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### **THE UNSPOKEN STORIES OF LGBTQ+ REFUGEES**

Healing personal trauma and social prejudices through storytelling and  
writing

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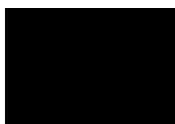


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This paper is dedicated to all persons around the world that escape injustice, persecution and violence for being LGBTQ+.

## **ABSTRACT**

LGBTQ+ refugees are a minority social group that suffers attacks and persecution in several parts of the world, resulting in the violation of their human rights. The traumatic experiences confronted weight and pressure on their identities which result in grave psychological burden. This paper aims to provide a current overview of the situation of LGBTQ+ refugees, along with an exploration of the theory of storytelling as a healing method. According to the literature, storytelling contributes to personal healing. The stories of five LGBTQ+ refugees are told with the aim to empower their voices and break the silence they endure. In addition, the present dissertation shows that visibility and consciousness are needed for social change. Finally, the paper remarks the need for further work on emotional therapy and psychological aid for persons escaping sexual persecution around the world.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+ rights, refugees, trauma studies, storytelling, emotional healing

## **RESUM**

Els refugiats LGBTQ+ son un grup social minoritari que pateix la violació dels seus drets humans a través d'atacs i persecucions a diverses parts del món. Les experiències traumàtiques que afronten afecten les seves identitats que resulten en greus càrregues psicològiques. Aquest treball presenta un resum de la seva situació actual juntament amb una exploració de la teoria de la auto-narració com a eina de cura emocional. Alhora, s'exposen les històries de cinc refugiats LGBTQ+ amb la intenció de donar veu a aquest col·lectiu, trencant amb el silenci que pateix. Igualment, aquest treball mostra que la visibilitat i la consciència són necessàries per aconseguir un canvi social. Finalment, s'emfatitza la necessitat que existeix per trobar futures teràpies emocionals i ajudes psicològiques professionals per les persones perseguides per raons d'orientació sexual i/o identitat de gènere.

**Paraules clau:** drets LGBTQ+, refugiats, estudis de trauma, auto-narració, curació emocional

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

'LGBTQ+ refugees' is the name given to the group of people that escape their homes because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. There are still a lot of countries in the world in which any sexual orientation different to heterosexuality is considered a mental disease. Although the World Health Organization eliminated it from its catalogue two decades ago, more than 70 countries penalize homosexual relations and 13 provinces affirm that said relations should be punished with death penalty (Garcia Iglesias, 2016).

The fact that thousands of people nowadays fly their homes because of who they are cannot be overlooked. The emotional weight that this group of people carry with them as a consequence of the traumatic events they go through cannot be ignored either.

The thesis of the present dissertation is that LGBTQ+ refugees carry with them traumatic experiences which, when told, can help both heal personal trauma and contribute to a social cause.

The first objective of the dissertation is to explore the ways in which storytelling and writing can become tools to help healing the personal traumas that LGBTQ+ refugees sustain. The essay investigates how the necessity of storytelling arises from the struggles and the psychological gravity that this particular group of people endure.

The second objective is to heal society through the stories of LGBTQ+ refugees. This objective emerges from the need to contribute to a social change by giving a voice to a clearly affected minority group in an attempt to equalize the poor sensitivity that exists regarding LGBTQ+ refugees.

A relevant emphasis of the present paper is to make known a kind of persecution that is invisible. LGBTQ+ refugees are often not included or mentioned when talking about forced migrations. This is why the paper meets with the voices of five LGBTQ+ refugees that tell their story with the intention of healing personal trauma. At the same time, their words serve to bring visibility, raise consciousness in society and to make people aware of the privilege they live in. In addition, this research attempts to denounce the gap of psychological treatment and emotional therapy that LGBTQ+ refugees encounter when they arrive to their countries of asylum.

It needs to be taken into account that the scope of change that this paper can achieve is restricted. It is clear that this dissertation will not have the power to fix large global problems, such as political and social persecution of individuals of diverse sexual

orientations and identities. However, it is very important to make the effort to discover the reality that thousands of people face around the world. As human beings, it is essential to invest energy in activities that will not produce any material results but that will cultivate our spirit (Ordine, 2013).

It is important to put a face, a name and a story behind the numbers of refugees that are represented in the media. It is crucial to name the silenced and the ignored, the distant facts, and the failures of humanity. There is a need to break the distance with the harsh reality that the world is living.

The real-life stories of LGBTQ+ refugees help bringing a more sustained, complete and faithful view on the matter of *sexile*.<sup>1</sup> It is important to engage with the following stories and to put an emphasis on the lives of LGBTQ+ refugees because they exist, and they cannot longer be ignored.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sexile*: Manolo Guzman defines it as the “the exile of those who have had to leave their nations of origin on account of their sexual orientation” (Guzman, 1997, p. 227). The merging of the word sex and exile is a productive way of encapsulating the forced migration that LGBTQ+ refugees undergo. The word will be used in determined situations throughout the paper.

## 1. A WORD ON STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

### *1.1. Structure of the paper*

This paper has been done following a specific approach: the text explores the context and theory of a problem and it illustrates it with real-life cases.

It is divided into three parts:

- 1) An exploration of the historical and social context of a specific group of people with the analysis of the current problems that the group faces.
- 2) A theoretical investigation on the literature related to the social problem that is exposed. There is a focus on the specific group of people that is affected.
- 3) An illustration of the theory through interviews of real-life cases, which prove the need for future solutions. The paper also opens a debate for future investigation and application to solve the problems presented.

### *1.2. Methodology of the paper*

The paper is based on a theoretical ground which is later exemplified by the real-life stories of five LGBTQ+ refugees. The initial idea of the research was to work personally with each of participants in order to produce a written text that would both tell their story to the world and reconcile with their past traumatic experiences. However, the paper has met with several obstacles that have limited the work.<sup>2</sup>

The participants were encouraged to do an exercise of reflection and introspection through a personal exploration of writing as a way of dealing with one's emotions.<sup>3</sup> They answered seventeen questions that aimed to bring a voice to their silenced story.

#### *1.2.1. The questionnaire<sup>4</sup>*

The type of questions that are used in this paper are scientifically referred to as 'structured interviews' as the different respondents are asked the same questions (Mathers, Fox, & Hunn, 1998). In a research project or a scientific study, the use of interviews would be classified as quantitative data which would need a statistical analysis to reflect on variables of the answers (Mather, Fox, & Hunn, 1998). However, the questionnaire that is used with the refugees aims to a more personal exploration of the respondents' answers. There is no intention of using the information that they provide as a data gathering technique but as a way of proving that the issue exposed in the theory exists and needs

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B for information about the process of contacting and working with the participants.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix C for the questions and Appendix D for answers to the questionnaire.

solution. In fact, the questionnaire was presented to the participants as a tool to connect with their emotions. In addition, the stories of the respondents in this particular paper serve as an opportunity for the five participants to expose the reality they suffer.

### 1.2.2. Privacy and anonymity

Another issue that needs to be clarified regarding the methodology of the research is the treatment of the respondents' names. There existed the possibility to maintain the real names of the five refugees that answered the questionnaire, but the final decision was to conceal their identities in order to protect their anonymity.

Even though the participants did not explicitly express their will to conceal their real names, there was a need to reflect on the matter of anonymity and privacy as the stories that they tell are not to be taken lightly. Polish Post-doctor in Cultural Anthropology Adrianna Surmiak addresses this issue with the following reflection:

The research participants might be identified by some members of their community/group or by outsiders (e.g., journalists). This is particularly important in research with vulnerable groups and individuals in which the risk of harm is greater, for example because of their low social status or dependent position. (2018, p. 10)

Taking into account Surmiak's words and the delicate situation in which LGBTQ+ refugees find themselves, the necessity to conceal their identities seemed clear. The option of masking their identities with the word 'respondent' and the correspondent number (1,2,3,4,5) seemed too distant and impersonal to be a plausible solution for anonymity. Consequently, replacing the real names of the five participants for fictional names seemed to be the most respectful and sensitive option for this paper.

## 2. HISTORY AND SITUATION OF LGBTQ+ REFUGEES

### 2.1. *The word refugee, origins and meaning*

As long as human civilizations have existed, forced migrations have existed too. Despite the great impact that the press and media have had on the refugee crisis since 2015 in Europe, this issue has been alive in our societies since ancient times. From the Ancient Greek and Roman times to Medieval times and the following centuries up until the twentieth and twenty first century, humans have always been concerned about the issue of refugees and asylum (University of Oxford, 1988).

