately, the resulting narrative seems to be in line with Western linear models of sexual development and homonationalist discourses. Particularly, negative feelings experienced with respect to the everyday life in the UK and persecution perpetuated by the Home Office are silenced; while the celebration of

the UK as a country defending and promoting LGBT rights is highlighted. Moreover, FPR is constructed in the emerging account as functional to the development of his homosexuality. Moreover, from the analysis of the abstracts of his substantial interview with the Home Office, it emerges that this narrative has been reproduced coherently and detailly, in a way that shows the applicant's efforts in faithfully recalling his personal statement.

### **7.1. Case Study 1: An Incredible LGBT Asylum Claim**

The case presented here involves an African woman who fled her home country and sought asylum on the grounds of two interwoven reasons: fearing persecution for being a lesbian and for an inheritance dispute with her siblings; indeed, following the inheritance that she received after the death of her parents, part of the abuse perpetrated by her siblings was homophobic in nature. My first impressions of the participant were of a shy person offering few words. At the time I allowed myself to wonder essentialist notions, was this perhaps due to an inherent personality or a product of a traumatic past; nonetheless her performed circumspect manner became a dynamic that attended our interactions. For this reason, I did not invite her to participate in a research interview. Despite this, she always exhibited a great desire to talk about her story, although she did not want or could not do it in words. In fact, when I gave her my availability to look at her case, she brought a big folder, with her personal statement, the transcripts of the interviews with the Home Office, the letters of refusal, her letters of appeal and the letters of support from LGBT organizations that she attached as evidence in her case; despite this surfeit she struggled to talk me through her case.

In the following discussion I address details that relate to the sexual orientation basis of her claim, which, as we shall see in detail, constituted a main ground for rejecting the whole claim. On the same day she arrived in the UK she claimed asylum. Nearly six months after her screening, she had her substantial asylum interview, which was divided in two parts. The first interview lasted 4 hours, while the second, which took place after six days, was approximately 150 minutes in duration. A total of 150 questions were asked in the first part of the interview, and 113 in the second part. She managed to get legal representation only three days before the substantive interview. Her asylum application was refused the day after her second asylum interview, which is an unusually prompt

decision, especially considering the long period of suspense which in other cases take months or even years before issuing a response. In the case at stake, her nationality and identity were accepted. Moreover, her fear of persecution on the basis of her sexual orientation was deemed to engage the refugee convention on the grounds of membership to a particular social group. However, the material facts of the applicant's case were not accepted. In particular, it was considered that, to use the Home Office wording, she had stated to be a lesbian 'in order to bolster' her asylum claim, hence the 'claimed sexual orientation has been rejected in its entirety'. As a result, a notice of appeal against the Home Office's decision was lodged a month later to the first-tier Tribunal. This is when she approached FPR for the first time. The court hearing happened after two months and the decision was issued after nineteen days. The judge of the first-tier tribunal claimed, 'I am not persuaded she has ever had any sexual relations with women' and agreed with the Home Office that 'she has essentially fabricated an asylum claim on the basis of sexual orientation'. The appellant's asylum appeal was therefore refused, and her case dismissed without possibility of a further appeal. In the following sections, I will examine the reasons that brought both the Home Office and the Judge of the first-tier tribunal to come to this conclusion by relying on the extensive documentations that she has shared with me in the course of conducting ethnographic fieldwork. First, I will look at one of the main issues with her claim, which seemed to lay in her failure to mention her homosexuality as a reason for fearing persecution during her initial Screening Interview. Then, I will look at other reasons that were listed in her rejection letters as reasons undermining her credibility, which refer to her account as emerging from the Substantive Interview on how she disclosed her sexuality whilst she was living in Africa and in the UK. Throughout the analysis and in the conclusive section particularly, I will try to assess the Home Office and First-Tier Tribunal assessment of her case to highlight what is 'reasonably expected' from people seeking asylum on the grounds of their sexuality.

### **Summary of the Applicant's case**

This section will summarise the applicant's account as outlined in her personal statement, which she included as evidence to her claim at the substantial interview<sup>9</sup>. The personal

---

<sup>9</sup> It was agreed with the participant to anonymize her home country with "an African country", hence in the extracts of the Home Office interviews I have changed the name of her country of origin with "home

statement is relatively brief, only one page long consisting of eight paragraphs. At paragraph 1, she begins with stating her name and other personal information. Particularly, she explains that she is the last born of a family of eight and that she has three children who ‘stay with their grandmothers from the father’s side because they say I am not fit to look after them’. The reason for the latter is explained in the following paragraph 2 as, ‘My family hated me because they knew that I was a lesbian from childhood’. Hence the statement unfolds as to outline her problems with her sexuality. Whilst growing up, she was taken to different religious prophets and traditional healers by her family who used to say that she ‘had a demon which needed to be healed’. This action was taken because of an incident at school when she was 16 years old when peers saw her kissing another girl and reported her to the teacher who issued a warning letter to her parents. At the age of 17, she was forced to marry her late sister’s husband, ‘because they said it will cure me’. Hence, she explains that she had her first child with him and that she believes she contracted a sexually transmitted disease from him. Moreover, he was always violent towards her and he later sent her back to her parental home saying, ‘she was not loving at all’, as she had no feelings towards him or men in general. She was then forced to marry a family friend and had her second child. In her personal statement she claimed that ‘he was a good man’ but since she did not feel anything for him, because of her homosexuality, she left him and returned to her family home when her parents passed away. This is when the persecution which triggered her escape to the UK commenced. She was the youngest sibling in her family and in her culture, it is common for the youngest child to receive all the inheritance; hence she inherited everything including her family house. As a result, her siblings thought she was being favoured whilst she brought pain and shame to the family for being a lesbian. Hence, they began to subject her to homophobic verbal and physical abuse for eleven years. Over this period, she had many same-sex relationships, which she managed to keep secret, but finally she started living in the family’s house with her girlfriend. Her siblings conspired with a local terrorist group to evict her from the family home, so they could take over and occupy it. Therefore, they came to the house to assault and evict her from her home. She managed to flee to South Africa where she stayed for the next six weeks. In South Africa she was tracked

---

country”. It should be noted that this wording does not appear during the interviews, where the country name is explicitly stated.

down by individuals hired by her siblings to locate her, who threatened her on their behalf and told her not to report the matter to the police. One day in South Africa she met a lady in the Church who would help her to escape to UK, where upon arrival she claimed asylum.

### **Failure to Disclose her Sexuality at the Screening Interview**

During the Screening Interview, the applicant disclosed her intention to claim asylum without mentioning her sexuality as main reasons for doing so, as we can observe in the following extract from her Screening Interview:

Extract 7.1.

#### Part 4 – Basis of Asylum Claim

**4.1 Home Office:** Please BRIEFLY explain ALL the reasons why you cannot return to your home country?

**Jane:** If I go to my home country my sister and brothers may kill me. My mother and father passed away and they left everything to me. My brothers and sisters sent thieves to my house and beat me. They don't want to talk to me. Their fathers' mothers are looking after the children. My sister moved into the house last year. I lived in the bush until I went to ZAF. I don't know why they want to kill me

As can be observed in the above, the inheritance dispute and persecution in the home country is mentioned, although it is not overtly stated as the reason for her siblings to attempt to kill her. On the other hand, her sexual orientation is not mentioned anywhere in the asylum form. During her Substantive Interview, however, she disclosed her sexuality as one of the main reasons for fearing persecution, as we can see in the following extract from the first part of her Substantive Interview (questions are numbered as in the original file):

Extract 7.2.

**#32 Home Office:** Just briefly can you state all the reasons as to why you're claiming asylum and we'll go into much more detail about them shortly

**Jane:** The problem started when my parents died; they knew that I was a lesbian; I was the one who was given everything

**#33 Home Office:** Just to clarify, your parents left you everything in their wills, is that correct?

**Jane:** Yes

**#34 Home Office:** Who specifically do you fear in your home country?

**Jane:** I fear my relatives because they've threatened that they will kill me if I return and also, I fear that I could be arrested as I am known to be a lesbian

**#35 Home Office:** So just to clarify, you are claiming asylum because you fear your siblings due to inheritance you received from your parents and because of your sexuality, is that correct?

**Jane:** Yes

**#36 Home Office:** What date would you say your problems began in your home country?

**Jane:** I would say it started after my mother died [year of mother's death]; they were not beating me up at that time, but it was the talking

**#37 Home Office:** When you say it was the talking; what do you mean by that?

**Jane:** They used to call me names like, 'Lesbian, you've got everything and yet we've got nothing'

In the above extract, Jane gives her account as noted in the summary of her asylum case at the beginning. When asked about the reasons for claiming asylum (see, question 32), she concisely replies with the two overlapping aspects in her claim: the inheritance dispute and her homosexuality. This is further clarified in her answer to question 34, whereby she claims that she fears both her siblings and the authorities that might arrest her for being a lesbian. Moreover, her affirmative answer to question 35 confirms that she is claiming asylum because she fears her siblings due to the inheritance she received from her parents and because of her sexuality. The overlapping nature of the two issues is concisely summarised in her account (see, answers to questions 36-37), when she voices the verbal abuse of her siblings, 'Lesbian, you've got everything and yet we've got nothing'.

In the Home Office (2016) Policy Instructions on assessing asylum claims on the grounds of sexual orientation, key considerations for caseworkers and interviewers are listed that include the recommendation of being sensitive to the fact that asylum applicants, because of feelings of shame, cultural implications, or painful memories, particularly those of a sexual nature, may not have felt either willing or able to disclose their sexuality with figures of authority during screening. Hence, it is recommended

exploring such issues in greater depth at the substantive interview. The policy was published only a week before her substantive interview, but it seems that it had been considered by the Home Office in the assessment of her case. In fact, in the last question of the first part of her Substantive Interview, she was asked to explain why she did not disclose her sexual orientation during Screening, as we can observe in the following extract:

Extract 7.3.

**#149 Home Office:** Why did you not mention your sexual orientation during your SI?

**Jane:** I still feel embarrassed about it and I was in fear

**Home Office:** If you were in fear at your SI why are you disclosing this now?

**Jane:** Now I'm talking about it because I want you to know the truth and I am assured whatever I tell you here isn't going to get back to my home country

**Home Office:** Did you think what you said during your SI would get back to your home country?

**Jane:** Yes, it's fear really, I was afraid and also embarrassed to talk about it

**Home Office:** If you thought what you said during your Screening Interview would get back to your home country; why tell the screening people about your siblings wanting to kill you?

**Jane:** I told them because I was asking for help

**Home Office:** How long after your Screening Interview did you obtain legal representation?

**Jane:** I saw them only last week

**Home Office:** What date did you first obtain them?

**Jane:** The day I received the letter for the interview is when I started looking

**Home Office:** When did you officially obtain legal representation?

**Jane:** It was Monday last week I spoke to them

**Home Office:** Did you tell your legal representation at that point of your sexual orientation?

**Jane:** Yes

**Home Office:** Do you know why they haven't contacted us to inform us of your sexual orientation and make amendments to your Screening Interview?

**Jane:** They contacted me back on Monday last week and they then made an appointment for this Wednesday and it's then I went to see and talk to them.

The reasons she declared for not mentioning her sexuality at the Screening Interview were living in ‘fear’ and feelings of ‘embarrassment’ (to talk) about it, which are among those listed by the Home Office in the recommendations for evaluating the asylum claims on the basis of sexuality, as observed above. However, although feelings of shame are not explored in detail, as recommended in the government policy, the interviewer further investigates her feelings of fear. The provided reasons did not seem to convince the Home Office. In fact, in the rejection letter following her substantive asylum interview, failing to disclose her sexuality to the authority during screening and to provide a reasonable explanation for not having done so is cited in two sections, namely ‘credibility’ and ‘conclusion’, as reasons undermining the veracity of her account and consequently for rejecting her case. In the personal statement that she attached to appeal the Home Office decision, Jane reiterated that she was ‘too afraid’ and ‘ashamed’ to speak about her sexuality during screening. Furthermore, in her appeal letter, she added that if during screening she had been asked about it she would have disclosed it. Finally, she highlighted the fact that she has always mentioned that she is a lesbian as a reason for escaping her home country and claiming asylum at her substantive interview and that it was not her fault that her Screening Interview was not conducted so to ask her about her sexual orientation. To this respect, it should be noted that nowhere in the asylum application form there is space to indicate the applicant’s sexual orientation or their preference to not disclose it. However, the Judge of the first-tier tribunal did not accept her explanations as we can read in the following extract of the second rejection letter:

Extract 7.4.

