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# Chronic Pain of Race and Citizenship: Profound Subtleties of Injury and Redress in a Community of Queer Exile

RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

This article is about the torturous and protracted experiences of racialization and migration bureaucracies. I call these experiences of *chronic pain*. This is to (1) convey the damage they cause in the corporeal and social life of the racialized and the noncitizen and (2) to protest how in such experiences, the subject withdraws from politics. The article is based on ethnographic research at a support group for queer migrants in Helsinki. I locate the article in queer studies and their premise that the particular/personal is political and effects change within and beyond a given community or group. I expand on queer studies' investment in the intimate and the mundane for less injurious communities and relationality. With the ubiquity and recurrence of injurious bordering, the subjectivity of the racialized and noncitizen might shrink in pain, short of subversive sociopolitical mobilization. My question is: What becomes of community politics and (queer) kinship when we relinquish all subjectivity to conformist methods of numbing? I go through different strategies for how subjects numb physically and/or narratively numb or alleviate protracted injuries. Then I argue how these strategies can break into relational and communal aspects that invigorate and transform modes and methods of sociopolitical redress.



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## INTRODUCTION

I call the long and protracted injuries of race and citizenship *chronic pain*. My choice of terms is not metaphorical or poetic (unless metaphor or poeticism convey the embodied repercussions of injurious norms). In this text, the concept of *chronic pain* bridges between corporeality and political narratives and reality. The shout of pain and agony: 'I cannot breathe' (in the Black Lives Matter movement) bridged histories and presents. For Athena Athanasiou (2020), that shout bore witness to the painful 'ongoingness of racialized breathlessness' (92) and 'institutionalized asphyxiation' (95) that still characterize colonialism and the several-century-long aftermath of it. Injuries from racialization and citizenship bureaucracies, like somatic pain, make us shrink in fear and shame. They shrink the possibilities and embodiments of more livable (collective) bodies.

In Europe and Finland, the right to a legal residence permit is crucial for the imagining of a livable life (Ali 2023; Könönen 2018). The unthinkability of a life without state recognition makes immigration bureaucracies and laws 'inseparable from life' (Könönen 2018: 148). Despite this heavy and pervasive dependency on state recognition, the legalization and rights of asylum seekers are vehemently and violently contested in politics and policy-making (Haavisto 2020; Keskinen 2023; Pellander & Horsti 2018). As Camilla Haavisto notes, in the mainstream media and politics, 'Finland is envisioned as an innocent and rational State under siege from a chaotic, ethnically diverse and hostile world' (2020: 169). Still, in the Finnish exilic atmosphere, exiles manage to bring their pain to public mobilization and to press for change in politics and policy-making (Haavisto 2020; Pellander & Horsti 2018).

Previous studies in Finland and Europe have focused on political communication in more institutionalized politics, like sit-ins, hunger strikes, and demonstrations (Haavisto 2020; Pellander & Horsti 2018; Sager 2018). I instead focus on how these injuries form and inform the politics of community and relationality within (queer) communities. In the community of a queer asylum support group, I trace how members communicate and tackle protracted injuries of race and citizenship within each other's proximity.

As discussed in previous literature (Ali 2023; Dustin & Held 2021; Held 2023), queer asylum support groups provide such vital assistance and social mooring that these groups are often referred to as *families*. This also happened in the support group I am writing about/from. Such groups in Europe (Dustin & Held 2021; Held 2023) and Finland (Ali 2023) work mainly in the frame of state institutions and bureaucracies. They mediate between state institutions and the exiled person. This involves legal counseling, mediation in healthcare, accommodation, and many other welfare-related services. Moreover, and this is the premise of my article, in the austere sociality that the bureaucratic complications induce, these groups become key sites of community, communication, and connection.

The focus on legalization and state recognition is vital. However, it might eclipse the exile's pernicious experiences of protracted injuries in the mundane and the relational. It might also overshadow the vitality of the communal and relational aspects of redressing injuries. Diagnosis and governance of asylum and migration tend to discount the heterogeneity in the exile subject's tackling of protracted exile (Drangsland 2020). Redress tends to be prescribed in homogeneous and hegemonic terms; only through legalization can the exile enter the social and political structure

of the country of refuge. Jacobsen and Karlsen (2020) and Drangsland (2020) invite us to challenge this linear single-time and one-way notion of progress and redress. Jacobsen and Karlsen (2020) critique terms like *liminality* and *limbo* that assume that the success and prosperity of the subject are coterminous with admission into the nation-state and its institutions. Such concepts depict 'the national order as the solution' (Jacobsen & Karlsen 2020: 6) and therefore assume the normalcy of injurious orders and borders. Interestingly, in the field of queer exile, Thomas Wimark mobilizes the concept of 'perpetual liminality' (2021: 647) signaling how queer subjects ceaselessly tackle norms of belonging, never really fitting or settling. Fatima El-Tayeb exposes that liminality in the lives of racialized queers in Europe. In an article titled 'Gays who cannot properly be gay,' El-Tayeb protests how for the racialized LGBTQ+ person, refuge, and belonging become harder, if not impossible, due to discriminatory sociopolitics.

