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From Borders to Bodies: "Circlusion" and Desires Beyond Credibility in Queer Asylum

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ABSTRACT

Borders and boundaries have long served as powerful metaphors in migration and queer studies, yet they risk reproducing heteronormative paradigms that equate (border) penetration with power, and movement with violation. Drawing on interviews from research with queer refugees in Berlin and Copenhagen, this article foregrounds bodies, sexual desires and pleasures, dimensions often marginalized within queer asylum scholarship. Through two empirical vignettes, the analysis mobilizes "circlusion," a concept developed as a counterpart to penetration, as a conceptual alternative for examining queer migration as an embodied process of opening rather than intrusion. Rather than displacing existing analyses of violence, surveillance, and credibility, the article situates circlusion as an analytical lens that brings desire and pleasure into view within the asylum contexts. Focusing on the lived, sexual experiences of Joshua and Khaled, the article shows how queer refugees can be understood not only as objects of control but also as agents of pleasure, relation, and subversion. By centering desires beyond credibility, this contribution opens space for more nuanced engagements with pleasure, agency, and embodiment in queer asylum research, without reducing queer refugees to either victims or icons of resistance.

KEYWORDS

Queer migration; circlusion; desire; pleasure; body; credibility; queer asylum

Introduction

The transnational movement of people is often analyzed through the lens of borders and boundaries. As moving subjects, people will cross, or attempt to cross, geopolitical borders. Nation-states have an interest in regulating who can enter their territory, and therefore, visa requirements, residence permit rules, and border checkpoints police who can enter and be in a country "legally." The term "border orientation" describes this fixation of states "to control the terms of penetration of its national borders" (Simmons & Kenwick, 2022, p. 853). Borders and boundaries are also often invoked *metaphorically* in analyses of movement across categories of identity and belonging. Multiple processes of inclusion and exclusion, often along racialized lines, demarcate

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who remains a "foreigner," who is positioned as an "expat," and who is able to "integrate" (El-Tayeb, 2011; Haritaworn, 2015; Tudor, 2017). In this article, I argue that researching literal and metaphorical border crossings is not a neutral endeavor. It is infused with anxieties about national purity, racialized threats, and bodily intrusion. The state's "border orientation" (Simmons & Kenwick, 2022), its obsession with regulating who and what can pass, mirrors broader heteronormative narratives that equate penetration with power and vulnerability with passivity. The state wants to be in control of who enters and not be passively "invaded."

Such reiteration of border thinking can also be observed in queer migration and asylum studies, which frequently conceptualize queer migration as "border crossings" (Cantú, 2009; Luibhéid & Cantú, 2005). These studies foreground literal border crossings, for instance, through analyses of the "sexual politics of border control" (Holzberg et al., 2021), as well as metaphorical borders and boundary-making that surround inclusion and exclusion within the notion of queerness (e.g., Kehl, 2024). Even critical deployments of border metaphors risk reproducing the very logics they seek to trouble: logics of exclusion, penetration, and containment.

While influential concepts such as Anza'sldúa (1987) "borderlands" have illuminated the hybridity and transgression inherent in living at the margins, my aim with this article is to move beyond the (metaphor of the) border as the primary analytic. I move from borders to bodies as I explore queer refugees' experiences. To do so, I propose utilizing the concept of "circlusion" (Adamczak, 2016). As a counterpart to penetration, circlusion centers on the active act of enclosing rather than penetrating. Throughout this article, penetration operates across multiple registers that are analytically related yet not identical. In the context of borders and migration governance, penetration functions as a metaphor of intrusion, through which the nation-state imagines itself as a bounded body threatened by unwanted entry. Within sexual discourse, penetration is often framed as an active, heteronormative, and racialized practice that unevenly assigns agency. These meanings intersect in queer asylum contexts, where racialized queer bodies are imagined as both sexually excessive and politically invasive. Circlusion is not proposed to deny these meanings, but to offer a different analytic vantage point. Rather than focusing on moments of crossing or intrusion, circlusion foregrounds processes of opening, enclosing, and relational engagement. This shift redirects attention from whether bodies are permitted to enter territories or narratives of credibility to how queer refugees negotiate desire and pleasure beyond metaphors of penetration.

By utilizing circlusion, I reimagine the queer asylum narratives in this article not as acts of intrusion but as a process of opening—both in relation to borders and bodies. Therewith, I foreground embodied desire and corporeal agency rather than spatial logics of crossing. This reframing invites inquiry

into how queer refugees envision opening themselves and their bodies in their cities of refuge, and how host societies may resist such openness amid racialized anxieties about migration. Circlusion is not proposed as a replacement for border(lands) frameworks, but as a supplemental analytic that is particularly productive when research questions concern desire, pleasure, and relational opening rather than sovereign exclusion.

The article explores the complexities surrounding sexual desire and corporeal materiality when queer bodies move and enter nations and each other. I reexamine empirical material gathered as part of my research with queer refugees in Berlin and Copenhagen. The article focuses specifically on queer refugees whose experiences are shaped by asylum systems that prioritize credibility and narratives of suffering. By centering two of my interview partners, whom I call Joshua and Khaled here, the analysis demonstrates how circlusion illuminates aspects of queer refugees' lives that are often minimized within asylum contexts. Rather than tracing trajectories of identities, pain, or suffering, I focus on the expressions of desire, sexual fantasies, and pleasure—elements largely marginalized in queer asylum scholarship (for an exception, see Altay, 2024a). Embracing both the vulnerabilities and pleasures of queer bodies in motion opens new avenues for understanding the intersections of sexuality, migration, and racialization.