**Judge of the first-tier tribunal:** I am afraid I simply do not accept any of the appellant’s explanations (...). I find even less persuasive the argument that if she had been asked about her sexual orientation then she would have said so. This answer undermines her claim that she was afraid or embarrassed to mention her sexual orientation (...) [as] she does not appear to be citing any fear or embarrassment if the respondent had asked her about her sexual orientation

Here the judge confirms the Home Office assessment that the reasons provided at the substantive interview for not disclosing her sexuality during the screening (i.e.; feelings of shame and fear) were not convincing. Meanwhile the judge also identifies one of the

reasons provided in her appeal letter (if asked, she would have disclosed her sexuality) as contradicting the others (that she was ashamed and fearful to do so).

Throughout her asylum interview with the Home Office she explicitly and coherently talked about the fear and shame about disclosing her sexuality to the authorities (see extract 7.5 below). Fear of the authorities (with respect to revealing her homosexuality) seems to start the moment she discovered that homosexuality was proscribed in her home country (Interview Part 2, question 2 and 3); i.e., when the school teachers sent a warning letter to her parents upon discovering her kissing with another girl (Interview Part 1, questions 134 and 138) and when she was taken, as a consequence, to traditional healers and prophets (Interview Part 2, question 142). Since then, fearing the authorities seems to become a motif throughout her life. For example, she explained that she had never reported her siblings to the police neither in home country (Interview Part 1, question 53) nor in South Africa (Interview Part 2, questions 76, 83 and 86) when she had fled, because she feared they could in turn report her for her homosexuality. Moreover, this fear is often connected to feelings of shame (Interview Part 2, questions 2-3 and 86).

Extract 7.5.

Home Office Interview, Part 1

**#53 Home Office:** From [reference to the time period in which she was verbally and physically abused by her siblings], did you ever go to the police or any other governmental body in order to report your siblings or the people they'd hired?

**Jane:** I did not go to the police because they always threatened that they'd tell the police I am a lesbian

**#134 Home Office:** How did you feel when you discovered that letter?

**Jane:** Fear, I was afraid

**Home Office:** Why was that?

**Jane:** Because it was stated in that letter that it is not allowed in Your home country; so, I feared that anyone could go to the police and report me [Applicant step out of room for 2 minutes]

**#138 Home Office:** How did you feel when you found the letter was sent to your parents?

**Jane:** I was afraid that they could possibly end up going to the police

Home Office Interview, Part 2

**#2 Home Office:** When you realised being a lesbian in Your home country was not permitted; how did that make you feel?

**Jane:** I was embarrassed and in fear

**#3 Home Office:** Why were you fearful and what were you fearful of?

**Jane:** I feared if anyone reported it to the police; I'd be arrested

**#142 Home Office:** How did you feel about them telling other people [i.e., traditional prophets and healers] about your sexual orientation?

**Jane:** I was in fear thinking they'd go to the police

**#76 Home Office:** Why didn't you report what had happened to you (in Your home country) to the South African authorities straight away, as you stated you were not threatened in SA until a few days after arriving there?

**Jane:** I was in fear that's why I couldn't go and report

**#83 Home Office:** Did you fear telling people what you'd been through as they might have reported it to the police?

**Jane:** I was in fear yes. I only disclosed to people in the church I attended; I was seeking help

**#86 Home Office:** If you had planned to do that [going to report to the authorities what had happened to you in Your home country] why didn't you do that before you were beaten up?

**Jane:** I could not do it at that time as I was in fear for my life and also the other thing was that I was shy as I was a lesbian

At other points during the interview, she talks about her feelings of shame that she experienced about disclosing her sexuality to other people, as we can observe in the following extract:

Extract 7.6.

Home Office Interview, Part 1

**#126 Home Office:** Once you realised your sexual orientation, how did that make you feel?

**Jane:** I felt a bit embarrassed especially when I was around people, but when I was on my own I realised that is who I am and I cannot change it

**#144 Home Office:** When you realised they were taking you to those people [i.e., local prophets and traditional healers] to try as you put it ‘get you out’ of being a lesbian; how did that make you feel?

**Jane:** I was just embarrassed

**#148 Home Office:** Once you realized your true sexual orientation how did you feel knowing that you wanted to live a life against your family expectation?

**Jane:** I was embarrassed

### Home Office Interview, Part 2

**#25 Home Office:** How do you feel that your society doesn’t agree with your sexual orientation?

**Jane:** I feel embarrassed but there’s nothing I can do that’s what I am

Alongside feelings of shame emerges the individual awareness of the irreversibility of her sexuality, described as an innate characteristic of the person, something that she seemed to have accepted because she cannot change it. However, when mentioned, feelings of shame are not further investigated by the Home Office (as opposed to feelings of fear, for instance, see extract 3 and extract 5, Home Office Interview, Part 2, question 2). Nonetheless the Home Office drew negative conclusions on the declared feelings of shame. For example, ‘embarrassment’ was deemed ‘a feeling which did not reasonably resonate with the claimed situations she found herself in’, such as when asked how she felt about her parents taking her to traditional healers to fix her sexuality (see above extract, question 144).

### **Failure to Disclose her Sexuality at the Substantive Interview with Appropriate Terminology**

In this section, I will analyse how the disclosure of her sexuality to the interviewer of the Substantive Interview is judged as undermining her credibility to be an authentic lesbian. In the Home Office rejection letter, under the section ‘Sexual Orientation’, it is stated that

she failed to answer the question about what word or phrase she has chosen to describe her sexual orientation with, which in turn undermined her credibility. In what follows, I will report the Substantive Interview interaction the Home Office refers to, where the question at stake is explicitly asked:

Extract 7.7.

**#120 Home Office:** I am just going to ask you some questions about your sexual orientation now. You've stated that you are a lesbian, is that the word you have chosen to describe your sexual orientation with?

**Jane:** Because I am someone who deals with girls since when I was 16

**Home Office:** But is lesbian a word you choose to describe yourself with?

**Jane:** It's not that I would want to be known as, but it's what my siblings call me

**#121 Home Office:** What words or phrases would you use to describe your sexual orientation?

**Jane:** It's not something I would tell people about, because I was shy to talk about it, but obviously the people who knew I liked girls, that's what they'd refer me to be

The apparent failure in answering the question of the precise lexis she would choose to identify her sexuality seems to dissolve for various reasons. First, while nowhere in the above extract the applicant employs the word 'lesbian', she does use different phrases to refer to her sexuality, such as 'I am someone who deals with girls' and 'I liked girls'. Moreover, at the beginning of the Substantive Interview, when she was asked about the reasons for claiming asylum, she explicitly stated that one of them was because she is a 'lesbian'. Finally, from her answers in the above extract, it seems that she was trying to explain why she would not choose the word 'lesbian' to describe her sexuality, which is in line with a persecutory narrative on the grounds of sexuality. In fact, she explains that 'lesbian' is the word her persecutors (i.e., her siblings) and people of the community used in their verbal and physical abuses. When the question is reiterated more directly as to avoid this ambiguity, she explains that she would rather not tell about her sexuality as she was 'shy to talk about it'. Hence, once again, her feelings of shame about disclosing her homosexuality to other people emerge in her account. In other points of the rejection letter, the Home Office seems to reach similar negative conclusions on the basis of the terminology she used to refer to her sexuality during the Substantive Interview. For

example, when she was asked how she managed to sustain her homosexual relationships in Her home country; she replied, ‘When we loved; we wouldn’t show we would sin where people could see us’. Hence, the Home Office drew the following conclusion from her answer:

Extract 7.8.

**Home Office:** It is questionable why you would use the word ‘sin’ when referring to conducting your relationship; when throughout your entire narrative, you have stated you were simply being who you are

In her appeal letter against the Home Office’s decision, she explains that she referred to her relationship being a ‘sin’ because she knew it is illegal in her home country, not because she thought that it could describe what she is. In this case, therefore, the Home Office does not seem to take into consideration the applicant’s background, which might have influenced the language employed to describe her sexuality, especially in those points of the interview in which she is asked to outline her persecutory past in her home country with respect to her sexuality. That is, it is at least plausible that a person who is asked to tell about traumatic events that occurred in the past can express it by means of the very same persecutory language she used to hear at the time the persecution occurred. Moreover, it should be noted that her interview was conducted in her native language with the help of an interpreter, hence in the language of the home rather than host country. Finally, while in the extract above the Home Office personnel does not seem to make any reference to the criminalisation of homosexuality in her country of origin as a factor that could influence the answers provided throughout the interview, yet elsewhere this seems to have been considered and used as a reason to undermine her claim, as in the following conclusive statement of the rejection letter:

Extract 7.9.

**Home Office:** You were asked how many sex relationships you’d had, and you replied, ‘I had many relationships, because every time I finished with one, I would get into the next one’. It is reasonable to expect that a person who conducted same sex relationships in a homophobic country be aware of how many same sex relationships they had entered into.

From the above statement it can be inferred that the ‘reasonableness’ of the cited expectations are based on normative beliefs about what a person should or should not remember depending on the country of origin. If the latter is a so-called ‘homophobic country’, as the Home Office defines her home country, then it is expected that the exact number of homosexual relationships would be remembered. In her appeal letter, she provided the exact number of same-sex relationships and explained that she thought that at the asylum interview she was been asked to name the relationships, which suggests that she had trouble remembering the names of some or all of the people she claimed to have had same-sex relationship with. Hence, the Judge of the First-Tier tribunal took the latter as evidence undermining her credibility.

### **Failing to Provide a Credible Account on How She and Others Found Out She Was a Lesbian in her Home Country**

In this section I describe how, during the Substantive Interview, the participant explains how she had disclosed her homosexuality to others in her country of origin and the prevailing judgement on her credibility. In the Substantive Interview, she states that at first, she did not disclose her sexual orientation to anyone; rather it was discovered when she was sixteen years old by her school friends who saw her kissing another girl. Hence during the interview she was asked if she had disclosed her sexual orientation to this girl before kissing her; and she replied ‘No I did not, but she was older than me and she was seeing that’s what I was about’; after a long pause she then replied, ‘sometimes when I played with other girls, I would touch them all over, that’s when she noticed that’s what I should be’. Hence, the Home Office and the judge of the first-tier tribunal did not find it credible that she would behave in such a way, for throughout the interview she claimed that she was embarrassed to even talk about her sexuality and because if her actions were that apparent, then others who saw her would have also been able to come to the same conclusion as the girl who kissed her. In turn, the entire sequence of events which followed was dismissed; namely that the peers who saw her kissing with the girl reported her to the teacher, the teacher reporting her to the parents, and the parents taking her to traditional healers. Hence, on the one hand, she is held accountable for others’ actions who did or did not draw that conclusion from her overt behaviour. Moreover, feelings of shame are taken as contradicting such behaviour.

However, as noted, feelings of embarrassment with respect to her sexuality are employed in her account only after she became aware of her sexuality and that it was not permitted in her country. On the other hand, prior to holding that knowledge, the applicant does not mention any feeling of shame with respect to her sexuality. She was rather gradually discovering it by finding out that she was attracted to the girls she was playing with. There is one point in the interview where she is asked whether there was a specific event that triggered her sexuality realisation, to which she replied precisely that when she was 16 years old ‘every time I was playing with girls, I found I was attracted to them’, which led to kissing with her first girlfriend at school. However, even this possible explanation collapses in front of another assessment made by the Home Office on how she understood that she was homosexual by finding out that she was attracted to girls when she was younger. In fact, according to the Home Office, ‘she did not display any feelings of internal struggle which might be expected for somebody who comes from a religious background’.