The origins of the category 'refugee' are observed by American anthropologist Liisa H. Malkki. According to her, the word emerged at the end of the Second World War as a result of a necessity to address a global issue of social and legal preoccupation

(Malkki, 1995, p. 498). Although people have always looked for refuge and protection in other parts of the world, it is true that if we look at the crucial historic time of the end of the Second World War, we find that, in Europe, there was a displacement of people that was massive and record-breaking, Malkki explains. As a consequence, the phenomenon had to be standardized (Malkki, 1995, p. 497). It was at that point of the twentieth century that the word *refugee* originated, and it would be in the years that followed that this term would become of global use. One of the first instances of the use of the word *refugee* is found in the Geneva convention<sup>5</sup>.

However, the notion of ‘refugee’ was not considered or recognized as a humanitarian problem until the mid of the twentieth century, when UNHCR<sup>6</sup> was created. Before, people escaping the Holocaust were just considered to be a result of a military problem (Malkki 1995). This process of recognition of refugees as an extended global issue went hand in hand with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, written in 1948 with the aim to provide fundamental human rights for everyone. Article 14 in the declaration states that “everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” (United Nations, 1948).

The last years have met with progressive and hopeful initiatives and advances regarding the issue of LGBTQ+ rights in relation to refuge and asylum. UNHCR’s High Commissioner for Protection Volker Türk (2012) exposes different developments on this matter. He claims that a topic of research has emerged in the last years, at the same time that there is now “greater awareness” in the fields of humanitarian works and human rights concerns about the specificities of protecting LGBTQ+ refugees (2012, p. 120). As promising as these statements sound, it has not always been this way.

The first time that a refugee claim regarding sexual orientation and gender identity was taken into court was on the decade of the 1980s (Türk, 2012). Since then, there have been investigations on the jurisprudence that exists in this area of refugee law. It needs to be said that it was not until the twenty first century that international and domestic courts took measure in regard to the “legal rights of LGBTI individuals”, Türk explains (2012, p. 123). He continues to argue that it has been in the two last decades of this century that

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<sup>5</sup> The Geneva convention of 1951 states the rights of refugees for the first time.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR was initially formed in 1950 to protect and assist refugees after the impact of the Second World War.

the UN has taken the responsibility of documenting attacks and articulating standards of human rights for the LGBTQ+ community.

Finally, there is a need to highlight the work done by the International Commission of Jurists (2011) discussed in the *Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Justice: A Comparative Law Casebook*. The book explores over a hundred cases of people that belong to a sexual minority around the world. It analyses each of the cases and the decision of the judges with a clear aim: to bring a global view on the protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ people, at the same time that it questions, challenges and argues for a better completion of the role of judges, lawyers and human rights activists.

For instance, they denounce the jurisprudence from a judge that relied on the mere stereotypes that he had on the “appearance, dress, and affect” of homosexuals in order to claim if the asylum seeker was gay or not (International Commission of Jurists, 2011, p. 300). On the very same page, ICJ asks for “grounded” and “substantial evidence” to apply in cases related to sexual minorities as this kind of “stereotyping would not be tolerated in other contexts, such as race or religion.”. The work of the International Commission of Jurists is a remarkable work of critical reflections that serves as an example for the legal treatment of LGBTQ+ asylum cases.

## 2.2. Notes on terminology of the word LGBTQ+

In order to be as accurate and respectful as possible in the writing of this paper, a documented and positioned reflection is provided on the best linguistic option to refer to the group of people that escape their countries because of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

The language that one uses is of remarkable importance, particularly if the linguistic term used serves for the identification of one’s self (Zosky & Alberts, 2016). Thus, in this case, American Doctor on social work and violence Diane L. Zosky and Robert Alberts tell us that language can be crucial for the assimilation of one’s identity (2016). Not everyone might be aware that the linguistic treatment of a certain group of people is critical in order to respect their identity. The term that is commonly known and widely used to refer to the community of people that identify with non-normative sexualities and/or sexual identities is the acronym ‘LGBT’<sup>7</sup>.

It is after this reflection that a variety of linguistic alternatives appeared as possible options for the paper. The initial option of using the plain acronym LGBT in

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<sup>7</sup> LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

front of the word 'refugee' seemed right: the research and investigation is intended on the situation of refugees that identify either as homosexual, bisexual and/or transgender. However, the high pressure that labelling puts on certain people and the image that is attached to each word of the acronym, pushed the possibility of considering other terms or incorporating more letters to the acronym at the front.

The word *queer* appeared as another possible option. The term *queer* seemed to be less direct in terms of labelling; it includes the LGBT community in a word, but it does not specify each of the types of sexual orientation/identity that are involved in the group. It also points into a more general, less intrusive, and therefore more respectful, way of naming this group of people.

Some scholars, like Filipino anthropologist Martin F. Manalansan, had already talked about this concept by saying that "the queer perspective suggests going beyond a laboring gendered agent" (Manalansan, 2006, p. 243). Manalansan discusses the importance of talking about the asylum of people with different sexual orientation and/or gender identity as a matter that reaches to a more open "context of the intersection of marginalized racialized and classed sexualities" (2006, p. 243). In this case, using the term *queer* would help to broad the scope.

However, as the five participants in the paper come from Africa, avoidance of a western point of view that directly uses the known western term needed to be asserted. It was, indeed, after some research that it became apparent that the term LGBT might be unknown or not used outside of Europe and the Western world. This thought was reassured when Alexander, one of the five participants, asked what LGBT meant. He belonged in the LGBT community but was not aware that it actually existed or had a name. He was being put, together with the others, in a bag without them being aware of it. What was feared most had been done: their identities and sexualities had been westernized. As African/Ethiopian human rights activist and Doctor of Juristic Science Abadir M. Ibrahim puts it in his article: "The 'LGBT' lexicon is evidence of the predominance of Western discourses on sexuality which may not reflect the experiences and identities of Africans with non-conforming sexualities or genders" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 266).

Although the previously stated arguments pointed to a rather unpreferred use of the acronym LGBT, it was used persistently and repeatedly in published works. It seemed that official documents by recognized associations and organizations made use of it too. In fact, UNHCR used it as well when talking about refugees.



After these findings, ultimately, I decided to maintain the term LGBT but to add a Q (from queer) to the acronym in order to make sure the term was broad, unwesternized, and respectful to the group of people that the paper makes reference to. In addition, since the intended readership of this paper would, generally, be a western readership, it made sense to use this known acronym too.

Finally, although this was not found in academic publications, the plus sign added to the acronym LGBTQ would include and take into account other identities that are not represented in the letters LGBTQ but that need recognition and identification too. The usage of the plus sign is usually found in Internet sites and social media as a way to “be inclusive of all identities” (Common Space, 2019).

As mentioned before, there exists a variety of words, acronyms and names that can be used. In the end, although each has its own specificities, they all point out to the same minority group of people that is the LGBTQ+ community. This is why in some quotes or references; the acronym might take different forms such as LGBT, LGBTI or LGBTIQ+, depending on the usage of each author.

To sum up, the acronym ‘LGBTQ+’ together with the word ‘refugee’ defines and shapes the meaning of the group I intend to talk about with a definite but unwesternized personal use that is not judgemental of stereotypes or has linguistic constraints.

### *2.3. LGBTQ+ persons nowadays: a distinct attacked minority social group*

The situation that LGBTQ+ persons live nowadays is not a simple one. There are still 76 countries in the world that consider “same-sex sexual conduct” a crime and carry penalties that are supported by the law system of the country (International Commission of Jurists, 2011, p. 7). LGBTQ+ persons that seek asylum face an innumerable amount of “threats, risks and vulnerabilities throughout all stages of the displacement cycle” (Türk, 2012, p. 120), a reality that is worrying. They suffer violence worldwide in countries where there is, supposedly, legal protection for them.

Refugees are no exception to this ironic reality. It has been observed that LGBTQ+ refugees find themselves in challenging situations in the places where they expect to be welcomed and find refuge. Türk explains how the persecution that they are escaping “is at times repeated in the country of asylum” (2012, p. 120) and also criticizes how this violence is often found in the very refugee communities where they stay. It is common that LGBTQ+ refugees will maintain their sexuality in secret in order to protect their integrity: “They usually keep a low profile in order not to attract discrimination and

violence from other refugees, the local community or State authorities.” (Türk, 2012, p. 128).