The article is structured as follows: First, I explore the current state of the art of queer asylum scholarship in Europe, highlighting how its focus on identity and credibility often overlooks the embodied dimensions of sex and pleasure. I then propose a theoretical framework centered on circlusion as an alternative to the pervasive "heteronormative penetration paradigm" (Puar, 2007, p. 47). After presenting my methods and material, I delve into two empirical vignettes from my research. These narratives show how sexual desires and embodied agency complicate state-sanctioned narratives of legibility and legitimacy, demonstrating the analytical value of circlusion for queer asylum research.

State of the art: Opening bodies

Bodies often receive surprisingly little attention in research on queer subjects' transnational movements, with identities frequently taking precedence. This is particularly evident in the growing body of European queer asylum research. While queer migration studies broadly address the diverse movements and experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals across borders, queer asylum studies focus on the legal, social, and political processes surrounding claims for international protection based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Danisi et al., 2021). Its institutional focus on legal frameworks and credibility assessments has narrowed its analytical lens, leading to an overemphasis on narratives of pain, trauma, and identity legibility, and a corresponding neglect

of desires and pleasure. This article addresses this conceptual and empirical gap within queer asylum studies.

Scholarship on refugee status determination has revealed the complexities of becoming "credibly queer" to immigration authorities (Danisi et al., 2021; Dustin & Ferreira, 2021; Giametta, 2017; Mole, 2021). This includes navigating a system that has shifted from understanding sexual orientation as behavior (Mole, 2021) to evaluating the genuineness of a "queer identity," which often demands a linear and stable narrative (D. A. B. Murray, 2014; Schröder, 2023b; Shakhsari, 2014). This emphasis privileges narratives of suffering over pleasure or agency (Saleh, 2020). Research further shows that it can be a strategic choice what to disclose to immigration authorities, in an attempt to appear credible in the "colonial surveillance" they conduct (Lunau & Schröder, 2025). Such demands reinforce Western-centric understandings of sexuality, contributing to what Ammaturo (2015) describes as a "Pink Agenda" that constructs a homonationalist European sexual citizenship, differentiating a "queer-friendly West" from other regions. This becomes a new form of bordering practice to exclude racialized queer individuals.

While this scholarship has powerfully exposed the pitfalls and violence of asylum assessment, it has also drawn scholarly attention away from embodied dimensions of queer refugees' lives. Although refugee determination processes often exclude discussions of specific sexual practices for ethical reasons, research on queer refugees must not erase these desires. Instead, it is crucial to recognize queer refugees not solely as vulnerable or suffering subjects (Saleh, 2020), but also as individuals with agency, desires, and pleasures.

Queer asylum research has further demonstrated how sexuality functions as a bordering practice, in which queer subjects are violently objectified by national border regimes (Holzberg et al., 2021). In colonial continuity, this is especially the case for refugees who are racialized in particular ways (Lee, 2018). Haritaworn's (2015) analysis of queer inclusion and exclusion in Berlin shows how racialization undermines the credibility of queer people of color. Multiple studies have pointed out the violent consequences of this in the asylum system, when, for example, Black lesbians are not believed to be "true" lesbians and therefore rejected in their claims of asylum (Tschalaer, 2020b).

When bodies appear in migration scholarship, it is thus frequently framed by their interaction with the migration regime (e.g. Häkli & Kallio, 2021) or through processes of its racialization (e.g., Altay, 2024b; Tschalaer, 2020a, 2020b). However, important work, such as the edited volume by Camminga and Marnell (2022), implicitly or explicitly touches upon embodied experiences of desires beyond the scope of asylum claims. Similarly, earlier scholarship on gender and sexuality in non-"Western" contexts, such as explored by Murray and Roscoe (1998) has long illuminated diverse understandings of desire and embodiment that diverge from "Western" norms. Critical queer of

color and diaspora studies have further reshaped our understanding of embodiment and desire. For instance, Gopinath (2018) illuminates how queer diasporic bodies embody histories of violence and desire, challenging national and colonial narratives.

Following Gorman-Murray (2007), who proposes to rethink queer migration through the body, "the body is not only a scale—it is the site of sexual identity-formation and the vector of movement" (Gorman-Murray, 2007, p. 106). Rather than studying scales such as "the rural" and "the urban" in processes of so-called "coming out," taking the body as the scale of movement opens further possibilities of destabilizing taken-for-granted meanings. Following flows of desires allows a "more fluid understanding of queer migration" (Gorman-Murray, 2007, p. 115).

The preceding section has mapped how academic scholarship on queer asylum, by focusing predominantly on asylum assessment practices, has often disciplined bodies through identity-based frameworks, pain-centered narratives, and normative scripts of legibility. This has thereby limited attention to desire, and pleasure within queer refugees' lives. It is this conceptual and empirical gap within queer asylum research that this article proposes to address through a different conceptual tool: Circlusion.

