



# Multiple Encounters: Queer Migrants and Bureaucratic Violence

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## Article abstract

In this paper, we analyze the multiple encounters queer asylum seekers face due to violence embedded in border control and asylum recognition processes. This analysis is based on the reconstitution of two narratives that form part of an ethnographic study, the result of five years of fieldwork with queer migrants in Brazil and Spain. We employ the notion of bureaucratic violence to understand the ambiguities between control and protection in the emergence of the LGBTI refugee as a subject of rights in the humanitarian realm.





# Multiple Encounters: Queer Migrants and Bureaucratic Violence

Isadora Lins França<sup>a</sup> and Bruno Nzinga Ribeiro<sup>b</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyze the multiple encounters queer asylum seekers face due to violence embedded in border control and asylum recognition processes. This analysis is based on the reconstitution of two narratives that form part of an ethnographic study, the result of five years of fieldwork with queer migrants in Brazil and Spain. We employ the notion of bureaucratic violence to understand the ambiguities between control and protection in the emergence of the LGBTI refugee as a subject of rights in the humanitarian realm.

## KEYWORDS

asylum; queer; migrants; violence; bureaucracy

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, nous analysons les rencontres multiples vécues par les demandeurs d'asile *queer* en raison de la violence inhérente au contrôle des frontières et au processus de reconnaissance du droit d'asile. Cette analyse s'appuie sur la reconstitution de deux récits qui font partie d'une étude ethnographique et qui résultent de cinq années de travail sur le terrain avec des migrants *queers* au Brésil et en Espagne. Nous utilisons la notion de violence bureaucratique pour comprendre les tensions entre le contrôle et la protection dans l'émergence du réfugié LGBTI en tant que sujet de droits dans le domaine humanitaire.

## INTRODUCTION

This article employs the concept of bureaucratic violence to understand two different contexts by which queer migrants face state violence: control and vigilance at the borders and asylum recognition processes based on their sexual identities. The ambiguity between protection and control is posed by a current migratory management system that combines the enforcement of borders with discretionary humanitarian policies, which operate through hierarchical relations between the Global North and the Global South. In this system, queer migrants frequently face

death, detention, and deportation, and once in the country of arrival, they must also deal with the slow process of providing proof of their life stories and the forms of violence they have been subjected to.

The arguments are developed by reconstructing two migrant narratives in Spain and Brazil. While embarking on the narratives, the approach focuses precisely on the critical moments regarding border control and asylum processes without embracing all the particularities concerning the discrete national contexts involved. The analysis draws on interviews with two interlocutors whom França

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met in 2016: a Salvadorian man who had been living in Barcelona (Spain) while waiting for a response to his asylum request and a Bangladeshi man who had been living in São Paulo (Brazil) as a refugee. While Ariel was grappling with the violence in El Salvador, and Ravi faced persecution as a member of a religious minority in Bangladesh, experiences that are very common to migrants from their countries, both men shared another common ground: the imperative of fleeing their countries due to persecution based on their sexuality. It is important to clarify that the narratives are told by gay men who identify as such and do not reflect the totality of the diverse experiences of queer migrants. However, based on our prior experiences and the literature, we argue that these narratives assist us by exploring the convergence of violence, bureaucracy, and sexuality in bordering processes, particularly regarding homosexuality.

The article is a collaborative effort between Isadora Lins França and Bruno Nzinga Ribeiro. Isadora conducted the fieldwork and interviews while both worked on the writing process. The following five sections further explore the argument presented in the introduction. The first section describes the research methodology. The second explores the analytical connection between bureaucratic violence, queer and trans migrants, and bordering processes. In the third section, the focus turns to the violence experienced by migrants at borders. The fourth section delves into the recognition processes for queer asylum seekers and the more subtle violence implicit within these. The final section revisits the main arguments presented throughout the text.

The text disaggregates the narratives of Ariel and Ravi and recomposes them in two distinct moments: their displacement through borders and time in detention, and the pro-

cess of eligibility and asylum request based on sexual orientation. The writing strategies used seek to better understand how these two moments are connected in experiences of asylum seekers through the bureaucratic violence they both faced in their displacement journeys. Aligned with [Eldridge and Reinke \(2018\)](#), we acknowledge the importance of ethnography in understanding bureaucracies through the viewpoints of those affected by them.

In this article, we employ the category of “queer migrants” or “queer asylum seekers” to render intelligibility to the broader topic discussed while highlighting the instability of gender and sexual categories and identities, following the consolidated debate regarding the category “queer.” When we mention “LGBTI” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) as a category, between quote marks, we are referring to a category that has been present in the humanitarian context to refer to asylum seekers on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, sometimes referred to as SOGI (see [UNHCR, 2012](#)). More recently, in the humanitarian context, the LGBTI category has ceded some space to LGBTQ+, LGBTQI+, and LGBTQIA+ categories following advances in the definition of the same in social movements.

