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"How Can You Put This All Down in One Story?" Transgender Refugees' Experiences of Forced Migration, Border Crossings, and the Asylum Process in Canada Through Oral History and Photovoice

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abstract

Research on asylum experiences for sexual and gender minority refugees has increased within the past decade. However, even within this growing body of research and critical commentary, the voices of transgender (trans) refugees and their particular experiences navigating migration and asylum processes can sometimes be overlooked or lost within the larger subject of queer refugee experiences. Exploring the individual experiences of trans refugees can help scholars to further understand how gender identity and sexual orientation are regulated in migration and settlement. This article focuses on the narratives and photovoice of two trans refugees in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Canada offered them relief from the state and social persecution they were experiencing in their countries of origin. Yet, they also experienced hyper-regulation by the Canadian state that caused them to be detained and interrogated by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) as well as fear and silencing in their asylum hearings by the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) of Canada. Their experiences reveal how trans individuals are both hyper-regulated and marginalized by asylum and immigration processes in Canada. These government processes work to reinforce heteronormativity and the gender binary in which trans asylum seekers are marginalized.

keywords

refugee studies, transgender studies, oral history, border imperialism, cisnormativity

The amount of research on individuals claiming asylum based on sexual orientation and gender identity in Canada has increased throughout the past ten years (Llewellyn, 2017: 1120; Kahn and Alessi, 2017: 22-24). The work being produced has done much to destabilize xenophobic representations of sexual and gender minority refugees as bogus or potentially dangerous migrants. This work has also challenged the homonationalist framing of Canada as inherently progressive and accepting of sexual and gender minorities, pointing out ongoing xenophobia, racism, and transphobia in immigration policies and societal treatment (Llewellyn, 2017). However, even within this growing body of research and critical commentary, the voices of gender minority or trans[1] refugees and their particular experiences navigating the Canadian migration and asylum processes can

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sometimes be overlooked or lost within the larger subject of queer refugee experiences. Understanding the individual experiences of trans refugees can help scholars to further reveal how gender identity and sexual orientation are regulated in Canadian migration and settlement (Nash, 2011).

This article focuses on the oral history and photovoice of two trans refugees in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Tiffany is a transwoman from Asia who came to Vancouver in 2014 and successfully gained asylum in 2014. June[2] is a transman from Asia who came to Vancouver in 2012 and successfully gained asylum in 2013. Their persecution was inherently tied to social gender norms that caused them to be objectified and experience violence. Canada offered them relief from the state and social persecution. Yet, they also experienced hyper-regulation (Spade, 2015) by the state that caused them to be detained and interrogated by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) as irregular entries susceptible to deportation. Furthermore, they encountered fear and silencing in their asylum hearings due to the limited scope and the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) of Canada's imposed heteronormative and cisnormative narratives of what it means to be a gender minority and experience persecution on the basis of gender identity. Their narratives reveal how trans individuals are both hyper-regulated and marginalized by asylum and immigration processes in Canada. These government processes work to reinforce heteronormativity and the gender binary in which trans asylum seekers are marginalized.

The stories collected come from a 2012-2016 study with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans refugees living in Vancouver, British Columbia. The research consisted of ethnography, oral history and participatory photography, also known as photovoice. The ethnographic portion consisted of my three years working as an asylum and settlement volunteer for Rainbow Refugee, a non-profit organization based in Vancouver, dedicated to assisting those claiming asylum on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and HIV status. As a volunteer I supported claimants through the refugee process, served as a witness to their hearings, and helped to address their daily needs of housing, food, and other forms of support.

Tiffany and June worked with me over the period of two years, during which I recorded their oral histories of migration and settlement in Canada. Tiffany and June later participated in a photovoice portion of the project in which they used a digital camera to explore their experiences of migration and settlement in Canada. Oral history interviewing was used in order to provide opportunity for the participants to expand and reflect on their experiences of migration. The personal narratives collected from long and extended oral history interviews provide insight into how refugees make sense of their worlds and how they

perceive the impact of social, political, and cultural change in their everyday lives. In its ability to allow the participant to narrate their story, oral history can serve as a counternarrative to the restrictions often imposed on refugees when sharing their story either through the asylum process or through state media. Usually a linear narrative of the person fleeing oppression from a "backward" country of origin and finding freedom and opportunity in their more "enlightened" and progressive Western country of settlement, regardless if this is their reality or not. Oral history provides space for more complicated and contradictory experience of migration and settlement that are not so linear. In the oral history interviews, each participant provided a life narrative of their experiences in their country of origin, their migration to Canada, the refugee process, and what happened afterwards. Participants sat for two to three oral history interviews, lasting one to two hours. Participants would then receive a copy of the oral history transcript and audio recording, which we would both go over and edit if necessary. Participants had final approval over the completed transcript.

Twenty LGBT+ refugees participated in the oral history portion of the project. Of these, ten participants completed the photography or photovoice portion of the project. I wanted another opportunity for the participants to document and express their experiences of migration and settlement in Canada. Photovoice provided an avenue for participants to creatively document their experiences and feelings beyond the text, allowing for greater complexity and contradictions. The participants were given access to a camera and were responsible for deciding what photographs were produced and the meanings behind them. The only request I made was that the photographs would speak to the participants' experiences of migration and settlement, especially in regards to their feelings or experiences around "home" and "belonging." The project was open to the participants in terms of how they wanted to frame "home" and capture it in their pictures. At the introductory meeting and throughout the picture-taking period, I talked with the participants about how they would go about taking pictures that represented their stories of migration and experiences of home and belonging. I was interested in how they then interpreted these themes through their choice and design of pictures. After the photographs were taken, I sat down with each participant and interviewed them about the meanings and messages attached to them. Participants curated their photographs, much like their oral histories, focusing on specific parts of their immigration experience as well as what home and belonging means to them. Using oral history and photovoice allowed the participants to reflect critically together and circle back to key points or insights about their experiences and narrative constructions of home.