Beyond identities and penetration: Theorising circlusion

Merging "corporeal feminism" (Grosz, 1994) with queer theory, I approach bodies as processes of embodiment in which social, cultural, and historical norms are inscribed (Butler, 1988). Bodies and their sexualities, what counts as "good" and "bad" sex, are political categories defined through power (Rubin, 2006 [1984]). Importantly, it is not merely within laws and written guidelines that sexual politics are negotiated; they are lived struggles in sexual interactions between bodies.

The "heteronormative penetration paradigms" (Puar, 2007, p. 47) of so-called "Western" societies are intimately connected to patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and white supremacy. Informed by patriarchy, penetration is closely linked to power: The penetrating subject is usually perceived as the active, controlling part with power, while the penetrated is often rendered passive or receptive (Heaney, 2024). Moreover, penetration is connected to notions of cisness (ibid.) and usually male-connoted; the word penetration, in a way, invokes the penis of a cis man (Preciado, 2018). This is even though penetration does not—or should not—only refer to penis-in-vagina sex, but can also refer to fingers, dildos, or other objects penetrating the asshole or elsewhere (Puar, 2007; Rubin, 2006).

Penetration also functions metaphorically in interconnected ways. First, it operates as a metaphor of intrusion, reflecting the nation's anxiety about racialized "foreign" bodies penetrating its borders. Massey (1994) critiques

a "common association between penetrability and vulnerability. For it is this kind of association which makes invasion by newcomers so threatening" (Massey, 1994, p. 155). Here, she connects penetration and "foreigners" entering nations, crossing borders. Penetration here is an active act, conceptualized as threatening. Second, penetration is employed as a metaphor of degradation that reinforces processes of racialization. This has been exemplified by Jasbir K. Puar's (2007) analysis of the use of penetration in post-9/11 discourses to dehumanize certain populations. Puar brings the example of "a turbaned caricature of Osama bin Laden being anally penetrated by the Empire State Building" (Puar, 2007, p. 37) circulating in New York City only days after 9/11. Penetration is used here as a metaphor for degradation, as a threat. It is also a metaphor of intrusion that carries and further enhances processes of racialization (Puar, 2007).

Racialization is a key component in constructions of power around penetration, and sexual politics more broadly (Collins, 2004). Research on sexual positioning discourses highlights how penetration is mobilized within masculine boundary work, such as "bottom-shaming" among Black gay men (Winder, 2023). Asian gay masculinities in America have been complicated through the concept of "bottomhood," which challenges the passivity of anal receptivity and its Oriental underpinnings (Nguyen, 2014). Outside "Western" context, penetration may be conceptualized quite differently. In Kenya, for instance, "rather than appear passive, men's anal receptiveness was often imagined as assertive, active, and agentive" (Meiu, 2020, p. 594). Nzegwu (2011) proposes "osunality" as African eroticism or sensuality challenging phallocentric notions of pleasure. Through the image of a "devouring vagina," Nzegwu (2011) writes out the "dangerously agentive power of feminine sexuality, its ability to engulf the penis, to make it disappear" (Meiu, 2020, p. 595). In his work on "diaper discourses" in Kenya, appearing as underlayers of citizenship, Meiu (2020) thinks this further and proposes that the anus can be perceived as "devouring" in a similar manner. These examples provide crucial conceptual alternatives that underpin the need for concepts such as circlusion to move beyond Western-centric penetration paradigms. These co-existing meanings of penetration point to the messy nature of this seemingly straightforward conceptualization. In the context of the article, which focuses on moving queers, it is important to point to these localized and shifting understandings, revealing that the queer refugees in this study might be confronted with different conceptualizations as they move. Their queer bodies are thus rendered hybrid and fluid, in a state of transgression (Anzaldúa, 1987).

As an alternative to the ambivalence of penetration, I propose circlusion as a productive analytical perspective. Circlusion was coined by Bini Adamczak (2016), who was trying to find new ways of thinking and speaking about sex that decenter penetration. This is needed as, argued above, penetration is inseparable from the misery of the heteronormative imaginary. Adamczak

proposed the term in the feminist German *Missy Magazine* (Adamczak, 2016). Translating the essay into English together with Sophie Lewis (see Lewis & Adamczak, 2022) made the concept of circlusion and its idea available to an audience beyond Germany and gained wider attention.

The term circlusion "refers to the same physical process, but from the opposite perspective. Penetration means pushing something – a shaft or a nipple – *into* som ething else – a ring or a tube. Circlusion means pushing something – a ring or a tube – *onto* something else – a nipple of a shat. The ring and the tube are rendered active" (Lewis & Adamczak, 2022, n.p.). Circlusion thus allows one to change the focus point while still gazing at the same process. Through the notion of circlusion, it is not the dildo that is active in penetrating, for instance, the asshole, but the asshole is actively letting in the dildo, or whichever other object or body part. Circlusion thus allows us to reimagine agency. Writing on being (or becoming) a *Power Bottom*, Evan Hugo Tepest (2023) utilizes circlusion to explore agency and power plays in queer*lesbian sex. The person acting as the "bottom," the one being penetrated, is reimagined as opening to enclose something or someone and thus regains power and agency in the sexual act.

Circlusion thus offers a conceptual lens for analyzing active process of opening, enclosing, and receiving in both sexual and metaphorical contexts. Crucially, while circlusion allows me to foreground agency and pleasure, it does not negate the profound violence and dehumanization inherent in border regimes. Rather, by centering the body's capacities for active opening and desire, circlusion allows us to analyze how queer refugees assert their humanity and agency in the face of such violence. This reorientation helps us see how pleasure and desire are not the omission of pain, but often radical acts of self-determination within a violent context.