## METHODOLOGY

The ethnographic material was gathered during research regarding the emergence of the “LGBTI refugee” category in the institutional realm of asylum in both Spain and Brazil. França conducted the fieldwork between 2015 and 2019, which involved analyzing documents, participating in humanitarian events, and conducting 25 semi-structured interviews with both humanitarian workers and refugees. The researcher informed the participants about the study and the implications of taking part. The interviewees

were informed that they could end the interview or refuse to answer questions if they experienced any discomfort. Moreover, they were assured that their names would not be disclosed in any research findings; Ravi and Ariel are pseudonyms used to protect the individuals' privacy and identity.<sup>1</sup>

The interviews with Ariel and Ravi took place in 2016, in Barcelona and São Paulo, respectively. França first met Ariel at an association for LGBTI migrants, and the interview took place in the apartment he shared with other queer migrants while awaiting the result of his application. Initial contact with Ravi occurred via a humanitarian organization, and the interview was conducted at a shopping mall in São Paulo, a place he chose. At the time, the Brazilian state had already recognized Ravi as a refugee. Both narratives are somewhat fragmented, and the researcher has been out of touch with them for quite some time; however, the present analysis focuses more on how they perceived their own experiences rather than the details of their displacements.

During the interview, Ariel provided insights into his personal history, shedding light on the violence he endured as a gay man in El Salvador, along with the tough situations encountered during his migration journey. Furthermore, Ariel referred to the process that enabled him to openly articulate his sexual identity, particularly in the context of the asylum application process. Unlike Ariel, Ravi refrained from discussing the violence he endured due to his sexuality and withheld many details concerning his life in Bangladesh. Ravi had already obtained refugee status, and revisiting the past was uncomfortable for him; moreover, he was concerned that disclosing details

of the violence could adversely impact his family in Bangladesh. In the interview, the researcher respected Ravi's decision and instead engaged in a discussion on the circumstances faced by Hindus and LGBTI persons in Bangladesh.

In humanitarian situations, one of a researcher's ethical obligations is to clarify that our research position normally does not give us the authority to intervene in the asylum processes of those we work with, for better or worse (on the role of the researcher as an "expert" in eligibility processes, see [McNeal, 2019](#); [Menetrier, 2023](#)). As researchers who work with asylum seekers, we also recognize the discomfort that can arise while recounting past experiences, and it is important to uphold ethical procedures by respecting the boundaries of our interviewees. However, listening to the accounts of asylum seekers is inevitable when developing a critical understanding of the humanitarian system. This understanding must incorporate the perspectives of the migrants and asylum seekers themselves, together with their experiences navigating borders and administrative processes. Rather than exploiting the distressing experiences of migrants, taking a critical approach enables us to gain meaningful knowledge on the violence they face during their journeys.

### BUREAUCRATIC VIOLENCE, QUEER MIGRANTS, AND BORDERING PROCESSES

The concept of bureaucratic violence encompasses regimes of mobility guaranteed by the control of borders, which undeniably carry the weight of colonial racialized power relations ([Abdelhady et al., 2020](#); [Casas-Cortes et al., 2015](#); [Cassidy et al., 2018](#)). According to [Abdelhady et al. \(2020\)](#), the concept has its roots in post-colonial studies, which located the role played by Western bureaucratic

<sup>1</sup>The interviews were recorded together with their verbal consent. However, formal approval from an ethics committee was not possible at the time because the rules regarding ethics in anthropological research had yet to be consolidated in Brazil.

systems in the forms of subjection of the colonized, as discussed by [Fanon \(2004, 2008\)](#). Drawing on this starting point, these authors sought to analyze the asylum system, in which bureaucratic violence manifests itself in the denial of rights ([Arendt, 1969](#)), physical violence and state surveillance ([Graeber, 2016](#)), the randomness of bureaucratic decisions and the normalization of suffering ([Gupta, 2012](#)), and forms of waiting as subordination ([Auyero, 2012](#); [Bourdieu, 2000](#)). The focus is on “the ways in which bureaucracies interact with refugees face-to-face, structure their lives outside of these personal interactions, and reproduce different forms of violence that diminish their access to citizenship and human rights” ([Abdelhady et al., 2020](#), p. 14). This article seeks to contribute to the discussion by addressing how queer migrants encounter physical violence at the borders of nation-states and how their sexual identities operate as a means to obtain asylum if they prove they are capable of successfully constructing a narrative of themselves as “authentic LGBTI refugees,” in [Murray's \(2016, p. 42\)](#) terms.

Studies on queer migrants have focused on the ambiguities between protection and control in both the legal and social policies of recognition of the “LGBTI refugee” and the subjectivation processes involved therein ([E. Fassin & Salcedo, 2015](#); [França, 2023](#); [Giametta, 2019](#); [Kobelinsky, 2015](#); [Lewis, 2014](#); [Murray, 2016](#); [Saleh, 2020](#); [Shakhsari, 2014](#)). In this set of studies, bordering processes are also highlighted, linked to racialization dynamics and the precarity faced by queer and trans migrants in the host country ([Bhagat, 2020](#); [Camminga, 2018](#); [França & Fontgaland, 2020](#); [Hodge, 2019](#); [Luibhéid & Chávez, 2020](#); [Seitz, 2017](#); [Zarco Ortiz & Chacón Reynosa, 2020](#)).