### **Failing to Provide a Credible Account on How She Came Out to Others in her Home Country**

The Home Office evaluation of the way she disclosed her homosexuality in her home country after the school incident did serve due consideration to the fact that she was now aware that being a lesbian was forbidden in there. Hence, doubts were casted on the credibility of her account on how she informed other women whom she wished to enter into a (sexual) relationship with about her sexual orientation, despite now holding the knowledge that her sexual orientation was not permitted in her home country. This, of course, stands in direct contrast to when she began her first same-sex relationship with the girl she kissed at school; wherein she was not aware of the situation of criminalisation. Particularly, she apparently did not demonstrate any sense of fear prior to disclosing her sexuality, which the Home Office argued was ‘reasonably expected’, especially given her previous statements that she feared others would inform the authorities about her sexual orientation. For example, she openly informed one girlfriend of her sexual orientation whilst in a cinema, without having previously discussed same-sex relationships with her, hence she may not have reacted well to that information and others could have overheard it. In the interview she explains that she indirectly disclosed her sexuality at the cinema by telling her that ‘she had beautiful lips’, that she felt ‘embarrassed’ to do so and that

‘we were sitting further away from people in there; no one could hear us talk’. Despite this, it was found that she failed to provide reasonable explanations for other similar actions, such as spending time with her girlfriend in her home area, when people of the area were aware of her sexual orientation, hence they could have reported her.

### **Failing to Provide a Credible Account on Why She Had Not Approached Other LGBT People or Organizations in the UK**

Another reason for refusing her claim to be a lesbian has to do with her coming out in the UK, as we can see in the following extract from the conclusive section of her first rejection letter:

Extract 7.10.

**Home Office:** You were internally inconsistent and unable to provide any reasonable explanation as to why you have not made any reasonable attempts to socialize with other LGBT people or join any LGBT organizations in the UK

When asked whether she tried socialising with other people of the same sexual orientation in the UK; she replied, that although she was attracted to some, she would not approach them. Hence, the Home Office asked her why she had not done so, given that she had been in the UK since February. The reasons she provided were, once again, feelings of fear (‘I still fear; I still don’t know exactly the laws how they work in this country’) and shame (‘It’s very difficult to meet up with someone and tell them straight away that you love them’). The contradiction, according to the Home Office, ought to be found in the fact that when asked how she felt about ‘being able to love freely’ in the UK; she replied, ‘I feel freedom, I am free’. Moreover, when asked if it would have been correct to say that she was aware that the UK permits people of all sexual orientations; she replied ‘Yes’. Hence, knowing the latter would undermine her claim that she feared disclosing her sexuality in the UK for not knowing the laws. However, as noted, the Home Office was aware of the fact that she had met with her legal representatives only two days before her asylum interview, when she was reassured that she could disclose her sexuality to the authorities. Finally, the judge of the first-tier tribunal takes into consideration the evidence of LGBT activity within the United Kingdom that she produced in support of her appeal claim, as we can see in the following extract:

Extract 7.11.

**Judge of the First-Tier Tribunal:** it is the appellant's case that she recently begun attending a LGBT centre in Newtown. Contained at page [page number] of the appellant's bundle is a letter from an LGBT group in Newtown called, 'The Centre'. The letter is dated [date of the letter] and confirms that the appellant is a member of the group. There is a further letter at page [page number] of the appellant's bundle from another LGBT group called 'Free and Pride Refuges'. I have taken into account all the content of these letters. However, in light of the above concerns raised I find that the appellant has simply attended these organizations and sought membership in order to bolster her asylum claim and not because she is a genuine lesbian

The support letters from The LGBT Centre and Free and Pride Refuges in Newtown post-dated her screening and substantive interviews. Moreover, because of the apparent contradictions inherent her case, the judge assessed the intention behind attending these organizations and seeking membership as bolstering her asylum claim, rather than seeking support for being a 'genuine lesbian'. In other words, they are rather taken as evidence of being a 'fake lesbian'.

## **Conclusions**

The case at stake was rejected not only on the grounds of sexuality, the only one we examined, but also on the grounds of the inheritance dispute. As for the latter, it is worth noting that similar credibility problems were found by the Home Office. For example, according to the Home Office, she was unable to provide specific dates or information which were deemed as key in her account and that, given their prominence, the Home Office expected her to be able to recall such details. For example, with respect to the sexual orientation basis: 'When pressed, she did not know her girlfriend's date of birth, where she was born and raised, when they initially met and when they entered into a relationship'. Moreover, as for the inheritance dispute: 'When pressed, she did not know the date she was evicted from her home by her siblings' and 'what items were in your bag when you were evicted from home', or 'who initially began beating you in your country'. Taken together, these evaluations highlight the importance of being

able to recall in detail what has happened in the past (even details that might not have been considered important at the time, such as the items in the bag when she escaped) in settings that might be threatening, for instance for the pressure imposed in answering the questions (cf. 'when pressed'). Moreover, the information provided must be internally and externally consistent with other evidence, including what has been claimed during the asylum interviews and personal statement.

Besides the 'reasonable expectations' of providing a detailed and coherent account, more specific expectations on sexuality can be drawn from what has been observed throughout the analysis of the assessment of her case on this ground. First, the expectation of being able to talk about sexuality with the appropriate terminology, which should not reproduce the homophobic language of the home country. Then, interview questions seem to consider the DSSH model. For example, feelings of shame and fear are expected. However, they are particularly expected to occur in certain ways depending on the country and situation the applicant found herself in. For example, embarrassment was not believed to be a reasonable feeling when her parents took her to traditional healers to 'fix' her sexuality. Moreover, being embarrassed about her sexuality is taken to undermine the credibility of her account on how she was behaving with girls at school in her country (i.e., 'touching them all over'). On the other hand, being embarrassed was not considered a plausible reason for not mentioning her sexuality to the British authority upon arrival at her screening interview or for not attempting meeting with other LGBT people or organizations in the UK. Furthermore, the Home Office expects that an applicant from a 'homophobic country' would mention feelings of fear prior to disclosing her sexuality to others or in public spaces for they could inform the authorities of the disclosed sexual orientation. On the other hand, because of apparent inconsistencies, feelings of fear were not considered 'plausible reasons' for not mentioning her sexuality to the British authorities upon arrival at her screening interview or for not attempting meeting with other LGBT people or organizations in the UK. Hence, there seems to be an expectation of demonstrating attempts to socialize with other people of the same sexual orientation by joining LGBT organizations in the UK, or of providing reasonable explanations for not having done so, resulting from motivations that can be deemed to be 'authentically' rooted in sexual orientation (although the basis upon which the Home Office determines authenticity is unclear). Finally, the Home Office drew negative conclusions on the way she became aware of her sexuality, because she did not display feelings of internal struggle, on the way she became aware of her sexuality, which were expected given her religious background.

It is beyond the scope of this section and research to attempt an analysis of emotionality and nonverbal communication displayed during asylum interrogations and court hearings. Nonetheless, silence and other nonverbal signs might equally bear meanings, which might be more significant than verbal communication especially during the evocation of traumatic events in LGBT asylum claims (Johnson, 2011). Throughout her interview, she had been consistent in her style of providing answers, especially when interrogated about her sexuality. For example, she often provided very short and identical answers of her feelings of shame and fear with respect to her sexuality. Moreover, in several points of the interview, when interrogated about the first disclosure of her sexuality in her home country, which triggered her sexual based persecution, she stepped out of the room for few minutes. One such occasion occurred during the first part of her substantive interview, at question 134, when she was asked about her feelings when the teacher issued a warning letter to her parents (see extract 5, Interview Part 1); another instance, which I have not included here, occurred a few moments later, at question 140, when she was asked what she was thinking when she was brought to traditional healer to fix her sexuality. Similarly, only after a long pause she disclosed that when she was younger she used to touch other girls whilst playing. Finally, the case seems to have been assessed in a way that tended to overlook the gendered aspect of her claim. The two grounds for applying for asylum - i.e., her homosexuality and the inheritance dispute with her siblings - did not only overlapped but also seem to be deeply intertwined with another fundamental feature of her social identity and associated persecution; thus, comprising aspects of gender-based persecution. In fact, as a (lesbian) woman she was forced to marry twice with men who were already affiliated to her family (the sister's husband after her death and the family friend) and to separate from her children, however this was not taken as an integral part of the claim. The experiences of gender abuse faced by lesbians might be key aspects to consider in the assessment of their claim, which are often overlooked by decision-making bodies (Dawson & Gerber 2017; UKGLIG 2010; Miles 2012; Lewis 2010; Berg & Millbank 2009). For instance, in the case at stake, a consideration of such aspect might have brought to dissipate some credibility issue in the assessment of her account. For example, it could be speculated that fear of authority figures and compliance with their requests have been deeply engrained and habituated in the applicant. Hence it is reasonable to believe that she did not disclose her sexuality at

screening for fearing the authority and also that she would have done it if asked to do so, which had been instead interpreted as a contradiction.

## **7.2. Case Study 2: A Credible LGBT Asylum Claim**

The following discussion draws on a participant's personal statement, transcripts of the research and Home Office interviews, and supportive evidence, to analyse a successful case of asylum on the grounds of sexual orientation. We have met this participant in Chapter 4 (see Extract 4.8), when he was describing his struggle in coming out with members of his Zimbabwean communities in Newtown. He was one of the first members of FPR. He arrived in the UK when he was around nineteen years old and sought asylum on the grounds of his fear of being persecuted for membership to the opposition party in his home country, Zimbabwe. His asylum application was finally rejected after 12 years. He would approach FPR after a few years during which he had illegally resided in the UK. Finally, after some months, he claimed asylum on the grounds of his sexuality. First, I discuss his personal statement, which he drafted with the help of his assigned case-worker at FPR. It is eight pages long, made of 24 paragraphs and deliberately drafted under the DSSH model criteria. Hence, I will first underline its structure and how it seemingly discursively follows the four criteria of the DSSH model. I will show the attempt to draft this personal statement according to the DSSH model seems to have elicited a narrative which focuses on sexual identity and follows Eurocentric (normatively linear) models of sexual development; i.e. Cass' (1979) homosexual identity formation in six stages and Coleman's (1982) five developmental stages of the coming out process. Crucially, within this linear framework, FPR seems to function as a normalising apparatus that corrects his (homo)sexuality deviating from the linear models (for the persecution he was subjected to in the home country and communities of belonging in the UK) and hence enables him to fully come out to others. Similarly, I will then look at other evidence (e.g., transcripts of the substantive asylum interview, FPR support letter and pictures taken during LGBT events) and how they are assembled in line with his personal statement. The last section looks in depth at those elements integrated in the linear narrative of sexual development and those that were omitted. Notably in the research interview he vented his frustration with his life as an asylum seeker and the way he was treated by the British government and society, whereas in his asylum application these

negative constructions are swept away in favour of a celebration of England as a homeland that respects and promotes the rights of LGBT people in contrast to the homophobic country of origin.

### **Analysis of the Applicant's Personal Statement**

The personal statement begins with stating the name and other personal information of the narrator, the applicant, such as his family and religious background. The first image we have of his life as a child is of happiness and routine, 'Growing up in a Christian loving family we used to go to church every Sunday without fail'. Paragraph 2 continues with the description of his happy childhood in his African community surrounded by friends and relatives. Moreover, he tells about his love for different sports. Feelings of being different from other peers with respect to his sexuality emerge precisely within this framework, 'I used to enjoy playing with my friends after sports. We would chase each other around the changing rooms naked. Everybody used to think it was a joke. It was funny, but I used to enjoy it so much'. 'Difference' is linguistically registered by juxtaposing what 'everybody used to think' with what he used to think. On the one hand, everybody thought that chasing people of the same sex naked was just a joke. On the other hand, for him it was more than a joke as he 'used to enjoy it so much'. In this 'pre-coming out' phase of his childhood he does not seem to be fully aware of his homosexuality although he seems to sense that he is attracted to people of the same sex. This is the starting point of his account on the recognition of this 'difference' and how it set him apart from others following the heteronormative expectations. The event that led him from a generally positive childhood to a bad/negative state is an 'outing incident' at school, reported fully as follows:

Extract 7.12.