In this article, I utilize circlusion as an analytical lens, allowing me to focus on the desires and bodies of those seeking refuge in "Western" capitals (Berlin and Copenhagen). It allows a refocusing on the bodies of the migrating, moving queers and their desires, rather than the metaphorical and geopolitical borders they may be crossing. In the remainder of this article, I follow the desires of two queer refugees that I interviewed, analyzing their seeking pleasure through the notion of circlusion. Before moving into the analysis, I briefly present my methods and materials.

Materials and methods

The material this article draws on was collected between summer 2022 and summer 2023 as part of my PhD project *Beyond Queer Refuge. Experiences of Support from Berlin and Copenhagen* (Schröder, 2025a), which is situated within feminist and queer methodologies (Browne & Nash, 2010). This means I have committed myself to the effort of "continually learning to let

go of borders: between theory and data, researcher and researched, hetero and homo, right and wrong" (Heckert, 2010, p. 42). I conducted semi-structured interviews with 34 refugees, volunteers, and employees in queer refugee support in Berlin and Copenhagen. Having been a volunteer at a Danish support organization for queer refugees for several years before starting my research, I entered "the field" with a lot of immersed knowledge and prior contacts with professionals, as well as friendships with people I ended up interviewing. My own position as a white, queer, female, young researcher who had moved from Germany to Denmark influenced how these encounters were established. It also shaped my perception of workshops, demonstrations, pride parades, and parties that I attended during my research. Fieldnotes from these events and the transcripts of the interviews, alongside publications of support groups, left me with a big textual archive of queer refugees' experiences of support in Berlin and Copenhagen. The material suggested the limits of border metaphors in capturing queer refugees' lived experiences. As one example, the German organization Women in Exile (2022) has declared the goal of *Breaking Borders to Build Bridges*. The Danish organization LGBT Asylum (2023) describes the process of their members building a home in Denmark *Like Rooting in Quicksand*.

The interview guide included questions about life in the country of asylum, living in asylum accommodation, participating in queer refugee support groups, attending events such as pride parades, visiting spaces like queer bars, and using dating apps. Most conversations unfolded in ways I had not expected, and the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to follow my interview partners into the stories they wanted to share. Rereading my material, I realized the presence of pleasures and desires articulated by my refugee interview partners, which I had not yet given enough attention to. Though their desired sexual practices are often the main reason for seeking asylum, sex takes surprisingly little space within queer asylum scholarship. I have been guilty of this myself. While carving out the difficulties connected to being trans, inter or non-binary in Berlin, and being "particularly vulnerable" (Schröder, 2025b), even when writing about "intimate exchanges" the pleasures around sex did not take up space.

"As a theory of sexuality, queer analysis must be able to talk about sex and, above all, must be able to talk about queer sex" (Evans, 2019, p. 113). Foregrounding sexuality and explicitly "talking about sex" generated crucial new insights by disrupting the predominant focus on pain and trauma in queer asylum narratives. It alters the interpretation of the material by revealing that queer refugees are not merely passive recipients of state policies or victims of persecution, but active agents negotiating complex, embodied, and often pleasurable lives. Therefore, in this article, I give space to the desires and pleasures shared with me, focusing on the interviews I conducted with two queer refugees whom I call Joshua and Khaled here. To ensure their

anonymity, their names have been changed, and I refrain from stating their countries of origin. This deliberate choice to focus on two in-depth vignettes enables a rich, nuanced, and theoretically generative analysis of complex embodied experiences that might be lost in broader quantitative or more diffuse qualitative studies. While the two vignettes draw on specific interviews, the interpretation is informed by the broader textual archive and my immersive knowledge, enabling a holistic understanding of the participants' worlds.

These two cases were selected because they vividly illustrate the intersection of desire, sexuality, and migration, providing particularly fertile ground for exploring the concept of circlusion in practice. I had known both of my interview partners for some time before meeting them for the interview, which allowed the content to become rather personal. Both interviews challenged the setting I had set up for the interview; in daring me to ask things I would usually not ask (Khaled) and merging an academic interview with online dating (Joshua). The material, particularly the unexpected revelations of desires and pleasures, was retrospectively reanalyzed and interpreted, considering the concept of circlusion to highlight these often-overlooked dimensions. This reanalysis was conducted through a thematic approach, identifying key themes such as dating, sex, pleasure, and desires, to gain insights related to the body and agency.

I do not seek to make a spectacle of Joshua's and Khaled's desires or further speak into the fetishization of the sexuality of "the other." In contemporary sex cultures, the wish to penetrate and fuck each other is, honestly, rather mundane. As Gayle Rubin (2006) has shown, the lines—the borders—between good sex and bad sex are continuously being renegotiated. While "pig sexualities" (Florêncio, 2020) or "bears" (McGlynn, 2024) are expressions of masculine sexual desires that might more easily spark controversies, a gay man being active on Grindr (Joshua) is anything but a surprise. We could rather be surprised by how little space hooking up and the culture around it takes in the study of those migrants and refugees who are queer (As an exception to the rule, Andrew Shield (2019) analyses the experiences of *Immigrants on Grindr*).