My ethnography in a support group that mobilized for the rights and wellbeing of queer exiles traces how the members narrate and tackle the chronic alienation in administrative and more mundane circumstances. I take that tackling as the unfinished work of the community (Nancy et. al. 1991; Shindo 2012). I also show how narrative recognition (Lindemann 2008) and creating a place of 'holding' (Gotlib 2012: 56) are crucial in projects of communal repair and in invigorating (queer) communal politics.

In the following sections, I will elaborate on how matters of *pain* and *community* are entangled. I explain why I chose to trace the chronic pain of race and citizenship in the mundane of a queer exile support group. After introducing literature on public and collective protests against the painful sociopolitics of asylum and migration in Finland, I discuss with other ethnographies the necessity to tune into non-institutionalized and more mundane modes of politics and politicization. In the methodology section, I go through the particularities of the support group where I did the fieldwork and experienced race and citizenship injuries in that group. I also elaborate on the rationale of tracing the pain and injuries of citizenship and rationalization in the mundane of the group, which sets the ground for my final discussion: how ethnographic dwelling on/in the mundane and the everyday of the subject opens up to different communal modes and potentialities of addressing and redressing injuries. I highlight how ethnographic dwelling on small story telling exposes the ubiquity of injury and triggers of pain in the participants' lives. I conclude by analyzing how such exposition can inform and reform understandings of queer communities and the politics of repair and redress.

## CHRONIC PAIN: IT'S ALL IN YOUR (S)KIN

Pain can be disconnective and alienating; the sufferer is ached not only by the pain itself, but also by the impossibility to convey how they feel. According to Sara Ahmed (2002), pain is 'throbbing in its thereness' but still, 'refuses to be simply present in speech' (18). Fits of chronic pain are hard to grasp by someone who is not in their remit. As Anna Gotlib (2012) shows, the 'failure [t]o externally validate one's current suffering' (47) puts the patient in an unrecognized/unrecognizable position as 'a legitimate subject of not only treatment, but compassion' (44). Likewise, protracted racialization and citizenship bureaucracies double back as a flaw inherent to the racialized and noncitizen. This happens when administrative and socioeconomic discrimination figures mainly as the subject's own and inherent inadequacy: 'failure to adapt' (El-Tayeb 2012: 81).

El-Tayeb (2012) shows how racialized queers appear in European public narratives and mundane experiences as a 'threat to the continent's foundations' (79) and representatives of 'their homophobic culture of origin' (Ibid.: 86). I avoid using terms like country or community of *origin*. This is to problematize depictions of *culture* and *origin* as formative and definitive and to honor the subject's choice of difference and *departure* from environments where they did not choose to belong. The queer exiles in my ethnography sought protection from discrimination and threats in their countries of departure because of their gender, sexuality, and/or gender-political mobilization. However, in their hope of home and settlement in the place of chosen refuge, they (re-)encountered injuries of race and citizenship that threatened to send them back to their countries of origin, so to speak. In their plea for protection from injuries, they figured as *the* injury. They figured as the threat of the very safety and sanctuary they sought.

*Queer* is not limited to sexual identity. Queer (before being sexual) is that which defies norms. For David Seitz, queer is a realm of 'repudiated desires' (2017: 444), whether in strictly sexual terms (when sexual desires are pathologized) or in racializing terms (when the desire to settle and belong is repudiated by norms of race and citizenship) (Ibid.). However, queer is not only a site of injury and repudiation. Following Cathy Cohen (2019), I see queer through its 'radical potential' and 'its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms' (142). That is especially relevant in situations of exile, because exile entails a tenuous and strenuous struggle with norms of nationality, race, and citizenship. Here, the term *exile* is not a melodramatic substitute for *displaced* or migrant, unless melodrama protests the pernicious and violent sense of alienation that subjects of displacement experience in legal, material, and personal terms.