The issue even extends to administrative persons and those in charge of providing a safe place for LGBTQ+ refugees, who can be ignorant of the problems this group might encounter in refugee camps and social programs. It is for these reasons that there is a necessity to recognize LGBTQ+ refugees as a distinct minority social group that suffers violence consistently. In her work “Refugees and Exile: From ‘Refugees Studies’ to the National Order of things”, Malkki (1995) she makes the following reflection about the diversity that exists under the group of people that we call ‘refugees’: “Forced population movements have extraordinarily diverse historical and political causes and involve people who, while all displaced, find themselves in qualitatively different situations and predicaments.” (1995, p. 496)

The fact that people who escape their home countries share a common experience of fleeing somewhere else to seek refuge does not mean that they share more than that. It is inevitable not to think of LGBTQ+ refugees here. They are one of the group of refugees that are especially different from other kind of refugees. It is important to distinguish them from the rest of refugees because they do not undergo the exact same circumstances as the others. The situation of a homosexual person in Morocco, for example, is very different from a person that escapes war in Syria. Their experiences and reasons to escape are likely to be substantially different. The first one is escaping violence and persecution as a result of a cultural, social, and political way of thinking. The second one is escaping violence and persecution as a result of a military conflict and political and ideological matters. UNCHR affirms that:

A group of persons who share a common characteristic other than their risk of being persecuted, or who are perceived as a group by society. The characteristic will often be one which is innate, unchangeable, or which is otherwise fundamental to identity, conscience or the exercise of one’s human rights. (as cited in International Commission of Jurists, 2011, p. 286)

Under the scope of the group of LGBTQ+ refugees, each case is has its own matters but share commonalities with the other cases. Even though the decision of leaving their homes cannot be traced to just one, simple reason, they generally escape for being who they are and who they love. They constitute a group of individuals that “share a common characteristic” apart from the danger of being persecuted (UNHCR, 2002, p. 11). UNHCR claims that they are identified as a social group. It is because of this reason that it is not fair to talk about them as just refugees that are LGBTQ+ but as a distinct

group of refugees that experience “innate” and “unchangeable” characteristics in their lives (UNHCR, 2002, p. 11).

LGBTQ+ refugees escape a sort of violence that is a product of a whole system that does not respect basic human rights; in this case, sexual freedom. In many parts of the world, LGBTQ+ rights are not recognized. Because of this violation of human rights these people confront persecution, violence and in many cases, discrimination in their countries. People that confront *sexile* may not even be able to ask for State protection because they may be considered to be an “offender instead of a victim” (UNHCR, 2008, p. 11). This is how serious the situation is for them; they are considered criminals instead of persons seeking help. Thus, the need to address the concept of the LGBTQ+ refugee as a distinct matter is relevant inside the study of refugees. We need to take into account the fact that, due to discriminatory laws, tradition and/or social practices, the rights of LGBTQ+ people are not guaranteed in some parts of the world; and, indeed, their rights are limited to a greater or lesser intensity (Garcia Iglesias, 2016, p. 12).

All this discrimination, abuse and violence might be because of prevailing cultural and social norms, which result in intolerance and prejudice, or because of national laws, which reflect said attitudes and acts (UNHCR, 2008). This is a key notion when talking about LGBTQ+ refugees specifically because, in contrast to other kind of refugees, they generally escape their countries because they do not fit into what is categorised as ‘correct’ or ‘accepted’. This adds an extra element to the pressure of escaping. They are not simply escaping a place but escaping a place that rejects them.

Brazilian Doctor on Social Science and specialist on Gender Studies Isadora L. França affirms that they do not only face “grave human rights violations, threats to life and liberty and other forms of violence”, but unacceptance and discrimination (2017, p. 11). It has been noted that there are laws that “violate human rights, including the rights to equality, privacy and non-discrimination”, at the same time that there is a strong link “between criminalization and homophobic hate crimes, police abuse, torture, and family and community violence” (UNHCR, 2013, p. 4). This issue will be explored in the following section.

Hiding one’s own sexuality does not guarantee a life free of acts that “violate the right to life, liberty and security of a person” (UNHCR, 2008, p. 9). UNCHR exposes that there are always risks “to be subjected to torture, cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment” for LGBTQ+ persons around the world. On their 2008 guidance note, it is

affirmed that there is no guarantee for them to escape violence. Therefore, such complicated situation demands better protection and understanding.

In conclusion, there is a necessity to recognise refugees who identify as LGBTQ+ as a social group that suffers violence worldwide and that has their rights violated (França, 2017). As Malkki puts it, “involuntary or forced movements of people are always only one aspect of much larger constellations of socio-political and cultural processes and practices” (1995, p. 496) . This means that the movement of groups of LGBTQ+ people are the result of a larger problem that shows that something is not working well. Doctor on Political Studies Ali Bhagat adds that the migration of LGBTQ+ individuals shows the cruel relation between violence, death, race and colonial legacies that are found in society at large (Bhagat, 2018).

#### *2.4. Western influence in anti LGBTQ+ beliefs in Africa*

Following Bhagat’s concept about colonial legacies, Ibrahim (2015) adds an explanation on why African countries perpetuate this (known to us as) unfair and backward ways of criminalizing and persecuting LGBTQ+ people. He points out that a great part of the non-acceptance of sexual liberties in Africa actually comes from the western colonial legacy that swept the African countries in the past (Ibrahim, 2015). He continues to complete his explanation by saying that the majority of the homophobic discourses that are rising nowadays are “once again taken from Western homophobic campaigns” (2015, p. 269).

Furthermore, UNHCR confirms that “politicians and religious groups” in certain countries defend anti-LGBT attitudes, such as considering LGBTQ+ people sinful and obscene, as a way to win more votes (Türk, 2012, p. 3). Doctor on Social and Political Sciences Kelly Kollman adds that there is a strong influence from religious conservative groups and their strong practices to resist the recognition of LGBT rights (2007).<sup>8</sup>

For instance, Ibrahim illustrates this situation by explaining how the western mind is found in homophobic practices and laws in Uganda. Apparently, the Anti-Homosexuality Act that was signed in 2014 in the country was majorly “sponsored by American evangelical groups.” (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 264) Luckily, this bill was cancelled after being challenged in the Ugandan Constitutional Court (Longjones & Wambere, 2018).

However, Ibrahim continues to argue that while the progressive direction that European and American countries have taken regarding homosexual marriage is

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<sup>8</sup> Kollman’s personal choice of using the simplified acronym LGBT.

remarkable, this has had a deteriorative impact on African countries, as they have decided to take “measures in the opposite direction.” (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 264) American professor of Political Science Patrick R. Ireland affirms that this direction seems to be pointing to a both “institutional and social homophobia” that aggravates the situation of homosexual people in the southern continent (2013, p. 49).

It is on this line that author Deborah Kintu describes how the Ugandan Christian church defended that their position against LGBTQ+ individuals was based firstly, on a western impact and, secondly, upon their purpose to protect the structure of the traditional Christian family in front of this influence from the West (2017, p. 88).

Additionally, Ireland (2013) provides information on the gravity of this problem in countries such as Kenya, Malawi, Uganda Zimbabwe, and how same-sex relations are treated in countries such as Ghana, Senegal, and Burundi. He continues to name even harsher situations in Mauritania, parts of Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, where they apply death penalty to homosexual people. Growing homophobia has had repercussions in the African society that cannot be ignored: there has been, and still is, a constant perpetuation of violence towards gay people, not just from the church, who asks for their death,<sup>9</sup> but from media, who exposes them and from society in general (Longjones & Wambere, 2018). This has led to a hostile and unsafe environment for people that live outside the traditional ways of understanding human affectionate relations and/or conventional gender identities.

It is clear that in African countries sexual and gender minorities are in risk and that institutionalized organs of the continent have governmental support to attack, diminish and violate the rights of the people that belong in the LGBTQ+ community. It is not a surprise either, that these attitudes and beliefs have a western origin and that while, in some parts of the world this issue is being put at front of the human rights preoccupations, in other parts, it is still a question of powerful controversy that seems to be subjected to a reality that limits the freedom of people and to laws that “disrupt lives and cause chaos” (Longjones & Wambere, 2018, p. 505).