In total the project involved oral histories of five transgender refugees; however, Tiffany and June were the only participants who completed both the oral history and the photovoice portions of the research. Both Tiffany's and June's experiences of migration and settlement are unique and should not be seen as representing all gender minority refugees' experiences. Like all incoming asylum seekers, they came with their own privileges and specific social locations. While there are limitations in focusing on two individuals' stories, much of what Tiffany and June experienced and had to navigate is shared by many incoming gender minority asylum seekers within North America. Examining their stories provides an opportunity to place trans refugees' voices at the center of inquiry and critique. This article is therefore structured around Tiffany's and June's narratives. As the author, I hold interpretative authority and responsibility for selecting and structuring what is shown in this article. The research produced six hours of recorded oral history interviews and thirty-eight photographs created by Tiffany and June. Out of this wealth of data, only eight photographs and a small selection of oral history excerpts are exhibited. Photographs and narratives were selected for the purpose of guiding the reader through Tiffany's and June's experiences of migration, as well as serving as touchstones to address larger systems of power and control imbedded in Canada's immigration system.

The first section focuses on their experiences in their countries of origin and what led them to want to make asylum claims in Canada. This leads into the next section, which addresses June's and Tiffany's experiences of crossing into Canada and encountering the CBSA. In this section, I explore how immigration processes work to hyper-regulate and make hyper-visual incoming trans and queer bodies in order to detain, interrogate, and attempt to deport them. Hyper-regulation refers to additional regulation placed on LGBT+ as well as non-white migrants by Canada's policies and state actors in order to further deter and limit their mobility and access to asylum, immigration and citizenship. Hyper-regulation goes beyond the standard rules and policies for all incoming migrants through the use of carceral border enforcement targeting non-white and LGBTQ+ migrants. Hyper-visibility refers to how gender and sexual minority migrants are heavily surveyed by the state, especially at the border. The third section follows Tiffany's and June's experiences of the Canadian asylum process, starting from the basis of claim and following through to the refugee hearings. Both Tiffany and June were successful in their asylum claims and had relatively positive and affirming experiences in their refugee hearings. Yet, even with these successful outcomes, they experienced pressure to conform to heteronormative and cisnormative scripts and experienced fear of being misunderstood or misrecognized by the IRB deciding members. The final section addresses the pitfalls in documentation and access to health and housing services for trans asylum claimants

and refugees. I look at how the inability for trans refugees to have their Canadian government-issued IDs match their gender presentation and identity only compounds the restricted access to resources critical for survival. I wrap this article up with questions raised from Tiffany's and June's narratives and the need for further research.

"I don't have too many memories because it was so sad": Tiffany's and June's experiences before coming to Canada

Tiffany's story of making a refugee claim in Vancouver is as much about crossing gendered binary borders as it is about crossing national borders. Tiffany was born in a country in East Asia[3]. In her final year living abroad for university, Tiffany began taking hormones to start her gender transitioning. Her country of origin would not renew her passport abroad, and Tiffany was forced to return to her country in order to complete her military service.

Once she arrived in her country of origin, Tiffany tried to get exemption from service as a transwoman. The picture below and her oral history describes the obstacle she faced trying to get this exemption from the military.

Fig. 1: One of the first dresses that Tiffany bought for herself in her country of origin (Source: Photograph by Tiffany, April 2015).

Tiffany: I went to the military all dressed up. I had to meet with the officer there. I wore a wig and shoes. I put on makeup. Even [when studying abroad] I didn't go out in a dress. But, for my life, to survive, I decided to go out in a dress with all makeup and wig.

The officer looked at me. I showed him my hormone medication. I showed him the doctor notes... I explained to him that I was transgender. But, he told me that I couldn't be exempt. I didn't have the documents from the mental hospital.

I asked the officer for an extension so that I could get the documents from the mental hospital. But, the officer said that in order to be exempt I needed to have surgery. I wouldn't be exempt unless I removed my penis and get a vagina. I didn't want to do that. I don't know if I even want to do it now. But, I didn't want to do that in my country. I was so devastated.

I don't have too many memories because it was so sad. I went home and cried. So, after that, I decided to make a refugee claim. (Tiffany, interview, 24 February 2015)

After reading online about a transwoman in her country getting asylum in Canada, Tiffany chose to travel to Canada to claim asylum. She managed to convince her mother to support her decision in order to avoid military service. Tiffany did not tell her mother that she would be making a claim as a transwoman, only as someone not wanting to serve in the military.

Similarly, June's story involves crossing not only national borders, but also gender borders. June grew up in a wealthy middle-class family in Asia. June never fully identified with the gender assigned to him at birth and always felt that he was somehow different from his sister and other girls. He hated the gendered expectations that were placed on him by his family and society.

June: The first time I learned about transgender and made that connection to myself was at my art school in the United States. 'Cause I make a lot of art about myself and I was making art as a gay guy. Yeah, and I talk about my art at the class, and people talking about transgender stuff, and that's how I connected the dots together. (June, interview, 16 November 2013)

Fig. 2: June bought this doll when he was in the United States and used it in several pieces of artwork he created while attending art school. When June moved to Canada, he had his mother mail the doll to him (Source: Photograph by June, January 2014).

June attended art school in the United States. While still living in the United States, June revealed to his mother and sister that he was transgender. June's mother and sister promised to keep his gender identity a secret from June's father out of concern that he would stop financially supporting June. During June's last year of art school, his mother paid for him to undergo top surgery[4].

As June's final year of art school was ending, he was unable to find a job that would sponsor him to stay in the United States. Returning to his country of origin was devastating for June. He was not able to stay on his hormone medication and had to hide his top surgery from his father. His legal status in his country of origin was female, and all of his identity documents reflected this. In order to change his legal status, he would need to spend six months in a mental institution and undergo psychoanalysis for gender identity dysphoria. Even though June had undergone a top surgery, which is a recognized gender-affirming

surgery, he would also need to have a hysterectomy and a phalloplasty. June did not want to be hospitalized and was fearful of the doctors in his country of origin performing these surgeries.

June's country of origin did not legally criminalize gay and lesbian activity; however, the conservative cultural climate heavily marginalized sexual and gender minorities. June was fearful every day of being rejected from his family home because he was transgender. He felt that he would not be able to get a job because his identity documents did not match his gender identity. June read daily news reports of transpersons being violently attacked and murdered. He knew that he could not survive alone in his country. He felt hopeless about his situation until one day, while watching the news, he saw a report about a gay cisgender man in his country successfully gaining asylum in Canada. When June showed this report to his mother and sister, they agreed to support him and bought him a one-way ticket to Canada.

As transpersons, both Tiffany and June faced intense regulation and fear that left them with little choice but to seek asylum. They were both hopeful that Canada would offer them the security, dignity, and protection needed to live their lives free of fear. However, June and Tiffany each experienced gendered regulation from the moment that they entered Canada. The next section explores Tiffany's and June's experiences with the CBSA and the precariousness of trans migrants.