Maybe this lack of engagement with sex, desires, and pleasures is rooted in a fear of contesting or at least complexifying the figure of the queer refugee, as not only "queer lover" (Haritaworn, 2015) that should be protected by the nation, but always also "other" – as all of us, multiple, complex, ever-changing. Moreover, analyzing the desires of racialized men as a white woman involves high ethical risks. There is a danger of perpetuating colonial continuity if I portray their desires as extraordinary. But I believe there is also a danger in further victimizing queer refugees if they never appear as agents carrying desires, seeking pleasures in multiple ways. As my interview partners did not share their desires with me in private, but within the formalized setting of an interview, a recorder between us, I am convinced it is essential to give some attention to these desires. They wanted these things to take up space, so ignoring them would feel like writing them out of their everyday lives. In the

following analysis, I foreground the sexual pleasures and desires of two queer refugees whom I introduce along the way.

Vignette 1: Joshua and the pleasure of being a "Grindr slut"

> *According to Joshua, there is no gay life in the small city where he is staying, and Grindr shows him people who are 36 km away. When I ask him how much time he has for our meeting, he says he is not stressed and that the only reason he would have to leave would be because of a hookup. Throughout our conversation, both during dinner and the more formal setting of the interview, Joshua is active on Grindr, receiving messages and answering. During dinner, he shows me his phone, where a white man had just sent him some very explicit pictures of his ass. Joshua says: "You see, there is always some shame with being a bottom. The stereotypes that go with it. This man had said he is a top in his profile, but then sent the pictures of his ass, with a good view on the anus, and asked: Do you want to fuck me?"* (author's fieldnotes, June 2022)

Joshua is a cis gay man who is racialized as Black. He grew up in an orthodox Christian community in a country in Southern Africa. Before coming to Europe, he relocated to South Africa, the first country in which he could try out and follow his queer desires. His *becoming* gay in South Africa troubles the linear movement that is often expected in queer refugees' journeys, where they can only become "out and proud" in a capital in the so-called Global North (Camminga & Marnell, 2022), and need to perform "coming out of the closet" to become legible (Schröder, 2023a). While I started the interview with the usual questions—when he received asylum, if his life has changed since, and what (if any) queer spaces he is frequenting, Grindr continues to pop up—both as literal messages on Joshua's phone, as well as during our conversation. After the first half hour of the interview, Joshua says he needs to drink some more tea, and when I offer to also take a break, he declines but says:

> Joshua: "*I might open Grindr from time to time [laughs]. It's a bad habit*."

How present Grindr is in our conversation (and on Joshua's phone, which he keeps checking) also becomes visible when I come to the question regarding the role of dating apps in my interview partner's everyday lives, which I usually ask in the interviews.

> Rieke: "*We already talked a lot about dating apps, and you are also kind of on it. Is it-*"
>
> Joshua: "*I hope you don't find it disturbing?*"
>
> Rieke: "*[laughs] I'm impressed because, like, I can't multitask for the love of God*."

Impressed I was, indeed. Joshua did not lose a beat in answering my questions, even when they were about (supposedly) heavy topics, such as

his reasoning for seeking asylum and his experiences with fetishism and racism. He shared emotional stories with me while at the same time receiving explicit messages and photos on his phone. Here, my own understandings and expectations about how to do research, how to conduct an academic interview and how to go about online dating were queered by Joshua. Instead of being the traumatized queer refugee the system would expect (Saleh, 2020), pleasure is central to Joshua's everyday life, and also during the time of our interview.

> Joshua: "*[On Grindr] for me, it's been positive, I guess. Not racism in a bad way. More like you could almost say fetishised. . . . Mostly it's because they've heard stories about having huge penises, of being hung like horses . . . So they're just looking for a huge penis.*"

When asking him about his experiences as a Black man on Grindr, Joshua shares that he is perceived to be more masculine due to being Black. He says he does not mind this prejudice, as it ensures many men want to hook up with him. This perception, while framed by Joshua as positive, reflects a pervasive racialized sexual fetishization rooted in anti-Blackness, where Black men are often subjected to hypersexualised and hypermasculinised tropes in queer spaces (Winder, 2023). While Joshua exhibits agency in navigating these desires, his experiences of being wanted for his Blackness, particularly in relation to perceived hypermasculinity, operate within a historically constructed global system of beliefs about Black sexuality. As Winder (2023) argues, Black masculinity is both created and policed within gay communities, where hypermasculinity can be both celebrated and a site of "bottom-shaming." This dynamic reveals how Black men's experiences in gay communities can be simultaneously empowering and reinforcing of racial hierarchies. Because of "the pleasure of stereotype" (Walcott, 2019, p. 73), sometimes Black men reinforce racist tropes, to use them for their own advantage as part of their "black cumjoy" (Walcott, 2019).

Here, circlusion offers a powerful lens to understand Joshua's desires. Rather than passively receiving racialized fetishization of merely performing a "credible" identity, Joshua actively encloses and re-channels these desires toward his own pleasure. He transforms what could be a site of racial objectification into a space of active self-determination, thereby re-imagining agency not through outward subversion but through an embodied, internal embrace of desire. This move highlights how circlusion enables a conceptual shift from narratives centered on pain and trauma, often accompanying discussions of racialized experiences, toward an affirmation of pleasure and desire as central to the lived realities of queer refugees. His willingness to "let in" the desires of others, on his own terms, demonstrates agency that transcends the need to present a "respectable" or predefined queer identity within or outside the asylum system.