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<sup>9</sup>Taken from Longjones & Wambere’s *Out, Proud, and African: One Man's Journey as a Gay Ugandan Activist*: “It also led to continuous incitement of violence through the media exposing gay individuals and churches calling for the death of gay people” (2018, p. 504)

### 3. STORYTELLING AS HEALING

What does it mean to remember and recollect trauma, particularly if traumas are situated in and on the body? How are naming and witnessing trauma informed by power and social identities (race, class, gender, sexual identity, and so on?) How are narratives and labels forms of “debases power” and also sites of resistance? How do sexual biographies form, change and rupture? Finally, how do the politics of naming transform not only individual narratives of trauma, but also larger institutions that evaluate, label, minimize, treat, and potentially discard traumatic experiences?  
(Casper & Wertheimer, 2016, p. 62 and 63)

Life’s traumas, whether major or simple traumas, create traces in the mind. These trauma traces, as physiological imprints or memories of past experiences, often dictate how we think, feel, and cope with life.  
(Hayes, 2015)

The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive.  
(Felman & Laub, 1991, p. 78)

#### *3.1. The silence of LGBTQ+ refugees*

LGBTQ+ refugees undergo silence during their lives and along their journey when escaping to another country. Garcia Iglesias declares that some of them hide their sexual orientation or gender identity as a result of fear of persecution (2016). In fact, many of them may not even acknowledge their sexual and/or gender identity to family or friends. It can be also the case that to stay in the closet “in hostile environments” is the only safe option that they have (International Commission of Jurists, 2011, p. 287).

However, living one’s sexuality as one pleases is important at a personal level and should not be constrained. As UNCHR states: “each person’s self-defined sexual orientation and gender identity is integral to their personality and is one of the most basic aspects of self-determination, dignity and freedom.” (UNHCR, 2011, p. 2) If so, refugees deserve the right to live their sexual life without discretion and restraints because it shapes who they are.

UNHCR describes this issue with more accuracy in its guidance note on LGBT refugees: “A common element in the experience of many LGBT applicants is having to keep aspects and sometimes large parts of their lives secret. This may be in response to

societal pressure, explicit or implicit hostility and discrimination, and/or criminal sanctions.” (2008, p. 5).

Consequently, most often LGBTQ+ refugees do not have the opportunity to express their emotions. They usually cannot speak about their situation with others because they cannot trust those who persecute them or because it is not accepted at a societal level. LGBTQ+ refugees suffer silence at a personal level which adds to the trauma of escaping.

Although the treatment of the asylum process for LGBTQ+ refugees has evolved enormously, it has not always been this way. In the Geneva Convention of 1951<sup>10</sup>, it was stated that a person “could have avoided persecution by simply concealing their sexual orientation” (Türk, 2012, p. 5). The International Commission of Jurists considered this position unacceptable to assess the legitimacy of an asylum seeker: “it would be wrong to expect an applicant for asylum to live discreetly so as to avoid persecutory harm.” (International Commission of Jurists, 2011, p. 297). This is another attack to the sexual freedom of the applicant and a statement that deteriorates and damages the person’s human rights. Apart from perpetuating the continuity of silence in the internal experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees.

As anthropology and gender studies Professor Gabriele M. Schwab points out in “On speaking from within the Void”, it is not rare to remain silent about experiences that relate to violence and trauma (Casper & Wertheimer, 2016). In fact, Schwab assures that “human beings have always silenced violent histories” and that some stories have to be silenced for some time in order to survive (Schwab, 2016, p. 120). However, she continues to add, “too much silence becomes haunting”. This is why it is crucial for these persons to put into words what they have gone through.

### *3.2. Storytelling as healing in LGBTQ+ refugees*

As it has been explored in the previous section, LGBTQ+ refugees do not have the chance to live their sexuality openly, much less to talk about the emotions that the trauma they have lived caused in them. This section of the paper explores how storytelling can contribute to a personal healing in LGBTQ+ refugees.

Several specialized authors bring reflections that prove that Holocaust victims or sexual abused victims consider storytelling an effective mechanism when treating

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<sup>10</sup> See footnote 1.

trauma.<sup>11</sup> However, LGBTQ+ refugees come from a very different background. On the one hand, they have lived their emotions and feelings in silence but, on the other hand, they have had to tell their story several times when seeking asylum. However, there is a difference in telling one's story as a way of healing and reconciling with the reality of one's past and telling one's story as a mere tool to prove a reality<sup>12</sup>. It is known that LGBTQ+ refugees have "limited evidence to establish their LGBT identity or may not be able to demonstrate past persecution", especially if they have not lived their sexuality openly in their home country (UNHCR, 2008, p. 5).

This notion is supported by UNHCR: "it is hardly possible for an applicant to "prove" every part of her/his case [...] Normally, an interview should suffice to bring the applicant's story to light." (2011, p. 2). Therefore, there is a need to focus on the first type of storytelling: the one that meets with one's past in order to resolve the trauma and resolve with the present reality.

As Californian Assistant Professor of Women's Studies Katherine Fobear says, "for many who have lived in silence most of their lives because of homophobia and transphobia" storytelling can become a way to "induce a sense of pride and accomplishment." (2015, p. 103). Although it is clear that the ways of dealing with traumatic experiences or events that have marked each person cannot be generalised, a common pattern can be found among a group of people that share similar experiences. There are different ways of healing trauma.

According to Hayes, "death, loss, stress, and grief can create trauma" and it is through art that it can be treated (Hayes, 2015, p. 2). Generally, art is a great tool to express feelings and emotions that are related to distress, disturb and pain. Refugees are no exception to this. As it has been mentioned before, they undergo long periods of suffering, insecurity, doubt, fear, and anxiety.

Australian anthropologist Arthur Saniotis and psychologist Farahnaz Sobhanian point out that "if the stories that refugees tell others involve the reclaiming of self, then such narratives may constitute a method of healing and reconciliation with the world" (2008, p. 2). Having this approach in mind, storytelling for LGBTQ+ refugees should be a plausible way of healing and alleviating the traumatic experiences that they have lived.

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<sup>11</sup> See especially: "Naming Sexual Trauma" (Fahs, 2016) and "Education and Crisis" (Felman, 1991)

<sup>12</sup> Refugee stories' usually serve to prove that the suffering, persecution and fear they have undergone is real.



It is worth mentioning American philosophy professor at Dartmouth College and trauma theory specialist Susan J. Brison (2013) in order to bring a more sustained vision on the theory of writing as healing. Brison notes that writing first-person narratives helps the writer bring light to “hidden biases”, at the same time that they serve to grow a sense of empathy with “those different from ourselves” and to notice our own biases (Brison, 2013, p. 26). We can apply this notion to storytelling in LGBTQ+ refugees in the sense that it can reveal certain aspects of the mind of the writer that had remained invisible. If we understand storytelling as a mechanism to acknowledge concealed feelings and emotions, we can talk of writing one’s story as a therapy, a way of healing one’s traumas.

Further on her book, Brison assures that the beginning of this curing process takes place with the act of admitting and recognizing that one is hurt and in need for recovery. According to her, it is only through accepting one’s trauma that the function of healing becomes productive (Brison, 2013). França introduces another aspect to take into account when talking about storytelling in refugees:

The way that the story is told is also important, that is, the conventions by which the torture, assassination, sexual violence, mutilation, death or other forms of violence are inscribed in the statements of the refugees and also in those of the institutions involved with refugees. (França, 2017, p. 30)

Because traumatic experiences assault the language and the thoughts of the person, the only way to access and transform the affected parts of the mind is through indirect paths (Casper & Wertheimer, 2016). According to Schwab, literature is an art that allows that roundabout way to get to the trauma. On the same page, the author affirms that “traumatic histories constitute an attack on memory, language, and the symbolic order.” (2016, p. 121). It is in “‘No Other Tale to Tell’: Trauma and Acts of Forgetting in The Road”, in Casper and Wertheimer’s book (2016), that author Amanda Wicks illustrates how “the act of remembering and recounting structures *through* language what has occurred beyond language” (Wicks, 2016, p. 135). It is also important to keep in mind that literature and language enable the mind to go through processes that cure trauma.

However, as psychiatric epidemiologist Ilan Meyer states “minority stress theory states that, because sexual and racial minorities are regularly exposed to prejudice and stigma, they are at greater risk for mental and physical health problems, through the increase of psychological distress.” (2003) (as cited in Ghabrial, 2017, p. 43). As it has been exposed previously, LGBTQ+ refugees suffer from restrictions at the level of their personal identity. Meyer here explains how these personal attacks form grave psychological problems in the minds of LGBTQ+ refugees. This information needs to be

emphasized when working with LGBTQ+ refugees because it is a crucial aspect that adds to the psychological weight that these persons carry.