This ethnography happened in life environments where governmental and social alienation have become so suffusing in the person's experience that they stopped figuring as emergent issues of address and redress. 'Environment' in Lauren Berlant's words 'denotes a scene in which structural conditions are suffused through [p]redictable repetitions and other spatial practices that might well go under the radar' (2011: 101). Through suffusion and repetition, racialization and othering stop figuring as such. Instead, they figure as a part of a normalized exilic structure and rationale. Still, the exiled person experiences chronic alienation as slow death. My ethnography traces how such chronic exile is narrated, navigated, and tackled in queer communities.

Pain and suffering are communal issues because redress and treatment are entangled with narrative elements of selfhood and community. In matters of chronic and serious illnesses, Anna Gotlib and Hilde Lindemann foreground the importance of relations that *hold* the sufferer and keep them from disintegrating. *Holding* for Lindemann is akin to '[n]arrative recognition [that is a] source of identity maintenance'. (2008: 73). By 'narrative recognition,' Lindemann refers to holding on to and maintaining what the sufferer cherishes in their mundane, like the music they listen to, their pets, or their cherished activities. What I mean by 'narrative recognition' is not identical to or coterminous with what Lindemann (2008) describes. However, my 'narrative recognition' shares the core with Lindemann's. It means sharing (or attempting to share) the particularities and subtitles of the person's experience. Those particularities could manifest in how suffering alienates the sufferer from their cherished mundane (Lindemann 2008). They also manifest in nuanced and subtle ways that are opaque to people sharing the suffering person's mundane surroundings. This is crucial considering that pain can be an alienating experience, so much there, but almost

impossible to communicate (Ahmed 2002). I see the work of narrative recognition as an engaged attempt to meet the sufferer in the particularities and subtleties of suffering lest they disintegrate into a world of alienating pain where nobody can visit.

I am interested in communities like the support group where I did my ethnography not only because such groups restore, even if partially, a sense of mundane sociality. They also partially restore a sense of community and connection. In the mundane of a support group, members are in proximity to the particularities and subtleties of each other's experiences of injuries. Narrative recognition between people happens in such mundane proximity.

The title of this section, 'it's all in your (s)kin' reflects how one's features (race) and assumed belonging (nationality) become a site of injury. It also reflects how the skin (the contour) of the community and the sense of kinship within that community take shape as an effect of tackling injurious norms. Pain can be alienating, but the impossibility of experiencing another's pain does not mean that pain and injury are individual matters. For Ahmed, pain suggests 'the limitation of knowledge rather than the existence of absolute knowledge' (2002: 32). The impossibility of experiencing the pain of others subjectively or first-hand necessitates collective and engaged communication. In that, I subscribe to Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of community as working through unworkability. For Nancy, 'to be absolutely alone, it is not enough that I be so; I must also be alone being alone-and this of course is contradictory' (1991: 4). I understand community and communication as a continuous work to tackle the contradictions of how pain is connective and disconnective at the same time, pressing for modes and methods of communication and politics.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: ALIENATED IN BELONGING AND BELONGING IN ALIENATION

In this section, I elaborate with other scholars on how the ubiquity of bordering induces a chronic and pervasive sense of alienation and how a sense of home and kinship might emerge in shared experiences of alienation. Injurious narratives and practices are rife in foundational institutions like the (state) laws. For Wendy Brown, the 'law and the state as appropriate protectors against injury' are paradoxically 'invested with the power to injure' (1995: 27). That injury haunts and materializes beyond instances of direct encounter with state officials. Several studies by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), Tervonen et al. (2018), Könönen (2018), and Jacobsen (2022) show how state laws make bordering an *everyday* and *everywhere* practice. The laws of marriage, employment, social services, and accommodation dictate the relation between the citizen/national and the racialized noncitizen. The racialized noncitizen experiences a pernicious sense of alienation in corporeal proximity to others. This is what Malene Jacobsen termed 'wars *in* refuge' (2022: 1), 'wars that remain invisible to those who are not its target' (8). Likewise, in Finland, Könönen sees that 'borders invade the mind and get under the skin' (2018: 148). For a person dealing with protracted and tenuous bureaucracies, checking the mail at one's doorstep becomes an instance of intense anxiety (Ibid.). A single letter (from the government) at the person's doorstep could announce the person's (in)ability to stay on the territory where they have invested to stay for years.

Triggers of severe anxiety of alienation are official and less official. Anoop Nayak shows how reminders of exclusion are arbitrary and random in the lives of racialized people.

