The Affects of Knowing Queerness – An Important Contribution to Queer Migration Studies

Lunau Dejgaard, Marie. 2023. *The Affective Politics of Queer Migration: On Affective Ambivalence, Truth and Queerness*. PhD diss. Roskilde University: The Doctoral School of Social Science & Business. (268 pages)

MARIE LUNAU DEJGAARD'S PhD thesis *The Affective Politics of Queer Migration: On Affective Ambivalence, Truth and Queerness*, innovatively explores the role of affect in queer asylum migration in Denmark. In queer asylum cases, the asylum adjudication process revolves largely around the evaluation of applicants' feelings, such as desire, attraction, love, and fear. Although relevant to migration control more broadly, exploring how affects can be known and assessed is therefore particularly urgent in the field of queer asylum. In addition to exploring how affects are assessed for their 'credibility' and 'truth', Lunau's thesis explores how affects influence and shape the assessments and decisions, in other words, the affective governmentality of the asylum system. Lunau also studies the affects produced by the asylum assessment processes, focusing on how for instance anger, empathy, anxiety, and love might be affective states from which resistance and critique may emanate, and from

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where alternatives to current deathly migration systems might be felt and thought.

The thesis builds primarily on interviews and other ethnographic encounters with queer asylum seekers, and interviews with immigration officers. The rich ethnographic material enables an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the affective dimensions of the assessment of asylum. The extensive material also provides valuable empirical insights into the details and complexities of the process of assessing queer asylum applications in a Danish context and of how the process is experienced by both asylum seekers and immigration officers.

Affect theory, and more specifically what Lunau, drawing on Sara Ahmed (2014), calls "affective politics", constitute the theoretical ground for Lunau's thesis. The concepts of *affective governmentality* (Vukov 2003, among others) and *affective ambivalence* (Hemmings 2018) are also significant within Lunau's theoretical and analytical framework. The focus on affective ambivalence serves as a fruitful analytical tool to explore the nuances and specificities of the asylum system. It also functions as a way of dealing with the responsibilities of representing others, where the attention towards affective ambivalence works to avoid simplistic and one-sided representations of both immigration officers and asylum seekers.

One of the most incisive conclusions of Lunau's thesis concerns the difficulties of producing 'credible' evidence of a queer life and identity. A number of contradictions pertaining particularly to the situation of queer asylum seekers complicate the assessment of 'credibility' and 'truth'. Consistency over time, both across interviews and along one's life, is demanded. Yet, (queer) identities and desires are instable across life courses in a way that do not conform to normative ideas of innateness, and distortion, fragmentation or loss of memory are all characteristics of trauma, which many asylum seekers to varying degrees have experienced. Moreover, visibility and tangible evidence are demanded by the migration authorities. Yet, affects are ephemeral, and it is significative of queer lives lived under threat and persecution that the visible traces of queer desires to varying degrees have had to remain closeted, buried

and hidden. Affects and acts must be deemed plausible in the eyes of the immigration officials. Yet, and as much previous scholarship on the subject has also shown, what is considered 'plausible' is heavily dependent on contextual, cultural, gendered, sexual, racial, national and classist normativities. And further, asylum seekers' account of fear must carefully balance between successfully proving a history of a queer life and simultaneously having hidden one's queerness for fear of persecution. If there is evidence, the situation cannot have been so bad – and if there is no evidence then you are not deemed credible. As Lunau succinctly formulates it, "[t]hrough the credibility assessment, it is presumed that what has been buried is now supposed to be evidence, but the absence of evidence could, indeed, be the evidence" (130). The ways in which the state knows queerness, the state's epistemologies of queerness, are at odds with the lives of queer asylum seekers.

Lunau's analysis of immigration officers' affects relating to the assessment process shows how the very idea of it being an *un*affective process – in line with the ideal of bureaucratic rationality and objectivity – involves affective regulation in itself. For instance, Lunau argues that anxiety permeates the process in at least three ways. Firstly, anxiety takes the form of a collective, political fear projected onto the figure of the asylum seeker (an analysis drawing on Ahmed 2004) and of immigration officers' hesitancy regarding how to talk about sexuality and gender identity in a correct way. Secondly, there is *epistemic anxiety* (Stoler 2009) relating to the difficulties of 'knowing' who is truthfully queer and persecuted and to taking the 'right' decision. Thirdly, there is an anxiety stemming from immigration officers both being tasked with upholding sometimes repressive laws, while also critically reflecting upon these and their own position. Lunau argues that these anxieties infusing the assessment process are lessened through bureaucratic alienation, which functions to protect immigration officers from knowing the consequences of their decisions and diminish their sense of responsibility (195–196). I particularly appreciate this analysis, and the conclusion points to severe issues within the processing of asylum applications.

Lunau is careful to explain her methodological considerations and to guide the reader through the text. The downside is that the thesis is rather long, and certain arguments and analyses would benefit from further condensation. One point where I was curious to read more, however, concerned the potentials of love. While the discussion of 'love' does not aim to "celebrate the affective politics of love" (227), I wonder what would happen if 'love' was analysed with the same attention to ambivalence as that which is afforded the other affects examined in this thesis. While Lunau expertly and valuably counters uniform representations of queer asylum seekers as associated with death and suffering, a more extensive analysis of ambivalences relating to 'love' could perhaps be a way of further exploring variations in relation to love and solidarity also within this group.

Lunau's thesis constitutes a valuable contribution to several fields. Not least does the rich and solidly handled empirical material advance the field of queer migration studies by highlighting a previously understudied context: namely queer asylum assessment processes in Denmark. The analysis of the difficulties of assessing the affective dimensions of asylum applications, to varying degrees and in various ways, applies also to other grounds for asylum and migration. This analysis thus provides important perspectives on credibility assessments more generally. Furthermore, Lunau's analysis of how affective dynamics form an integral part of the governmentality of the asylum system is highly important for research on bureaucratic assessment processes. Her work also hints at the wider applicability and analytical productivity of affect theory in the context of queer migration research and critical border and migration studies.

I hope this thesis will be read and I look forward to seeing how Lunau will develop insights from this project into future research.

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