RESEARCH ARTICLE

"*I WON'T GIVE YOU A STORY OF SUFFERING*": QUEER MIGRANTS' EVERYDAY RESISTANCE IN İSTANBUL

Öykü Aytaçoğlu
University of Paris 8 & Aix-Marseille University

Cosimo Pica
University of Tours & Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (INALCO)

ABSTRACT: This article explores how queer migrants' experiences reveal the complex dynamics of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and everyday resistance. Utilising a socio-anthropological and geographical approach, it examines the intersections of migration, queerness, and resistance in Türkiye - a leading refugee-hosting country with diverse origins driven by various motivations. Focusing on queer migrants who navigate among political and gender boundaries that often homogenise migration narratives, the study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Türkiye from 2019 to 2024. It highlights the structural violence and oppression shaping their experiences and investigates İstanbul as a potential queer oasis for life experiences that have been positioned on the margins of dominant gender and racial norms. Furthermore, the article examines how vulnerability is transformed into everyday resistance, showcasing diverse narratives that subvert the prevailing portrayal of migrants as solely suffering. Based on firsthand accounts, it illustrates how people endure within heteronormative and oppressive structures through the types of tactics we suggest referring to as evasive, solidarity, belonging and claiming.

KEYWORDS: everyday resistance, sexual and gender-based violence, intersectionality, queer migration, Türkiye, vulnerability.

CORRESPONDING AUTHORS: oykuaytacoglu@gmail.com, cosimo.pica7@gmail.com

1. Introduction

I know you were expecting a more sad and miserable story. [...] No, because when it comes to talking about myself, I don't like [...] talking about [...] misery. Okay, we all know my life is hard. And we trans people all have difficulties [...]. But what matters is how we came out of it. What are we doing? I know it's very difficult. I know some of us aren't very privileged. But we have to keep pushing. I've been pushing since the first day (Manel, April 2024, İstanbul).

Puffing cigarette smoke toward the window of an apartment in Kurtuluş, İstanbul, Manel, a Tunisian woman in her mid-twenties, let a cynical smile curl on her lips. Then, without hesitation, she delivered her verdict: "*If you're expecting a tale of suffering, you've come to the wrong person.*" Her words, like the smoke she exhaled, hung in the air—defiant, refusing to conform. This reluctance to adopt the conventional narrative of vulnerability was not unusual in our ethnographic encounters on queer migration in Türkiye. Manel's refusal to conform to this expected framing underscores this article's aim: to explore how queer migrants circumvent structural violence, engaging in critical and potentially transformative practices that reshape dominant sexual and racial norms.

The governance of migration in Türkiye, like in many contexts, reinforces vulnerabilities through both legal and social mechanisms. The asylum system, in particular, compels people to frame their experiences in terms of suffering, often requiring them to embody vulnerability and queerness to establish their deservingness in the eyes of institutional actors and civil society organizations (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Koçak 2020). While this can increase access to international protection, it also imposes a form of symbolic violence, limiting agency (Freedman 2019). However, vulnerability is not mere powerlessness—it can also be a tool for contesting injustice (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016). In this light, our analysis seeks to illuminate how tacit forms of resistance emerge and are negotiated in everyday life. While taking the case of queer migration towards Türkiye as an example, an analysis is proposed in this article with a view to explore the tacit resistance practices employed to navigate social spaces and addresses how queer[1] migrants[2] navigate, negotiate, and perform in ways that counteract intersectional violence. Türkiye's geopolitical position as a country of emigration, immigration, and transit makes it a key site for analyzing diverse migration trajectories, including those of queer people.

This study seeks to contribute to critical perspectives on queer migration by shifting away from neo-colonial representations of suffering and victimhood. Instead, it explores the intersections of migration, queerness, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), with a particular focus on the city of İstanbul as a space of both constraint and possibility. For this purpose, first, we discuss the ethnographic approach and the ways in which fieldwork shaped our analysis. Second, we examine queer migration in Türkiye through an intersectional lens, considering systemic power structures and urban experiences in İstanbul. Third, we explore the relationship between vulnerability and resistance, surpassing dominant narratives of victimhood. Finally, we analyze everyday resistance tactics, which we propose to categorize as evasive, solidarity, belonging, and claiming, before concluding with broader reflections on the scope of resistance and the violence embedded in social dynamics.

2. Overview on the ethnographic approach

[1] Our interlocutors use various terms, depending on time and context, to refer to identifications related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI). In this article, we choose the term "queer" as a generic and critical term to designate life experiences that stand in opposition to heterosexual and cisgender norms, considered legitimate and dominant. The term also allows us to capture the complexity of emotions, sexualities, and lived experiences, and to critique fixed binary categories, especially in asylum contexts.

[2] The corpus is diverse, as it brings together individuals with irregular status in Istanbul, beneficiaries of international protection in resettlement countries, and those holding foreign student status. This diversity stems from the multiplicity of legal categories and migratory trajectories, which led us to use the term "migrant" as a generic designation, regardless of the statuses assigned by states.

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2024 as part of our doctoral research projects. Initially centered in İstanbul, Türkiye, this fieldwork expanded through interviews with people living or having lived in Ankara and Yalova (Türkiye), Paris and Marseille (France), and Toronto (Canada). In total, approximately forty participants took part in the study, with most conversations recorded and transcribed, while others contributed through informal exchanges and field notes. Besides these encounters, sustained relationships developed with several interlocutors, maintained over time through various communication channels, particularly digital social networks. Participants were reached without prior selection based on country of origin, age, legal status, place of residence, or specific sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI). Consequently, this research includes queer people whose sexual practices, orientations, gender identities, lifestyles, or desires are delegitimized, and who migrated to Türkiye for various reasons—most often as part of forced displacement.