'You are going straight back onto the plane': hyper-regulation of trans bodies at the border

June: This picture represents when I first came here. Very dark. I was scared. (June, interview, 15 January 2014)

Author: What was it like first coming here?

June: I remember when my plane landed in Vancouver. I cried. I was out of that terrible country. I was so relieved. I just cried in my seat... But then it was hard. (June, interview, 16 November 2013)

Fig. 3: June digitally manipulated the photograph from color to black and white (Source: Photograph by June, January 2014).

June arrived in Vancouver, British Columbia, on a visitor's visa in the winter of 2012. When June met with customs officials at the Vancouver International Airport, he showed them his country of origin passport and said that he wanted to

make a refugee claim. June was taken into immediate custody by the CBSA and questioned at the airport detention center for more than 24 hours.

> **June:** The custom guys treated me like shit. I said to the guy, 'I want to make a refugee claim.' And the guy at the counter said, 'Oh no you aren't.' He was like very mad at me for coming here and making a refugee claim.
>
> He then took me to a room. It was very small. No windows. He started like yelling at me, saying stuff like, 'You can't make a refugee claim,' and, 'You are going straight back onto the plane.'
>
> He was trying to find any reason he could send me back. He went through my possessions. Take everything, my possessions, go through my possessions on the table.
>
> But he found my testosterone in the bag and I told him, he was asking me, like, 'Why are you coming here to make a refugee claim?' and all kinds of stuff...
>
> And I didn't know everyone out there. I didn't know who could be listening. I was very afraid to tell him that I was transgender. I was afraid that I would be arrested or attacked...
>
> They kept questioning me. I was put into a room with other people. I was too scared to talk. About every hour they bring me out to be questioned again by someone else...
>
> But I did not want to go. So, I just talked in a really loud voice. I shouted at the officers. I spoke to the translator that in order to change your gender in my country, you have to get surgery. I explain about this procedure and told them that it was dangerous. I told them that the surgery results are horrible. They could kill you. And that I was vulnerable to being raped or killed in my country because I am transgender. I had to shout at him. I was so scared. (June, interview, 16 November 2013)

The CBSA eventually released June, and he was sent to a women's refugee shelter, as it was the only refugee shelter in Vancouver that was willing to house him at the time. The experience with the CBSA officers made June afraid to leave his room. The lasting effects of being detained continued long after June filed for asylum shortly after being released. He experienced panic attacks and an overwhelming fear that he would be put into a detention center. Even after his successful refugee hearing, June still experiences panic when seeing police or the CBSA.

When she arrived in Vancouver in 2014, Tiffany also experienced questioning by the CBSA border guards, but to a much lesser extent than June, because she hid from the CBSA officer her reason for coming into Canada. Before arriving to Canada, Tiffany managed to contact a local lawyer in Vancouver. This lawyer helped Tiffany prepare for entry into Canada by giving her advice on what documents and evidence she needed to bring for her asylum case. The lawyer also

gave Tiffany valuable advice about how to act when she arrived at Canadian customs at the Vancouver International Airport.

> **Tiffany:** One of the most important things he [Tiffany's lawyer in Canada] told me was how to get through the border without being put into detention. Like, not to pack too many bags because it would look like I was staying. I had a return ticket and I had a visitor's visa. So, I was only going to tell the border people that I was here on vacation. I did not want them to know that I was making a refugee claim. I was worried that the border guards would know that I'm transgender so I dressed very androgynous. I did not want them to suspect me.
>
> My lawyer told me to be careful at the border because the customs people are putting refugees in detention. He told me that detention would not be safe for someone like me – you know, a transgender woman. That's why I dressed more androgynous. To not draw attention to me. I was not confident to dress as myself, as a woman. And my passport says male anyways, so they would know right away.
>
> Because detention is prison. That's the thing a lot of people don't know. It is not like a hotel. You are put into a small room, like a prison cell. You have to be in a room with people. With people who have maybe killed or hurt other transgender people like me. You are in there with them. You have no contact with the outside world, only a phone.
>
> And if they want to, they can take you to actual prison. It is worse there. (Tiffany, interview, 24 February 2015)

When Tiffany landed at the Vancouver International Airport, she was not put into detention. However, she was taken in for questioning by the CBSA. Her bags and body were searched. Two CBSA officers questioned Tiffany about her travel plans for more than three hours. Tiffany described feeling very scared of the CBSA officers, but she stuck to her story about coming to Vancouver for a vacation. She showed the CBSA officers her return flight ticket and gave them the address of the place she was going to stay. Eventually, she managed to convince the CBSA officers that she was in Vancouver for vacation and they let her go.

Tiffany's and June's experience with the CBSA should not be seen as unique. Laurie Berg and Jenni Millbank (2013) write that travel is always risky for transpersons. Acquiring travel documents can be challenging. Those transpersons who are able to get travel documents often find that they do not reflect their gender identity. During migration, transpersons run the risks of harassment and sexual and physical violence from both fellow migrants and state officials. National borders become sites where reactive forms of governmental power regulate bodies in order to reinforce and reproduce heterosexist gender norms (Gillespie, 2015). Identity documents, border checks, and detention centers work together to create a structured insecurity in which gender-expansive bodies are forced to perform certain gender identities (Gillespie, 2015). These administrative procedures

work to create an unequal distribution of life chances across migrant populations in which their ability to migrate into a country and claim asylum are limited or denied (Aizura, 2006: 292).

Benjamin Gillespie (2015) writes that in charged heteronormative spaces like the U.S.–Canadian border, bodies are under intense surveillance for any signs of deviancy, especially in regards to gender and sexuality. Under these conditions, gender-expansive and queer bodies often have to assume heteronormative gender roles in order to escape detection and suspicion. Closeting one's gender identity at the border in order to match identity documents, as Tiffany did, may be a solution for some transpersons. However, it comes with a high amount of risk and is not an option available to all transpersons. Tiffany also had to hide her intention to claim asylum. Aren Aizura (2006) writes that Canadian and U.S. border guards can be suspicious of gender or sexually non-normative bodies, questioning their citizenship and limiting their access to the country. Queer and gender-expansive migrants face regulatory state structures (such as increased interrogation, physical searches, and identity document checks by border officials) as non-normative bodies (Seitz, 2017; Murray, 2017; Gaucher and DeGagne, 2014). To put it more bluntly, in a 2014 workshop on refugee detention I attended as member of Rainbow Refugee, one of the lawyers said, 'If you are a gay or transgender person coming to Canada from outside of Western Europe and the United States, be prepared for the border guards to assume you also want to make an asylum claim' (Fieldnotes, January 2014). This assumption of asylum-seeking for gender-variant/nonconforming and queer bodies creates much more risk for trans and queer migrants in their efforts to enter Canada safely without being interrogated by the CBSA and possibly detained.