Joshua shares with me his impression that being "the bottom," the one being penetrated, carries some shame within the gay community. Many men he writes with will only "come out" as bottom in a direct message, even though they state they are "top" on their profiles. Complicating these binaries, many gay men are not either a bottom or a top but are interested in switching and trying out different positions—receiving and giving pleasure in various ways. By sending an explicit picture of his anus, the white man on Grindr signifies that he is ready to open up and let Joshua in. Thinking with circlusion allows us to reimagine agency, both of the white man, but also of Joshua, who is actively seeking pleasure, even (or especially?) during the time of my interview with him.

Through circlusion, I conceptualize this interaction not as a simple reversal of power, but as a dynamic where Joshua actively encloses the offered submission, transforming it into a moment of mutual, albeit racialized, pleasure. His agency emerges not from a fixed identity, but from his embodied practice of navigating and responding to desires, actively shaping the sexual encounter from a position of desired receptivity. This moves beyond merely observing subversive strategies of identity performance, emphasizing instead the embodied and relational negotiation of desires that defy simplistic categorizations of "top," "bottom," "agent," or "victim." Online dating experiences are not only narrated by Joshua but actively created while we speak. Joshua acknowledges this in ending our interview by saying:

Joshua: "*I'm sorry. I've just been a Grindr slut the entire time.*"

I bring this vignette of interviewing Joshua to illuminate how much the figure of the suffering queer refugee (Saleh, 2020) had (and still has) also spilt into the way I was approaching and conducting my research. I was ready to listen to stories around pain and trauma, and less prepared to hear about sexual desires and being shown nudes, meeting a "*Grindr slut*." Besides being startled by the explicit images that Joshua shared with me during our interview, the nudes and Joshua's candor opened up for pleasures and the seeking of desires. The vignette of Joshua vividly demonstrates how circlusion offers a reframing of agency for queer refugees. It allowed me, as the researcher, to recognize the profound significance of Joshua's sexual desires and practices. Instead of focusing on what constitutes a "genuine" queer refugee identity, Joshua's story shows that bodies, their pleasures, and practices are central to queer refugees' everyday lives. While not being relevant to their credibility, they are relevant to trying to grasp the complexity of his everyday, in which desire is co-constituted by Joshua's body and his swiping, in which he mediates the complexities of racial narratives.

Vignette II: Khaled and "being a smart whore"

At the time of the interview, Khaled and I had known each other for some years, as we were both engaged in a Danish queer refugee support group. Khaled is a cis bisexual man from the Middle East, who grew up Muslim and received asylum a decade before the interview took place. While following the semi-structured interview guideline (more or less), I keep being surprised by where Khaled takes us with his stories. True to *The Importance of Being Bitchy* (Cohen-Vrignaud & Reader, 2024), both of us seek pleasure by sharing anecdotes and gossip, joking around with each other. As our conversation unfolds, Khaled shares his difficulties in landing in Denmark, finding true (Danish) friends, and building meaningful relationships. His many years in Denmark have made Khaled critical and cynical toward "*the Danish Community: Sex and eating flæskesteg*." Flæskesteg, the Danish version of roast pork, is the only thing Khaled believes Danish people have as "culture." Khaled rejects any demand to integrate into this "community" and is critical of other refugees who become too engaged with these values.

> Khaled: "*They thought this is what integration is: Just being a sex object and worshipping penises*."

While Khaled is very critical of how much space sex takes within the queer community in Denmark, the topic of sex also ends up taking considerable space during our interview. Stating "*I'm very terrible at dating*," Khaled says he does not want to date Danish people anymore, due to the numerous racist experiences he had while dating and hooking up. He is annoyed with people basing their confidence and gay validity on the number of hookups they are having. But he is not against casual sex.

> Khaled: "*Be a whore, but be a smart whore*."

As a person of color and a refugee from the Middle East, Khaled's sexuality—or rather, what it supposedly signifies—is oftentimes presented as a threat in need of management within the broader discourse of Denmark, and Europe more generally (El-Tayeb, 2012; Haritaworn, 2015; Sweetapple, 2018; Tschalaer, 2020a; Yurdakul & Korteweg, 2021). Nevertheless, Khaled describes his desires as unbounded by those societal constraints. When I tell him we are getting toward the end of the interview, Khaled seems to be unsatisfied with what we have been talking about so far, and he tells me:

> Khaled: "*You can ask whatever. Take a chance. Feel different things, different aspects you're curious about, that you're not aware of. Edgy things. Things you're not allowed to talk about usually. You're welcome to do so*."

My—rather shy—answer to this invitation is asking Khaled if he can share a little more about the feelings he has connected to his sexuality. Answering

this, he describes in more detail the struggle he has with being bisexual and not being able to fit into the queer imaginary ("*You have to fit a very specific image of being gay*."). This brings him to talk more about his gender expression and where he sees himself on the gender spectrum. The way he expresses and understands his gender is closely connected to Khaled and mirrored in his sexual practices.