I remember playing in the showers after swimming lessons. I remember once my friend hit me with a towel and I went to tackle him in the shower. I took him onto the floor both of us were naked but when he got on top of me I just froze. I was confused on what was happening to me. When I got up I was so embarrassed because I had a reaction, all the other boy started laughing at me. The guys called me gay, I was so angry, humiliated and confused I punched one of them in the face. My teacher was called, and he took me to the headmaster's office and I was sent

home for the day for injuring one of the students. I was sent home that day and my dad was told what happened, he beat me up so much, even up to this day I still think of it. [Martin]

The recognition of his sexual difference (i.e., the ‘reaction’ to physical interaction with a person of the same sex) and that it is not accepted by society, family members and friends, happens within the same conflicted event. Upon seeing his sexual arousal, the school peers verbally abused him, the headmaster informed the father, who severely assaulted him as a punishment. The public verbal and physical condemnation of his actions – which were subjected to a sexualised witnessing as performatively homosexual behaviour – enables the brutal recognition that the majority disapproves the so-called deviant conduct. Recognition of his sexual deviance triggers feelings of shame (i.e., ‘I was so embarrassed because I had a reaction’) and confusion (i.e., ‘I just froze. I was confused on what was happening to me’). The personal statement proceeds to consider this gradual recognition of both his homosexuality and that it is not accepted by society. For instance, he refers to public statements by Mugabe, president of Zimbabwe, and state laws condemning homosexuality, whereby he became aware that homosexuality is forbidden by law. He also refers to when he realised that homosexuality is condemned in the Bible: ‘The scriptures of the Bible speak of relations with men and women, not man and man. I saw that it was wrong to feel this way, but I could not change it. I tried being normal by having relationship with the opposite sex, I tried to change myself, but it did not work’. Here, sexual difference is constructed as morally ‘wrong’ and as an immutable characteristic of the self, which sets him apart from the heterosexual norm. Hence, he endorses the subject position of abnormal who tries ‘being normal’ by engaging in heterosexual relationships. The statement then considers how throughout his adolescence he became more and more aware of his sexuality. Another school incident is described as key in the recognition of his sexuality. When he went to boarding school, he was told by the headmaster that he would have to share a single bed with another boy. In the following extract he describes in detail his reaction upon learning the sleeping policy of the school:

Extract 7.13.

I told the headmaster I wasn’t going to (...) share my bed. I was told that was the school policy and I couldn’t do anything about it. (...) A new school mate came, and I was forced to sleep with somebody on the single bed. (...) I really enjoyed his

company (...). We used to play fight and it used to get physical. One time we were sleeping in our bed, I started touching him at night whilst he and everybody else was sleeping. And I liked it. One day he asked me why I slept so close to him and why I touched him at night. I was so embarrassed I told him that I was sleeping, and I didn't remember touching him that it must have been nightmares. [Martin]

From the above extract, it seems that in that phase of his life he still had problems with accepting his homosexuality. In fact, he describes conflicting reactions with respect to having to sleep in the same bed with another boy. On the one hand, he complained to the headmaster of the school when he found out about the sleeping policy. Publicly expressing his disappointment to sleep with a person of the same sex provides what could be considered a heteronormative response. Indeed, his previous experience with peers during the 'outing incident' taught him that the blatant public rejection of homosexuality is socially acceptable and expected. On the other hand, one night 'whilst he and everybody else was sleeping', he gave vent to his sexual impulses and started touching his friend. Since during the day in public he does not want and cannot publicly demonstrate his homosexuality it is therefore in the secrecy of the night, when everyone sleeps, and nobody can see, he tries to explore his sexual impulses towards another person of the same sex and comes to the realization that he 'liked it'. When the new day arrives, however, and his friend questions him about his behaviour during the night, he returns to conform to the heterosexual norm. He denied what happened by claiming that he was asleep and suggesting that he was probably having 'nightmares'. The use of the latter word to refer to homosexuality is another indicator that makes the reader understand how he tries to adhere to the heteronormative behaviour when he is in public even through the use of an 'acceptable' language of damnation; that is, touching and holding another boy at night is a secret pleasure, but publicly it must be considered as a 'nightmare', something that is negative and never existed. The realisation of his homosexuality and of the fact that is not allowed is what triggers his feelings of isolation and shame: the recognition of being 'other' rather than the 'same'. This is concisely summarised by the following extract from his personal statement:

Extract 7.14.

It took me a very long time to get to know what was going on with me, that I had feelings for another boy somebody just like me. I felt so sick, confused, ashamed

and disgusted with myself for feeling this way for a boy (...). I could not talk to anybody about my feelings as I knew these sorts of thoughts were not normal, they were forbidden. Whilst growing up it was something that confused me so much, but I knew I could not and should not talk about it to anyone, even my own brothers, sisters and friends as they wouldn't understand it. [Martin]

The above extract summarises and concludes his account on the past in his country of origin in relation to his sexuality with the conscious realization that his feelings of attraction towards another boy were wrong, abnormal, forbidden and to be kept hidden. The sense of shame, disgust, confusion and isolation in relation to the realization of his sexuality and the fact that it is not accepted accompany him throughout his life in the home country.

The personal statement then transitions from his past in the home country to the escape to the UK and claim for asylum for reasons related to his political affiliation with the opposition party in Zimbabwe. The reference to his escape is briefly mentioned and serves the narrative function of opening his account on his sexual development in the host country. The latter is constructed in opposition to the homophobic Zimbabwe, as we can see in the following extract:

Extract 7.15.

I saw a different way of life when I came to the United Kingdom (...). I saw so many openly gay people. People could even hold their partner's hand in the town centre, the shops, the pubs, and clubs, everywhere. This took me with surprise because in Zimbabwe you could not even talk about that. If you had held your same sex partners hand in Zimbabwe you could have gotten beaten or imprisoned. [Martin]

He continues his story by explaining how he could not enjoy the 'different life' that he saw when he arrived in England, where homosexuals could be open and even hold hands in the town centre. Although in the UK he started exploring the 'gay scene', such as attending the LGBT bars and clubs in Newtown, where he met his first same-sex partner, he deliberately engaged in public heterosexual relationships as a cover. In fact, as noted in Chapter 3 (see extract 8), he still had to keep his homosexuality hidden for fear of being ostracized by the Zimbabwean family and Christian community in the UK. Hence,

in his account, the heterosexist and homophobic world is constructed as the home country, which continues to exist in the communities of belonging in the host country. This is stylistically achieved in the personal statement by recalling the conversations he used to have with his first same-sex partner about what would happen when he told his family in the UK or in Zimbabwe that he was gay.

Extract 7.16.

I told him my family in this country would disown me due to their strong Christian beliefs, (...) because in my own community I am different I am abnormal. I am always asked when I see people from this community when I will get married (...). They ask me why I have not got a wife or child. At my age there's an expectation for you to look for a partner whom you can start a family with, I cannot tell them I am gay as I'm scared of the result of even telling one person from my community. I know they will isolate me, I will be alone, and there would be no place for me in the whole community. For this reason, I play the part that they expect from me. With Max I could talk about what would happen if somebody found out I was gay in Zimbabwe. The answers were all terrifying; they would assault me, put me in jail, beat me up or kill me. [Martin]

In the above extract, fear of persecution in the home country is conveyed, whereby he reviews the possible 'terrifying' scenarios that would occur if somebody in Zimbabwe found out that he was gay, which are described in the denouement 'assaulting, jailing, beating up and killing'. The comparison between the two possible scenarios contributes to building the UK in opposition to the homophobic country of origin. The 'terrifying' scenarios could never occur in the UK. Meanwhile members of his Zimbabwean communities in the UK would 'disown' and 'isolate' him, if they knew about his homosexuality. For fear of being discovered and because of the constant pressure by members of his own community on when he would finally settle down with 'a wife or a child', he decided to 'play the part that they expect from him'. Thus, living a double life, in front of his Zimbabwean communities in the UK he would pretend to lead a heterosexual life, whereas he would secretly continue with his homosexual relationship and attend LGBT places in Newtown. This phase of his life continues until another tragic event occurred that marks his unfolding biography as a homosexual asylum seeker in the UK; after twelve years in suspense his asylum application on a political ground was

refused. In the personal statement, he explains that the news of the refusal came along with that of his mother's death, which contributed to episodes of depression, paranoia, insomnia, attempted suicide and the end of the relationship with his first love.

We now reach the end of the personal statement; the last paragraphs (from 20 to 24) are used to describe the positive resolution of his story. Here he explains that during those tragic circumstances he met Steven and Luke at Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers and how this meeting would have positively marked the course of events.

Extract 7.17.

One thing that has helped me to grow was my introduction to Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (...). This is where I met Luke and Steven. We became friends and would often talk. Steven and I went out for lunch we listened to Luke's proposal about starting a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender asylum seekers and refugee group for people in Newtownshire. I was definitely interested and would soon become an active member of the project called Free and Pride Refuges when it would begin. From the very beginning I have felt that this project has been a home for me. It was a first time for me to be part of a group who I was open to and who were open to me. I have been introduced to members and volunteers who understand what I am going through and who understand me. I am happy to be part of this family. It is from this experience that I feel I am not alone. This group has allowed me to feel as if I can open up because I feel supported. I feel empowered and at ease when I am with people from my group. It is still an internal struggle for me, but I am trying to let go of the belief that I am abnormal. I am trying to move on from the religious and cultural beliefs that keep telling me I am an abomination. I am learning that I am normal and still I am working on myself. [Martin]

Within FPR his struggle finds a positive resolution. The caring function of FPR is conveyed in his construction of FPR as a new 'home' and a 'family', where he can finally be open about his sexuality among people who are like him and accept him for what he truly is (see Chapter 4, Extract 8). The therapeutic function of FPR emerges whereby he explains that he is learning that he is 'normal' and not an 'abomination' as according to his religious and cultural upbringings. This new 'homo-normality' is something that he has to learn and that FPR helps him to understand through care and support (i.e., the hermeneutic function). With expressed gratitude toward FPR, feelings of shame and isolation begin to dissipate and make room for those of communion and pride, which

enabled him to progressively come-out to larger and more visible communities of LGBT people. For example, he joined FPR in gay pride parades throughout UK and had been referred to the Newtown LGBT Centre.

Extract 7.18.

I have been able to attend LGBT events like London, Manchester and Newtown pride parade and been able to hold up banners on the front line supporting the cause. I am on FPR's Facebook photos showing my support openly. Also, I have participated in LGBT activities such as lectures and theatre productions which aim to raise awareness to the general public about experiences of being an asylum seeker from oppressive countries such as Zimbabwe within the LGBT community. Now I am a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) group in Newtown, which I was referred to by Luke, project coordinator at Free and Pride Refuges. I was happy to join the LGBT centre at this time because from the support at FPR I felt I was ready to join a more open LGBT group. [Martin]

Participation in LGBT events such as pride marches is described as a task or a mission that he has finally been able to accomplish. The use of the linguistic formation 'I have been able' to participate in these events and 'hold up banners on the front line supporting the cause', gives the idea of an inner agonistic relation that he has finally overcome thanks to FPR. Moreover, in the extract Zimbabwe is constructed as an oppressive country as opposed to the UK, where the various public support activities for LGBT people are celebrated.

His account of the meeting with FPR conveys the idea of 'growth', from a negative state of difference, shame, fear, isolation to a positive one of normality, pride, security and community. The extract concludes with the following summary of this 'journey' throughout the recognition, knowledge, acceptance and pride of his sexual identity, which integrates all the aspects seen so far:

Extract 7.19.

I can honestly say my journey has been full of obstructions and full of detours. In Zimbabwe I struggled to understand my identity and sexuality. I came to the UK and was in a different world trying to navigate myself through it. (...) I can now say I am happy and proud to be a gay man. I feel safe to be in a country I know won't prosecute, assault or send me to jail because of my sexual orientation. But my

journey is not complete, I am struggling and will continue to feel fear of the reactions of others, this is because I know (...) my British Zimbabwean community looks down and would outcast me if I were to come out to them. I still have to battle with myself because how I have been brought up the culture and traditional Christian values which see me as a pervert. But I know I am safe here from the physical and mental abuse I would suffer if I were in Zimbabwe. I could not go back and hide or pretend to be someone I am not. (...) I have a support network here. I hope one day when I am ready and with my support networks help that I'll be able to tell my family members that I'm gay and to some extent they will accept this. I want to move forward and if I am given the chance to be in this country which I have called home for the last 13 years I'm going to try to help others who are like me. [Martin]

The extract summarises his meaning-making journey towards understanding and accessing his true sexual identity and so outlines his reasons for fearing persecution in the home country for being gay. Homophobic constructions of the home country and of the communities of belonging in the UK emerge throughout. The UK is defined as 'home', where he feels 'safe' and he can finally be a 'happy and proud gay man'. However, 'his journey is not complete' as he still clearly agonises over his strict Christian upbringing and fears going back to Zimbabwe. The statement concludes with the hope of finally being able to disclose his sexuality with his family in the UK with the help of his 'support networks', which is conditional upon being granted leave to remain in the UK. The intended reader is Home Office personnel, to which the narrator is appealing to conclude the story with a happy end i.e. being granted leave to remain; thus, the figure of the grateful migrant emerges, whereby he promises that, if he was given a chance to be in the UK, he would give back to the community by helping others like himself.