Immigrants and refugees are detained if the CBSA and Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness consider them to pose an internal flight risk or potential danger to public safety, if they are without a visa, or if they do not have official identity documents and/or have false identity documents. Detention is used as a holding period while the CBSA assess the person's flight and public safety risks and/or retrieve official identity documents. A person can file for asylum while in detention and will be allowed to contact Legal Aid and speak to a lawyer over the phone. If the person passes the review of refugee admissibility, which determines eligibility to make a refugee claim in Canada, the individual can meet with a lawyer while in detention. A member of the Immigration Division of the IRB reviews all detentions after 48 hours. If the Immigration Division decides that the person is not an internal flight risk or a threat to public safety, and/or the person is able to get official legal documentation, the claimant may be released from detention.

Since the 2012 passing of Bill C-31, now known as the "Protecting Canada"s Immigration System Act," the CBSA holds more discretionary power to detain individuals for indefinite periods of time. Bill C-31 provided more grounds for arbitrary detention; for example, if two or more foreign nationals arrive together at the Canadian border, they may be detained on suspicion of smuggling or being trafficked (Silverman, 2014). The CBSA claims that almost 74 percent of detainees, including children, are released within 48 hours (Silverman, 2014: 605). However, any time spent in detention can have detrimental effects on refugees' mental and physical health (Silverman, 2014). Shana Tabak and Rachel Levitan (2014) write that LGBT+ refugees are particularly vulnerable to heightened levels of physical and mental abuse while in detainment (49).

Trans refugees face added vulnerability based on their gender nonconformity. Like trans inmates in non-immigration prison settings in Canada, trans refugees are often placed into either male or female detainment centers based primarily on their genitalia or identity documents rather than on their self-expressed gender identities (Sexton, Jenness, and Sumner, 2010; Tabak and Levitan, 2014). When I visited the Vancouver immigration holding center with Rainbow Refugee in 2013, the CBSA officer told me that they would take into consideration the person's preference for being placed in either a female or male detainee holding area. However, the decision is ultimately in the hands of the CBSA officer, private security officer, or prison official in charge of allocating spaces. I met with refugee claimants at Rainbow Refugee whose requests to be placed in a male or female room were denied because officials determined their room allocation based on their genitalia or on the person's identity documents that listed the gender assigned to them at birth. Tabak and Levitan (2014) report that trans refugees have been strip searched by officials, denied access to hormone medication, and subjected to physical and sexual abuse by fellow detainees.

The abuses LGBT+ persons face in detention have not gone unnoticed. In 2012, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued new detention guidelines for refugees (Tabak and Levitan, 2014), including guidelines to address the special concerns of LGBT+ refugees in detention. The guidelines state that special measures need to be taken to ensure the safety and wellbeing of LGBT+ detainees (Tabak and Levitan, 2014). These measures include access to adequate health care, gender and sexuality sensitivity and human rights training for prison or border officials, and the limited use of solitary confinement. These measures are a step in the right direction for LGBT+ persons currently in detention (UNHCR, 2012). However, as trans activist Dean Spade (2015) warns, these kinds of inclusionary measures in law and detainment facilities further support hierarchical, colonial, and unjust systems of power that regulate bodies and limit life chances for gender-variant individuals. The issue

of LGBT+ refugees facing violence in detention centers goes beyond homophobia or transphobia. Kerry Carrington (2006) writes that the closure of borders and the increased use of disciplinary measures to segregate, detain, and deport undesirable migrants builds on the ongoing history of settler colonialism that depends on technologies of population control to narrowly define those eligible for citizenship and expel those who do not belong. The increased use of detention is just another means through which the Canadian state can control migrants' bodies and chances for refugee protection. It is not surprising that a disproportionate number of people in Canadian detention centers are from the Global South (Silverman, 2014). While the grounds for determining detention are not officially based on country of origin, income status, race, class, gender, or sexuality, migrants are detained for reasons that inevitably fall along social, political, and economic lines. Low-income people, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and sexual and gender minorities face greater limitations in obtaining legal travel documents and qualifying for visas to Canada because of their marginalized status in society. In escaping persecution, they may have no option but to obtain false documents to enter Canada and claim asylum. These circumstances, however, are not taken into account when the CBSA and Immigration Division officers question migrants at the border and later detain them. Instead, they are labeled as irregular migrants and their rights to enter the country and claim asylum are challenged by the CBSA and Immigration Division (Silverman, 2014). This significantly affects refugees' chances of a successful hearing and, in fact, of survival (Tabak and Levitan, 2014).

Tiffany and June had advantages in navigating their entries into Canada. They both had the financial means and social resources to learn that they could make asylum claims based on gender identity, and the ability to fly into Canada to make a claim. June and Tiffany were also fortunate that CBSA officers did not send them to the Richmond Detention Center. For every story like June's and Tiffany's, there are countless more in which sexual and gender minorities enter Canada without prior knowledge that they could make an asylum claim or are sent to detention centers to await their asylum hearings. As a volunteer organization, Rainbow Refugee is not informed whom the CBSA is holding in detention. It is not unusual to hear about an asylum claim based on sexual orientation and gender identity being denied while the person is still being detained without any social or institutional support. Preparing for and undergoing the asylum hearing is an emotionally intense process that can be especially difficult for those who have had to live in fear and shame because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Having to go through the process while also being detained only adds to this difficulty.