> Khaled: "*I don't want to be feminine. I don't want to be too masculine. I just want to be me. . . . But trying to find this balance in between two things is so complicated and so difficult. If you want to bottom with a guy, I feel like it's so difficult for me to be submissive. Even if I want to bottom with a guy, I'm just going to tell him: Shut the fuck up. I will take control. You can try to put me under control a little bit, I will answer to you. You can do whatever you want, but in the end, it's my choice what I want to do. And the same thing with the female.*"

Khaled clearly reimagines agency within bottoming. Analyzing this with circlusion allows to reorient understandings of power dynamics, especially salient for refugees who often inhabit liminal spaces of control and dislocation. The analytical surplus of circlusion here lies in its ability to articulate how this reimagined agency operates beyond mere boundary negotiation. Khaled's demand for communication and consent ("Shut the fuck up," "I will take control") is not simply about drawing lines but actively enclosing the sexual encounter within a framework of his own making. His careful negotiation of boundaries demonstrates how bodily parts—the anus, hands, or voice—actively mediate power relations.

The body, in its active engagement, resists straightforward victim-agent narratives, instead participating as an agent in the ongoing construction of desire and boundaries. This moves beyond binary victim-agent frameworks by illustrating that agency is not solely about "doing to" or "being done to," but about the active, embodied practice of structuring and commanding the conditions of intimate desire. For Khaled, these desires are not oriented toward a certain gender. His "taking control" during sex is framed by carefully and continuously checking in with his sex partner(s), practising ongoing communication regarding consent. This is not always appreciated by the people Khaled hooks up with.

> Khaled: "*And when you ask, like, are you feeling okay? Is that all right? Are you feeling pain? You want to change position? And they get annoyed because they think you have to be more aggressive. I'm being considerate. Even if we are having sex in this moment, I want to make sure that you are having fun, too. But they don't get it. It's always trying to find the balance between so many things, trying to juggle so many balls at the same time. It's complicated. It's really difficult. . . . Like, are you feeling all right? Am I putting too much pressure on you? Are you feeling smothered? Can I put that in your ass? This*

stuff, people don't ask, sometimes just go for it. . . . And I don't understand why people feel uncomfortable doing this [asking]. I think everyone should do this."

With this approach to communication within "taking control," Khaled subverts expectations usually associated with what being a "top" or a "power bottom" entails. Pleasure is bound to open communication and to being sure it is fun for the other person, too. Importantly, Khaled describes feeling uncomfortable in queer clubs and bars, where he has experienced transgressive behavior, and people touching him without asking first. He gets completely turned off when someone does not communicate their desires before acting on them. Similarly, Khaled believes people should be open about their desires, even if they are "*weird*":

Khaled: "*If you want to do something, even if you think it's weird, just say it. One time, I hooked up with a guy who had a fart fetish. That was so weird. And I told him I can't, like, fart. Like I'm douched and everything. He said, okay, I can blow air in your ass, and you can fart it. That was the most fun I have ever had. There was laughing all the time, and the guy was like going horny as fuck. . . . To me, it stopped being about sex. I was just letting this guy actually have fun. And he was enjoying it so much. I was just laughing, laughing, laughing.*"

Being taken to places and pleasures he would have never sought out himself, Khaled describes this hook up as "*the most fun I ever had*." Stating "*it stopped being about sex*," he discovers the pleasure in going beyond pre-determined scripts. Having air blown into his ass and letting the air in and out again, Khaled opens up and lets go, circludes to the fetish of his sex partner. This experience powerfully exemplifies the distinct analytical utility of circlusion. His pleasure is manifest in this active letting in of the unusual desire, and his conscious choice to enclose the experience with humor and generosity for his partner's pleasures. This demonstrates how circlusion allows us to see agency in receptive acts, revealing a complex interplay of giving and receiving pleasure that transcends traditional active/passive binaries and illuminates the embodied and relational aspects of desire beyond mere acceptance.

Khaled's experience also helps to point to the temporality central to circlusion: Instead of focusing on a singular push, penetrating a border, circlusion allows me to foreground the repetitive notion of letting someone in, maybe a little deeper each time. From this experience, Khaled reflects on other fetishes and hookups.

Khaled: "*I would never judge someone's fetish. Until I try it first-hand. . . . I thought fart fetish is disgusting. It's horrible. But when I saw how much joy he had, and actually, I was laughing too, I thought it's funny. It's not as creepy as people think. Oh, look, I would never do it again, just to clarify. But it's okay. I tried golden shower too, it's not my thing. I can do it on other people if*

they want me to. But on me, no. People should be more open minded to try different things. I hate judging people."

Khaled's complex reflections on fetish, power, and curiosity illustrate how body parts are not passive recipients of desire but active agents in exploring and negotiating boundaries, identities, and social norms. Khaled's acknowledgment that fetishes like fart and golden shower are objects of curiosity, rather than shame, underscores the body's agency in shaping desire—disrupting normative narratives about what is acceptable or taboo. He also shares a specific fantasy that he would like to act upon.

Khaled: "*I want to fist someone. I would never let anyone fist me. I think that's terrifying. But I want to experience this. Like, if you put your hand all the way in and you do like this [opens and closes hand], do they talk? [laughs] I'm so curious to feel the human body from the inside. Because sometimes, I see videos, people, like, really going elbow deep, and like, wait, where does it go? Can you feel the heart maybe?*"

Thinking the desire of fisting through circlusion, we can analyze that while being terrified of being fisted himself, Khaled is excited and aroused by the idea of someone else opening up enough to let him in, full fist and all. His desire to penetrate someone else is not heteronormative, as it neither includes his penis nor is dependent on the gender of his sexual partner(s). A notion of control is present, as he imagines being able to make the person he fists talk through moving his hand inside of them. At the same time, he considers whether he will be able to feel their heart. This specific desire further highlights the analytical power of circlusion. Khaled's fascination with feeling "*the human body from the inside*" and making his partner "*talk*" through fisting is not just a masculine power fantasy involving complete submission over someone else, or a sexual border crossing, but a deeply relational exploration of embodied connection and mutual openness.

