

Book Review

Camminga, B. *Transgender Refugees and the Imagined South Africa*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 301 pages.

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Transgender Refugees and the Imagined South Africa explores the growing issue of ‘gender refugees,’ refugees fleeing violence and persecution because they are perceived to have a gender identity and/or gender expression that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. These refugees might be described as ‘transgender’ by those in the Global North, but as Camminga points out, this may not be a descriptor with which gender refugees necessarily identify. In recent years, gender refugees have emerged as a distinct group of asylum-seekers in South Africa. This book examines how South African policy established the country as a place of imagined possibilities for African gender refugees. From there, it explores the systemic barriers experienced by those who choose to migrate to South Africa in order to actualize these possibilities. To this end, Camminga analyzes the experiences of twenty Black African gender refugees who arrived in South Africa after 2000. Fourteen of these stories were collected through life story interviews. The stories of six gender refugees that had been previously collected and archived by South African LGBT groups are also included. The book received an honourable mention for the 2019 Ruth Benedict Prize, an annual prize awarded by the Association for Queer Anthropology to an outstanding single-author ethnographic monograph.

South Africa’s post-Apartheid Constitution extends rights not just to its citizens, but to all people within its borders. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of ‘sexual orientation,’ which has been interpreted not just to mean sexuality but could also apply to any number of possible non-normative gender expressions. The controversy surrounding the inclusion of ‘sexual orientation’ in the Constitution served to spread LGBT human rights discourse around the continent. This development was amplified by news media outlets across Africa

and fostered a pan-African association between South Africa and LGBT rights. Camminga illustrates how this facilitated the migration and adoption of language surrounding 'LGBT,' and in particular, helped to spread the identity categories of 'lesbian,' 'gay,' 'bisexual,' and 'transgender' across Africa. The establishment of the South African Refugees Act in 1998 made asylum a possibility for those who were being persecuted on the basis of their gender identity or sexual orientation. For these reasons, South Africa has become established in the minds of gender non-conforming Africans as a place of possibility and freedom.

While the book provides an overview of theoretical conceptions of gender and sexuality, including feminist theory, queer theory, and trans theory, the author emphasizes that this work is generally "routed/routed in the Global North" (7). While acknowledging that "subaltern transgender experiences" (8) may be framed through Northern discourses, the author incorporates a genealogy of the term 'transgender' (Stryker 2006) that is specific to South Africa. They explore how these concepts are introduced through interactions with the Global North, are experienced subjectively by locals, and are imbued with new, localized meaning. For Camminga, this raises questions about the political economy of discourses based in the Global North and the identity movements that evolve from them.

Throughout the book, Camminga illustrates the hegemony of systems of power and control experienced by gender refugees, employing Prosser's (1998) notion of literal and embodied migration to demonstrate how gender refugees move across both geopolitical and gender borders. These socially constructed boundaries are both politically reinforced and socially reproduced. Through interview excerpts, Camminga demonstrates how gender refugees are marginalized in their countries of origin. Highly visible to others in their transgression of gender norms, they struggle to survive amidst ostracization and threats of violence—what Arendt (1962) calls a state of 'rightlessness.' In reaction to this violence, gender refugees flee their countries of origin and make their way to South Africa. These refugees migrate with the expectation that they are headed to a place of acceptance and recognition, where they might be able to reinstate their status as human beings. This is what Camminga calls 'the imagined South Africa.'

The book's most valuable contribution is how it masterfully employs ethnographic evidence to illustrate the gap between legislated rights and the bureaucratic and social mechanisms that perpetuate the marginalization of gender

refugees. Camminga notes that the South African asylum system is problematic for all asylum seekers, but gender refugees in particular experience exacerbated challenges. The very mechanics of the asylum system perpetuate the inflexible gender binary that gender refugees seek to escape. Furthermore, the lack of support for new gender refugees means that they are almost always unable to evade the communities of their countries of origin, even in South Africa. The asylum system requires refugees to renew their paperwork four to twelve times a year, for as long as they remain in the system. Refugees are required to visit the office at the same time as others from their country of origin, and once there must queue according to gender. This is inherently problematic for gender refugees. Exposing themselves as transgender to others from their country of origin can be dangerous, while hiding one's transness in order to safely navigate the queue might potentially invalidate one's claim as a gender refugee in the eyes of administrators.

Only participants who bypass the asylum system through illicit means, or who are able to assimilate to binary gender categories, are able to live in a way that confers acceptance and humanity. The incongruity between legislative protections and the bureaucratic mechanisms that attempt to mete out these protections leads to adverse consequences for gender refugees.

While some gender refugees find ways to survive in such a system, this survival is far from what was imagined. Of those mentioned by Camminga, five employed illicit strategies of subterfuge in order to avoid the asylum system; two were eventually resettled outside of South Africa, while one is in the process of applying for resettlement; one obtained refugee papers and fled to another country; one fell out of the asylum system and is now considered by the state to be 'illegal'; one has moved to the United States, having obtained refugee status there; two remain in the asylum system well beyond the 18-month period stipulated by the state; and one has left the country and returned to their country of origin, a place they originally left due to threats of violence. Only three have been able to access steady employment and relative safety, which they largely attribute to their ability to 'pass' as gender-normative.

Camminga deftly illustrates the history of state mechanisms of control for gender transgression in South Africa, as well as the history of the LGBT movement in South Africa and its pan-African application. They apply work by theorists from the Global North, while critiquing the limits of these theories in relation to African transgender phenomena. They use the experiences of African gender refugees to illustrate how supposedly progressive state policies

are rendered ineffective through problematic bureaucratic methods, leading to the continued marginalization of those who are most vulnerable. This ethnography is a must-read for queer anthropologists, those who study gender, and those interested in the role that states play in the marginalization of vulnerable communities.

Note

¹ The author uses they/them pronouns.

References

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