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"I was dealing with all of these changes": reinforcing cisnormativity and heteronormativity in the asylum process

Fig. 4: (Tiffany, interview, 20 April 2015) These are a picture of my feet again. This is at the Vancouver Library, where I had my refugee hearing. I was just so happy when I got accepted. Then I realized I am too free now. I was feeling like a bird in a cage before. That was my feeling during my refugee hearing. I could not fly. I was scared. (Source: Photograph by Tiffany, April 20, 2015)

The process of claiming asylum in Canada is predicated on the assumption that the claimant can provide a clear and convincing narrative to the IRB to establish the credibility of a claimant's identity, their fear of persecution, and whether they qualify on specific protected grounds. The first thing the claim-ant must do is submit a basis of claim to the IRB for evaluation. If it as approved, the claimant then has a refugee hearing. The two- to three-month processing time for asylum applications and hearings can leave many claimants feeling rushed and unprepared. Tiffany had a limited time to stay in Canada because of her travel visa and therefore needed to make her asylum claim quickly. She had 30 days to prepare for her asylum hearing once she submitted her basis of claim to the IRB. The process of writing and submitting the basis of claim and being approved can take from two weeks to more than a month depending on the circumstances. The basis of claim is essentially a story that the claimant writes about themselves, their evidence of persecution, and their fear of returning back to their country of origin. The basis of claim serves as the primary document for a person's refugee claim and is the evidence that the IRB deciding member uses to discern a person's eligibility for asylum. Rushing to finish the basis of claim can leave opportunity for mistakes or information being left out that may be vital to a person's claim. Mixing up a date or mistaken omission of a key detail can work to dismantle a claimant's credibility and lead to a loss of their case.

Writing her basis of claim was both cathartic and stressful for Tiffany, as she tried to write her story in a way that would make sense to the deciding IRB member. She was still very much at the beginning of her gender transitioning. As Tiffany explains, her feelings about her gender identity and her body were intermixed with her fear of military service and the difficulties she would face as a transwoman.

Tiffany: It was so hard to write my basis of claim. I wanted to be truthful. But, it also needed to be understood...

If there wasn't the threat of military, I might not have started my transitioning when I did. It is hard to say. It is kind of mixed. I don't have a clear memory of it. There was so much fear. So much was going on...

I don't want you to think that I transitioned only to get out of military service. I was dealing with this when I was writing about my story, you know, for refugee. It was so hard to explain. How can you put this all down in one story? That's why it took me so long to do my basis of claim. It took me a month to write it down. It was so difficult.

I was dealing with all of these changes. My feelings about myself as a woman were growing. I knew that I had thoughts of wanting to become a woman. I was just scared. I was not confident. I was unsure. But the threat of military moved me to transition. I took a leap. I did not have the time to grow. I had to just go for it. I was happy as a gay man. I had a boyfriend back then. I am usually a happy person. But the military service was always there...

But once my body started changing, you know, because of the hormones, I felt shy. I felt more worried about how I look. I was worried about how I look as a woman. I never felt that before. I got all the girl problems of worrying about how I look and if I am pretty. Do I pass? You know, all those insecurities. I did not have those insecurities before. I worried if I made the right choice.

I did not talk about this in my refugee claim. I was worried that it would sound like I was just being transgender to get out of military. But, you know, if I just did the hormone therapy to avoid military service, I wouldn't have kept it up after I got my refugee. I wouldn't keep up with my hormones. I wouldn't keep dressing up and wearing makeup. So, obviously, I am a woman. I wouldn't do all of this if I was not a woman. So, I guess I have to thank the military service for pushing me. (Tiffany, interview, 21 January 2015)

Tiffany's struggle to present a coherent story about her gender identity to the IRB member speaks to the underlying heteronormativity and cisnormativity within immigration and asylum processes that further reinforce binaries around gender and sexuality (Barnes, 2019; Benson, 2008). Tiffany was concerned that if she talked about her experiences and the uncertainties she was currently facing regarding her gender transitioning, then it would look like she was only claiming to be a transwoman in order to avoid military service. This meant that Tiffany had to be selective with the telling of her story so that the IRB member would recognize her as a person experiencing persecution on the basis of being a gender minority. Jena McGill and Kyle Kirkup (2013: 137) write that "the process of asylum claims is built on an unrealistic ideal of a definitive and revelatory self" that may run counter to the necessary fluidity and ambiguity of sexuality, gender identification, and bodily expression. Trans refugees are faced with the task of articulating difficult life experiences and understandings of themselves as gender-expansive persons. Trans refugees are faced not only with the problem of trying to present a complete and coherent story of their lives as gender-expansive

persons, but also with the challenge of trying to explain complex feelings and experiences to a potentially biased and ill-informed IRB member (Jordan and Morrissey, 2013).

Laurie Berg and Jenni Millbank (2013) write that until very recently, the IRB's understanding of gender-expansive refugee claimants was minimal to non-existent. Even today, trans-specific vulnerabilities and persecution remain alarmingly absent from or misleading in the majority of country of origin information documents IRB members use to help evaluate refugee claims (Berg and Millbank, 2013). Sensitivity trainings by outside organizations such as Rainbow Refugee, and greater awareness in the popular media about transpersons, bring better understanding about respectfully interacting with trans individuals. These interventions are helpful, but much more critical work and research is needed. Understanding the complexity of the gender spectrum and that one transgender experience does not represent all trans experiences is needed. Popular representations of binary trans persons makes it difficult for those whose identity, expression, and emotional connection does not fit so neatly. Much like there has been several criticisms around homonormativity within the asylum process, there is a danger of a transnormativity based on a heteronormative construction of gender and whiteness (Rosati et al., 2021). Cultural understandings around gender norms are also critical. In May 2017, the Immigration and Refugee Board released "Chairperson's Guideline 9: Proceedings Before the IRB Involving Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression," which outlines new guidelines around sexual orientation and gender identity refugee claimants in order to promote greater understanding. Section 6 of the "Chairperson's Guideline" specifically addresses avoiding stereotyping when making findings of fact. These guidelines emphasize the importance to recognize diversity in sexual and gender minority refugee claimants that may challenge Western norms around sexual and gender identities.

The "Chairperson's Guideline" is a major step and victory in advocacy for sexual and gender minority refugee claimants. Recent research has shown that while the language provided in the guideline is useful in addressing stereotyping in IRB decision-making, it still is not inclusive of the particular experiences of sexual and gender minority persecution (Rinaldi and Fernando, 2019). Nick Múle (2019) writes that despite the "Chairperson's Guideline," there remains an emphasis on proving identity (in this case sexual and gender identity) over vulnerability to persecution. This emphasis on identity creates a barrier for many sexual and gender minority refugees in gaining asylum, as many are still forced to prove their sexuality and gender identity rather than discuss why they are fearful of persecution based on the particular gender and sexual political and cultural dynamics happening in their country of origin. Vulnerability to persecution may

Fig. 5: (June, interview, 15 January 2014) Look how little this pinecone is. It's in this big hand. I see it as myself at my [refugee] hearing. I was so afraid. They [the Canadian Government] had me in their hand. I had to hope that I would be okay. (Source: Photograph by June, January 2014)

not rest solely on identity, but on positionality of the claimant and their access to resources and protections. For example, Mexico has recently granted same-sex marriage across its thirty-two states, yet vulnerability to persecution still remains, especially for Indigenous, rural, and poor sexual and gender minorities.