Although it has been seen that literature and writing can constitute a productive way of healing, not everyone is able to find a way of healing in written storytelling or will have the level of literacy in order to express themselves in writing. This is why it is important to take into account other kinds of storytelling in the healing process. In this case, there is a need to welcome oral storytelling as a way of courage and personal embracement. The fact that is not written does not take value off the process of storytelling. Fobear defends the notion that oral storytelling is a genuine way of doing art, and, as it has been exposed, art can become a way of healing:

Likewise, oral history is similar to the act of choreography, as the oral historian and the participants co-create and evolve into a storytelling team. More particularly, until the dance is performed, and until the oral history is told, the final product continues to emerge and rearrange itself. Finally, both dance and oral history are in the end telling a story, and may be considered to be works of art (Fobear, 2015, p. 115)

### *3.3. Healing society through the stories of LGBTQ+ refugees*

One of the important objectives of this paper is bringing visibility to the minority group of refugees that escape due to sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Furthermore, there is one primordial objective that wants to go beyond the reflections on theory and aims to heal society from insensitivity and prejudices regarding LGBTQ+ refugees.

As University of South Florida professor Valerie Janesick puts it,<sup>13</sup> “when members of oppressed communities are able to tell their stories, they can challenge norms and speak directly to the social, economic, and political forces that marginalize them” (Janesick, 2010). The stories of LGBTQ+ refugees can help reshape the way we think as a society. Their stories speak clear and out loud about realities that some people do not want to know or hear. Therefore, it is a moral responsibility to engage with stories that challenge established truths about our world. It is relevant to quote Fobear here:

The potential efficacy of storytelling as a social justice resource informs my commitment to record LGBT refugee stories and to ensure that refugees voices and concerns are at the forefront of social change. [...] I explore how storytelling can be a powerful tool of justice for LGBT refugees that validates their truths and brings their voices to the forefront in confronting state and public violence. (Fobear, 2015, p. 104)

Fobear argues that storytelling becomes an agent for change that brings justice at a social level. It is clear that the stories about these refugees do not leave anyone unaffected. The reaction that we have when we hear stories of misery and poverty is not

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<sup>13</sup> Specialized professor in gender issues in education and social justice studies.

the same as the one we have when we hear stories of violence and persecution. In the latter case, one or a group of human beings is directly exercising their power in order to harm another human being. It is unfair and it is horrifying to hear these stories. Janesick (2007) affirms too that “storytelling is an important social justice tool for marginalized communities.”

It is also important to make society aware of the privileges that they possess. As professor René Brown affirmed in her talk *the Call to Courage*, “not to have conversations because they make you uncomfortable is the definition of privilege” (Restrepo, 2019). Therefore, there is a responsibility to engage in conversations about LGBTQ+ refugees in order to awake our consciousness.

Another way that these stories can contribute to a social change is by fixing the image that is often portrayed about the LGBTQ+ community. As Türk confirms, there is hope to “change the way society labels and stigmatizes LGBTI people” (2012, p. 122). He remarks that we need to welcome differences and promote comprehension in order to accomplish this. In fact, he insists that the “acceptance and courage” we are aiming for are actually found in the very own LGBTQ+ stories we are talking about (2012, p. 122).<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, if there is a need to awake the minds of society, there is a need to awake the minds of the people that are in power and have responsibilities. There is a need to observe and denounce the jurisprudence that some asylum decision-makers may still favour. ICJ observes that because sexuality is not as detectable as race, nationality or religion may be, adjudicators can become fixated with looking for visible evidence that the asylum seeker is in fact LGBTQ+ (2011). There is a risk that they will “rely on their own stereotypes of how gay men or lesbian women look and act, threatening the impartiality of decisions.” (International Commission of Jurists, 2011, page 287).

Once more, personal, real stories of LGBTQ+ refugees told by themselves are another way to contribute to the changing of diverse way of stereotyping and judging this group of people.

#### **4. THE VOICES OF THE UNSPOKEN**

##### *4.1. The stories of Adam, Alexander, Bruno, Timothy and Gabby*

After exploring how the theory of storytelling and writing can be used as a tool to help LGBTQ+ refugees heal the traumatic experiences they have undergone, this section

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix F for further information and examples.

moves into telling the real-life stories of five LGBTQ+ refugees: Adam (26), Alexander (20), Timothy (25), Bruno (21) and Gabby (28).

The following stories show the ways in which the persecution of LGBTQ+ people exists in the contemporary world. The participants expressed themselves differently and approached the exercise of telling their story in diverse ways according to their situation and personal attitude. The following is an overview of their answers that aims to bring a light to real struggles that LGBTQ+ people face nowadays as a result of political, social and cultural oppression to sexual diversity.<sup>15</sup>

#### *4.1.1. Adam's story*

Adam is 26 years old and was born in Burundi. He had to escape not only because of his sexual orientation but because of the situation in his home country. In Burundi he was tortured and imprisoned for three months before he decided to escape. His father and some of his friends were killed. He had no choice. Adam's story shows the large variety of reasons why refugees escape, and it substantiates the complexity that is found in each of the cases. Apart from the violence, persecution and imprisonment that he suffered, Adam has not seen his family since they migrated to the neighbouring country, Rwanda, three years ago.

#### *4.1.2. Alexander's story*

Alexander is 20 years old and was born in Uganda. Like Adam, he left Uganda as a result of a political problem and because of his sexual orientation too. Consequently, he has not been able to return to his home country since 2017, when he escaped to the Arabic countries. For more than two years now, he has faced a long journey of fear, persecution and deception all by himself. No one helped him. Although the situation he is living as an asylum seeker in Greece is not the one he wished for, he is sure he cannot return to his home country.

#### *4.1.3. Bruno's story*

Bruno is 21 years old and was born in Uganda. He was arrested by the police when he was at a disco with his partner in his home country. He was taken to the police station and was going to be sent to prison for seven years when he managed to escape. He hid in the woods for six hours until he was found by a friend of his partner who helped him

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<sup>15</sup> Personal conversations with the participants have been an important source of information apart from their questionnaires' answers, which in some cases were very brief. In the case of Bruno, all information has been taken from his use of oral storytelling and conversations with him.

escape to Turkey. In Turkey, the persons that had helped him enter the country asked him to pay an enormous amount of money that he did not have. He was then slaved and tortured. After three months of hard work he managed to get the money to jump on a small boat to Greece. Bruno stayed in a camp in Lesbos for eight months while he waited for the resolution of his case. At the moment, he has been given the refugee card and has a job in the city. However, it has been more than a year since he waits for his resolution to be solved and has no assurance about his future.

#### 4.1.4. Timothy's story

Timothy is 26 years old and was born in Uganda. He finds himself in Greece at the moment, where he is waiting for his asylum resolution. Little information is known about his story.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4.1.5. Gabby's story

Gabby is 28 years old and was born in Uganda. She was raped when she was thirteen and forced to get married when their parents discovered she was pregnant. She was part of an abusive and violent marriage for twelve years until she was caught having a romantic relationship with a woman in secret. Gabby was then persecuted by friends and family, including her parents. Consequently, she had to leave the country and abandon her three children in Uganda in order to save herself. She finds herself in Greece at the moment, where she works taking care of a blind elderly man while she waits for her asylum resolution. The latest information that Gabby has received is that if she cannot bring further proof about her case, she will be deported next February.

#### 4.2. *Connections with the theory*

In this part of the paper there is a reflection on the stories of Adam, Alexander, Bruno, Timothy and Gabby in relation to the theory that has been exposed previously. For the sake of clarity, this part follows a thematic division. Each section explores a topic related to the theory and is illustrated by the real-life experiences of the participants.

The attitude and approach that the participants took was different for each case due to their personal experiences and personalities. From the very beginning of the process there was a participant that showed more impetus and motivation into collaborating and working with the exercise proposed. This was Gabby, the only woman participant.

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<sup>16</sup> The reasons for Timothy's silence are explained in section 5.2.4.

Gabby had a personal inclination to writing that the other participants did not show, or at least did not express implicitly. She also showed an interest in singing and storytelling that was relevant and marked her as different from the other participants. However, it was not just that she felt more motivated into writing her story but that the connection she had and the way she opened personally to me enabled a more flourishing experience with her. It can be said that Gabby was the most collaborative regarding the use of writing as a tool for healing. In addition to answering the questionnaire, Gabby wrote a text of 500 words approximately that narrated scenes of her life back in Uganda, such as the moment she fell in love with a woman or the moment she had to escape.<sup>17</sup>

The distinct way of engaging with the project that Gabby demonstrated and the personal relation that was developed from it incites a discussion about gender. Certain questions arise from the different attitudes that have been observed between the male participants and the female participant. Do women find it is easier to talk to other women about feelings and sensitive matters than to men? Is there an influence of gender in the opening up of the only female participant in the research? Why did the other four male participants not show the same level of personal engagement if they were treated the same way as Gabby? Was it an accident the fact that the separation between the participants' attitudes coincided with their gender?