Racist slurs or graffiti might interrupt lives at unexpected moments. Sometimes, this happens in very subtle but still painful ways: in 'the barely uttered gestures, fleeting glances, strained silences, and discreet performances of othering.' (Nayak 2010: 2388) The subject of recurrent injuries keeps in apprehension and anxious alertness to such painful and injurious reminders and interruptions. There is a sense of loss of control over when and how the fit of chronic exclusion hits and how severely.

According to Gotlib, the chronic pains of migraine and fibromyalgia are debilitating. In their unpredictable occurrence and severity, they induce a 'shrinking sphere of what is *controllable*' (2012: 46). The patient loses track of 'the waxing and waning of the pain' and over 'how the experience of pain effects what one is able to do' (Ibid. 46). In parallel to how Gotlib narrates shrinking in chronic pain, Hannah Arendt, a Holocaust survivor, narrated the anxious shrinking of the subjectivity of the *refugee:*

> '[W]e already are so damnably careful in every moment of our daily lives to avoid anybody guessing who we are[.] We try the best we can to fit into a world where you have to be sort of politically minded when you buy your food.' (Arendt 2007: 269)

Arendt's statements show how the 'refugee' in her text titled 'We Refugees' is a part of a body shaped by governmental and political narratives beyond the refugee's control. The singular is unavoidably and forcibly experienced in association with the national or nonnational body, the noncitizen. *We* (*refugees* and *racialized*) live in a world that is saturated with (state and street) nationalism that constricts our everyday and everywhere.

We find ourselves wearing a body we did not choose and exposed to the injuries inflicted on that body. In Europe, racialized-as-Muslim queers and queers of color find themselves embodying a *European Other* (El-Tayeb 2012). While many queer exiles choose Europe as a place of safety and community, they persistently figure in public discourse and media as an embodied 'threat to the continent's foundations' (Ibid. 79).

Such othering and violent repudiation haunts the racialized and noncitizen subject, even in, or especially in, the acts of protesting that violence. In Finland, Saara Pellander and Karina Horsti (2018) show how the public and political media kept actively and intentionally silent about the long suffering of rejected asylum seekers on hunger strikes. Haavisto (2020) shows how sit-in demonstrations for the rights of undocumented migrants figured in mainstream media as a threat to law and order 'and a potential provocation to more serious security-related threats.' (177). 'What kinds of threats, from whom, directed where, and how the Police knew about these threats was left unclear' (Ibid. 177). As if no elaboration is required when the racialized is present. The presence of the racialized noncitizen body, even in its most pained and injured circumstance, is in itself framed as injury.

Still, public activism and demonstration on the part of the racialized and the noncitizen are subversive. In Pellander and Horsti's ethnography (2018), hunger strikes, even if ignored by politicians and mainstream media, brought the invisible suffering of the racialized migrant into public view (Ibid.). While in Haavisto's study (2020), public activism was crucial for building networks of legal assistance and political mobilization. I am interested in how projects of collective mobilization inform and affect not only state laws and public discourse, but also the relationality within a community.

If community is a 'mode of sharing' (Shindo 2012: 153), I trace how alienation is shared and communicated. Reiko Shindo's concept of 'sharing of isolation' (158) inspires and resonates through my analysis. Interestingly, Shindo used the concept not in an ethnographic study but in a literary analysis of a novel. Shindo highlights how the exile/noncitizen subject can form a sense of home and community exactly in the sphere where communication and translation seem to fail. Suzy and Grace, the two exiled subjects in Shindo's analysis, inhabit a sense and a scene of contested citizenship and racialized alienation. However, they find home and belonging in the unending journey of alienation each of them leads. 'Suzy's journey to find Grace is a journey to find herself' (Ibid. 159). I trace how community is a mode of sharing the pain, as hard or impossible it is to *share* pain, and as alienating and non-sharable pain tends to be. I see the work of community (as Shindo does) as a work of translatability that happens at the limits of communication. At the breakdown of communication and the vigorous engagement to understand the other's subjective experience, we get to know our own experience. I trace how the *sharing of isolation* can be a mode of articulating community.