More research is required on the connection between physical violence at bor-

ders and implicit violence in administrative asylum procedures, particularly concerning migrant detention. The work edited by [Luibhéid and Chávez \(2020\)](#) makes a valuable contribution, and according to [Luibhéid \(2020\)](#), there is a belief in essentialist views of gender and sexuality that leads to the categorization of individuals as either “economic migrants” or “refugees.” Such classification often results in illegalization, detention, and deportation. The notion of an authentic LGBTI refugee is constructed as a counterpart to these operations.

This management system for migrant/refugee populations, which combines detention and control devices with restricted and discretionary humanitarian policies, has previously been addressed in the context of critiquing humanitarian reason by authors such as [D. Fassin \(2012\)](#). Concerning borders, [Casas-Cortes et al. \(2015\)](#) reject a conception of borders merely as walls and mechanisms of exclusion and instead consider their multiplication in the tensions between “access and denial, mobility and immobilization, discipline and punishment, freedom and control” (p. 57). On this topic, [Cassidy et al. \(2018\)](#) draw our attention to the issue of social difference when describing “borders, borderscapes and bordering processes as ‘situated intersectional bordering’” that operate in historical contexts specific to certain social divisions (p. 139).

Inspired by these theoretical approaches, this article focuses on the different forms of violence present in bordering processes, whether in the more tangible aspects of physical violence in the containment of migrant movements at the borders or in more intangible aspects involved in the processes of recognition based on sexual identities. The concept of bureaucratic violence operates here as an analytical key that connects the



different moments through which queer migrants encounter state violence.

## BORDERING PROCESSES: DETENTION CENTRES AND AIRPORTS

### I.

França and Ariel met in January 2016, three years after a migratory journey that had started in El Salvador. He was 36 years old at the time, and his trajectory was entangled with those of other migrants who in the last few decades had tried to escape from the violence in the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America, formed by El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, with the Mexican territory working as a “vertical border” to the United States (EL COLEF, 2018; Huerta, 2016; Torre-Cantalapiedra & Yee-Quintero, 2018). However, Ariel perceived his homosexuality as an aggravating factor in the persecution he suffered from gangs in El Salvador, as we discuss below.

Ariel left his hometown in 2013, moving to the interior of the country to guarantee his immediate safety. With the aid of siblings who lived in the United States, he managed to hire a “coyote” and was transported to the US border amid numerous dangers. He was offered American documents to pass through the immigration checkpoints on the American side of the border. With those documents in hand, without knowing how to speak English, Ariel was caught at the border for the first time and was detained in Texas for six months.

As discussed by Wever (2022), prolonged detentions are impediments for queer and trans migrants to access legal aid in the US. According to the author, there are 637 migrant facilities in the US, including detention centres (officially 111), county jails, and processing centres, most of which are managed by private companies. Ariel talked about his time in detention centres with

pain: “They say it’s a detention centre, but that’s a lie; it’s a prison.” He remembers the yells and insults from the guards. He also recollects the repetitive counting during the day, the uncomfortable cell, other detainees’ screams, periods of waiting without water or food, and transportation with his hands and feet tied. Furthermore, it was impossible to receive visits from family members who were also undocumented in the US, which aggravated his loneliness. While talking about how he felt, he said,

Very frustrated. Very frustrated, very difficult, I mean, it’s one of the most difficult experiences I’ve ever had in my life. Because without having done anything and because you want to protect your own life, they do what they do to you. ... You don’t have peace during the day, you don’t have peace at night, because they spend every moment counting, they count every hour, you have to get up, you have to sit down. ... If you’re watching television you have to leave and go to your bed .... I don’t know how to explain it to you. It’s horrible, like harassment all day long.

The dominating feelings are frustration, incomprehension, and the absence of autonomy over time. Being held “for wanting to protect your own life” seemed like a massive contradiction to Ariel, illustrating the relations between the detention and control of “migrants” and the protection of “refugees.” The control over the detainees’ routines and the threats and punishments by prison officers once again took him back to the violence he had tried to escape.

Ariel requested international protection, but his request was denied the following day. He had a short phone interview, interrupted by many questions, which left him in a confused state of mind. He also felt unable to disclose that he was a homosexual like he did later in Spain, living in freedom with the support of humanitarian entities. Moreover, Ariel was afraid of suffering violence from other detainees if they knew about his sex-

uality, since the reasons that led him to flee from El Salvador were related to his sexual identity.