These questions open a research question on the matter of gender. However, answering them falls out of the scope of this paper.

#### 4.2.1. Family persecution

As it has been seen in the first part of the paper, LGBTQ+ refugees suffer persecution from different agents. As Kintu (2017) exposes in her book about Uganda's harsh laws on homosexuals, the church can constitute an important operator of anti-LGBTQ+ beliefs and actions. A more surprising agent against people of diverse sexual orientation and identities can be the family of said persons. In Uganda, it is normally the case that LGBTQ+ women are more affected by family attacks than other members of the community.

After investigating on this issue, UNHCR affirms that "LGBTI youth and lesbian, bisexual and transgender women are at particular risk of physical, psychological and sexual violence in family and community settings." (2015, p. 1). Already in 2008 UNHCR denounced how LGBTQ+ women are "forced to marry; subjected to psychiatric

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<sup>17</sup> See appendix E.

treatment against their will; deprived of their children; and are victims of discrimination in respect to housing, employment, education, and health services.” (2008, p. 197).<sup>18</sup>

One of the participants of the research lived this on her own skin. Gabby personally confessed how she was forced to marry and was subjected to rape, violence and persecution from close members of her village and her own family. She was married to her husband for twelve years, in which she had to cope with recurrent rape, one miscarriage and physical violence. However, her case is complicated because most of the violence she suffered was not public. The International Commission of Jurists acknowledges that it is “harder for women who experience harm in the private sphere to obtain asylum.” (2011, p. 288). Gabby’s current situation confirms ICJ’s affirmations about private violence in women: if she is not able to provide more evidence of the persecution that she suffered in Uganda, her case will be rejected and she will be deported.

#### 4.2.2. Social marginalisation

If the case of most LGBTQ+ women is the suffering of violence in private, the case of LGBTQ+ men is, among other sorts of difficulties, social marginalisation. As Longjones and Wambere claim:

In most cases, gay men are made a mockery of and are a laughing stock each time they go to seek services. All of this is the result of ignorance, putting aside a code of conduct in favour of religious beliefs, misperceptions about sexuality, and considering anything out of the norm to be a crime. To be a gay man in Uganda means facing persecution, rejection, blackmail, or prison sentences. (2018, p. 500)

Because Bruno is homosexual, his social life in Uganda was affected in serious ways. This happens because homophobia and anti-LGBTQ+ thinking are strongly established in the Ugandan society (Ireland, 2013) that Bruno could not be socially accepted or live a ‘normal’ life back in his home country. Despite the “extreme social ostracism and official discrimination” that LGBTQ+ people have to go through, Ugandan Courts affirm that this group of people are “entitled to universal human rights guarantees” (International Commission of Jurists, 2011, p. 28). The reality in the country is certainly another. Bruno survived until he was arrested by the police and had to escape. He explained how the police practised electrocutions to people under arrest. This can also be considered a form of “institutional [...] homophobia” inside society (Ireland, 2013, p. 49).

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<sup>18</sup> See also: UNHCR, 2013.

In addition, LGBTQ+ refugees often find anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes in the countries where they seek asylum. This notion, investigated previously in the paper, is again found in the personal experiences of Adam's, Alexander's, Bruno's, Timothy's and Gabby's stories. When Gabby was asked how the other refugees treated her in the camps she said: "Yes I was different, they was treating me bad and I had to hide my status from everyone in camp" (Answer to question 11, see appendix D). This shows the endless violence that LGBTQ+ refugees face even in the places where they are expected to be safe. Once more, as Türk (2012) well explained previously, discretion is needed in order to avoid social discrimination. Therefore, there is a connection between the notion of social marginalisation and silence, because one does not exist without the other.

#### 4.2.3. Silence

The notion of silence is discussed in section 4.1., *The silence of LGBTQ+ refugees*. Furthermore, apart from having to hide their sexual identities, most LGBTQ+ refugees do not have the chance to talk about the emotions they face. The refugees that answered the questionnaire gave negative answers when asked if they had anyone to talk about their feelings with when they escaped. Adam added to his answer: "that [not having someone to talk to] is a serious matter I am facing right now" (answer to question 6, see appendix D).

Another kind of silence is found in Timothy's case. He was not able to answer the questionnaire because of the emotional weight that talking about past events supposed to him. It should not be forgotten that if the traumatic experience is kept in silence for too long, it haunts the affected person (Schwab, 2016). It is in these cases that the necessity for psychological aid is most important.

UNHCR also argues that refugees might not talk about their story as a result of a combination of reasons, but in the case of LGBTQ+ refugees they "can be reluctant to talk about such intimate matters, particularly where his or her sexual orientation would be the cause of shame or taboo in the country of origin. As a result, he or she may at first not feel confident to speak freely or to give an accurate account of his or her case." (UNHCR, 2008, p. 17). This reflection could also explain Timothy's silence regarding the questionnaire.

Nevertheless, Timothy's issue could not be resolved due to obstacles in long-distance communication and my own gap of professional psychological knowledge. Although a friendly and non-judgemental atmosphere was provided at all times when carrying out



the interviews and conversations, Timothy's incapacity to answer the questions could also be explained by the grave psychological problems that he suffers as a LGBTQ+ refugee.

#### 4.2.4. Psychological health

The continuous and diverse ways in which LGBTQ+ refugees are attacked cause them heavy psychological disorders (Meyer, 2003). Although not psychologically assessed, the five participants are most likely to suffer from psychological concerns since the experiences they have lived meet Meyer's descriptions. The psychological health of refugees is linked to the previously explored problem of silence in LGBTQ+ refugees because it contributes to their psychological trauma.

A clear illustration of this is found in Adam's story. He explicitly expressed his necessity to talk about how he feels with someone and denounced the current situation of refugee camps. His experience in Moria camp, in Lesbos, Greece, was brutal. As many journalists have already investigated, Moria camp is one of the camps that meets the worst circumstances and treatment of all. The fact that the camp holds up to two thirds more of the people that can fit in it, the constant fights, and the bad living conditions that are found worsens the psychological health of the refugees that stay there. Adam denounces how his mental health "keeps worsening", how he gets "anxiousness, stress, flashbacks..." and is "always trying to keep yourself safe" there (personal communication, 14 March, 2019).

In relation to question 6 of the questionnaire as to whether he had someone to talk about emotions and feelings with, Adam explicitly called for psychological aid: "No, that is a serious matter I am facing right now. After the torture and the violence I've been through i think i [*sic*] need to talk to someone and help me to improve my situation.". Then, in question 14 as whether his sense of identity had been affected, he answered: "After à [*sic*] long journey of different matters, you are affected either you like it or not". Adam's confessions about his situation and his feelings point to future necessities and solutions for him and for others that find themselves in this situation.

#### 4.3. Final reflection

After knowing the stories of Adam, Alexander, Bruno, Timothy and Gabby and connecting their experiences to the theory that the paper explores, there is no doubt that the harsh reality that LGBTQ+ refugees encounter around world is recurrent in our contemporary society. Their stories meet with family persecution, social marginalisation, silence and other factors which build up to serious psychological disturbance. The respondents expressed their need to find treatment for their traumatic baggage.

The process of exploring and aiming to a personal healing through storytelling has contributed to the achievement of two relevant objectives: bringing visibility and social consciousness about a minority group that is under attack, and providing a space and an atmosphere for the refugees to be listened to and to be witnessed through the telling of their stories. Laub's and Felman's theory of witnessing is relevant here. Felman puts into words the way that storytelling helps people who have suffered trauma:

Enable them for the first time to believe that it is possible, indeed, against all odds and against their past experience, to tell the story and *be heard*, to in fact address the significance of their biography -to *address*, that is, the suffering, the truth, and the necessity of this impossible narration- to a hearing "you" and to a listening community. (Felman, 1991, p. 41)

Furthermore, a final evaluation was done with Gabby to assess how she felt along and after the process of remembering and telling her story. In emotional terms, she claimed that there was no psychological rest taken out of the exercise, however, she did feel that someone cared for her and that she could collaborate to a larger cause. Her final reflections bring a closure to the contribution that these stories can have on a personal level and on society itself.

Nevertheless, the theory that explores personal healing through storytelling has been harder to prove through the participants' stories than, for example, the persecution they suffer. Although there is a need for a solution at an emotional level in LGBTQ+ refugees, the work that has been done with the participants in this paper has not been enough to categorize it as healing.