## METHODOLOGY AND POSITIONALITY IN A FIELD OF INJURIES

I base this text on ethnographic participatory research. The field is weekly group meetings for people who applied for asylum in Finland for gender- and sexuality-based discrimination in their countries of departure (I refer to these as *queer exiles*). The group was hosted by an NGO, I anonymize as *the Organization*. The Organization advocated for the rights and wellbeing of its participants. It also offered personalized legal counseling (outside the weekly meetings). I visited the group meetings over the period of 3 years once or twice every month. I volunteered as an interpreter between (Arabic, English, and French). I announced my roles as a *researcher* and *interpreter* before each meeting. I attended around 30 of these meetings, where 6–2 participants participated in discussions, chats, and recreational activities (like art workshops and yoga sessions). My participation, especially in the discussions/chats and in side-talks, made it possible to exchange stories and get in touch with the participants' narratives of painful bureaucratic procedures and racialization in Finland.

I tune into how hegemonic narratives shape small stories (Phoenix 2013). My strategy is to trace acts, narratives, and remarks that appear small (if they appear at all) vis-à-vis the hegemonic narratives. According to Jack/Judith Halberstam (2011) literature on hegemony, 'has attributed so much power to [hegemony] that it has seemed impossible to imagine counterhegemonic options.' (2011: 17) Small stories expose the multiplicities and particularities that the hegemonic has repressed in its claims of hegemony and homogeneity.

The mundane living-room-like space where the support group met weekly was where I met the subjects for the first time. However, the field extended to activities and events in urban and public spaces. Sometimes, in a relatively small city like Helsinki, we would meet by accident or design. When I referenced remarks and conversations that happened beyond the activities of the organization, I asked for the participants' permission. Sometimes they would caution me about what to mention and *not* to mention at all in my research.

When tackling pain and injury, a non-planned conversation is more appropriate and considerate than an orchestrated 'interview.' The participant can choose when and how often they share and communicate. In fact, several members rejected the idea of me interviewing them. Some kept politely postponing an interview they had promised. 'Interview' was most associated with interrogation-like encounters with the migration authorities to assess asylum claims. Some participants said that they were too anxious about the 'interview' (with the migration authorities) to participate in my interview. Others still resented the official 'interviews' long after they had passed. It is characteristic of interviews with migration authorities to evoke such draining anxieties and apprehensions. These interviews not only evoke a massive sense of anxiety because they are crucial in deciding whether the interviewee can stay in the country. They also often touch upon intimate and traumatic experiences of the subject and induce further injuries (Ali 2023; Perego 2021).

As a participant researcher, I witnessed and experienced injuries from racialization in the field. Bahar Baser and Mari Toivanen (2018) argue that research subjectivity is charged with the sociopolitical identity/associations of the researcher. My assumed identity (as an Arab/non-Finn) was a site of injury. That made my participation uneasy, but necessary and informative. As Linda Lapiņa and Mantė Vertelytė put it, 'knowledge is situated in and produced through our embodied, sensory, and affective engagements with the field' (2020: 240). One of the participants, I will call Adam, contrasted my research to the 'real research' that a 'Finnish' state-worker who came sometimes to the weekly meetings did. That 'real researcher,' according to Adam, 'reports directly to Migri (the Finnish migration authorities).' Adam's argument did not necessarily reflect his conviction of the insignificance of my research. However, it reflected and sustained racializing logics: whose subjectivity (and research) made priority and whose was considered too racialized to matter.

Unlike Adam, Haifa, another participant, claimed that my research *was* insignificant *because* it tackled racialization and citizenship injuries in Finland. She argued (passionately) that instances of exclusion and racism encountered in Finland are not comparable to the violence we encountered or may still encounter in Arab communities. I am not trying to dispute that. I might not be able to. However, I dwell on how instances and experiences of racialization and citizenship bureaucracies are sucked into (and numbed by) such comparisons. Moreover, I dwell on how Haifa expressed the pain of racialization in the same breath as she dismissed that pain. She bore witness to how such injuries figured as unworthy of urgent and emergent political mobilization. In this text, rather than ending the story with such injurious remarks, I take them as acts of expression and communication, a refusal to curl and shrink in pain and shame. I dwell on these narratives and instances of injury and trace the political insights and mobilization that they enable.

Miranda Joseph's ethnography on identity-based activism in a communal gay/lesbian theater highlights the implication of community members in the injurious norms of race and gender. Like Joseph, I trace the 'implication of our communities in the very forces we seek to oppose' (2002: xxv). Joseph also follows Nancy's notion of 'community itself as work' (Nancy et. al. 1991: xxxix), a continuous tackling of injurious norms that haunts the community from within. Community is a continuous work, rather than a finished ideal. More so, in queer communities, where queer is a relentless work to expand our understandings and bear witness to how norms rest on violent omissions.