It is important to mention that Ariel's priority was entering the US and living as an undocumented migrant rather than asking for asylum, a process that often requires previous preparation and legal support. The fact that his request was denied means nothing in relation to the veracity and merit of his appeal: most Salvadoran migrants are seen as "economic migrants" by the American asylum system, irrespective of their reasons for fleeing, which explains why asking for asylum is not always their first option when entering US territory. Ariel knew the odds were not in his favour, and feeling uncomfortable speaking about his sexuality as a motive for seeking protection did not improve things for him.

Ariel was deported to El Salvador after his first attempt. He lived there in isolation for two years, after which he again tried to migrate to the US in 2015. During this second attempt, he was detained by Mexican immigration agents at the border of Mexico and Guatemala and was forced to return to El Salvador. Immediately after his return, he embarked on another attempt, this time encountering the immigration police when he got to the US side of the border, from whom he ran "as if he had seen the devil himself." The police captured and isolated him in a small cell for a few days, time he spent removing the thorns that had spiked his body during the journey across the desert. As soon as his case was processed, the police informed him that he "had no rights" because he had already been deported once and had to sign his voluntary departure. He immediately signed the documents: "I know what it's like to be detained, so I signed them right away. They will always say no to you." After a month, he was once again deported to El Salvador.

Ariel estimates that his brothers in the US spent around \$25,000 between coyotes and expenses in detention centres. So, he gave up on living with his family and decided to migrate to Spain, which did not require a visa for Salvadorian citizens. Upon arrival at Barcelona airport, in May 2015, he was interrogated by border control officers, who complained that "too many Latinos were coming here" but allowed him to enter the country as a tourist. In January 2016, he was finally able to request asylum based on his sexual identity and was awaiting a decision.

## II.

We now turn to Ravi, who was 36 years old when he was detained at Guarulhos International Airport in São Paulo, Brazil, in 2014. At that time, Bangladeshis composed the largest number of asylum seekers in the country, with 1,830 applications. As previously stated, Ravi ran away from Bangladesh for two reasons: he was part of a Hindu minority, frequently marginalized in the Muslim country; and he identified as a member of the LGBTI community, which suffers constant violence in Bangladesh. Despite this twofold condition, his homosexuality carried more weight in how he narrated his journey because he had been subjected to physical and psychological violence for being gay. As the following section discusses, Ravi preferred not to go into detail regarding the forms of violence he had suffered due to his sexuality. However, he did describe the precarity experienced by the LGBTI community in Bangladesh in general.

Regarding borders, Ravi described his arrival process as a "ping-pong match" from "one country to another in airport detention rooms." Therefore, his narrative presented as barely linear, and his route might seem illogical from a purely geographic standpoint:

Some countries may think I am an immigration risk, I may not get a legit visa from a country I want to

go to. So, I didn't take that chance. So, I travelled in such a way that I only went to those countries that won't require a transit visa so that I can transit to my destination country, so I spent a lot of money on this.

Ravi devised an elaborate plan of connecting flights through "visa-free" countries, aiming to arrive at his destination in the Caribbean, where some countries are visa-free for Bangladeshi citizens. Nonetheless, Ravi could not reach his final destination, because he was held and subsequently "pushed to another country" in an absurd route through Jamaica, Barbados, Panama, Chile, and Brazil in the "ping-pong match" he referred to. His final destination was never meant to be Brazil but a country in the Caribbean from where he planned to migrate to the United States or Canada.

In Brazil, Ravi was detained for five days in a space known as "Connector" at Guarulhos International Airport, a room between landing and immigration, where unaccepted passengers are held under the custody of the Brazilian federal police. Without due attention to comfort and hygiene, with food being the responsibility of the airlines, and with no legal advice, dozens of people were kept there for days or weeks (see [Conectas, 2014](#)). Despite the pressure from human rights agencies, this place continues to work as a "limbo," according to a human rights activist assisting migrants in Brazil (informal interview, February 20, 2022).

By "limbo," the activist suggests a space where no agent takes responsibility. Three main agents are linked to Connector: the federal police, the airlines, and the private company that manages Guarulhos International Airport, which together produce a form of "legal vacuum" where no one is ever held accountable for the space. In this intentional blurring of responsibilities, the demands of human rights activists regarding migrants' well-being and rights tend to be

ignored. The recurrent requests for data on the non-admissibility and their respective profiles are always denied under the pretext that these data are sensitive to "national security." Without adequate information and hostage to the "legal void" created between private and state agents, it is difficult for human rights agencies to follow up on denunciations of airport incarceration. The arbitrariness that characterizes the space is almost never documented. An additional fear is that should the Connector space be extinguished, a detention centre for migrants could replace it, which would be a negative outcome for a country that does not have migrant detention centres.