This group includes diverse SOGI identities (gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, trans, intersex) and origins (Afghanistan, East Turkestan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia). Their socio-professional backgrounds vary, spanning students, translators, non-governmental organization (NGO) coordinators, artists, hairdressers, and sex workers. This diversity also shapes the dynamics of accessing the field, as queer migration remains largely invisible. Interviews took place in participants' homes, queer-friendly third places (cafés, bars in İstanbul and Ankara), or online for those elsewhere in Türkiye or in third countries. Discussions with state offices, NGOs, and associations were conducted in their workplaces or online. The interviews traced migration trajectories, exploring motivations, lived experiences, daily life in İstanbul, solidarity networks, activism, asylum processes, and tactics of resistance. With informed consent, most were recorded and transcribed, and all anonymized through pseudonyms. We sincerely thank all participants for their time, for sharing their stories, and for their invaluable contributions to this research—of which this article is one outcome.

In addition to recorded interviews, informal and unstructured interactions enriched our understanding of participants' sense of belonging. The extended duration of our research fostered connections that revealed often-hidden aspects of intimacy and daily life. Throughout this process, we reflected on our positionality and the power dynamics between researchers and participants. To foster more equitable interactions, we engaged in collaborative dialogues, addressing power imbalances despite communicating in languages like Turkish, English, or French rather than our or their native tongues. We involved participants in discussions on how findings were framed and presented, ensuring our research remained a shared body of knowledge rather than solely the researcher's interpretation. This approach shaped our ethnographic work, emphasizing horizontal relationships and ongoing dialogue. It was within this spirit of collaboration that encounters like those with Manel and Nour took shape, offering glimpses into the ways they crafted and narrated their own stories. At their home, they shared their documentary on their life, merging personal narratives with İstanbul's nightlife. After watching their self-directed trailer, we collectively explored funding possibilities. Later, Mona presented the work at a queer migration workshop we co-organized in İstanbul, and with their consent, we screened it in Paris at an academic event. A similar exchange unfolded with Luqa, a Syrian friend who lived in İstanbul from 2013 to 2014 before resettling in Spain. A key connection to queer Syrians and Iranians in Türkiye, he later began writing songs and a book reflecting on exile, imagined return, and queer love. Our discussions on his creative work deepened both our research and his artistic exploration, reinforcing a reciprocal relationship. These encounters extended past conventional ethnographic engagements, questioning the idea of the research field as a space one simply enters and exits. Together, we explored how to restitute participants' narratives, ensuring they remained central in determining when, how, and to whom their stories were shared. These collaborative approaches, transcending traditional research frameworks, are fundamental to rethinking the researcher-interviewee relationship.

This work reflects a collaborative approach, merging empirical research and theoretical reflection. The ethnographic data originate from one author's doctoral fieldwork, while analysis and writing were a joint effort. Our research converged in an İstanbul-based research center, where we explored violence and resistance in migration, focusing on their simultaneous (in)visibility—both present and obscured in urban spaces. One of us examines the reconfiguration of Turkishness in relation to migration in cities, while the other studies on the

deconstruction of dominant racial and gendered boundaries in migration contexts. Our work intersects in analyzing symbolic, spatial, national, and gendered borders within Türkiye, particularly regarding queer migration. This shared focus led us to co-author this article, aiming to break away from criminalizing, victimizing, or essentializing migration narratives. Committed to studying subaltern resistance, we draw from existing literature to offer alternative perspectives on how oppression is both experienced and contested. By bridging our fields, we examine everyday resistance tactics in queer migration and how violence and resistance can remain partially visible or strategically obscured depending on spatial, political, and social contexts.

3. Reasoning queer migration and intersectionality in the context of Türkiye

Over the past two decades, research on queer migration has called for a critique to reductive and neocolonial representations of these mobilities (Manalansan 2006; Jenicek et al. 2009; Aizura 2012; Camminga 2018). However, much of the scholarship remains focused on South-to-North trajectories, reinforcing a linear narrative in which migration is framed as a journey from repression to freedom or a heroic quest for liberation (Luibhéid 2005, xxv). This perspective risks reproducing homonationalist discourses (Puar 2007) and neocolonial logics, positioning the Global North as the only geography where queer people can survive (Camminga and Marnell 2022, 2). Such an emphasis overlooks alternative mobility patterns and reduces queer migrants to simplified figures that align with dominant expectations. In response, Luibhéid and Chávez (2021) analyze borders, detention, and deportation regimes as interconnected crises disproportionately affecting those already marginalized by race, class, gender, and sexuality. While queer asylum policies have, in some cases, facilitated political recognition and resettlement, they have also been instrumentalized by states to advance homonationalist agendas, selectively integrating certain migrants while excluding others (Puar 2007).

Migration policies remain shaped by racialized scripts (Molina 2014), heteronormativity, and state control over legibility, restricting queer people's right to safety. The contradictions of humanitarian discourse further complicate these realities, as seen in the case of Syrian asylum seekers in Türkiye, who are often granted asylum only when their persecution is framed primarily in terms of homophobia rather than war and displacement (Saleh 2021). Recognizing queer not only as an identity category but as an analytical framework, these studies highlight how sexuality and gender shape both migration constraints and strategies of endurance. Besides, the governance of migration increasingly relies on waiting as a mechanism of control, subjecting migrants to prolonged uncertainty. Tschalaer (2022) demonstrates that waiting is not merely a bureaucratic process but a racialized and sexualized form of state violence, disproportionately affecting queer asylum seekers. While migrants in the Global North are often caught in accelerated bureaucratic hurdles, those in Türkiye and other peripheral states face deliberate delays through prolonged administrative processes (İkizoğlu Erensü 2019, 163). Building on these discussions, this article explores how heteronormativity, migration policies, and sexuality shape the experiences of those fleeing persecution based on their SOGI (Luibhéid and Chávez 2020, 4). Türkiye, positioned at the crossroads of transit, immigration, and emigration, provides a crucial lens for analyzing diverse migration trajectories beyond dominant South-to-North narratives. The study focuses on the past decade, marked by the rise of an authoritarian national-Islamist, patriarchal, and heteronormative regime, which has reshaped migration policies, media representations, and legal frameworks. In this context, it is essential to examine how queer migrants navigate state and social violence, as well as the realities of mobility that do not always fit into conventional migration models.