Understanding the particularities of vulnerability is essential in accessing a person's need for asylum. Identity alone cannot always answer this. While there is language in the "Chairperson's Guideline" on being inclusive to a wider range of sexual and gender identities, the emphasis on identity as being the basis for asylum needs to be questioned. It still constricts sexual and gender minority refugees to a limited narrative of Western sexuality and gender identities in which stereotypes and misunderstanding can occur. The current Canadian refugee system still does not take into account sexual and gender minority claimants. The short processing time of asylum claims – two to three months, as mentioned above – means there is little time for claimants to prepare before they are standing in front of the IRB being questioned for their asylum decision. An IRB member is appointed to review the supporting documents (such as the basis of claim, government reports, photographs, news clippings, and letters of support). The IRB member then holds a private hearing with the claimant, their lawyer, a translator (if needed), and witnesses (if available). At the hearing, the IRB member interrogates the claimant about their story and their need for asylum. The IRB member makes a decision on the basis of the claimant's credibility and the supporting evidence. It is this person who determines whether the refugee claimant is granted asylum. If given a negative decision, the claimant may have the option to appeal the decision with the IRB or the Canadian Criminal Courts. However, the chances of success are then much lower.

June: I was really worried about my hearing. I thought it would be difficult. Like, the person wouldn't know what transgender is and I would have to explain it to him. Or he would, like, call me a woman or something. I heard bad stories from other people from Rainbow Refugee...

I heard they [IRB members] called them [claimants] the wrong name or gender. Even when they were corrected. They kept calling them that. Made them really upset. I heard that they [IRB members] not believing them [claimants] or thinking that they are only transgender to get into Canada.

Author: What were you the most afraid of in the hearing?

June: I would not be taken seriously. I am little. I get mistaken for a girl. Even doctors treated me like shit when I first got on hormones. Saying things like, 'Oh, honey, are you sure?' Treated me like I was some confused girl.
So why would it be different? I felt that I had to prove myself. I had to make him believe that I am transgender. (June, interview, 16 November 2013)

Sexual and gender minority refugees must negotiate Western-based norms and biases regarding sexuality and gender identity in order to successfully make the case for asylum (Jordan and Morrissey, 2013). David Murray's (2017) work focuses on how sexual and gender minorities must worry about being rejected because they do not appear to be gay or trans enough. The 2017 "Chairperson's Guideline" is the first step in addressing biases in refugee decision-making by IRB board members, but it does not go far enough in regards to reinforcing norms around gender identity and trans experiences. Trans refugees must navigate a tangled web of social norms around gender and sexuality in order to successfully convey to the IRB not only that they are gender-expansive (and therefore members of a particular social group), but also that they warrant asylum based on a fear of persecution. This can pressure trans refugee claimants to reproduce normative and linear narratives around their gender and sexual identities in order to be recognized as trans by the IRB (Jordan and Morrissey, 2013; Berg and Millbank, 2013). Trans scholar Susan Stryker (2013) writes about the legal and discursive framing of gender-expansive persons in North America that reinforces normative social values around sexuality and gender. These normative social values further cement the gender binary as something that is natural and normal. The gender binary erases trans subjectivity and bodies by refusing to recognize gender fluidity and oppressing gender-expansive individuals.

Jena McGill and Kyle Kirkup (2013) write that the problem with the trans subject created in the media and in legal discourse is that it reflects only one version of trans lives and reifies trans subjects in a singular way that does not challenge the gender binary. Transpersons are underrepresented in the media and in legal discourse. The few instances in which transpersons are represented often depict them one-dimensionally as people who want to fully transition to the opposite side of the gender binary (Gilden, 2008). This may be the experience for many transpersons; however, it is not the only experience. Some trans persons refuse the gender binary altogether and do not wish to be associated with either gender category. The dominant narrative also does not take into account cultural differences or the social, political, and economic factors that also play a part in a person's experience of being trans and gender-variant. The popular framing of transpersons conflates gender, biological sex, and genitalia as one and the same, inherently connected. The exclusionary effects of upholding a single model of

trans experience – not taking into account social and cultural differences, and overly conflating sex, genitalia, and gender – cast those seeking to challenge the binary understandings of sex and gender, as well as those with fluid or undefined gender identities, outside the legal domain of rights and recognition (McGill and Kirkup, 2013: 137). Trans individuals who do not fit into this narrative of trans subjectivity are forced to adopt normative sex and gender values and undergo invasive and costly procedures in order to be legally recognized, or they are ignored entirely and suffer further human rights abuses.

June: My judge [IRB deciding member] was a guy. I was scared, but he was very respectful. I was his first transgender case. He asked me at the beginning what gender I preferred to be called. He even asked, like, to correct him if he said something wrong about transgender. It was surprising, you know. I mean, I never heard of this before. (June, interview, 16 November 2013)

Tiffany: I remember shaking so much. I was so scared. I remember the dress I was wearing. I really liked my judge. She kept smiling at me and that made me feel a little less scared. She also said that she would only use my name, not my birth name, in the hearing and asked me if it was okay. I was so happy to hear this. I was really surprised. (Tiffany, interview, 21 January 2015)

While asylum applicants like Tiffany and June can gather supporting evidence, witnesses, and prepare for their asylum hearings, ultimately it is left to a particular IRB deciding member to determine if the claimant is credible, has proven fear of persecution, and therefore warrants asylum. The IRB members asked clarifying questions, but ultimately let Tiffany and June tell their stories without interruption and little interrogation. Their experiences with asylum are examples of what can go right and what can go wrong in the asylum process for trans refugees. When an IRB member makes the effort to fully understand a claimant's story on their own terms, then things can go right. When the IRB member tries as much as possible to make the claimant feel respected, the claimant will feel much more comfortable telling their story and arguing for asylum. Fortunately for June and Tiffany, they were assigned IRB members who took deliberate care to respect their preferred names and gender pronouns. Even though they were asked tough questions about their past experiences and fear of persecution, they felt that the IRB members assigned to them made an effort to make them feel comfortable. The asylum hearing was an affirming experience for each of them, and they were both granted asylum. Yet, for every right there is wrong. Trans refugees like Tiffany and June must work with and against normative gender and sexuality narratives in order for the IRB to recognize them as gender minorities. June's fears about not being understood or believed to be trans are based on his witnessing other trans refugees' struggles with the IRB. Tiffany's and June's struggles to present coherent and credible stories about

their gender identities to the IRB members speak to the underlying heteronormativity within immigration and asylum processes that further reinforces binaries around gender.

