

Carceral Asylum: LGBTQ+ refugees, waiting, and stuckness

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Abstract

Although LGBTQ+ refugees are recognized as a “vulnerable group” eligible for prioritized resettlement to the Global North, they are stranded in so-called transit countries like Turkey for years—sometimes over a decade—due to the resettlement countries’ restrictive asylum policies and border closures. As they wait, refugees struggle with the uncertainty of living in limbo, dire living conditions that turn them into informal and exploitable labor, and numerous restrictions that govern their mobilities, gender and sexuality, labor, and every aspect of their daily lives. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research and community engagement with Iranian LGBTQ+ refugees in Turkey awaiting resettlement to the Global North, this talk conceptualizes asylum as a carceral formation. It examines how refugees articulate their experiences in Turkey through metaphors such as “stuckness” (*gir kardan*), “imprisonment” (*zendooni shodan*), “suffocation” (*khafegi*), and “modern slavery.” Analyzing how these metaphors manifest in lived experiences and policies, the talk explores the entrapment of LGBTQ+ refugees within interlocking systems of spatial confinement, protracted waiting, arduous asylum bureaucracy, labor exploitation, homo/transphobia, and deportability. At the same time, the talk highlights how refugees resist and reimagine these multiple forms of carcerality through fugitive and creative practices. From working informally to forging queer kinship networks to using drag as a form of escape—both literal and metaphorical—LGBTQ+ refugees carve out spaces of agency and survival amidst oppressive systems.

Biography

Elif Sari is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. Her research explores transnational sexualities, migration, asylum, waiting, humanitarianism, and queer and critical race theory, with a particular focus on the Middle East and its diasporas. She received her Ph.D. in Anthropology from Cornell University, with a concentration in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Before joining UBC, she was a Postdoctoral Fellow in Queer and Trans Research Lab at the University of Toronto. Elif is currently completing her first book manuscript—an ethnography of LGBTQ+ asylum from the Middle East to North America, centered on the experiences of Iranian queer and trans refugees waiting in Turkey. She is also excited to launch two new research projects: one on private refugee sponsorship programs in Canada and another examining the intersections of migration, sexuality, and art (particularly drag).