Estimating the number of queer migrants in Türkiye is difficult, as no systematic data records SOGI. However, reports provide rough figures: in 2017, about 2,000 Syrians identifying as homosexual applied for resettlement (Kıvılcım 2017), while another study estimated 700–800 queer exiles, mostly from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Gessen 2018). Academic, media, and artistic works explore how queer migrants navigate intersecting social, economic, and political realities. In Türkiye, intersectionality is key to analyzing race- and gender-based oppression. Karakaşlı (2008) described Armenian women's "double otherness" as *çifte kavrulmuş* ("double roasted"), while Yıldırım (2018) examined shifting identity boundaries among Alevi

LGBT[3] people. Sevli (2019) used *ötekinin ötekisi* ("the other among the other") to describe Kurdish Alevi identity. Shakhsari (2013, 2014) critiques citizen/refugee binaries, calling for a rethinking of rights, refugeehood, and citizenship. Other studies analyze gendered exile, focusing on Syrian and LGBTI refugees' access to protection, work, healthcare, and social aid while exposing discrimination (Kıvılcım and Baklacıoğlu 2015). Bayramoğlu and Lünenborg (2018) highlight the media's role in empowering queer refugees migrating from the Middle East to Germany via Türkiye. Recent research examines queer asylum seekers' precarity. Renda (2019) describes Syrian gay men's experiences as a "double burden" (*çifte külfetli*), while Sarı (2020) explores how Iranian lesbians adjust narratives to fit institutional expectations. Koçak (2020a, 2020b) critiques UNHCR's asylum process, showing how queer refugees must "prove" their worthiness. Saleh (2020) questions the "suffering Syrian gay refugee" trope, proposing alternative narratives of queer migration. Kalfa Topateş (2021) describes fragmented trajectories of LGBTI refugees in Denizli, while Şahin (2021) explores homemaking as a form of belonging. Yıldız (2022) analyzes the bureaucratic "discursive labyrinth" faced by Iranian bear asylum seekers. Aytaçoğlu (2023) investigates how heterosexism and nationalism shape structural violence in Türkiye, while İstanbul offers spaces of resistance. Yarıcı (2023) examines Mr. Gay Syria, highlighting intersectional solidarity. This scholarship reveals not only constraints but also survival strategies, legal navigation, and community building. Our article further explores how queer migrants negotiate violence and create resistance spaces.

4. Between constraint and opportunity: queer migrants in İstanbul's landscape

Nation-states have historically sought to standardize identities, enforcing linguistic, ethnic, and sexual uniformity through patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks (Andrews and Kalpaklı 2005; Kuru 2006; Kontovas 2012). As Athanasiou and Butler (2016) argue, these systems do not merely exclude those who do not conform but actively produce "disposable" bodies—identities rendered illegible within national imaginaries. Najmabadi (2005), studying the Iranian context, highlights how state institutions reshape gender and sexuality, criminalizing homosexuality while recognizing trans identities as a form of state-sanctioned legibility. These dynamics force people into complex identity negotiations, a reality Bâbak, a gay Iranian in his early thirties, experienced firsthand:

> In Iran, [...] if you have a tendency to sleep with the same sex, you are not gay, you are in fact trans. They push you to have a sex exchange [...]. Growing up in this society, I was telling myself, I don't look like a man, I don't look like a woman, where am I? [...] The more I acted feminine, the more they understood me. I was kind of conflicted while growing up. The government completely eliminates homosexual behaviours [...] They always want to put you in a box that they want to treat you according to. (Bâbak, October 2021, İstanbul)

For queer migrants in Türkiye, systemic violence, exclusion, and precarity are exacerbated by their foreign status. This context underscores how normative constructions of national and sexual citizenship shape belonging. Over the past two decades, Türkiye's neoliberal policies and conservative religious values have reinforced traditional gender roles, restricting queer migrants' access to public life, employment, and housing, while rising xenophobia and racism further isolate them. Within this intersectional framework, SOGI, migration status, and class expose queer migrants to multi-layered discrimination. State-led demonization, political-media narratives, and moralistic rhetoric contribute to their continued exclusion and delegitimization.

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[3] While this article opts to use the term "queer migration", the others, such as LGBT, and LGBTI appear fluidly throughout the text, as we respect and retain the terminology used by our interlocutors and the research we reference.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has instrumentalized gender[4] as part of its populist agenda, intertwining right-wing religious and neoliberal ideologies to create a hostile socio-political climate for queer people—especially migrants. While legal frameworks offer limited protections, such as the Law on Foreigners and International Protection and the Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM 2014)[5], policies like temporary protection for Syrians and the "satellite city" where asylum seekers have to reside after completing their application registration, restrict mobility and isolate migrants in resource-limited Anatolian towns. These regulations reflect a rule of "differential inclusion" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), where legal status and mobility rights are dictated by geographical origin and socio-economic capital. Since the 2016 European Union (EU)-Türkiye migration agreement, state rhetoric has shifted from a discourse of religious and cultural solidarity to one of migration containment and repatriation. The economic crisis has further intensified anti-migrant sentiments, reinforcing xenophobia, racism, and exclusionary policies. In this climate, queer migrants are often invisible within public debates, not because they are uniquely targeted but because the broader nationalist and heteronormative structures do not recognize their specific needs. This invisibility exacerbates risks of daily harassment, precarious labor conditions, and lack of access to safe housing, forcing many into informal economies for survival.