As it has been exposed before, there are several factors that play an important role in the lives of LGBTQ+ refugees in relation to trauma that need professional help. Therefore, new ways of thinking about the psychological issues of LGBTQ+ refugees have to be explored in order to come up with contextualised and meditated solutions. This cannot be done without taking into account that LGBTQ+ refugees are a minority social group that needs individual and specialised professional treatment.

This was out of the paper's reach.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Since the beginnings of human history, there have been groups of people that have been forced to migrate for different reasons. This reality has existed and developed until our days in more complicated ways and now people that undergo forced migrations have official and legal recognition and rights. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and persons that identify with non-normative sexualities/sexual identities constitute a minority social group that confront violence and discrimination around the world. Consequently, people that belong to the LGBTQ+ community and that seek asylum are named LGBTQ+ refugees. In addition, anti-LGBTQ+ laws and beliefs in some parts of Africa reflect the long-time influence of Western religious and politic campaigns on the continent.

The present paper has explored the silence that LGBTQ+ refugees undergo, one of the central struggles that they face in terms of personal issues. In many cases, even in the countries of refuge, LGBTQ+ refugees have to conceal their sexual orientation and/or sexual identity in order to protect themselves. Refugees are asked to provide evidence to prove their fear of persecution. In this sense, LGBTQ+ refugees tell their story as a mere tool for their asylum case. This is why there is a need for this group of people to embrace storytelling in a different light and use it as a way to connect with their emotions, healing the traumatic experiences they have lived.

In addition, this paper has brought the idea that LGBTQ+ refugees can also heal society from prejudices, stereotypes, and insensitivity. This point is illustrated by the stories of five LGBTQ+ refugees: Adam, Alexander, Bruno, Timothy and Gabby. Their stories bring consistence to the theory that has been exposed and serve to prove how the persecution of LGBTQ+ refugees around the world is a serious matter that needs solution. Several authors such as Janesick, Fobear and Türk have stated how visibility and consciousness are at the front of social change, using storytelling as a relevant tool for achieving societal progress.

The present dissertation has done a research through the stories of five LGBTQ+ refugees that has served to break with the lack of representation and silence that these persons withstand. In addition, the methodology of the paper has enabled an investigation on LGBTQ+ refugees without falling into a view that victimizes the affected persons. In fact, the real-life stories of the participants have helped to illustrate the theory and to humanize the image that is portrayed of them.

Authors such as Hayes, Brison and Schwab has exposed the functionality of storytelling as a method for personal healing. However, this has not been obtained in the participants due to problems with communication and lack of professional knowledge.

Furthermore, there has been a critical reflection on the notions of family persecution, social marginalisation, silence and psychological health in relation to the theory and the experiences of the participants. These reflections open a debate for future solutions.

This paper would lose its completeness without the collaboration of Adam, Alexander, Bruno, Timothy, and Gabby. Their stories expose the reality that LGBTQ+ people live nowadays and they also serve to denounce the lack of emotional work that is done when refugees seek asylum.

To conclude, the findings of the research emphasize on the need to find a space where LGBTQ+ refugees can express their emotions, and to treat their psychological issues with specialised professional help. This is a key notion that needs to be taken into account in further research on the psychological and emotional health of LGBTQ+ refugees.

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## 7. APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Limitations of the paper

Along the research process several associations that work with refugees, human rights, and LGBTQ+ issues in Catalonia were contacted. The initial idea was to contact ten refugees who had escaped their countries because of sexual reasons and interview them in order to know and record their story. One of the intentions of this part was to work with them in order to achieve a written result of their emotions that their journey as LGBTQ+ refugees have brought to them. However, almost every association contacted argued that they were not allowed to provide third parties information about the persons they worked with because those persons are in a vulnerable situation. CCAR (Comissió Catalana d'Ajuda al Refugiat) and ACATHI, the association that works with the sexual diversity in refuge and migration in Barcelona, were not able to facilitate any direct contact of refugees because of protection of data issues. They also observed that I, personally, did not possess the professional knowledge to treat such concerns.

As Guss van der Veer well explains, there is a need for “specialist knowledge” in order to “understand these problems” (1998). Adequate professional abilities and tools are needed in order to assess and counsel the psychological problems that appear out of traumatic experiences. Trying to do so without the specialised capacities that are needed can end in a sense of failure and helplessness, van der Veer claims.

In addition, due to long distance communication, the work was limited to phone calls and messages which hindered the desired continuous and assessed work that was aimed with the participants. The complicated psychological problems that LGBTQ+ refugees confront and the lack of professional knowledge to treat them diffculted the work too.



## Appendix B

### Contacting and working with the refugees

Contacting the refugees that participated in the research was made possible through a personal contact. A good peer of mine, who had been working in a refugee camp in Greece, provided me with the contact of two refugees who she had met personally. This opened a window to get in contact with Bruno and Gabby, and later on, with Adam, Alexander and timothy. These five persons would become the participants of the paper.

Before starting to work with them, the first thing that had to be done was to clarify the purpose of the paper and the role the participants had in it. It was important to let them know that the exercise needed a level of personal engagement that required effort from them. For example, dealing with personal questions about their sexuality and their past. Because there was no knowledge on the psychological problems that refugees undergo neither no professional tools or methods to treat trauma, they were invited to produce any sort of written text that would connect them to the inner feelings and bring some rest to the pain.

A relevant matter that needs emphasis is the notion of communication. Communication with the participants was difficult for two reasons: long distance communication and their literacy level. Because the five participants find themselves in Greece at the moment, it was impossible to talk face to face with them. Digital technologies enabled live conversations, which were very helpful in terms of fluid and personal conversations, but, at the same time, communication through the phone and WhatsApp resulted in a non-continuous way of working. A weekly face to face meeting would have been the ideal, but because of problems with connection and the disconnection of the life they lead in Greece (due to the physical distance) the work that could be done was limited to spontaneous phone calls, (ir)regular texting, and the hope that the participants would take their own personal initiative to engage with what had been proposed.

Secondly, the level of literacy that the participants have is not of high standards. The five of them are, generally, persons that have little education. Apart from low educational formation, the participants admitted that they struggled with English. Out of the five refugees, four are from Uganda, and although English is the national language in the country (Stranger-Johannessen, 2015), it is not their mother tongue language. Gabby herself confessed that although she was interested in writing, she was “too scared about

my spellings”. This had a repercussion in terms of what approach and direction their writings would take.

An open creative writing exercise that would serve as a potential healing activity seemed too demanding, or even unrealistic, taking into account the education background of the participants. Simply asking them to do a reflective and insightful exercise with their emotions and directly write a text of their own creation, would have been pretentious and considerably insensitive. In no case the participants were pressured to produce any kind of written text as an expected product or obligation. Although the objectives of the paper aimed for a written exercise as a way of healing, any orientalist or western approaches were dismissed in order to provide the participants with a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere in which they felt that it was safe to openly talk about their feelings. They were also made known that the exercise would, possibly, benefit them personally.

This led to the writing of a questionnaire of seventeen short, simple questions that aimed to awake feelings that may have been buried or silenced. Although all five participants were receptive and agreed to answer the questionnaire, only three sent their written answers: Adam, Alexander and Gabby. In the case of Timothy, when asked, he expressed that “it is difficult to talk for me” (personal communication, March 20, 2019). On the other side, Bruno, who seemed to be the most excited at the beginning, in the end never answered the questions. His way of expressing himself was orally, and so he used oral storytelling as his tool of expression.

Appendix C  
The questionnaire

1. How old are you now? Where are you from?
2. When did you have to leave your country and why?
3. Did your family know about your situation?
4. Did someone help you to escape? Were you alone?
5. Where did you go?
6. Did you have anyone to talk about your emotions and feelings with?
7. What made you keep going and not give up?
8. During your journey to Greece did someone help you, or people lied to you and asked you for money?
9. How did you get to Greece? Did you arrive on a small boat?
10. How did you feel when you arrived in Greece? Were you relieved or scared?
11. Did you feel that you were different from the other refugees in the camp? How did they treat you?
12. Was it hard to prove that you escaped your country because of your sexual orientation?
13. Do you think that if you weren't LGBT you would have an "easier" life?
14. How has the journey that you've been through affected your identity/who you are?
15. Which is the hardest moment you have lived as an LGBT refugee?
16. Do you feel safe in Greece? How do you feel now?
17. Do you have hope?