## GENERATIVE INVESTMENT IN PAINKILLERS

In this section, I show how narrative elements are crucial in the quest for alleviating pain in all its forms and manifestations. While, in conventional modes of redress, the narrative seems to be a side story to the 'real,' I argue that the narrative is real and political.

On the November 3, 2020, as was the case at the beginning of each group meeting, we had an introduction circle. Each of the members introduced themselves and shared updates from their lives and/or how they had been feeling recently. Members of the group would often be or look depressed due to complications in the application procedure for asylum or their waning capacity to keep high spirit during the long waiting periods. This painful protraction lasted for months or years for some and had become part of the atmosphere. Surprisingly, that day, Xef, one of the participants who often looked down and depressed, looked cheerful. He said that he was 'feeling better.' Xef's improved mood had little to do with his legal status. I knew that Xef's improved mood was partly, if not totally, because his doctor had prescribed new (stronger) medications.

After frequenting the group meetings for 3 years, I grew familiar with how psychoactive medications strongly affected moods and spirits. Several members had mentioned their tenuous negotiations with doctors to get 'stronger' medicines or 'increase' the dose. Bella, one of the members, mentioned several times how she had to 'book several meetings' to 'convince' the doctor to prescribe stronger medications. She came to the meeting looking and feeling better when 'the doctor increased the dose'.

Chronic pain from protracted and complicated bureaucracies (and social alienation) necessitated sedatives prescribed by doctors or *self-prescribed*. Fadi and Adam numbed that pain with clubbing and drinking. Both spoke about how 'they forgot all their problems' when they entered clubs and started drinking and dancing. 'The atmosphere itself was intoxicating' for Adam. Paradoxically, the two could not always enter these clubs. Sometimes they had to show valid identity cards, and authorities would not issue conventional biometric identity cards for asylum seekers. Their ID cards were not recognized at clubs.

I am not advocating for more or less sedatives or alcohol. Instead, I look into (1) injuries of racialization and protracted bureaucracies that traversed and lacerated the participants' lives, (2) how participants numbed injuries with and without substances, and (3) how that attempt for alleviation figured in sociopolitically generative ways.

Fadi worked for the national postal service (one of the few work options available for asylum seekers). He said that when doing night shifts with almost nobody around, 'the thoughts' came to his mind. I asked 'what thoughts?' He said, 'do not take me close to my pain now'. Instead, he took me to how he 'treated that pain.' He said that sometimes he drank with his friend, 'whose situation was the same and who knew everything about [Fadi].' He said they would 'cry together.' Fadi's method of tackling his injuries and pain is not reducible to alcohol itself. I want to highlight how his strategy of numbing, the administration of treatment, mobilized narratives of community (even if a community of two) to 'drink' and 'cry.' That is an act of community making irreducible to the substance or the practice of drinking. Such relations and communities are not only places of support and sustainment. They are also sites where the person's most painful and injurious experience are recognized. Fadi and his friend seem to have created a space and a relation of 'holding,' a small

community where they knew each other, each other's worries and pains in their particularities and subtleties. They kept each other from feeling completely alienated to each other and oneself. Gotlib reads Lindemann's *holding* (2008) as 'identity-constituting' relationships (Gotlib 2012: 56). Here, 'holding' and 'identity' are not static but nomadic. For Gotlib, holding is about 'doing the hard narrative work of forming, re-forming, and preserving the identity' (56). Fadi and his friend were not holding and sustaining each other's static identity. They instead created a space of community, mooring, and reference in the painful disorientation of exile. Fadi's minimal space for mooring and holding was *not* too small or mundane to be political. His elaboration on how he treated his pain reflected what I want to expose and accentuate in this text, namely, how recognizing the narrative and mundane subtleties of pain and injury among members made the support group sustaining and remedial.

## HOW PAINFUL IS THE (CRISIS) NEWS?

In times of political and pandemic crises, like the times I am writing about, the stigmatized and less privileged experience the crisis disproportionately. Rather than 'merg[ing] the intense with the exceptional and the extraordinary,' Berlant (2011) sees that the extraordinary of what we call crisis turns out to be an 'amplification' of a 'crisis ordinariness' (10). Those who live in chronic socioeconomic insecurity are most sensitive to what is chronically and increasingly broken. The queer exiles who lived in asylum centers were most in touch with the intensification of the pandemic *crisis*. They followed the pandemic news with exponential fear and anxiety.