Thus, while Türkiye is not uniquely hostile to queer migrants, its migration governance, political climate, and social hierarchies create an environment where they experience exclusion and structural violence. Within this system, queer migrants continuously navigate, negotiate, and resist—shaping their lives within a space that oscillates between possibility, precarity, and constraint. Additionally, control mechanisms and socio-political dynamics, which mark Türkiye's intricate history of mobility and immobility, profoundly influence the dimensions of a possible space of freedom, limbo, or prison[6]. İstanbul remains the city where most queer migrants wish to live, yet widespread repression and surveillance make it nearly inaccessible. It is a contradictory space—a city that, despite lacking legal protections for queer rights and being shaped by increasingly hostile political rhetoric (ILGA 2023), does not criminalize same-sex relationships like many MENA countries. At the same time, İstanbul is home to a dynamic queer cultural scene and a network of civil society organizations, offering spaces of refuge for those escaping more restrictive environments. This paradox encapsulates the broader tensions in Türkiye, where systemic discrimination and exclusion coexist with spaces that offer relative safety and belonging.

Yet, access to these resources is unevenly distributed across the city. Queer migrants living in central districts like Beyoğlu—a super-diverse space (Vertovec 2007)—can more easily tap into solidarity networks, queer nightlife, and activist spaces. Meanwhile, those in peripheral, economically marginalized areas struggle with isolation, limited opportunities, and restricted access to queer-friendly spaces. Gentrification has made these once-affordable hubs increasingly inaccessible, particularly for migrants and those with precarious livelihoods. Narîn, a Syrian Kurdish woman who has lived in Beyoğlu for a decade, captures this shift:

Although some urban transformation projects were already in process, many parts of the district still had the characteristics [...] marked by its alternative and rebellious history. It was a space shaped by various social and political groups, offering a sense of welcome and freedom. Over time, rising rents, job insecurity, and living costs have forced many out. [...] Some collective experiences have ended, others have relocated or disappeared [...], deepening contradictions and loneliness. Yet, for those who remain [...], the area still serves as a refuge, sustained by existing networks and resources, making it a key space for the city's queer community. (Narîn, İstanbul, 2023)

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[4] Recent developments include Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, repression of women's organizations, and legal actions against queer activism (Ünal 2024). Most recently, President Erdoğan declared 2025 'Year of the Family' to protect the heteronormative family, promote 'healthy generations,' and reinforce national values (Euronews 2025).

[5] The law introduced temporary protection for Syrians under Article 91, marking a key shift in Türkiye's legal framework.

[6] After the 2021 anti-Syrian pogrom in Ankara, the government introduced the "dilution plan," capping foreign residents at 20% in migrant-dense areas, including İstanbul and 63 other provinces (DGMM 2023).

Narîn's words highlight how spatial transformations impact queer urban life, but they also reveal the ways in which resistance and belonging persist despite displacement. Historically, İstanbul's queer communities have navigated waves of exclusion and reclamation. The 1980 military coup intensified the marginalization of queer people, forcing many—especially trans sex workers—to the margins of the city (Biondo 2017; Selek 2011). Yet, by the 1990s, these communities reclaimed space in Pürtelaş, Kazancı, and Ülker Street in Cihangir, leading collective struggles for the right to housing, work, and life itself.

The 2000s saw temporary openings as Türkiye's EU candidacy (1999) spurred civil society reforms. However, the 2013 Gezi protests—featuring the largest Pride March in Turkish history—and the 2016 coup attempt marked a turning point. Since then, urban spaces have become more controlled, less accessible, and increasingly hostile to those contesting gender, sexual, and ethnic-racial sovereignty. Meanwhile, urban transformation projects have intensified inequalities, particularly in Tarlabaşı, where gentrification has displaced queer and migrant residents (Kuyucu and Ünsal, 2010; Can, 2020). The eviction of trans women from Bayram Street, a symbolic community space, reflects the intersection of SGBV, class, and racial inequalities, making undocumented migrants especially vulnerable. Yet, displacement has also fostered unexpected solidarities, linking queer activism with anti-militarist, labor, and ethnic minority struggles. Groups like Hêvî LGBTI foreground the Kurdish issue, exposing the limits of the nation-state and the intertwined nature of queer and ethnic marginalization (Popa and Sandal, 2019). Through decolonial and intersectional lenses (Jivraj, Bakshi, and Posocco, 2020), queer activists in Türkiye contest dominant narratives on visibility, the closet, and resistance, continuously reshaping their actions in response to evolving threats and emerging possibilities.

5. Reconsidering resistance in the context of vulnerability

In this context of spatial dispossession and intersectional violence, there was also an atmosphere, sometimes dominant, sometimes tacit, that the backstreets of İstanbul sent an indication akin to Michel Foucault's (1976) renowned statement, "*where there is power, there is resistance*". One instance where this expression was manifested in a tangible manner was at the latest Pride march when, despite thousands of police officers stationed around Taksim Square to enforce a ban, demonstrators, on the contrary, were on the move all over the city[7]. In fact, the organisers of İstanbul Pride issued a last-minute call via encrypted messaging applications to gather not in the expected Beyoğlu area but on Bağdat Avenue, a major shopping district on the Asian side of the city, far from the traditional sites of social struggle in Türkiye[8]. This unexpected tactic led to a brief but impactful march, lasting about ten minutes and culminating in a press statement.

That said, it is important to note that none of our interviewees participated in the 2024 Pride march, and, more broadly, they tend to avoid demonstrations or public gatherings. While some attended Pride events in their early years in Türkiye, many—particularly Syrians—now find it difficult to leave their homes, let alone engage in activism[9]. This reluctance reflects a broader climate of insecurity, where the intensification of migration control mechanisms has reinforced precarity and invisibility. In recent years, deportations—often framed as "voluntary returns"—have increased, particularly in the aftermath of the Syrian conflict's shifting dynamics. By April 2022, the DGMM stated that the capacity of removal centers was only 1,740 in 2015. The

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[7] The Pride March, first organised in 2003, is banned by the authorities since 2019.