## Appendix D

### The participants' answers

#### Adam's answers

1. 26 years, from BURUNDI
2. I left my country in February 2016 because of political issues
3. No, my family doesn't know about me. Right now they are in neighbourhood country (RWANDA) in a camp (Mahama Camp)
4. yes my uncle helped me to escape the country by crossing the border
5. RWANDA, after to UGANDA
6. No, that is a serious matter I am facing right now. After the torture and the violence I've been through i think i need to talk to someone and help me to improve my situation
7. I've been in serious matter, my father was killed, also some of my friends killed, and me being tortured and jailed for 3months. But I keep faith that one day things will change in my country, so I don't give up
8. During my journey in Greece UNHCR welcomes me but I still have a long journey, cause a part from the safety they gave me, many things need to be done.
9. I arrived to Greece by sea on a small boat
10. It was a disappointment, life was very tough in Moria camp, fights everyday, living in bad conditions, always trying to survive
11. All i can say about this question is that the way you enter the camps is not the same when you leave there, my psychological health keeps worsening, anxiousness, stress, flashbacks, ...always trying to keep yourself safe
12. they always postpone my interview, so I have all the proofs
13. I don't know
14. After a long journey of different matters, you are affected either you like it or not
15. The settlement in Greece is still an issue
16. Safe yes, I feel like my future is uncertain
17. Hope yes, But still have a long journey in front of me

#### Alexander's answers

1. I'm from Uganda. I am 20 years old
2. Almost 2 years, Bcoz of political problem and of course because of my sexual orientation too
3. No they don't know even I don't know about them

- 4.No one, yes I was alone
- 5.Arabic Arabic countries
- 6.no
- 7.Some countries have H. R. W, than mine, and my life can change and help others  
I need change
- 8.They lied me and had bad situation during my journey, lot of money lost
- 9.with a small boat and many difficulties on our way.
- 10.\* I was happy to reach safely  
\*scared coz of the situation that I met
- 11.Yes, I tried to make myself busy all the time, like teaching others what I know after  
getting an occasion
- 12.yes of course
- 13.LGBT, don't get it well what is it!
- 14.Lot of things affected me coz many troubles that i passed through,
- 15.LGBT don't get it well, what does it mean??
16. Better than staying in My country.
- 17.Yes, Whenever I still alive still have hope.

#### Bruno's answers

A partial transcription of Bruno's oral narration of his story is provided below in order to show the emotional tone in which he expressed himself.

“There are two reasons why I left my country. First of all, I left my country because I am orphan, I don't have family, I was alone. It was very complicated to me. They tell me I was too young, my age was too low. I don't have a space to stay. Do you understand? The second reason, on my country they don't accept for my sexuality. That is a problem, they catch you, they put you to prison sometimes, sometimes all life, sometimes 12 years. The time I decided to leave my country, one day I was out with my partner. We were out, to a disco, just to enjoy. In the bar, we were upstairs. It was just a part of the boss and the manager, we were there. But the police were coming. They arrested everyone there, they put handicap. It was really very bad. Almost three days where everyday beating, it was bad dear. I don't want to remember this. They come get me. I stay with the police 3 days, some people die. They were using electricity, you know? You know with a cable? They put in a socket for electricity, it is like a stick. They beat you,

the body, they catch you. It was very bad, very complicated. Some people they died. That was mad, it was very complicated. So after three days, after judging everyone, looking at the papers, they decided to take everyone to prison. For 12 years... For me they decided 7 years. From that time, the police decided to take the handicap from everyone because people were fainting. So after they took the handicap from everyone, the bus was ready to go to prison. I started to run. I don't know where I am going. It was near a forest yeah? I ran away. Some people did not manage to run. From that time I didn't know what following. I stayed in a bush in the forest, for 6 hours. 6 hours! At night! A friend of my partner tried to take me to a clinic, a hospital. Because I was wound. It was too much. I was very sick, much" (Personal communication, 18 April, 2019)

Timothy's answers

No answers to the questionnaire.

Gabby's answers

1. I am 28 years old. I am from Uganda
2. I left my country November 2017 ,I had to leave my country because I am a lesbian. At that time I was 26 years old and I was very scared
3. Yes they know
4. Yes my girlfriend and her unko helped me to escape  
I escape from Uganda to turkey from turkey to greece
5. Turkey
- 6.No
7. Am mother whenever I fill like giving up I think about my children. I have 3 children, 2 boys and 1 girl, they are in Uganda now
8. Someone helped me and I paid 800 dollars
9. I came by tube boat
10. When I arrived in greece I was filling good, I was scared at the boat because I don't know how to swimm
11. Yes I was different, they was treating me bad and I had to hide my status from everyone in camp

12. Yes it's very hard them to believe and they gave me first rejection. Even the doctor who helped me in camp he have been to Uganda because of him I got all the papers I needed that time and I pray for him everyday

13. No

14. The journey of my life was very hard since I was 14 until now

15. Is the moment I use to go to hospital, if you tell them that your lesbian they don't work on you and I hard to take 60 tablet so that they can concentrate on me

16. When I left the camp to the city things was hard , but now is better, sometimes I fill uncomfortable, because if you ask same help from a man want to take advantage on you so it's not easy

17. Yes I have hope

## Appendix E

Gabby's additional text and final reflections<sup>19</sup>

This is my past, there is a joy and sad, I was 14 years old it was evening my dady send me at nearby soap to buy suger, on my way back the man raped me, after one month, My mother released that I was pregnant, my father and mummy decided to force me to marry the man, I was in marriage for 12 years, My husband torched me physically and emotionally , one day he beat me and I lost my pregnancy for 8 months, and that day I decided to go back to my parents but my dady take me back to my husband's house , one my best childhood friend went to my parents looking for me , my mother gaves here the location of my house, When she comes, I was starting tell her my problems she stopped me , she told me that she came to make me happy that I will not cry again, she brought beer we drink and she proposed to me that she loves me and that day we made love because my husband used to for work for a week 2 week's, I used to call my partner when my husband is not at home and we a enjoy she is only one person who gaves me joy in my life we use to talk and laugh we use to call mans that they are fake , but one day my husband told that he will not come back for a week , as usual I pick my phone I call her immediantely and after 30 minutes she come to house that day I asked her to sleep the all night course I knew my husband is not at home, we where enjoying making love. my husband enter the house straight to the bedroom. he was shocked, he wanted to shout, he was shirking and he started crying , I just pushed him and I run away with ANNIE , I left my small baby in bed, Annie kept me at her uncle' s house for a month and my 2 son's, My husband, My family and neighbor's were shacking everywhere to kill us , but ANNIE 'S uncle gives us advice to run away from our country. ANNIE 'S she saled her apartment she got some money and she send here uncle to get me visa and ticket she send me in turkey she used the balance to go to South Sudan, she did everything and her uncle to save me my family has abandoned me because I am a lesbian, I am proud to be a lesbian because I the moment of soul she was there to give me joy , she gives me back my full heart and I find her she told me that she is coming to me any time. (Personal communication, 4 April, 2019)

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<sup>19</sup> Gabby's original text with spelling, grammatical and punctuation errors untouched.



Gabby's final reflections

1. How did you feel after answering the questions?

I don't fill good

2. Did you feel released?

No

3. Did you feel that someone cared about your story?

Yes

4. Do you think that if you tell your story you can help other people that have lived the same as you?

Yes I really want to help but I have nothing, i only a dive them and to not lose hope

5. Did it feel good to share your emotions with someone?

Yes

6. Was it easy to remember all that you have lived?

No , if I keep remember that moment I fill bad and sometimes I cry

7. How do you feel now?

Am happy that I have a job but I miss my children's so much I can't concentrate. But for living in Greece am happy+

## Appendix F

### Acts of hope in the stories of LGBTQ+ refugees

There are instances of Türk's affirmations in some of the personal experiences of the five participants of this paper that bring light to the dark reality. For example, it is known that, sometimes, LGBTQ+ refugees have problems accessing basic services such as "health care, education, self-reliance assistance as well as registration and refugee status determination." (UNHCR, 2013, p. 3) However, in one of the conversations with Gabby, she emphasised that when she first arrived to Greece she was helped by a doctor who had lived in Uganda, her home country: "Even the doctor who helped me in camp he have been to Uganda [sic] because of him I got all the papers I needed that time and I pray for him everyday [sic]" (personal communication, May 7, 2019).

When escaping their countries of origin, Adam, Gabby, and Bruno were helped by members of their family. Bruno's friend from Afghanistan gave him some money in order to take the boat to Greece. As seen in these examples, the simple but hopeful acts that refugees have lived in their journeys are life lessons from which society should learn. In addition, these stories bring another side of LGBTQ+ refugees, a more personal and honest image of who they are.