### **Adherence to Eurocentric Linear Models of Sexual Development**

The story emerging from the personal statement seems to be centred around his gradual recognition of his sexuality, which becomes the prominent aspect of his individual identity and progresses in a linear and coherent way that broadly aligns with Coleman's (1982) and Cass's (1979) model of coming out and homosexuality development in stages, respectively, which is in line with the findings by Dawson and Gerber (2017, see literature

review for more details)<sup>10</sup>. First, the protagonist of the story became aware that his sexual identity was different than other peers, who were adhering to the heterosexual norm (i.e., Cass's 'identity awareness phase'). From the 'outing' incident at school, he understood not only that he was different from others (i.e. difference) but also that this difference was not allowed in his society (i.e. stigma). The strong physical reactions he experienced during this event (i.e., the sexual arousal and violently assaulting his peer who called him 'gay') seem to fit in Coleman's (1982) 'pre-coming out' stage, which occurs when the child acts out because he or she senses that he or she is not normal. The second school incident, occurred in a more mature phase of his life and self-sexual awareness, which can be best described by Cass's (1979) 'identity comparison' stage. In fact, through comparison with others and self-exploration he became more and more aware of his homosexuality (i.e. deliberately secretly hugging his friend at night), whilst pretending to be heterosexual (i.e. denying what had happened during the night). The recognition of this difference and of the fact that it is forbidden by society triggered his feelings of embarrassment (i.e., Shame) and fear of persecution (i.e., Harm) for his sexuality defined as deviant. The progressive understanding of his homosexuality and of living in a heterosexual and heterosexist world correspond to Cass's (1979) 'identity tolerance' stage. In the case at stake, the home country and the Zimbabwean communities of belonging in the UK are constructed as homophobic and persecutory, which influence the natural development of his 'coming out phase' (Coleman, 1982), which occurs gradually. In the home country as well as at the beginning of his journey in the UK, he 'came-out'

---

<sup>10</sup> The Australian psychologist Cass (1979) developed the first model of homosexual identity formation in six stages, which I outline in what follows. First, "identity awareness", when the individual becomes aware that he or she is different from his or her peers. Second "identity comparison", when the individual believes that he or she may be homosexual but pretends to be heterosexual. Third, "identity tolerance", when the individual realizes that he or she is homosexual in a heterosexist world. Fourth, "identity acceptance", when the individual begins to explore the gay community, and also gay or lesbian identity. Fifth, identity pride, when the individual becomes active in the gay community to the point that accepting homosexuality and rejecting heterosexuality are his or her primary concerns; and (6) synthesis, when the individual fully accepts himself or herself and others as equal members of the community. In 1982, the American Sexologist Eli Coleman (1982), proposed another model, which focused on five stages of "coming out" in the development of homosexuality. First, a "pre-coming out" stage, when a child acts out because he or she senses that he or she is not normal; i.e., different from others. Second, a "coming out" stage, when the child, now an adolescent, discloses his or her sexual orientation to the self and others. Third, "exploration" stage, when the adolescent becomes involved in the gay community and may start having casual sexual encounters. The fourth stage is when the young adult becomes tired of evanescent relationships and begins to place value on long-term meaningful relationships with same-sex peers. Finally, the fifth phase is the "integration", describe as an open-ended process marked by further long-term commitments, possibly leading to marriage.

to himself only, while he maintained the pretension to be heterosexual in front of the members of his community. He then started to secretly attend gay clubs in Newtown, which corresponds to Coleman's (1982) 'exploration stage' and Cass's (1979) 'identity acceptance' stage. This is when he met his first same-sex partner, with whom he started a strong loving relationship, a phase of his life which can be described by Coleman's (1982) 'first relationships' stage, when the young adult begins to place value on long-term meaningful relationships with same-sex partners. The encounter with Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers and Free and Pride Refuges marks the beginning of Cass's (1979) 'identity pride' stage, when the individual becomes active in the gay community to the point that accepting homosexuality and rejecting heterosexuality are his primary concerns. In fact, FPR 'empowered' him to become a 'happy and proud gay man' to the point of publicly joining gay pride parades and other LGBT events and groups alike in order to support the LGBT cause. Crucially, the 'coming out phase' described by Coleman's (1982) model occurs during adolescence, hence much earlier than when it is described for the participant of the story, who manages to fully come out only in his late twenties. Ultimately the deviation from this linear model of (homo)sexual development seems to be due to the traumatic past in the homophobic country of origin and deeply rooted in the strict traditional and Catholic education. Therefore, the protagonist endorses throughout his story the subject position of being abnormal. On the one hand, in the country of origin, he experiences his social status as different from others adhering to the heterosexual and heterosexist norms because he is homosexual. On the other hand, in the country of arrival, he is abnormal with respect to the development of his own homosexuality. Hence, FPR intervention becomes key in order to normalize his sexual identity so to allow him to progress to Cass's (1979) 'identity pride stage', whereby he becomes a 'happy and proud gay man'. Nonetheless, because of his asylum status, he cannot yet progress to Cass's or Coleman's final stage (i.e., 'synthesis' and 'integration', respectively), whereby he can accept himself as equal member of the community and engage in long term commitments, possibly leading to marriage. Ultimately drafting an LGBT asylum claim under the DSSH model seems to elicit a narrative in line with Eurocentric models of sexual development. Although that might well help some, as in the case at stake, it might be detrimental for others, who struggle to fulfil such a linear narrative (see case study 1 for a detailed example).

## Other Supportive Evidence

The personal statement constituted only a part of the extensive evidence that he had included in his asylum application. As noted, a key element in the assessment of asylum applications is that the evidence presented are not only internally valid but also externally consistent with each other and with what was stated during the asylum application interviews. In this case the applicant had ‘correctly’ answered the interview screening questions, indicating his homosexuality as a reason to apply for asylum. Furthermore, the answers he provided during his substantial interview were consistent with the narrative mentioned above. His substantial interview with the Home Office resulted in 46 questions in total. First of all, as per protocol, an initial question related to the reasons for applying for asylum, to which he answered in the same way as during screening. He was then asked if he had any other supporting material to consider. Hence, he produced supplementary evidence relating to his sexuality, including letters of support and photographs of activities and demonstrations including meeting Prince Harry. The Home Office then moved on to questioning his late disclosure of homosexuality to the British authorities. He replied explaining that he did not think his sexuality should concern immigration reasons and that coming out and talking to strangers had been very difficult. The Home Office did not seem convinced by his explanation and pressed him with a further clarification question on his late disclosure, as we can see in the following extract:

Extract 7.20.

**Home Office Personnel:** I understand that and can see your point. However, you were here for a long time and must have been aware of the importance. Why didn't you raise it earlier?

**Martin:** I got in country and applied for asylum and it was refused. There was a gap of 7 years before I applied again. My solicitor did not think it was worth raising on my behalf. This application, it took time to be confident to open up. It is a struggle with my mental problems. It's only last 3 years when I joined FPR I became openly gay and had the confidence. I kept it private to my partners but now I have the confidence to put it out, be happy with myself. I was empowered by the group. I should be out there. I should be happy with myself. It was a long journey

The applicant replied that his first asylum application on the grounds of political affiliation with an opposing persecuted party in Zimbabwe was refused, which explained some years of delay. Nonetheless he explained that he was psychologically struggling with coming out. His ‘coming out journey’ took him a long time, only recently he managed to be confident and happy with his sexuality, with the help of FPR. Martin’s answer not only summarises the main points of his personal statement as explored above, but also it does it in such a way that the very same linguistic expressions are employed. Therefore, this seems to be indicative of the work of studying and repeating his own narrative as it was built in the personal statement and rehearsed throughout his meetings with his case workers and volunteers, including the mock interview (see previous chapter).

The continuation of the interview is aimed at exploring this ‘long journey’ in more detail, starting from the country of origin, Zimbabwe. He was asked several questions, such as if he or others were aware of his homosexuality and how he had managed to live a double life whilst in Zimbabwe. In addition, specific questions were asked about his homosexual relationships, such as the name of his partners, when they met for the first time, if he had intimate relations with them and if the current partner had leave to remain in the UK. The interviewer then moved on to ask questions about England. In this regard, he was asked who was aware of his homosexuality, if he was still hiding from his Zimbabwean community and attending LGBT social events in the UK. Finally, he was asked about his health problems, insomnia, depression, suicide attempts and whether the psychological help he had been receiving was working. In any case, he managed to reply to all the interview questions in a detailed as well as internally/externally coherent way with the information and overall narrative provided in the personal statement and supportive evidence.

### **What must be said and what ought to be left unsaid**

As observed, one of the subject positions that Martin seems to endorse in his account is that of the ‘grateful migrant’. The latter is a subjective construction that displays gratefulness to the host country for the possibility of being granted refugee status. In the case of Martin, this possibility will be granted after two asylum applications and sixteen years in England as an asylum seeker and irregular migrant. Martin’s ‘journey’ in the UK

throughout all these years was not easy, but full of ‘obstructions and detours’, but not simply because of the problems he had with his sexuality, as conveyed in his asylum application. In fact, at various points in his research interview, he shared with me the frustration of his everyday life in England as an asylum seeker. In the following extract we see an example of this:

Extract 7.21.

**Lena:** Can you describe an asylum seeker in your own words but from a British perspective?

**Martin:** You know, people (...) would think that maybe, 1. I am an illegal worker, 2. I am a thief, 3. I am doing something just dodgy, which are false. So far, people just do not get or understand what an asylum seeker is. No one has at least spoke and told them the true figures of how many asylum seekers are in here. You’ll be shocked, (...) people would tell somebody who is seeking asylum, fearing persecution, (...) ‘oh, okay so why don’t you go back to your country?’. They don’t understand why somebody is seeking asylum... what is an asylum seeker? Ask someone, asked them, they have no idea they just know that somebody comes to this country (...) ‘to get our jobs’ and they expect all of us that we are getting their jobs, we are stealing their money, we are getting all their benefits. That’s what they know. Do you know why they know that? Because the government has said nothing against that. (...)

**Lena:** So, what’s the position of asylum seekers in society? Where do they stay?

**Martin:** They are just as good as a pet or a dog they are not recognizable by anybody. If you ask me a question like ‘what you think asylum seeker is?’, ‘What you think I feel to be asylum seeker?’ It is a very good question. I feel like I’m somebody unwanted in this country I’m scam. I’m like... I’m just like animal. You know when you walk down the road and you kick a piece of paper? That’s what I feel like I’m treated, yeah.

In the research interview he could share his feelings of frustration against the British government that does not intervene to change the negative and false vision that its citizens have of asylum seekers. Therefore, in his account, UK citizens are built as people who have stereotypical negative visions of asylum seekers as irregular workers, job or benefit thieves and delinquents. They cannot understand what an asylum seeker really is, someone who has had to flee his country of origin for fear of being persecuted. At the

same time, asylum seekers are not constructed as ‘people’, but as ‘animals’ or things, like pieces of paper in the street that are kicked off. Thus, the construction that he makes in this extract of England, the government, the English people and his life as an asylum seeker clashes with that provided in his asylum application. In the latter he presents a completely different image of England as a ‘home’ or a country where he can finally be safe and free to be what he truly is. The devotion to the new homeland is conveyed in his account through the adherence to liberal ideals of belonging to the LGBT community through participation in gay pride parades or attending gay clubs. Moreover, it is charged with patriotic and homonationalist meanings, whereby, for example, he provides as evidence to support his claim the photographs that portray him happy and proud to shake hands with Prince Harry at an LGBT event or the construction of the UK as a country promoting LGBT rights in contrast to the homophobic country of origin.