[8] Beyoğlu, particularly Taksim Square, has long been central to social movements in Türkiye (Karasulu 2015; Baykan and Hatuka 2010; Doan and Atalay 2019). Authorities have repeatedly restricted this symbolic space to limit demonstrators' visibility. This was evident in the Minister for Family and Social Services' justification for the March 8, 2022, ban: "The issue is not women gathering, but gathering in Taksim" (BİRGün 2022).

[9] In summer 2024, Türkiye saw a surge in anti-Syrian violence, escalating into what many call a pogrom. Fueled by nationalism and economic strain, riots targeted Syrians, especially in Kayseri, where attacks on homes and businesses caused fear and displacement. The unrest spread to İstanbul and Ankara, with reports of brutal assaults and property destruction.

institution highlighted that, with new removal centers set to open in May, the country would reach a total of 30 such centers with a capacity of 20,000 (DGMM 2022). In addition to physical detention, administrative measures such as the revocation of naturalization, residence permits, and access to essential services have contributed to an environment of uncertainty, making long-term settlement increasingly difficult. This restrictive landscape not only limits legal status but also deters political engagement and weakens solidarity networks. As Toprak, a queer activist engaged in feminist and migrant rights struggles, describes, migrants often live in a state of "temporariness within temporariness" where unpredictability itself functions as a mode of governance and pushing migrants into a state of perpetual precarity, coercing them into departure through a strategy of systematic intimidation. The criminalization of migrant political participation—evident in arrests following Pride marches (OMCT 2023) or other protests (Michaelson and Narlı 2022)—demonstrates how visibility can lead to heightened vulnerability.

Within this particular framework, our research sought to explore the following inquiry: *how can queer migrants navigate the city and exist in contexts dominated by extreme oppression and fear?* Seeking answers to this question was initially arduous, in the sense that we had the impression that we were searching for a needle in a haystack, for several reasons. Firstly, the geographical context was not consistent or easily discernible from day to day, or from one neighbourhood to the next. Although it might be seen as a queer refuge, its unpredictable and shifting nature made analysing resistance practices difficult by rendering them invisible. Additionally, the diversity of our sample made it difficult to analyse the empirical data within a common theoretical framework. However, as we began to focus on these multi-voiced narratives, each of which is in some way unique, we noticed a consistent pattern that made them complementary. Despite their differences, the dominant tone in the accounts we heard was one of complaint, anger, revolt, and a desire for change. Hence, what intrigued us was less about what people were protesting against, the extent of their protests, the channels they used, or the outcomes they achieved, and more about the very expression of their contestation and their yearning to rebuild their lives. Gradually, the theme of self-defence in daily interactions - whether at home, on the street, at the market, or in dealings with administrative institutions - emerged as a common thread in our analyses. This focus led us to reflect on these expressions as negotiations for change, seeking ways to counter or even disrupt oppressive social structures.

In this context, José Esteban Muñoz's "methodology of hope" served as a theoretical tool for interpreting our empirical data. Muñoz links queerness with rejecting present reality and emphasises the potential for another world, and defines potentiality as "*a certain mode of non-being that is imminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense*" (Esteban Muñoz 2019, 9). This framework, which focuses on potential rather than mere existence, illuminated the everyday resistance of queer migrants against structural oppressions. Thus, it has enabled us to uncover both explicit and tacit discourses that reveal unconventional forms of resistance and diverse expressions of identities, desires, and visions for a better future and that are subversive in character, or at any rate threatening to oppressive structures.

The accounts we examined emerged from the margins of societal norms and the urban landscape, often belonging to isolated people with the potential to form communities. These practices, rooted in everyday concerns, were neither part of organized movements nor explicitly ideological. Instead, they took informal and discrete forms, such as subtly circumventing surveillance, yet remained inherently political by introducing symbolic friction to dominant systems (Monahan and Gilliom 2012). Partha Chatterjee's (2006) concept of "popular politics" helps explain how subaltern groups, excluded from formal political spaces, negotiate power through informal networks. Similarly, James C. Scott's (1990) notion of "infrapolitics" captures the subtle, everyday forms of resistance employed by marginalized people. These frameworks guided our exploration of how queer migrants navigate governance and surveillance, contesting exclusion by seeking new physical and symbolic spaces. Our research asked: what socio-corporeal tactics do people use to find safe spaces? How do they reclaim subjectivity in a city where their sexual, national, and racial identities deviate from dominant norms?

While our fieldwork yielded fragmented answers, Michel De Certeau's (1990) distinction between "strategy" and "tactic" proved instrumental in structuring our analysis. His insights into how people subvert imposed spaces highlight the agency of queer migrants. De Certeau differentiates between "consumers," who

passively accept structures, and "users," who actively manipulate environments to resist domination. Despite legal and social constraints, users carve out spaces for personal expression, asserting their existence even at the risk of sanction (De Certeau 1990, 53). This perspective is particularly relevant to the experiences of queer migrants in Türkiye, where restrictive social and political structures shape their interactions with urban space. Although these constraints often render resistance tactics invisible, the ability to claim space remains crucial. De Certeau's framework enabled us to analyze the everyday tactics employed by queer people as forms of resistance and adaptation in the ongoing struggle between dominant power and marginalized bodies.

6. Everyday resistance tactics of queer migrants

During our fieldwork we analysed how our interviewees employed a series of tactics to navigate daily life in Türkiye, which we will explore in the final section of this article, focusing on practices that dominant systems have yet to domesticate (Buchanan 2000, 89).