Another area of cooperation between airlines and the federal police is the assignment of a specific "profile" for non-admitted "foreigners": according to the activist França talked to, most of the detainees are "African, Indian, Bangladeshi, or Pakistani." Ravi reports having stayed with other people, most of whom were of African origin, who had been there for longer. Regarding the detention of peers and the information on legal procedures to enter the country, he says that "it's like there was a curfew, they were watching people all the time. They don't want people to mingle and talk to each other. It's like they're listening, observing us. No information, nothing." Such silence was broken only when Ravi used a hidden tablet to ask for help from a refugee aid organization in São Paulo. The entity intervened on his behalf and explained his rights as an asylum seeker and what he had to say to be permitted to fill out an asylum form. He filled out the asylum form, arguing that he had suffered religious and sexual persecution in Bangladesh.

Ravi then endured a three-hour interrogation. In his words, the police accessed his email without authorization, combing



through "every correspondence" related to his testimony, always trying to test the coherence of his claims. They found out that Ravi had been writing to "experts, consultants, lawyers, psychiatrists" regarding refugee-related information. According to Ravi, people who wanted to request asylum faced resistance from the Brazilian federal police: "They try to push them back to different countries or the last country they came from," frequently using "force" or "intimidation." At this time, he talked about an attempt to sedate him to put him on an airplane headed somewhere else, which was only stopped by the aid and resistance of his African peers. Even though we have not encountered any reports of sedating migrants, his narrative is vivid and composes a horrific account in which the person has no control over their own body.

Ariel's and Ravi's narratives were selected not due to their exceptional nature, but because they allow us to perceive the violence performed in the regulation practices of border control and their forms of incarceration. These narratives enable an understanding of these practices from a subjective standpoint: the atmosphere of terror and fear becomes as relevant as the more objective parts. Ravi's account of feeling extremely intimidated to incessantly repeat his testimony without showing any inconsistency concerning his claim as a refugee for religious and sexual persecution, as well as feeling terrified about having an unknown substance injected into his body, is not so different from Ariel's narrative about detention centres, especially the fear of being outed as gay to the other detained men. Thus, we comprehend the capacity of bureaucratic violence to produce spaces marked by fear and terror, which these narratives give meaning to [Taussig \(2004\)](#).

Both accounts also reveal the migrants' efforts to navigate border regimes framed by inequalities between those who can move around the globe and those subject to a visa-granting system that is disadvantageous for people in the Global South. After spending three years trying to migrate to the US, Ariel decided on a country where he could enter as a tourist, even if it meant living far from his family. Ravi executed complex engineering to fly to a visa-free country for Bangladeshis and ended up in a country where he did not speak the language and that he did not have any connections to but had allowed him entry after being detained in an airport for five days. Their narratives enable us to challenge representations of migrations as occurring in a single linear direction, from the Global South to the Global North, a representation that gains liberatory colours in the case of LGBTI refugees ([Murray, 2016](#)).

Their narratives also draw attention to the less discussed temporal aspects of bordering processes, as [Tazzioli \(2018\)](#) argues, in which migrant movements face temporal borders that disrupt their sense of time and reinforce racialized hierarchies of migration. The border regime Ariel and Ravi faced slowed down and changed their migration plans unexpectedly: Ariel spent three years trying to reach the US to join his family, and then gave up; Ravi ended up stuck in Brazil. It is also easy to envision how being confined to a room or detention centre could be a distressing and disorienting experience. These feelings of temporal disruption are not uncommon in the narratives of migrants, and once they traverse detention centres and airports, queer migrants face other regimes of regulation and recognition.

## MAKING SOMEONE TALK: THE “TESTIMONY” OF INFLICTED VIOLENCE

### I.

In the United States, I went through the most difficult moments of my life, and shortly after that, here I am in Spain asking for international protection, hoping for a favourable answer. I would not be talking about this if it were not for the Red Cross psychologist. ... Thanks to this psychological intervention, I see things differently and I can talk, since talking about the subject is very difficult for me, as I see myself as the shame of the family, even though I am not; however, this is hard for me to accept. But I am doing so with the help of psychologists and social workers. (Fieldwork archive, Barcelona, February 2016)

The passage above closes Ariel’s written statement on his “life story.” At the beginning of the interview, Ariel promptly handed the researcher a copy of the statement he had already written. Seeing the researcher’s surprised reaction, he said he had told his story so many times that he decided to make a written record of it. After reading the text, it became clear that constructing an asylum seeker’s narrative is sometimes a collective work involving humanitarian agents, in a demanding process that requires queer migrants to deal with feelings such as shame. Ariel received the support of humanitarian organizations while he requested asylum in Spain, living in a shelter for some months in the countryside and then moving into a shared apartment with other gay and lesbian asylum seekers managed by an association of LGBTI migrants and refugees in Barcelona. The humanitarian organizations assisted him with his request while also offering psychological help.