## Chapter 8: Conclusions

This research has presented one of the possible accounts of my journey within the complex world of LGBT asylum in the UK. In order to stay with this complexity in a way that did not obscure, but rather underlined its many interrelations of discursive and non-discursive entities, I proposed to use the concepts of ‘assemblage’, ‘minor literature’, ‘major literature’, ‘territorialization’ and ‘deterritorialization’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1986; 1987). In the work on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari (1986) question how one can ‘enter’ the intricate world of Kafka’s novels, which seems to flee dominant understandings and interpretative codes. The work of Kafka in fact resembles an ‘assemblage’ made of blocks and openings, where everything is connected to everything else, but in a complex and tangled way, where the characters of his stories and readers find themselves lost in its labyrinthic structures. In Kafka’s works, the interpretative codes of the dominant German literature are helpless: looking for an interpretation according to it does not seem to lead anywhere; rather, it makes us lose even more in the ever-intricate Kafkaesque situations in which we found ourselves trapped in. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari (*ibid.*) try to enter through the concept of ‘minor literature’ and ‘major literature’. That is, Kafka’s work exemplifies the becoming minor of the major literature. In other words, Kafka’s works can be seen as a minor literature that deterritorializes the major one. The latter, that is, stops working according to the dominant interpretative code, and starts functioning for its minor use, that is to expose the practical necessity of the law, bureaucracy, and power relations, which constantly move the individual from one side at the other end of the process.

In Chapter 2, I proposed applying this Kafka framework to the empirics to access fieldwork in a way that would allow a rigorous method of investigation, but at the same time one that did not compromise the intricate dynamism of the assemblage unit under investigation. In the empirical part, I have tried to show how some of the elements encountered in the major literature (i.e., the interpretative codes of law, government, media, and academia reviewed in Chapter 2), territorialize LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters, who featured as participants in this research. In other words, I have tried to show, in the investigated support organization, the collective efforts to stylize LGBT asylum seekers’ accounts in a way that dominant interpretative codes might consider to be coherent and truthful. Furthermore, I have tried to explore aspects of the minor

literature of LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters. In other words, I have tried to observe how elements of the major literature have become minor, that is, how they have been deterritorialized to start functioning differently than they normally do in the major code. Moreover, to account for the non-discursive aspects of the assemblage, following Brown (2001), I have tried to account for processes of territorialization and deterritorialization of non-discursive aspects of the assemblage, by looking at the everyday (organizational) practices of LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters, the relationships of power forming between them, alternative forms of organizing and relating in various liminal spaces of becoming. In the remaining part of Chapter 2, I sampled the major code of LGBT asylum by reviewing the main laws and academic studies on the subject. From the review of legislation, policies, investigations by the government and non-governmental organizations, it emerges that the LGBT asylum seeker is a relatively recent figure (the first case of asylum on the basis of sexuality was recognised in 1999) and with specific characteristics. The first and only recent experimental statistics by the Home Office (2017) on the composition of the LGBT asylum seekers social group suggests that it is an heterogenous group of people coming from more than 100 different countries, where LGBT individuals are marginalised, criminalized and persecuted to different degrees, with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Uganda, Cameroon, and United Republic of Tanzania constituting the main countries of origin of LGBT asylum seekers in the UK. Moreover, the statistics suggests that in roughly 6% of the total asylum claims made in the UK, sexual orientation had been raised as part of the basis for the claim. Furthermore, among the latter, more than two thirds were rejected. Finally, it was noted that LGBT asylum seekers were systematically detained for indefinite periods of time in UK detention centres where they suffered various types of hate crimes, including verbal and physical harassment, against their sexuality (Bachmann 2016).

To these alarming results are added those made by governmental and non-governmental investigations that document how LGBT asylum seekers have been systematically misjudged by decision-making bodies and also subjected to practices that infringe human dignity, such as requesting to come back home and live “discreetly” their sexuality or submitting pornographic material to support their claims (Miles 2012; Vine 2014; Bachmann 2016). Crucially, LGBT asylum seekers are assessed according to a conception of sexuality as an immutable or fundamental characteristic of the individual (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR 2012), and ultimately as a

truth that must be confessed and evaluated by expert ‘masters of truth’ (Foucault 1988, p.67). Moreover, credibility of the provided account is key in such cases, given the fact that a proof of sexuality, in the form of a medical test or official certificate, does not exist. Importantly, therefore, the conception and evaluation of the true sexuality necessarily depends on the expectations of decision-making bodies on what it means to be LGBT and to seek asylum on this ground.

This research presents what I have identified and defined as *queer asylum scholarship*, an emerging body of inquiry within queer migration studies, which have tried to deconstruct the figure of the credible or genuine LGBT asylum seeker. From the review of the literature it emerges that the latter is a strongly sexualized and stereotyped identity construction. Jung (2015, p.312) contends that the credible or authentic LGBT asylum seeker ultimately coincides with the figure of the ‘homonormative queer asylum seeker’, whose sexuality is in line with dominant Western conceptions of homosexuality, performed in neoliberal consumeristic and commercial practices, whereby the typical neoliberal homosexual citizen is expected, for example, to attend LGBT clubs or gay pride parades (Berg & Millbank 2009; Millbank 2014). Crucially, in this way, other important aspects that intersect the identity of each person and that might be crucial in the asylum determination process, including gender, social class, legal status, race, to mention some, are systematically neglected (Anderson et al. 2014; Jung & Jung 2015; Millbank 2009; Berg & Millbank 2009). Moreover, these studies have shown that the home countries are stereotyped as homophobic and constructed in opposition to England as a country promoting (LGBT) rights and how that construction works to sustain bio- and necro-politics for the management of masses of people on the ground of acceptable sexual citizens (Ammaturo 2015; Raboin 2017a; Raboin 2017b). Finally, a group of studies has exposed the ways in which support organizations and collectives in their efforts of fighting against discriminatory practices and discourses contribute to reinforce them by perpetuating similar discourses and practices at the micro-political level (Jung & Jung 2015; McGuirk 2016; Giametta 2018).

In Chapter 3, I described in detail the composition of the researched and activist group, Free and Proud Refugees (FPR), explained my methodological approach and the methods of data gathering and analysis. First, I claimed that my research is in line with a partisan scholarship that is openly alongside the struggle of the group of investigation and activism (Brook & Darlington, 2013). Hence, I described the employed methodology

– i.e., ‘activist ethnography’, which enables a constant dialogue with the members of the chosen group (2006, p.97). Importantly, scholars in this tradition have highlighted the fundamental role of reflection to critically evaluate the position of the researcher in the activist and researched field at two levels, ethical and epistemological, respectively (Juris & Khasnabish 2013). From an ethical point of view, I reflected on the ethical challenges that arose during my fieldwork because of my dual role of researcher and activist within the group. In particular, the need to remind my participants of my “double identity” and that they would be anonymised in the final research. From an epistemological point of view, given the post-structuralist approach of the thesis, which rejects the idea of truth as something objective and to be discovered, my research has not tried to be objective, but rigorous. That is, through the method of critical reflexivity, in particular of queer reflexivity (McDonald 2013; McDonald 2016; Rumens et al. 2018), I have tried to expose the ways in which my position as a researcher and activist in the fieldwork has contributed to its formation and to the production of discursive and non-discursive practices that have influenced my research object. In the rest of Chapter 3, I have therefore provided a detailed account on the nature of my participation as an activist and researcher within FPR and throughout the empirical chapters I have tried to devote space for reflecting on my participation in the (re-)production of practices and discourses. Finally, I described the method of discourse analysis employed to interpret the various forms of collected discursive data, such as transcripts of the research and asylum interviews, Home Office rejection letters and policies, personal statements and supporting letters. Through the method of discourse psychology (Wetherell 1998; Wetherell 2007), I have tried to determine the discursive elements and their interplay, which in a communicative exchange or in text are indicative of the subject positions that are occupied or excluded.

Chapter 4 starts the empirical movement of the thesis and outlines the beginning of my experience as an activist and researcher within Free and Proud Refugees (FPR) since the day it was advertised within the host organization; i.e., Sanctuary for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (SforRA). Thus, Chapter 4 takes into consideration the beginning of FPR in order to show how, in its and SforRA institutional discourses, LGBT asylum seekers are constructed as a group of individuals different from other asylum seekers. The peculiarity of this group lies in the fact that it cannot be established within the typical communities of asylum seekers and refugees, like SforRA. LGBT asylum seekers, in fact, are constructed as hidden, scattered and isolated individuals, for the shame of revealing

their sexuality and for the fear of being rejected and persecuted by their communities of belonging in the UK. I have described these as transnational communities, such as family or ethnic groups in the UK but also virtual spaces such as social media communities, connected to those in their country of origin. Indeed, in their accounts, LGBT asylum seekers participants construct England as “a human rights country”, as opposed to their homophobic country of origin. However, their transnational communities of belonging in the UK emerging from their accounts in the UK complicate this construction. In fact, the homophobic country of belonging and the fear of being persecuted for their sexuality continue in the host country through the transnational communities of belonging, which trigger their isolation in the UK. Thus, various processes of deterritorialization are observed for the concepts of national border, (homophobic) country of origin, host country (as “a human rights country”), fear and persecution. National borders collapse and are incorporated within the host country in transnational communities, whose members embody the borders in various ways. For example, the fear of being watched all the time by members of the transnational communities of belonging leads LGBT asylum seekers of Newtown to avoid going to the LGBT centre. Members of the communities, hence can function as a system of panoptical surveillance which is in place at all time without the need of an actual gaze upon the individual LGBT. Moreover, fear and persecution are no longer associated only to the home country but integrated within these transnational communities. Furthermore, fear in the UK is also of the persecution perpetuated by the Home Office through its methods of assessment. In turn, other processes of deterritorialization are observed. For example, the rainbow symbol, on the one hand functions in a prototypical way as to symbolize an imagined universal LGBT community of belonging - or the “queer heaven” described by Raboin (2017a, p.13) - and it is employed with this meaning by SforRA and FPR on the first flyer, but it is also embodied by members who wear rainbow t-shirts or badges. On the other hand, it works as a threat when placed at the entrance of the LGBT Centre because the sexuality of any individual entering or exiting the building could be exposed. Furthermore, these constructions reinforce the justification of choosing a hidden sanctuary for FPR office. Finally, the figure of Luke starts emerging as atypical compared to the group of LGBT asylum seekers so described. In fact, he is, to use his own words, “the brave one”, who can openly be gay within his transnational communities of belonging in the UK, SforRA and the LGBT Centre, and start a support organization for LGBT asylum seekers with the collaboration of other organizations working on the territory.

Chapter 5 develops this insight by detailing an observed pastoral power relation (Foucault 2007) that is formed within FPR between the volunteers, exemplified in the figure of Luke, and LGBT asylum seekers members. With care and expertise, Luke-PWB helps members to extract and understand the truth about their sexuality (Foucault 1988). In this way they are subjected to the “master of truth” (Ibid., 1988, p.67) and subjectified as individuals in need of help. The pastoral technology of power emerges especially within the liminal spaces that I observed during my fieldwork, defined as coming out rites of passage (Stenner 2017; Van Gennep 1909). The latter do not necessarily refer to the rite of passage in a linear narrative of coming out (Coleman 1982) where the homosexual declares his sexuality for the first time to others. For example, Amid had already gone through the coming out phase in the traditional sense. Once in England, in fact, he would have started to have relationships with people of the same sex and to disclose his homosexuality in public situations. In several cases, moreover, the individuals’ sexuality had already been publicly exposed in their countries of origin, from which they had to flee for the consequent (fear of) persecution. On the other hand, the coming out rite described in Chapter 5 refers to very specific organizational practices. What I have called "individual coming out rituals" are private meetings between a potential member and one or two volunteers of the organization in order to register and incorporate the new member into the FPR group. As noted, these individuals coming out rites usually take place in a separate room from the office where group meetings are held. The structure of the room, the arrangement of the furniture, and ultimately the functions performed by the participants of this event constitute the individual rite of coming out as confession rite, preparatory for the group coming out rite of passage. During these individual meetings the pastoral power relationship is (re-)produced between the confessor (i.e., Luke and/or another volunteer) and the one confessing his or her sexuality (i.e., an LGBT asylum seeker prospective member of FPR). On the other hand, group coming out rites of passage take place in a more relaxed situation and can be described as a celebration, where the newly registered member is welcomed by the new community.