Fisting, here, could be read as a "countersexual" (Preciado, 2018) practice, freed from constraints of gender, focusing on the asshole as possibility. While scholars before me have found great words for the practice of fisting, comparing its desire of incorporation to the Christian act of communion (Evans, 2019), I would like to propose the asshole here as the center of letting someone or something in—the center of circlusion. It is powerful to be relaxed enough to let someone else in, and Khaled's desire to go "elbow deep." His desire to be "fister" while simultaneously being terrified of being fisted himself reveals a complex engagement with receptive and active roles. Circlusion enables us to interpret this not as a simple exercise of control, but a desire for reciprocal, deeply intimate enclosing of bodies, where both partners are actively engaged in opening themselves up. This reframing illuminated a curiosity for mutual embodiment and openness, moving beyond a singular focus on penetration as control

to reveal a desire for profound pleasure. The asshole, in this context, becomes the ultimate "centre of circlusion," a site of powerful, active receptivity.

As part of a queer refugee support organization, Khaled has been coached in how to present his desires to the asylum authorities in a way that will make his chances of obtaining asylum higher (Lunau & Schröder, 2025; Shakhsari, 2014). Thus, he most probably did not share this desire to fist someone with the refugee regime. And why should he? Most of us would not want to share our intimate sexual fantasies with most people, let alone state authorities. As argued above, this does not mean that these desires should never appear in research. I believe it is pertinent to foreground and focus on these desires, presenting pleasures and fantasies that might be counterproductive for queer refugees' claims of asylum, but are important to avoid introducing them as merely "a figure." Foregrounding such desires and fantasies, and exploring them through the notion of circlusion, illustrates intimate and often overlooked experiences shaping queer refugees' lives.

Conclusion: Desires beyond credibility

This article has argued for the value of complementing border metaphors in queer migration scholarship. As argued, border metaphors risk centering on penetration and control, whereas analytics of circlusion allow us to center bodily desires and openness. By bringing sexual fantasy and corporeal pleasure into view, I challenge narratives that risk positioning queer refugees primarily as suffering, traumatized, or passive subjects. Circlusion invites us to shift our analytical gaze from the territorial borders and metaphorical boundaries of nation-states to the bodies that move, feel, and desire across them. Therewith, queer migration can be approached as an embodied process, shaped not only by exclusion and surveillance but also by desire, pleasures, and agency. This shift opens new ways of listening to queer refugees—not just as legal subjects or policy objects, but as people who navigate complex, messy, and often pleasurable lives.

While Adamczak's initial framing of circlusion sought to re-center agency by making the "enclosing" element active, the experiences of Joshua and Khaled demonstrate that agency in sexual encounters is fluid, relational, and negotiated, exceeding simple active/passive binaries. Their stories reveal how individuals can assert control, define pleasure, and navigate power dynamics in ways that are far more complex than a mere reversal of roles. By focusing on the lived, sexual experiences of Joshua and Khaled, I show how their bodies can be understood not only as objects of control but also as agents of pleasure, relation, and subversion. This is not a metaphorical detour; it is a reorientation where the body becomes a site of knowledge production within migration studies. Circlusion thus functions not only as a term from sexual politics, but also as a situated epistemological intervention. It enables us to recentre desire not as a risk to credibility but as a site of knowledge production.

While this article foregrounds pleasure and desires, it is crucial to acknowledge that this de-centering of violence does not diminish the enduring realities of harm inherent in refugee and migration regimes. These lived experiences of vulnerability and systemic constraint remain ever-present for individuals like Khaled and Joshua, even as they actively seek pleasure and follow their desires. Their established refugee status, however, crucially allowed the interviews to extend beyond the refugee status determination process, enabling a deeper engagement with these often-overlooked dimensions of their lives.

Through circlusion, new avenues emerge for understanding the intricate intersections of sexuality, migration, and racialization. It shifts the analytical gaze from vulnerabilities to capabilities for agency. This reframing highlights how racialized sexual dynamics are not merely imposed but can be actively navigated and subverted, as seen in Joshua's experience. It foregrounds how the act of opening or circluding can be a profound assertion of selfhood and resistance against systems that seek to control and define their bodies. Beyond the corporeal pleasure of bodies moving, further research could evoke circlusion when addressing refugees within "the national order of things" (Malkki, 1995). Applying circlusion at the national scale suggests a paradigm shift in which responsibility for integration is shared, and the "host" society actively chooses to enclose and embrace, rather than merely permit entry to, those seeking refuge. This perspective offers a powerful counter-narrative to the prevailing discourse of "invasion" and "border control," thereby challenging inherent racist narratives about migration. What might become possible if we research queer refugees not through metaphors of penetration and border crossing, but instead through the lens of circlusion? Or is the nation-state the one that needs to circlude, relax enough to let the refugees in? Who is opening up, who can rub onto each other, and, most importantly, who comes first?

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