In the excerpt, when Ariel mentions “talking about yourself,” he refers to his sexual identity, which makes him the “shame of the family.” Born in a small rural village in El Salvador, he always kept secret his desire for

other men. His narrative also tells us about the war in El Salvador<sup>2</sup> and his childhood marked by the fear of gunshots, bombings, kidnappings, and death. From childhood to adulthood, he saw all his siblings migrate to the United States for better opportunities. Choosing to stay in El Salvador, Ariel got into a political career in public administration. Coming out to a work colleague about being homosexual was described by Ariel as a mistake that resulted in him fleeing: “It was the biggest mistake I could have made in my life.” After unveiling his sexual identity, Ariel faced harassment from his immediate superior, a local politician who persistently sought sexual favours. As Ariel resisted, the situation escalated, reaching a point where the man compelled him to resign from his job and leave the city, all while maintaining silence about the sexual harassment. Ariel’s harasser claimed close ties with local gangs (pandillas—gang-like organizations in El Salvador, currently also present in Guatemala and Honduras) and the police, asserting that reporting the situation would be futile.

One day, Ariel encountered a group of men affiliated with pandillas at his residence, and they threatened to end his life unless he departed the city. In his narrative, he highlights the pervasive atmosphere of terror imposed by pandillas in El Salvador, a context characterized by elevated homicide rates: “Life isn’t worth anything.” However, in his specific case, sexual identity assumed an important role in his victimization, resulting in persistent harassment and an impediment to reporting violence to the police—common features in the experiences of LGBTI individuals facing violence in El Salvador (Gómez Arévalo, 2017).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Between 1980 and 1992, the civil war in El Salvador killed approximately 75,000 civilians and caused the exodus of 20% of the country’s population. For a bibliographic review, see Mason (1999).

<sup>3</sup>In 2016, a report from the UNHCR qualified “LGBT people” as part of the “potential risk profiles for asylum-seekers from El

Once in Spain, he sought humanitarian organizations and felt he had finally been heard. Nevertheless, as stated by a humanitarian worker in Spain, the violence in El Salvador was understood at that time as “common violence” and not as “human rights violence,” and “though more people die in El Salvador than in Afghanistan,” the situation in the country had not justified classification as a “humanitarian crisis,” which would support asylum recognition (interview, humanitarian worker from a refugee hosting organization in Barcelona, February 2016).

Ariel was aware of the difficulties regarding requests for asylum coming from Salvadorians. Towards the conclusion of the interview, he shared news articles and graphic images depicting the violence in El Salvador, particularly instances of individuals murdered by pandillas. He argued that when faced with such evidence, it would be impossible to deny the gravity of the violence in his country, including that against “homosexuals.” His evident anxiety concerning the asylum application process was apparent in his eagerness to justify his need for protection. This urgency arose from a pervasive concern that the violence in El Salvador was not being recognized as a humanitarian crisis: “In my country, like Honduras, there are so many deaths every day and so many homosexuals are killed, but no one pays attention, because in our country there’s no money, there’s no oil, there’s nothing.”

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Salvador,” given that “discrimination against individuals of diverse sexual orientation and/or gender identities is reportedly widespread in El Salvador and such persons have consistently been targeted for attacks and murder by the gangs and other sectors of society, including by the police and other public authorities” (UNHCR, 2016, pp. 38–39). In 2020, the 138-page report released by [Human Rights Watch](#) delineates that “LGBT people, especially trans women, face violence at the hands of gangs that can be motivated by anti-LGBT animus or opportunism related to LGBT people’s perceived or actual social and economic vulnerability” (“Violence Against LGBT People in El Salvador”).

The engagement of psychologists and other humanitarian workers in Ariel’s case served a dual purpose: it aimed to enhance his mental well-being while also playing a crucial role in his ability to talk about his sexual identity and the violence he had experienced. As he said, “I wouldn’t be talking about this if it weren’t for the Red Cross psychologist.” Ariel understood that enunciating his sexual identity and establishing a coherent correlation to the violence he had experienced in his home country would enhance his chances of asylum. Therefore, articulating his identity as “homosexual” during the eligibility process was crucial for positioning him as an “LGBTI refugee,” distinguishing him from being merely categorized as another “economic migrant” fleeing “common violence” in the Northern Triangle.

## II.

The situation of Salvadorians at the time was not far removed from how Bangladeshi asylum applications were considered in Brazil. Ravi navigated this entanglement between humanitarianism, refuge, migration, control, and protection. His case is among the few Bangladeshis who have been recognized as refugees in Brazil; his sexual identity and religious affiliation were fundamental to the process. Despite participating in humanitarian events, Ravi never wanted to draw attention as an LGBTI refugee. When he was invited to participate in the research, Ravi accepted on the condition that certain subjects would not be discussed. He replied to the first invitation via text message: “I won’t talk about [sexual] orientation. However, there are plenty of other things we can talk about. I’m a social entrepreneur and I have a wealth of experiences living in many countries.”