Fadi (mentioned above) lived at an asylum center and was scared of falling sick. He feared that his body would be an object of more control and restrictions. He said if he got sick, he would be 'put on the upper floor, the quarantine floor.' Fadi's fear was not only fear of contagion or of being 'trapped' at the asylum center. The affective atmosphere was more injurious and contagious than the virus. Fadi said that during that time, a 'Somali asylum seeker committed suicide' at that center. Fadi tried to avoid being there 'by all means.' He stayed at friends' places.

The pandemic crisis was international and cross-national. In fact, there could be a sense of equality in times of pandemic; anybody could be contagious, and anybody could be a legitimate subject of control. In other crisis scenarios, like terror attacks, contagion followed racialized lines. On the evening of the Vienna attacks in 2020, Fadi came to the group with a pained look and shared his deep sense of trouble and anxiety. He knew that happenings and news of *terrorism* lead to intensification in racialization and policing of migration (Nayak 2010; Sager 2018). Terror attacks shake and challenge anybody's and everybody's sense of safety. However, when one finds themselves embodying the culprit body of a 'Muslim terrorist,' one feels the attack in layered and exponential terms. Their multifaceted sense of terror will not even register as a matter of concern or terror. Sometimes this would double back as a sense of shame or guilt. Adam and Fadi resented how the 'increase in terrorism and Islamism' *understandably* made authorities stricter in the assessment of claims of asylum (including theirs).

Fadi experienced policing and stigmatization not only vis-à-vis Finnish authorities or communities. He also feared policing and stigmatization among fellow nationals whom he needed for support in the lack of state recognition. People disadvantaged by racialization and migration policies resort to kinship and national fellowship for

finding jobs, accommodation, and a general sense of community and belonging (Könönen 2018; Wimark 2021). Fadi said that after participating in the Helsinki Pride Parade 2019, some acquaintances and friends stopped talking to him, and others condemned him. Some of his acquaintances and friends supported and sympathized with Fadi (in a one-on-one manner). However, these had to balance between their (political and personal urge to) support Fadi and the stakes they had with fellows who influenced social and material resources. Fadi and his other queer and queer-friendly fellows lived in a painful and restricted *perpetual liminality* (Wimark 2021) between different communities and possible injuries within these communities. They also created small communities of mooring, holding, and narrative recognition where they drank and cried together and recognized each other's painful (life) particularities.

Karol, another participant who came from Russia, referred to his asylum-seeking status as his 'situation.' He explained once that he was careful not to speak about his situation to other 'Russian' fellows in Finland. If Fadi's 'situation' among fellow 'Iraqis' was his sexuality and gender politics, Karol feared being mistrusted around his fellow (non-asylum-seeking) Russian friends *not* because of his sexuality. He saw that his situation assigned him, regrettably and *erroneously*, to the undeserving realm of '*other* migrants,' and by 'other' he meant non-Russian migrants. He explained that 'in Russia' seeking asylum is 'very looked down upon.' Instead of protesting that injury, Karol invested in it for a pain-killing sense of higher (Russian) morality. This is what Daria Krivonos might term as Russian-Speakers' investment in racializing narratives to generate 'alternative value as deserving citizens' (2018: 1145).

Rather than ending the story with Karol's injurious way of generating alternative value, I appreciate how he *did* speak about his situation, in its particularities. The support group was a site of narrative recognition (Lindemann 2008), where members of similar situations voiced and tackled (rather than shied about) their pain. In the group, Karol did not shrink in shame or fear because of that situation. Moreover, the ethnographic circumstance was also a site of 'holding' where he communicated how he tackled that injury.

Karol made those statements a few months after his arrival in Finland. His hopes were high before he got the first rejection of his asylum claim. Later, Karol's narrative seemed to shift. He realized that Russians and non-Russians (so to speak) had to deal with debilitating bureaucracies that do not only make work harder or impossible, but also make life itself unlivable. Over the following years, he increasingly connected his situation to structural issues instead of identity politics. In any case, what I am most interested in is how the support group and the relationality that took shape within the group premised for a site of rethinking and communicating the injury in less injurious terms.

Participants from different countries, Cameroon (Bella), Iraq (Adam and Fadi) and Russia (Karol) grew more appreciative of how the work of the support group exceeded mere mediation between exiles and state authorities. This was apparent in how members increasingly highlighted the participation in the group as a primal site of social and political activities. Fadi said that being in the group made it thinkable and enjoyable to participate in pride parades and events. Bella said that she only felt the joy and meaning of Christmas when she was around us who shared and understood her situation. This is what Ali (2023) calls 'warming up narratives of community' (10), where politics of community shift from sloppy and injurious identity markers and become more attuned to the violence that queer exiles undergo in the name of identity.