"Nobody cares about refugees here": continued barriers to documentation for trans asylum seekers

At the 2015 Mosaic LGBT+ Newcomers' Workshop, in a room filled with settlement workers, community activists, and representatives from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Tiffany stood and presented her story of struggle and hope as a transwoman refugee. This was the first time that Tiffany had spoken publicly about being a transwoman and a refugee.

Tiffany: I am happy being here as a woman in Canada. But, there are also pros and cons as a new immigrant...

Fig. 6: Tiffany took this picture while she was awaiting her refugee hearing in order for her to document that she was here in Canada – that it was not a dream. (Source: Photograph by Tiffany, April 2015)

Today, I would like to share some of my stories here. First is employment. I am still looking for a job... However, even if I'm about to get hired, I still face problems, because I'm still classified as male on my work permit. To change my gender on my work permit, the Canadian government told me that I would need a proof of sex reassignment surgery...

I also have a travel document, which is our 'passport' for refugee people. I sent my doctor's letter to prove that I am a transgender woman. But, they said I would still need medical documentation to confirm that I have undergone a change of sex and the surgery is complete.

I have heard that people in China have been strip-searched by customs officials at airports when their passport doesn't match their gender. People at the American border have been questioned for hours...

Secondly, housing is a big issue for me as well. If your gender does not match with your ID, it's very difficult to find a home. My transgender woman friend is still hiding from her landlord who lives on the same floor. He even told her that she will go to hell because of her sexuality and gender. Now she is always using the stairs and checks her entrance to make sure the landlord is not around. And it's her apartment! (Tiffany, speaking at Mosaic LGBT+ Newcomers' Workshop, Trout Lake Community Centre, 30 January 2015)

Trans individuals face many institutional and material barriers in reclassifying their gender in identity and citizenship documents (birth certificates, work permits, passports). This creates difficulties in being legally recognized by the state as a person warranting human rights protection (Spade, 2015). Until very recently, transpersons remained largely invisible in Canadian law, with most of the human rights laws against discrimination based on gender identity being inferred but not explicitly addressed.

Fig. 7: (Tiffany, interview, 20 April 2015) This is SkyTrain. These are my feet. I wanted to take a picture of my feet. When you look at them, you just see feet. They could be a woman's feet. There is no judgment. I can go about my day. I can pretend and imagine a life without the stress of being transgender, of being unemployed, of not having a family. I can just be two happy feet. No more discrimination. I can imagine these feet going to a happy life. You know, going home from work. Going home to a husband. Time can stop. Why do I need to hide? These are my happy feet. (Source: Photograph by Tiffany, April 2015)

In April 2014, the Vital Statistics Information Regulation (Vital Statistics) on gender reclassification for government-issued IDs was modified for Canadian citizens. Gender-affirming surgery is no longer required for Canadian citizens wanting to reclassify their gender on their birth certificates, driver's licenses, and passports. Individuals wanting to change their gender marker on their identification need only one affidavit and a doctor's letter. This change was praised as an important step forward to removing the medical stigma against trans individuals and giving them greater autonomy in their lives. However, as much as this has been a triumph in transgender rights and protection, the process still privileges those who have the financial means and citizenship to change their documentation. Trans refugees are often overlooked in the majority of the discussions around Canadian transgender rights and laws. The majority of advances in better access to changing documentation and medical care are still inaccessible for trans asylum seekers (Gowin et al., 2017: 338). A case in point is Tiffany's experience of trying to change her Canadian government-issued identification documents.

When Tiffany made a refugee claim, the Ministry of Immigration took her passport and all supporting documentation into custody. She was assigned a temporary refugee identification card based on her passport, which listed her gender as male and used her birth name. The refugee identification card serves as the primary source of identification in Canada for refugee claimants, and Tiffany was unable to change the information on her card while she was a refugee claimant. When Tiffany was accepted as a Convention Refugee, she applied for a work permit, permanent residency, a British Columbia identification card

(BCID), and a travel document. As part of the application process, she submitted the IRB's written positive decision on her refugee claim, hoping that the claim's basis on her being trans would allow her to use her female gender and name on the new documents. Tiffany learned, however, that although her claim listed her as a transwoman, she did not meet the eligibility requirements set by the Canadian federal government to use anything other than her birth gender on government-issued documents. Tiffany would first need to apply for and receive her permanent residency, which can take up to two years for approval and costs around 500 dollars. She would then need to resubmit her application in order to change her gender identity and name, which could take up to a year. Until then, she would not be able to change her name and gender identity on her work permit and travel document. When Tiffany went to the IRCC office in 2014, she was told that she could possibly bypass this process if she had gender-affirming surgery (specifically, a vaginoplasty). Tiffany explained that when she talked to other trans refugees who were going through the same ordeal, they heard similar or conflicting advice on how to change their documentation. This left many in a state of confusion and fear that they would have to wait another five years before they could fully change their government-issued IDs.

Fig. 8: (June, interview, 15 January 2014) This is another picture from my room. I spent the whole winter inside, mostly. I don't like going out. You feel so much... I don't know... it makes me feel anxious... This place is not good, too. I just have my room. My cat is here. That's important... but I don't want to live here. (Source: Photograph by June, January 2014)

June: After I got it [refugee acceptance]... I was happy. But, it was also difficult. My documents were not right and it was hard for me to get a job. It is like where I came from. Gave me the same feeling. The only thing different is now I am alone here. I don't have my family here. It made it worse for me... for my health. (June, interview, 16 November 2013)

June's experiences matched Tiffany's, as he was unable to change his gender and name on his identification documents until after he was approved as a permanent resident. Being unemployed and living on social assistance, June was not able to afford the fee to apply for permanent residency and had to slowly save up for it. After two years, he applied for permanent residency in 2016 and waited another year for it to be approved. Once he received it, he still had to wait to file for a change of name and gender. His IDs not matching his gender and name has made it difficult for him to apply for jobs and housing, as he has to reveal to potential employers and landlords that he is transgender. Even three

years after the Canadian government reformed the procedures for changing name and gender identity on government-issued IDs, it is still an unclear and confusing process for many trans refugees. This not only adds more stress to an already stressed population, but can be a matter of survival in terms of access to housing, employment, and other services.