6.1 Evasive tactics

Some accounts highlight what we may call evasive tactics, which align with Erving Goffman's (1963) concept of passing, a practice through which people conceal aspects of their identity to navigate potentially hostile environments. These tactics emerge as a means of managing risk in contexts where visibility could lead to exclusion, discrimination, or even direct harm. One example is Sarwar, an Afghan in his late twenties, who recognizes that both his sexual orientation and racial identity expose him to precarious situations in Türkiye, where he currently resides. Rather than attempting to negotiate his otherness within a particular group, Sarwar employs passing as a means of protection, deliberately concealing his homosexuality and Afghan identity in environments where they might render him vulnerable. His account illustrates how evasive tactics can function as a way to maintain security and navigate public and social spaces with reduced exposure to scrutiny:

If I was white and came from another country, [...] everyone would run after me [sarcastically]. Especially gays. [...] Sometimes they would ask me where I was from. I wouldn't answer. [...] Because there is a reaction against Afghanistan. [...] There is that discrimination and racism among gays too. [...] I have made fun of them. I also started to react after a while. I strengthened myself a little bit, I started to react. But [...] now [...] I keep myself separate from that part. [...] I'm not dating [...] with anyone right now. [...] I cut myself off from that area. [...] I have more straight friends than gay friends now [...] Think about it, I didn't recognise myself as Afghan for a while. [...] I started to cover up my origin. [...] Because I couldn't tolerate that reaction. It was very difficult for me. But I had to. Or I didn't say where I came from. [...] I usually say Iranian. Because [...] they are modern, there are no problems in Iran, the Taliban is not there [...] For example, when I am on the metrobus, I don't answer my phone and I don't speak in a foreign language. [...] So I can only answer if [...] a Turkish speaking person calls. [...] If my mum calls, I hang up immediately, I write a text message. [...] I am protecting myself (Sarwar, March 2023, İstanbul).

Similarly, Adil, a Uyghur in his late twenties who studied in Türkiye and worked as a journalist before seeking asylum in France, also engages in selective disclosure of his identity. During the interview, his narrative primarily focused on his sense of belonging to the Uyghur cause, while his bisexuality remained in the background, only mentioned when directly asked. Adil's approach suggests a context-dependent evasive tactic, in which he prioritizes certain aspects of his identity based on their relevance to his legal and professional struggles. By choosing not to disclose his bisexuality in specific contexts, he creates a form of protection that enables him to sustain his professional engagements more effectively :

There was never time to get in touch with them [queer organisations]. We were always extremely interested in those other [ethnic] issues. [...] I didn't have very close acquaintances with whom I could make contact or get into that community. Also, when you are doing journalism among Uighurs, if you come to the forefront as a very gay person, it becomes very difficult for you to do gay activism as a very gay person and at the same time get information from within those conservative societies. [...] For this reason, it was necessary to give up

a little bit from the other [...] activism. That's why I was only interested in the situation of Uighurs, I didn't do much on LGBT issues (Adil, January 2024, Paris, online).

However, the deployment of these tactics is not fixed or singular. The spaces, contexts, and temporalities in which people adopt them shift continuously, and different tactics may be enacted simultaneously. In this sense, Adil's case, which may initially appear solely as an evasive tactic, also operates as a form of claim-making. By emphasizing his Uyghur identity, he is not merely avoiding risk but actively positioning himself within a political and professional field. His engagement with the Uyghur cause is not only a response to his personal history but also a structuring force in his daily life. This suggests that passing and claim-making can intersect, shaping the ways people navigate precarious conditions and articulate their subjectivities in varying contexts.

6.2 Solidarity tactics

Some of the voices we heard speak of what we might call solidarity tactics—ways of navigating daily life in İstanbul through social networks, queer nightlife, associative spaces, and dating apps. The friendship between Manel, Nour, and Mona—queer migrants from Tunisia, Syria, and Sudan—is one such story. They see each other as family, holding on to this bond while making their way through Türkiye. Nour, who lives without legal status, describes the anxiety that comes with stepping outside, knowing that any moment could bring a police check, a demand for papers, a threat of deportation. To stay safe, they have found ways to move through the city together, watching over each other. Their story is a reminder that friendship is more than companionship—it is protection. In a city where walking alone can mean exposure to danger, social ties become a way of resisting invisibility, a way of holding onto presence, of making life possible:

> Nour: When we go out, Mona has to walk in front of me […] He's Black, he's also queer, he's also a refugee[10]. […] He's always the one the police approach first. Then I take a moment to disappear. One day, Mona and my ex-boyfriend were leaving […] The police […] ignored everyone else and came straight to us. Mona had pink hair, he is Black, my boyfriend had painted nails, looked foreign but was super white. I also looked different. […] They asked us for ID.
> Mona: I had mine and showed them. The other guy, very white-looking […], just showed a picture.
> Nour: They didn't even check.
> Mona: Yeah. Because he is white. […] They asked Nour for ID. She said she had it but not with her. […] They took them to the car. […] In my mind, they would immediately deport them to the Syrian border.
> Nour: In the car, I showed them my press ID from my old TV job. […] They said, "Next time, carry your kimlik[11]." […] I lied about where I was from, saying I was Lebanese. […] If they found out, they would [laughs and pauses]. But if I hadn't lied, it would have been worse. If I said I was Syrian, […] neither a press ID nor God would help. […] That day, I felt like I was born again. (Nour and Mona, February 2024, İstanbul)

Beyond the mutual support their friendship provides in İstanbul's backstreets, Nour's account highlights her decision to lie about her national identity—a courageous, last-minute act that ultimately saves her. As Spivak (2020) suggests, subaltern groups often resort to deception as a form of resistance, particularly when speaking out could lead to sanctions or further marginalization. Similarly, Scott (1990) describes how subordinate groups use subtle, everyday tactics—like trickery—to undermine power structures while minimizing the risk of punishment. Seen in this light, Nour's decision to lie to the police was more than an act of desperation—it was a calculated move, a way to navigate and destabilize the very system threatening her. Supported by Mona and her ex-boyfriend, her deception became a temporary but effective tactic, disrupting the hegemonic surveillance system and asserting control over a situation designed to strip her of agency.