Chapter 6 deals with the (botched) becoming-credible LGBT asylum seeker, where LGBT asylum seekers with the help of their supporters try to build a credible LGBT asylum case, one that is consistent with the government criteria by means of which they will be judged. Two support activities seem to be especially functional for this

purpose: the writing sessions between a member and the assigned case workers to produce the personal statement and the mock interview to train to remember and talk about the narrative produced in the personal statement during interview settings. In the analysis of the construction of a template for support letters I tried to show how it is an interactive and collective practice, where members and volunteers discuss and share various materials (including the Home Office refusal letters and the guidelines produced by other support organizations) in order to make sense of how to build credible supporting letters. Crucially, the latter in trying to meet governmental criteria tend to reproduce and reinforce neoliberal and stereotypical state conceptions of sexuality and associated dichotomies; i.e. LGBT citizens as experts in sexuality are committed to save LGBT asylum seekers and to teach them the dominant interpretative and behavioural codes of what kind of sexuality and subject position is expected and considered acceptable in the UK. Another important aspect that I tried to highlight throughout this chapter is how FPR from a small support group with less than ten members became (with the growing of members and volunteers, the increased shared knowledge of what can constitute a credible evidence in cases of LGBT asylum, and the consequent implementation of targeted support practices aimed at this end) established as the institution supporting this type of subjectivity in the territory of Newtown. In fact, I showed how FPR has progressively implemented a series of bureaucratic control procedures (e.g., the archive, the register of signatures, the various forms of registration and consent to the use of photographs) that, if on the one hand helped members to produce evidence to be attached to their asylum cases, on the other hand they made FPR a proxy of the Home Office by subcontracting its work and practices.

The analysis presented in chapter 7 was moved by two objectives. First, I wanted to contribute to the activist part of this research by trying to show how, despite the implementation of new government regulations to avoid evaluating asylum applications based on sexuality through assumptions and stereotypes (Vine 2014), still they seem to play an important role in the assessment of these claims. For example, from the analysis of the incredible case, there seems to be a tendency not to recognize the intersection of different aspects of the individual's identity and struggles associated with them (i.e., a gender-based fear of persecution), which, however, could be decisive in the evaluation of her asylum application. Moreover, the analysis of the rejection letter shows the Home Office's construction of the homophobic home

country (where people are expected to hide their sexuality and struggle with its acceptance and disclosure) in opposition to the host country (where people are expected to make an effort and join LGBT communities and places).

Second, I have tried to show the difficulties that non-experts in law, such as LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters within FPR, can meet in the attempt to make sense of statutory statements. The authority with which I have evaluated this case, in fact, is not that of a law practitioner, despite having studied extensively the laws regulating LGBT asylum. Instead, I tried to highlight the activity of the volunteer who tries to make sense of the way in which the Home Office and the judges of the various courts assess the sexuality of individuals seeking asylum, which is functional to other support activities described in the previous chapter, especially the drafting of the personal statement and the mock interview. Crucially, it could be argued that this is an illegal practice and therefore a major obstacle to any grassroots organization that aspires to support LGBT asylum seekers. In fact, in the UK, the Immigration Act of 1999 made it a criminal offense to give Immigration Advice unless properly regulated, for example by the OISC accreditation. Support groups such as FPR work at the margins of the law. To tackle the issue, FPR has always stressed this legislative hurdle to all members and volunteers and asked its members to discuss with their legal representatives the evidence produced, especially the personal statement. Furthermore, as noted in the methodology chapter, several volunteers, including myself, had started participating in OISC free trainings in order to become accredited as legal advisers. Finally, another legal problem arose of having asylum seekers providing support to other asylum seekers. In fact, as noted, most asylum seekers are forbidden to work by law.

The second case study demonstrates the end product of the support activity to put together a credible asylum application. I have therefore analysed the construction of the personal statement that had been made explicitly in accordance with the DSSH model and how the produced story inevitably strengthened a sexualized narrative of the applicant's life according to Western linear models of sexual development of sexuality (Coleman 1982; Cass 1979; Dawson & Gerber 2017). I have also highlighted the way in which negative representations of the host country, which emerge in the research interview with the participant, are silenced in the personal statement, where instead the UK is exalted as a country of rights and freedom. Crucially, this analysis does not simply show the emergence of the figure of the homonormative queer asylum seeker (Jung,

2015), but also of the role that support organizations like FPR go to assume within it. The FPR support organization becomes that institutional body aimed at curing and normalizing a deviated (homo) sexuality from dominant linear models of sexual development, because of the persecutory past in the homophobic country of origin and in the transnational communities of the host country.

Ultimately, FPR is constituted as a production machine. Evidence is produced in the form of photographs, narratives, personal statements, supporting letters. Meanwhile subjectivity is produced in line with the ‘homonormative queer asylum seeker’ (Jung, 2015), the ‘expert saviour’ (McGuirk 2016, p.116) and the ‘European LGBT citizen’ (Ammaturo 2015, p.1152). The organizational identity of FPR is also produced, which, like other organizations working in the area, embraces the LGBT cause whilst supporting pastoral support practices. The thesis therefore contributes to studies in queer asylum scholarship on activism in collectives and various support organizations in the UK, which have documented their efforts to combat exclusionary practices and discourses perpetuated by the government and the law, and their simultaneous and irrepressible struggle to continue strengthening them (Jung 2015; McGuirk 2016; Giametta 2018). The empirical aspects of the thesis have focussed the exploration of these issues. In other words, I have tried to deconstruct the identity category of the LGBT asylum seeker in the context of FPR to expose how dominant interpretative codes constrains how LGBT asylum seekers and their supporters can live meaningful lives in constituting minority identities as the other to the homonormative. In doing so, I was able to unmask the ways in which LGBT asylum seekers in FPR are normalized according to governmental criteria, stereotypes, and ultimately the figure of the ‘homonormative queer asylum seeker’ (Jung 2015, p.312), and the complicity of support organizations in reinforcing normative categorizations and practices.

At the same time, however, I tried to problematize or queer the normalization of the figure of the LGBT asylum seeker, which in recent years has come to light as ‘a prominent avatar for refugees’ (Giametta 2018, p .2). Thus, I have tried to destabilize this normalization through queer theory, guided by Brown’s (2012) call for a return to the territory in which sexuality develops. As observed in the literature review, Brown’s problem with normalizing theorizations of homonormativity, homonormative, capitalism and neoliberalism is that they ultimately tend to overlook the ways they reproduce themselves in the everyday practices of millions of people and alternative ways of

relating. In his article, in a crucial way, Brown explains that he is not trying to suggest that these theorizations and practices do not impact outside of metropolitan contexts, where they are more visible, as in metropolises like London, but that these reproductions are ‘spatially specific’ and ‘geographically nuanced’: ‘[t]he pressures and pleasures of gay life are not the same in Leicester as they are London’ (Brown 2012, p.1070). In my field of study within the territory of Newtown, different bodies and discursive entities change with respect to dominant categorizations. For example, homophobic countries collapse in Newtown in the transnational communities they belong to in the UK. Importantly, this fact profoundly affects the everyday life of LGBT asylum seekers living in Newtown, who do not disclose their sexuality even in places where we might think it is safe to do so (as in support organizations for LGBT or refugee people that support the LGBT cause), since they can also be attended by members of their transnational communities. Furthermore, this fact determines the construction of FPR as a support group hidden from others. Arguably, these practices and power relations that are formed in contexts like Newtown, could be different in metropolises like London, where certainly there are transnational communities but where their dimension of metropolis can help the individual to find new communities or support groups for LGBT asylum seekers already operating in the territory. In cities like Newtown, on the other hand, in a dimension where “everyone knows everyone”, where news can spread like “wood fire” (in Martin’s terms, see Chapter 4), and where before FPR there was no support group for LGBT asylum seekers, this might not seem to be possible, at least for some individuals.

In this context I have therefore tried to queer the categories of the dominant code and to (de-)territorialize them, in the sense of both Deleuze and Guattari (1986) and Brown (2012). Or to queer dominant categories of the major code. The ‘expert saviours’ (McGuirk 2016, p.116) encountered in this thesis, for example, are not only illuminated ‘European LGBT citizens’ (Ammaturo 2015, p.1152), but LGBT asylum seekers can also take upon this subject position, like Luke, who I used throughout the thesis as a representative figure of many other asylum seekers and LGBT refugees who endorsed the same function within FPR. Moreover, in moments of (queer) reflexivity within the thesis I tried to explore queer liminal spaces, spaces for deterritorialization of identity categories or relational and organizational practices, wherein the participants (myself included) have destabilized dominant codes and experimented different ways of (self-)categorizing and interacting. For example, in the course of the methodology, I have tried

to explain how within FPR new alliances between volunteers and asylum seekers have been formed, which escape dominant understanding and build new alliances on different grounds. For instance, for the same research interest and commitment to activism, LGBT asylum seekers become co-presenters in university conference or even co-researchers in joint projects, which has actively contributed to influence academic dominant codes of understanding and fight for equal access to higher education. Moreover, in moments of queer reflexivity, I explained the way in which I exposed my sexuality and how it contributed to the discovery of how one can occupy the position of the other by occupying the dominant position of the heterosexual. In other words, in the context of FPR, critically reflecting on the normalized positions on which I have always acted upon in the course of my life has allowed me to unmask the way in which heterosexuality can be closeted too (McDonald 2013; McDonald 2016; Rumens et al. 2018) but also queered. I have tried to explore the latter aspect in a section of Chapter 6, where I used the concept of self-consciousness to describe the internal practices of FPR in which individuals (re-)negotiated the categories of identities in a continuous experimentation of relating to themselves and others. In these spaces both queer categories (e.g., LGBT) and normative categories (e.g., the heterosexual, the homonormative and the homonormative queer asylum seeker) have been deconstructed so to expose the non-normative aspects of both (including heterosexuality, see Rumens et al., 2018)

The analysis of the deconstruction of minor sexual categories reveals how support organizations contribute to the strengthening of dominant practices and categorizations. Indeed, the latter was a dominant aspect observed within FPR. This method to bring about social change is therefore clearly hampered by the struggle of movements and collectives that, in the attempt of supporting LGBT asylum seekers against marginalizing discourses and practices ultimately contribute to reinforce them. To facilitate change activist groups must maintain critical reflexivity toward the particular ways they become manifest in specific territories. In fact, dominant theorizations can provide interpretative codes that risk overlooking the particular way in which they occur in different contexts. Deconstruction of normalized queer categories, such as the emerging homonormative queer asylum seeker as a prominent avatar for LGBT asylum seekers (Jung 2015; Giametta 2018), is key to expose the way dominant exclusionary discourses and practices are (re-)produced in local contexts. Ultimately focussing queer critical reflexivity onto how this (re-)production occurs

will illuminate the ways in which bodies and their relations are pushed into dominant subject positions and power technologies and facilitating the emergence of queer spaces for a continuous experimentation of diversity and creative ways of representing and relating. I hope this study serves a minor literature *for* queer asylum scholarship.