LGBTI persecution in Bangladesh formed part of the conversation due to the research objectives. However, the researcher avoided asking about Ravi’s personal experience,

discussing instead historical events, legal aspects, and everyday violence against these populations in his country.<sup>4</sup> Summarizing these points, Ravi defined the violence and the feeling of vulnerability regarding “gay people” in Bangladesh:

Violence is like this: if anyone comes out as gay, there’s no support from anywhere, not from their family, not from relatives, not from friends, doctors, psychiatrists, counselling services, not from the police, not from the state. The state doesn’t protect them, so it’s really fucked up.

By the end of the interview, França asked why Ravi had said he would prefer not to talk about his sexual identity. He answered that he had no restrictions on speaking about his sexuality once he understood it was part of him. However, he avoided reliving the situations he had suffered in the past due to his sexuality. He said he had been subjected to “a lot of trauma, bad memories, and a lot of mockery.” He argued that “if you’re talking about now, I don’t have any problem talking about it [sexual identity], but I know, when you ask me, you want to talk to me about my past,” and then added:

With other people in your place, I’ve done that in the past, and I finish the interview or this discussion, and when I leave, I don’t feel good. I have a very bad feeling for a few days, so I avoided it this time; I didn’t even go there. I have plans. I’m doing good. I’m organized, and I don’t want to get distracted for a few days because I went back to my life [since] some of the things, I mean ... things ... some of the things that happened or are happening to people like us are really, really fucked up.

<sup>4</sup>Ravi’s report is aligned with a series of complaints concerning the reality faced by the LGBTI community in Bangladesh. According to the country’s penal code, sexual relations considered “against the order of nature” can be punished with imprisonment. Furthermore, LGBTI people suffer from widespread discrimination, violence, and legal restrictions, since there are no specific laws of protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. In 2023, the UK government released a report indicating that the criminalization of same-sex sexual activity between men “is used to arrest, harass and extort individuals based on their sexual orientation, contributing to a climate of fear an repression for LGBTI individuals” (GOV.UK, 2023, para. 1). See Wolf (2013); Chaney et al. (2020).

It’s terrible ... it can make anyone feel depressed, unworthy, you know, unworthy. So why go back there?

The things that happened to Ravi were really “fucked up” and led to the disruption of his daily life and feelings of being unworthy. The demand to repeat his story over and over was perceived as something that led to suffering, devaluation, and discomfort, and did not fit with his goals of being valued as a person. His refusal to continue reliving those stories once his asylum was granted reveals the violent aspects of having to narrate and perform a specific type of pain as a refugee. Furthermore, he highlighted his fear of being identified by any Bangladeshi authority. At some point, he said they could come after his family or “come and kill” him in Brazil through government allies in the Bangladeshi community. Therefore, even as a refugee in Brazil, he revealed there was a time he was watching over his shoulder “all the time.” At that moment, it became clear that his reluctance to discuss his sexuality stemmed from the violent experiences imposed on him throughout his life. This became even more apparent when he expressed the impossibility of such persons to live their sexuality openly in Bangladesh. Even when they remain silent about their sexuality, LGBTI people live under the fear of extortion, of being outed, arrested, and murdered. For all these reasons, he finally encapsulates his decision to flee by succinctly stating, “I don’t have a future there.”<sup>5</sup>

During the interview, Ravi talked about his effort to relearn to speak English without a recognizable accent, improving his chances with potential Brazilian students, who sometimes showed prejudice towards non-white English speakers from the Global South. As a

<sup>5</sup>In his autoethnography, Nur Makbul (2023), a Bangladeshi LGBT scholar living in the United States, narrates a series of experiences strikingly close to those reported by Ravi, encompassing cases of threats, extortion, and even the peril of being killed due to his sexual orientation.



result, he reinvented himself linguistically: "I made a complete makeover of myself, so I trained myself in phonetics, I worked on my pronunciation, I improved my English." Such reinvention is an example of his emphasis on moving towards the future, even if rewriting accents and histories was necessary. For this Bangladeshi man, if the enunciation of his sexual identity and the violence he had suffered were fundamental in his asylum process, the constant revisiting of such a painful history tended to fix him in a past he would rather leave behind. Rejecting a situation he described as "emotionally draining," he also declined to dwell in the position of the "gay refugee" as victim.

Both Ariel's and Ravi's accounts reveal the intricate construction of a narrative of a person as a "refugee" and as "homosexual," established from the moment asylum is requested in the country, whether in Spain or Brazil. The request to talk can be experienced as violent by some asylum seekers because of the exhausting emotional effort that it demands, especially when they feel under suspicion of not telling the "truth." For queer migrants, the suspicious logic that governs the opposition between "true refugee" and "migrant" extends to verification of the "authentic queer refugee," as sustained by Murray (2016). Although this paper cannot offer a view of the legal system from the inside, some studies indicate how migrants must perform "credible testimonies," which will be judged by legal officers who carry their own racialized, gendered, and sexualized biases (Facundo, 2017; Torres, 2018).