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[10] They switch between "he," "she" and "they" but it's unclear if this reflects gender fluidity or language limitations, as none of us are native English speakers. We, therefore, preserve their original wording.

[11] *Kimlik*, the Turkish word for identity, was used by our interviewees regardless of the language spoken. It refers to a residence permit specifying the official city of residence, or satellite city.

The bonds of solidarity that support queer migrants navigate daily life in İstanbul also serve as powerful tools for action when faced with repression. While Nour relied on these networks to move freely in the city, Mona—who had actively supported her during this period—soon found herself dealing with the unpredictability of migration policies firsthand. Despite having legal residency in İstanbul, Mona was arrested once and then detained again in January 2025 when she visited the immigration office to renew her residence permit. Only upon her arrest did she learn that her permit had been revoked. Without prior notice, she was transferred to a deportation center. In response, her friends mobilized immediately, spreading the word online and organizing support. Local queer activists, members of her networks, and organizations such as Rainbow Railroad coordinated efforts across different platforms, while her partner and close friends worked with a lawyer to intervene. This collective effort—both digital and on the ground—shifted the course of events, leading to her release within days and an expedited resettlement process to Canada. Mona's case demonstrates that mobility is not just restricted by legal status—it is negotiated and reshaped through collective action. While resettlement processes are often slow and unpredictable, networks of solidarity managed to accelerate timelines and open new possibilities. This instance highlights how queer migrants are not merely subjected to migration policies but actively navigate, resist, and reshape them, forging their own paths in the face of institutional constraints.

6.3 Belonging tactics

In addition, we would like to speak of belonging tactics, which highlight how people navigate perception, inclusion, exclusion, and affiliation, positioning themselves within power structures through identity and place. These tactics also shape how people seek, negotiate, or resist recognition in different social contexts. Alternatively, we can consider narratives that adopt a survivor and/or fighter tone. In this sense, discourses in which people reconstruct their identity along their migration journey can be seen as belonging tactics. Accounts reveal that migration—along with the struggles before and during the journey—can transform into a defining element of belonging. The awareness of persecution and vulnerability may not only reshape identity but also lead to its active reclamation and embrace. These tactics of belonging enable people to navigate unfamiliar environments, establish new connections, and affirm an identity they defend with pride. Migration, even when marked by hardship, can become a foundation for resistance, allowing people to redefine their sense of self. Some testimonies show that these experiences not only strengthen political consciousness but also construct a new framework for belonging—both personal and collective. Taking an approach in which migration and the right to flee are understood as political acts (Mezzadra 2004), the decision to migrate itself can be seen as an act of agency, a refusal to remain confined to powerlessness. Bâbak's account offers insight into this process, illustrating how migration is not just displacement but an assertion of self-determination:

> I've been running for the last 11 years. […] I've been persecuted for being who I am for the last 11 years and […] I am not ashamed of […] what I've been through, it made me who I am […] I think it [his journey] made me quite strong. I took my time to cry but then I got up and I did something […]. Before I left Iran, I was thinking about suicide. […] I wanted to be who I wanted to be, but I couldn't, and I was arrested, abused—sexually and physically—by the police in Iran. In the end, I decided either I die or I leave. Because there was no other way for me to survive (Bâbak, October 2021, İstanbul).

A further example illustrating the importance of establishing social ties in the country of immigration, and where the sense of attachment can be seen as a belonging tactic, comes from an Azerbaijani's in his late twenties, Arif's, account. His narrative below highlights the role of social and linguistic capital in resisting violence and exclusion. Building social networks in the country of immigration seems in this sense to be crucial for marginalised identities, insofar as these networks can provide emotional support, access to resources and a sense of belonging:

> I arrived, and [...] I constantly heard people saying that my Turkish was bad. [...] So I became determined: [...] I read, I worked, I had conversations. [...] It was also crucial for accessing my rights here, [...] for finding a job,

housing, socializing, going to LGBTI+ spaces, and accessing healthcare. I wouldn't have been able to do any of this without my friends in Türkiye. The Turkish language suddenly took on such a central place in my life. [...] I learnt Turkish from *lubunya*[12]. [...] The areas where I feel safe and build myself come from the communication with my friends from Türkiye. [...] [*Lubunca*] it's something I use constantly in daily life. [...] When I hear *Lubunca* on the street, [...] I instantly feel very safe. [...] Knowing *Lubunca* is actually directly related to social cohesion. (Arif, March 2023, Ankara, online).

Arif's account illustrates how speaking *Lubunca* fosters a sense of belonging and helps construct a queerness that defies normative gender and sexual frameworks (Bilal 2024)). While historically rooted in the trans sex worker community, *Lubunca* has expanded into broader queer circles, particularly through social media, increasing its visibility and reach. Arif embodies this linguistic tactic of belonging: his fluency in both Turkish and *Lubunc*a reinforces his place within the *Lubunya* community and actively contributes to its transmission. His mastery of these languages not only strengthens his connections within queer networks but also offers a means of navigating social spaces on his own terms. As Gouyon (2015, 50) suggests, language and activism function as intertwined forms of resistance. This aligns with Garaoun's (2023) study of *Hawəssəš*, a cryptolect spoken among gender and sexual minorities in northwestern Morocco. Like *Lubunca*, *Hawəssəš* is more than just a means of communication; it enables marginalized groups to assert their identities, sustain community ties, and resist oppression. Besides its role in everyday interactions, *Lubunca* functions as a strategic tool, particularly in public spaces, where it can serve as a protective mechanism against hostility and aggression (Garaoun 2023, 107). While our research does not focus primarily on language practices, these cryptolects shed light on a broader set of tactics—linguistic, identity-based, and solidaristic—through which marginalized communities claim space and agency. Rather than passively accepting the roles imposed upon them, members of these communities live, resist, create, and transmit knowledge, continuously shaping alternative modes of existence in the face of systemic constraints.