## Reference

- Agamben, G., 1995. Homo Sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita. *Filozofski Vestnik*.
- Ammaturo, F.R., 2015. The ‘Pink Agenda’: Questioning and Challenging European Homonationalist Sexual Citizenship. *Sociology*, 49(6), pp.1151–1166.
- Anderson, J. et al., 2014. *The culture of disbelief: An ethnographic approach to understanding an under-theorised concept in the UK asylum system*, Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre.
- Bachmann, C.L., 2016. *NO SAFE REFUGE Experiences of lgbtb asylum seekers in detention*, London: UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group; Stonewall. Available at: [www.bakermckenzie.com](http://www.bakermckenzie.com) [Accessed September 24, 2018].
- Baker, P. & McEnery, T., 2005. A corpus-based approach to discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in UN and newspaper texts. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 4(2), pp.197–226.
- Baker, P., McEnery, T. & Gabrielatos, C., 2007. Using collocation analysis to reveal the construction of minority groups: The case of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in the UK press. *Corpus Linguistics 2007*.
- Bell, E. & Thorpe, R., 2013. *A very short, fairly interesting and reasonably cheap book about management research*, Sage.
- Berg, L. & Millbank, J., 2009. Constructing the personal narratives of Lesbian, gay and bisexual asylum claimants. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22(2), pp.195–223.
- Brook, P. & Darlington, R., 2013. Partisan, scholarly and active: Arguments for an organic public sociology of work. *Work, Employment and Society*, 27(2), pp.232–243. Available at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0950017012461838> [Accessed August 25, 2018].
- Brown, G., 2012. Homonormativity: A Metropolitan Concept that Denigrates “Ordinary” Gay Lives. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 59(7), pp.1065–1072. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=wjhm20> [Accessed September 11, 2018].
- Brown, S.D., 2001. Psychology and the art of living. *Theory & Psychology*, 11(2),

- pp.171–192.
- Butler, J., 1990. Gender trouble and the subversion of identity. *New York and London: Routledge*.
- Cass, V.C., 1979. Homosexual identity formation: a theoretical model. *Journal of homosexuality*, 4(3), 219-235.
- Clark, T., 2008. We're Over-Researched Here!' Exploring Accounts of Research Fatigue within Qualitative Research Engagements. *Sociology*, 42(5), pp.953–970.
- Coleman, E., 1982. Developmental Stages of the Coming Out Process. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 7(3), pp.31–43.
- Conrad, R., 2014. *Against equality: Queer revolution, not mere inclusion*, AK Press.
- Crenshaw, K., 1989. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics [1989]. *Feminist Legal Theory: Readings in Law and Gender*, 1989(1), pp.57–80.
- Dawson, J. & Gerber, P., 2017. Assessing the Refugee Claims of LGBTI People: Is the DSSH Model Useful for Determining Claims by Women for Asylum Based on Sexual Orientation? *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 29(2), pp.292–322.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F., 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis London: The University of Minnesota Press. Available at: [http://www.kareneliot.de/downloads/Deleuze\\_Guattari\\_A\\_Thousand\\_Plateaus.pdf](http://www.kareneliot.de/downloads/Deleuze_Guattari_A_Thousand_Plateaus.pdf) [Accessed September 18, 2018].
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F., 1986. *Kafka: Toward a minor literature*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Desai, M., 2013. The possibilities and perils for scholar-activists and activist-scholars: Reflections on the feminist dialogues. In *Insurgent Encounters: Transnational Activism, Ethnography, and the Political*. Duke University Press Durham, p. 106.
- Van Dijk, T.A., 1993. Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & society*, 4(2), pp.249–283.
- Duggan, L., 2002. The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neoliberalism. *Materializing democracy: Toward a revitalized cultural politics*, pp.175–194.
- Ellis, B.H. et al., 2007. Ethical research in refugee communities and the use of community participatory methods. *Transcultural psychiatry*, 44(3), pp.459–481.
- Fairclough, N., 1992. Discourse and text: Linguistic and intertextual analysis within discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 3(2), pp.193–217.

- Farrier, D., 2011. *Postcolonial asylum : seeking sanctuary before the law*, Liverpool University Press.
- Foucault, M., 1978. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. *Contemporary Sociology*.
- Foucault, M., 2007. *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78* Senellart Michel et al., eds., Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M., 1988. *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, London: Penguin Group.
- Gabrielatos, C. & Baker, P., 2008. Fleeing, sneaking, flooding: A corpus analysis of discursive constructions of refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press, 1996-2005. *Journal of English Linguistics*.
- Van Gennep, A., 1909. (1960). The rites of passage. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Giametta, C., 2018. New asylum protection categories and elusive filtering devices: the case of ‘Queer asylum’ in France and the UK. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, (102), pp.1–16.
- Giametta, C., 2017. *The Sexual Politics of Asylum*, Routledge.
- GOV.UK., 2018. Claim asylum in the UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/claim-asylum> [Accessed September 24, 2018].
- Gray, A. & McDowall, A., 2013. LGBT refugee protection in the UK: from discretion to belief? *Forced Migration Review*, 42, pp.22–25.
- Hale, C.R., 2006. Activist Research v. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology. *Cultural Anthropology*, 21(1), pp.96–120.
- Halilovich, H., 2013. Ethical approaches in research with refugees and asylum seekers using participatory action research. *Values and vulnerabilities: The ethics of research with refugees and asylum seekers*, p.127.
- Heinz, B. et al., 2002. Under the rainbow flag: Webbing global gay identities. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 7(2–3), pp.107–124.
- Hernando, H., 2016. Asylum seeker “was asked to provide intimate photos to prove she was gay.” *Mirror*. Available at: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/asylum-seeker-was-asked-provide-7614388>.
- Hess, D.J., 2013. Local and Not-So-Local Exchanges: Alternative Economies, Ethnography, and Social Science. In *Insurgent Encounters: Transnational*

- Activism, Ethnography, and the Political*. p. 106.
- Home Office, 2017. *Asylum claims on the basis of sexual orientation*,
- Horsley, K., 2007. Storytelling, conflict and diversity. *Community Development Journal*, 42(2), pp.265–269.
- Hynes, P., 2011. *The dispersal and social exclusion of asylum seekers: between liminality and belonging*, Policy Press.
- Johnson, T.A.M., 2011. On Silence , Sexuality and Skeletons : Reconceptualizing Narrative in Asylum Hearings. , 20(1), pp.57–78.
- Jung, M., 2015. Logics of Citizenship and Violence of Rights: The Queer Migrant Body and the Asylum System. *Birkbeck L. Rev.*, 3, p.305.
- Juris, J.S. & Khasnabish, A., 2013. *Insurgent encounters : transnational activism, ethnography, and the political*, Duke University Press.
- Kemmis, S., 2006. Participatory action research and the public sphere. *Educational Action Research*, 14(4), pp.459–476.
- KhosraviNik, M., 2010. The representation of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in British newspapers. *Journal of Language and Politics* , 9(1), 1-28.
- Kimmel, M. & Llewellyn, C., 2012. Homosexuality, Gender Nonconformity, and the Neoliberal State. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 59(7), pp.1087–1094.
- Krulfeld, R.M., 1998. Exploring New Methods for Collaboration in Ethnographic Research. *Power, ethics, and human rights: Anthropological studies of refugee research and action*, 21.
- Laskar, P., Johansson, A. & Mulinari, D., 2016. *Decolonising the Rainbow Flag*, Available at: <http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se> [Accessed July 27, 2018].
- Levinson, S.C., 2013. Action formation and ascription. In *The handbook of conversation analysis*. Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 103–130.
- Lewis, H.J., 2007. *Interrogating community : dispersed refugees in Leeds*. University of Hull.
- Lewis, R., 2010. The Cultural Politics of Lesbian Asylum. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 12(3), pp.424–443.
- Lewis, R.A., 2014. “Gay? Prove it”: The politics of queer anti-deportation activism R. A. Lewis & N. A. Naples, eds. *Sexualities*, 17(8), pp.958–975.
- Luibheid, E., 2008. *QUEER/MIGRATION An Unruly Body of Scholarship*, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 14(2), 169-190.

- Lupton, T., 1985. *Let the Data Speak!*, Manchester Business School.
- Mbembe, A., 2003. Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11-40.
- McDonald, J., 2016. Expanding queer reflexivity: The closet as a guiding metaphor for reflexive practice. *Management Learning*, 47(4), pp.391–406.
- McDonald, J., 2013. Coming out in the field: A queer reflexive account of shifting researcher identity. *Management Learning*, 44(2), pp.127–143.
- McGuirk, S., 2016. *LGBT ASYLUM SEEKERS AND NGO ADVOCACY IN THE UNITED STATES*. American University Washington D.C.
- Miles, N., 2012. *No going back: Lesbian and gay people and the asylum system*, Stonewall.
- Millbank, J., 2009. From discretion to disbelief: recent trends in refugee determinations on the basis of sexual orientation in Australia and the United Kingdom. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 13(Nos 2-3), pp.391–414.
- Millbank, J., 2014. From discretion to disbelief: Recent trends in refugee determinations on the basis of sexual orientation in Australia and the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Colorectal Disease*, 29(11), pp.319–414.
- Morgan, D.A., 2006. Not Gay Enough for the Government: Racial and Sexual Stereotypes in Sexual Orientation Asylum Cases. *Law & Sexuality: A Review of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Legal Issues*, 15.
- Murray, D.A.B., 2014. Real queer: “authentic” LGBT refugee claimants and homonationalism in the canadian refugee system1. *Anthropologica*, 56(1).
- Oswick, C., (2011), 'Discourse' in in M. Tadajewski, P. Maclaran, E. Parsons and M. Parker (ed.), in *Key Concepts in Critical Management Studies*, London: Sage.
- Potter, J., & Hepburn, A. (2008). Discursive constructionism. *Handbook of constructionist research*, 275-293.
- Puar, J.K., 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: homonationalism in queer times*, Duke: Duke University Press.
- Raboin, T., 2017a. *Discourses on LGBT asylum in the UK: Constructing a queer haven*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Raboin, T., 2017b. Exhortations of happiness: Liberalism and nationalism in the discourses on LGBTI asylum rights in the UK. *Sexualities*, 20(5–6), pp.663–681.
- Rosenthal, G., 2003. The healing effects of storytelling: On the conditions of curative storytelling in the context of research and counseling. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(6),

- pp.915–933.
- Rumens, N., de Souza, E.M. & Brewis, J., 2018. Queering Queer Theory in Management and Organization Studies: Notes toward queering heterosexuality. *Organization Studies*, pp.1–20.
- Schegloff, E.A., 2007. *Sequence organization in interaction: Volume 1: A primer in conversation analysis*, Cambridge University Press.
- Schegloff, E.A., 1997. Whose text? Whose context? *Discourse & society*, 8(2), pp.165–187.
- Seidman, S., 1997. *Difference troubles: Queering social theory and sexual politics*, Cambridge University Press.
- Stenner, P., 2017. *Liminality and Experience: A transdisciplinary approach to the psychosocial*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stryker, S., 2008. Transgender history, homonormativity, and disciplinarity. *Radical History Review*, 2008(100), pp.145–157.
- Sullivan, N., 2003. *A critical introduction to queer theory*, NYU Press.
- Temple, B. & Moran, R., 2006. *Doing research with refugees: Issues and guidelines*, Policy Press.
- The Migration Observatory, 2018. Immigration Detention in the UK. Available at: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-detention-in-the-uk/> [Accessed September 24, 2018].
- Tyler, I., 2006. ‘Welcome to Britain’ the cultural politics of asylum. *European journal of cultural studies*, 9(2), pp.185–202.
- UKGLIG, 2010. *Failing The Grade: Home Office initial decisions on lesbian and gay claims for asylum*, UKGLIG.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011. Handbook and Guidelines on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status (HCR/1P/4/enG/Rev. 3). , (December), pp.1–191.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2012. Guidelines on International Protection No . 9 : I . Introduction Ii . International Human Rights Law. , (9).
- Vacchelli, E., 2011. Geographies of subjectivity: locating feminist political subjects in Milan. *Place & Culture*, 18(6), pp.768–785.
- Vine, J., 2014. *An Investigation into the Home Office’s Handling of Asylum Claims*

- Made on the Grounds of Sexual Orientation*, London: Williams Lea Group on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/547330/Investigation-into-the-Handling-of-Asylum-Claims\\_Oct\\_2014.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/547330/Investigation-into-the-Handling-of-Asylum-Claims_Oct_2014.pdf) [Accessed July 19, 2018].
- Warner, M., 1991. Fear of a Queer Planet Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, ed. *Social Text*, 29(29), pp.3–17.
- Wetherell, M., 2007. A step too far: Discursive psychology, linguistic ethnography and questions of identity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 11(5), pp.661–681.
- Wetherell, M., 1998. Positioning and interpretative repertoires: Conversation analysis and post-structuralism in dialogue. *Discourse & society*, 9(3), pp.387–412.
- Zembylas, M., 2010. Agamben 's Theory of Biopower and Immigrants / Refugees / Asylum Seekers: Discourses of Citizenship and the Implications for Curriculum Theorizing. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 26(2), pp.31–45.