Amid these moral economies, it is worth remembering that certain agents operate as "gatekeepers," including state agents, but also agents that can act in an official capacity alongside legal processes or relate very indirectly to them, such as nurses, doctors, and psychologists (Ticktin, 2006). In

Ariel's account, humanitarian agents provided essential legal and material support and helped alleviate the aftermaths of the violence suffered in his home country. Humanitarian aid was crucial for Ariel and Ravi to navigate the international protection system, and they were aware of that. However, recognizing humanitarian work does not exempt us from understanding how these entities forcibly operate within a discretionary asylum system—and often reinforce them, even if involuntarily.

To obtain social and legal recognition, asylum seekers are frequently evoked to narrate the violence suffered in their countries of origin, providing "testimony" of their suffering as they move through a moral economy of asylum that relies upon the politics of compassion (D. Fassin, 2012). This testimony is always a conventionally sanctioned narrative, which the asylum seeker needs to engage with in certain specific ways and in which the only possible position is that of "victimhood" (Malkki, 1995). However, this sanctioned narrative does not operate in the legal processes of eligibility alone: its logic spreads to journalists, researchers, and other social agents interested in listening to refugee narratives as histories of suffering and overcoming. As a result, the histories of refugees are only seen as legitimate if they correspond to expectations regarding particular forms of narrative aimed at the past, reinforcing the victimhood, the suffering, and the gratitude for being protected.

This reconstitution of the past aims to erase any ambiguities in search of a coherent narrative, which ends up fixing histories and persons to a specific temporality of remembrance and pain (Vianna & Facundo, 2015). For those identified as "queer refugees," it is also commonly expected that they present a narrative where they describe the violence suffered in their countries of origin, which



must be unequivocally linked to their sexual or gender identities and succeed by achieving an individualistic version of freedom in a new country. In such narratives, “queer refugees” are always inscribed in the temporality of the past: as Ravi said, “when you ask me, you want to talk to me about my past.”

## FINAL REMARKS

In this article, we examined the experiences of Ariel and Ravi as migrants, focusing mainly on their encounters with state violence during border management and in the process of the recognition of rights. Our analysis draws on the concept of bureaucratic violence to show how these aspects of migrant management are not isolated from each other. Quite the contrary, as the abundant literature on humanitarianism and migration has explored, the control and protection of migrants and refugees are mutually constituted through moral economies that produce “suspects” and “vulnerable” persons, who must be “controlled” or “protected” within the scope of the state.

This article aims to place the experiences of violence endured by queer migrants within this broader analytical framework, avoiding the oversimplification of their narratives by reducing them solely to that of sexuality. In some cases, a person’s sexuality can be a reason to flee, or it may lead to concerns about potential violations, especially in ambiguous places like detention centres. Moreover, sexuality can serve as grounds for seeking asylum; however, there are instances where queer migrants face similar violence to other migrants, irrespective of their sexuality. We argue that it is crucial to analyze queer migrant journeys without isolating the aspects related to sexuality from other violent situations they share with other migrants.

In the cases analyzed here, the police forces operate as bureaucratic agents in

controlling borders, and queer migrants may encounter similar forms of violence to that of other migrants in these contexts. Such phenomena expose a fundamental dimension of bureaucratic violence: physical violence per se, translated into different forms of detention encountered by migrants during their journeys. Regarding migration management, border regulation mechanisms extend through migrant detention centres, processing centres, airports, hotspots, seas, and beyond. In this complicated architecture, border enforcement takes place in the apparent action of state repression agents. Moreover, it is completed in limbos and grey areas where state and non-state agents operate according to the arbitrary logic that divides “migrants” from “refugees” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). When the roles of different actors in safeguarding the protection and rights of refugees are blurred, the practical effect is that migrants and the collectives fighting for them are usually situated in a “ping-pong match” that makes it hard for them to even identify who they should be talking in the first place. As argued by Hannah Arendt (1969) concerning the violence surrounding bureaucracy, the problem is that “there is nobody left with whom one could argue” (p. 80).

However, while violence at the borders is a crucial aspect of bureaucratic mechanisms perpetuating structural inequalities, the scope of bureaucratic violence in the refugee context extends beyond geographical borders. Once asylum seekers enter the national space, they are required to portray themselves as victims in administrative processes related to eligibility. The very state bureaucracy for asylum recognition is, to a certain degree, violent because it forces migrants to perform their stories for specialists who ultimately have the power to define their fates through the legitimation, or dele-

gitimation, of their narratives. In such scenarios, queer asylum seekers have to not only convincingly articulate the authenticity of their sexual identities but also demonstrate that the violence they endured because of these identities justifies international protection. In cases where a person's sexual identity is linked to shame or humiliation, the process of proving that oneself as an "authentic LGBTI refugee" during administrative procedures can itself be a form of violence, albeit one that is often more intangible. The conceptual framework of bureaucratic violence enables us to connect these different types of violence experienced by queer migrants, ranging from the obvious violence at borders to the more subtle violence that occurs during recognition processes.

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