6.4 Claiming tactics

As mentioned earlier, the structural context and its punitive mechanisms rarely encourage people to raise their voices. Yet, whether in Türkiye or a third country of resettlement, the time spent with our interviewees allowed us to see their daily struggles through a different lens—one that reveals another type of tactic: the act of claiming. These tactics are not just about survival; they are about demanding rights, where narratives frequently take on a critical stance against political, social, and heteronormative systems. Whether in housing, healthcare, or asylum, these claims reflect a refusal to accept imposed conditions and instead, an effort to shape their own paths—both in Türkiye and beyond.

One striking way this manifests is through self-representation on social media and the body. Hussein and Siham, both Syrian, chose to depict scales of justice in their online profiles, accompanied by the phrase "*There is no justice*". Siham, whom we met in İstanbul in 2019 and who now lives in Canada, has the same symbol tattooed on her body. Whether inscribed digitally or on the skin, these images seem to signify a self-claimed identity, rather than one imposed on them, reinforcing their quest for justice. Siham's tattoo mirrors the critical tone she adopts when speaking about her departure from Syria and her life as a Syrian trans woman in Türkiye. As she recounted the difficulties of transitioning in Türkiye, she picked up her phone and typed into Google Translate. The English translation appeared: "*There's nothing to lose.*" This phrase, both defiant and resolute, suggests that with nothing left to lose, everything becomes possible. Siham's journey—condemning the war in her homeland, deserting the army, coming out as gay and then trans, leaving behind her family and any resources she might have had in Türkiye—reflects an active rejection of military-patriarchal logic (Selek 2023, 61). In this sense, the dispossessions she has faced—her country, her trans identity, her forced migration—

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[12] The term *lubunya* signifies identification with a community for Lubunca speakers. Originally a secret language of trans sex workers, Lubunca stems from the Romani *lubni* (prostitute). Used to evade authority, it became a linguistic tactic of queer resistance. For more on Lubunca, see : *Ottoman History Podcast* 2013.

have not led to submission but rather to a claim for justice, transforming vulnerability into action (Athanasiou and Butler 2016).

A similar trajectory can be seen in Bijan's story. Originally from Iran, he spent five years in Türkiye before resettling in Canada, and his journey reflects how struggles become lifelong commitments to claiming rights. An activist in Iran, his involvement in Türkiye was at first personal rather than organized. Over time, his activism expanded, shifting from individual concerns to a broader fight for justice. His fluency in Turkish allowed him to work with various associations, and his ability to navigate multiple languages—Turkish, English, Persian, and Azerbaijani—opened doors to work within an NGO. The rights violations he endured from an early age, coupled with his activism in gender, violence, and HIV in Türkiye, shaped a transnational activist career that he continues to pursue today, across Iran, Türkiye, and Canada:

> My concern was that a life had been stolen from me, and it kept being taken away. In fact, I am a claimant, and I still am. I have always used this as a source of strength within myself. And I told myself—my concern is not activism, [...] I am a claimant, and I am pursuing my claim. You will acknowledge my right, no matter where I am. [...] After [...] meeting other LGBTI+ refugees like myself, I realized—no, if I am truly a claimant, then I must also stand by this claim. And in doing so, I turned queer struggle into a deeply personal fight. All these stolen years, all the systemic violence I have endured, cannot remain unaddressed. If anyone should expect change, that person is no one but me. [...] I am a claimant, and even now in Canada, I continue to pursue my claim. [...] In Iran, the reason for my arrest, [...] was to do activism. [...] I was detained [...] During the trial [...] we were informed [...] that the outcome [...] would be execution. [after a long pause], after that I decided to leave Iran. [...] Because I had to continue the struggle. [...] I couldn't be one of those killed, I chose not to be. At least I took a chance, and I succeeded (Bijan, November 2023, Toronto, Canada, online).

7. Conclusion

Focusing on the migration experiences of queer people in Türkiye has led us to rethink conventional understandings of the Global North and South. Rather than reinforcing the figure of the suffering refugee on a heroic journey northward, this research has placed systems of oppression, individual perspectives, struggles, and agency at the center of the analysis. While we contribute to the literature on South-South queer migrations, we do not lose sight of the broader power dynamics and violence that shape migration across different contexts. Social and spatial confinement, surveillance, and control operate transnationally, whether at Türkiye's borders or through cross-border governance elsewhere. Yet, resistance takes many forms, adapting to different times and places—through mobility tactics, community networks, and linguistic practices, queer migrants carve out spaces of action and transformation.

By adopting an intersectional approach, this study highlights the diversity of migration trajectories, spanning multiple nationalities, social classes, and experiences. The data rebuts homogenizing narratives of queer asylum seekers, showing that vulnerability is neither universal nor experienced equally. Race, class, and SOGI intersect to shape who faces the harshest conditions before, during, and after migration. While our research recognizes the structural vulnerabilities inherent in migration, it also reveals how queer migrants actively resist and reclaim agency—whether through self-reconstruction, collective struggles, or the refusal to accept imposed conditions. That said, recognizing resistance does not mean overlooking the realities of systemic violence. From struggles over housing and resettlement to everyday discrimination, our interlocutors navigate a world where violence is institutionalized and deeply entrenched. We write these words without forgetting Muhammed Wisam Sankari, a gay Syrian refugee kidnapped, raped, and murdered in İstanbul in 2016; Hande Kader, a trans activist whose burned body was found weeks later; and Ahmet Handan El Naif, a 17-year-old Syrian refugee killed in Antalya during anti-Syrian attacks in 2024. They, and many others, have lost their lives in a system that continues to produce disposable bodies.

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