This regulatory matrix creates a precarious scenario for trans refugees, who do not enjoy the rights and protection of Canadian citizenship. Trying to navigate an immigration and health care system that does not take into account barriers around language and finances is difficult. Even the privileges Tiffany and June had in terms of having the language competency and the financial means to come to Canada and claim asylum did not save them from being denied their right to have their identification documents match their name and gender. The inconsistency and lack of consideration around trans refugees' needs, not only by IRCC but also by mainstream transgender rights services and organizations, has further silenced and marginalized trans refugees. It is unclear how future legislation around documentation will affect trans refugees. The current approval of a non-binary or third gender identity category marker on Canadian passports and birth certificates is celebrated as a progressive move to be more inclusive of gender-expansive individuals. However, whether or how this will impact gender minority asylum seekers and Convention Refugees is very much left to be determined. Trans refugees' voices and concerns should be given a greater platform and consideration in immigration policy as well as in larger discussions around trans rights and protections.

"Maybe my story will help other transwomen refugees like me": concluding key points and further research possibilities

Author: What are you hoping to get out of telling your story?

Tiffany: Well, for me, I am not really expecting anything personally. I just wanted to tell my story. Maybe my story will help other transwomen refugees like me. I guess if it can be used to help inform people about what we go through as refugees, that would be good. I'm not sure that my story will help another refugee learn from my mistakes. But maybe if other people, people who aren't refugees, could listen to my story, maybe they will think differently about refugees.

They would see that Canada has a lot of problems still around trans and gay people. It isn't what I thought it would be. Maybe they will see how hard we work. They won't see us, like, as abusing the system... So, yeah. If my story can change one person's idea about transpeople, refugees, that would be good. (Tiffany, interview, 21 January 2015)

The stories and photographs Tiffany and June shared reveal the underlying heteronormativity and cisnormativity within Canadian immigration that regulates and marginalizes gender minority refugee bodies, preventing them from gaining asylum and accessing needed resources. Oral history and photovoice provide a methodological avenue in which the complexity of Tiffany and June's experiences are documented. Their stories and photographs create an alternative archive of trans experiences of forced migration and settlement. This alternative archive highlights the experiences of displaced trans and gender-expansive persons and resists the dominant heteronormative narratives that uphold the gender binary, thereby creating a new narrative space in which to challenge the institutional structures that threaten trans refugees' security and chances for survival. Trans asylum seekers experience a contradiction when entering Canada. They are marginalized by an immigration system that is not inclusive to non-cisgender immigrants and therefore not accommodating to their specific needs. At the same time, they experience heightened surveillance at the Canadian border due to being trans. They are both marginalized and hypervisual. The hyper-regulation by and marginalization within the Canadian state that Tiffany and June experienced is a form of gender violence that ultimately goes back to the structuring of immigration and citizenship around strictly cisgender bodies. Those who do not fit within narrow definitions of transgender identity run the risk of being detained, deported, and refused asylum. Crossing into the Canadian state is a risky and potentially life-threatening experience for queer and trans migrants, as they may be detained, interrogated, and even deported. Trans migrants must navigate a border security system that makes them hypervisual and therefore hyper-suspicious. Detainment can have detrimental effects on the mental and physical wellbeing of trans asylum seekers, making it difficult for them to prepare for their asylum hearings successfully. The dependence on a single IRB member's decision about a refugee claimant's credibility at the asylum hearing means potential for bias as well as misunderstanding of a trans refugee's experiences and need for asylum. Tiffany's and June's stories are examples of what can go right in an asylum hearing, but unfortunately there are many more hearings that do not turn out so well for the trans refugee claimants.

In addition to the challenges of entering and gaining asylum in Canada, trans refugees' ability to change their documentation is restricted, thereby limiting their access to resources. The state's dependence on a gender binary medical model in refugee documentation has meant the refusal to recognize refugee claimants' transgender status. When a government-issued ID does not match gender identity and presentation, the repercussions can range from a loss of housing and employment to targeted attacks against trans refugees by outsiders.

Much more research needs to be done to understand the particular experiences of trans refugees seeking asylum in countries like Canada and elsewhere. While the research conducted for this report was carried out five years ago, it still remains to be fully understood what the recent changes to Canadian government-issued IDs will mean for trans and gender-expansive asylum seekers. More research is needed on the impact of the 2017 "Chairperson's Guideline" on IRB decision-making. Inclusive documentation and guidelines for the IRB in determining cases are an important step in addressing systemic failures in Canada's immigration system. Yet even with new processes and guidelines in place, navigating asylum as a trans and gender-expansive person does not automatically easier. Bias remains in the Canadian IRB as well as an impossible asylum processing timeline which makes it impossible for trans and gender-expansive to prepare successfully for their asylum hearings. Currently, Canada is seeing a surge in asylum seekers, many of whom are traveling through or coming from the United States due to immigration changes brought on by the former Trump administration, such as the remain in Mexico policy and the decrease in acceptance rates for incoming asylum seekers. There is limited research on how trans refugees are navigating increased security at the U.S.–Canadian border. In addition to further research on immigration processes, more work needs to be done on access to health and social services for trans refugees. Housing remains a key issue, as does employment. More documentation and amplification of trans refugees' voices on these matters is critical.

notes

1 In this article I deliberately use the term 'trans' instead of transgender or other gender-expansive identity labels as a way to show the diversity of identities, expressions, and ways of being within the larger gender minority community. I use gender-expansive instead of gender-nonconforming as a way to challenge heteronormative language around the gender binary as being the norm.

2 Tiffany and June are pseudonyms selected by the participants.

3 As part of the confidentiality agreement signed by the participants and by me, I am unable to disclose the participants' exact countries of origin. I am able to refer to the general geographical location of the area.

4 Top surgery is breast surgery that ranges from removal or reduction of breast tissue to enhancing the size of breast tissue through medical stretchers or implants.

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