Finally, in their tackling of the injuries of racialization and citizenship, participants exposed that a community of holding and healing is an ongoing work through unworkability (Nancy 1991). Karol's narration of his injuries brought insight into how racism was reproduced and recycled. Haifa was convinced that the racialization and citizenship bureaucracies we experienced in Finland were incomparable to the violence we experienced in our countries of departure. However, by accident or design, her vehement and aggressive conviction exposed how the violence we experienced in countries we abandoned keeps haunting and demoralizing us from tackling urgent and emergent issues in countries of chosen refuge.

## CONCLUSION

Queer exile is an unfinished journey of tackling protracted injuries, from injuries experienced in countries of departure to injuries in countries of chosen refuge. In holding our (political) breath, shrinking and numbing, what remains of political curiosity and vision? Sites of communities open up to instances and possibilities of communicating pain in its multiple manifestations and pernicious subtleties. In my ethnographic study, I have shown how dwelling with pain and the mundane tackling of it exposes the heterogeneity of modes of experiencing, addressing, and redressing injuries. More institutionalized and publicly mediatized mobilization like sit-ins and demonstrations are crucial events of political redress. However, tracing the mundane manifestations of injuries is as crucial to recognize how injurious norms manifest in real, real-time, and corporeal embodiment.

My ethnographic dwelling in real-time and corporeal proximity to subjects with protracted injuries of racialization and citizenship showed that community and relationality are sites of vital narrative recognition. In experiential and mundane proximity, the pained subject voiced the particularities of their injury, how it was embodied, how painful it was, and how it was painful. Without narrative recognition, there could be no real place of mooring and community, nor could there be a possibility to understand and tackle the injurious norms within and without the community. In an ethnography that traces and recognizes the particularities of narratives, it becomes more tangible how norms and big narratives sustain the injury in the political and the mundane, the everyday and the everywhere.

My ethnography tuned into the particularities and nuances of pain and its tackling. Methods of numbing, even if they seemed too conventional, inevitably broke into different forms and nuances of mobilization. Numbing could be substantial involving medication and alcohol. It could also be narrative and ideational, like subscribing to narratives that curtail the gravity of structural and mundane racialization. However, in these diverse strategies, the sites of community also premised for the recognition of heterogeneous modes of addressing and redressing injuries.

Numbing could also take different forms of reciprocating injuries in ways that sustain injuries, like investing in racialization or submitting to injurious norms. However, investment in racializing narratives and citizenship norms might highlight and accentuate how such norms have become normalized in a structure of violence. In my ethnography, I took that investment as a way of tackling and protesting how injuries have saturated, flooded, and suffocated the sociopolitical environment of queer exile.

In times of increasingly painful climaxes of the crisis ordinariness, gender politics figure as too personal to be political or even politically harmful. In Nordic countries,

the discourse on crisis and its management has been increasingly overtaken by injurious populist narratives about feminism and queer politics gone too far (Kantola 2018; Keskinen 2013). In response, I see it is more urgent than ever for scholars to further queer research and politics and their honoring of the particular, the personal, and the mundane to challenge the depoliticization of pain. Bringing pain and its heavy subtleties into the realm of politics can expose the chronic crisis of community and communication, the crisis of how matters of affinity and personal connections figure as secondary to normative tenets of redress. In fact, in this article, I wanted to expose the irony of how communities and connections emerge as side effects of normative and mechanized modes of redress. Participants in my study resorted to the support group for mediation in legal and medical procedures, but along those procedures, a subtle but vital and healing relationality materialized. If the journey of queer exile is a quest for a circumstance where injuries and pains are recognized, minded, and mended, then it is the primal site of queer politics to keep addressing the pernicious and subtle experiences of injurious norms.

I endorse politics and political ethnography that tracks and cracks the chronicity of excruciating norms and amplifies the cracks. I see ethnography as a collaboration to publicize and politicize heterogeneous and nuanced suffering in order to trigger new potentialities of redress. This is crucial in Nordic and European countries that tend to figure as benign havens of queer justice. It is high time we recognized the heterogeneity of how (queer) exiles experience seemingly benign norms and environments as perniciously injurious.

Tracing and politicizing particularities is vital to expose and erode modes and norms of redress that sustained injuries and stifled their contestation. If the small stories are not a substitute for public and mass demonstrations, they still protest how the relationality between members in the mundane and the lived experience of exile has a life of its own, a life that cannot be described and prescribed by norms of governance and institutionalized politics.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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