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Abstract

This study examines the role of migrations for sexual subjectivities, based on biographic narrative interviews with CEE LGB migrants married or raising children with a same-sex partner in Belgium and the Netherlands. Migrants' experiences highlight the salience of the migration-as-liberation with the empowering role of new beginnings in LGB-protective countries. At the same time, migrants' stories also challenge this liberation tale, especially when situated within transnational family relations. In this context, migration and post-migration junctures differently impact sexual subjectivities, demonstrating fragmentations and non-linearity, and highlighting how migrations are only potentially transformative, with an important role played by full access to intimate citizenship.

Key words: sexual subjectivities, LGB migrants, CEE, transnational families, biographic narrative interviews

An LGB Migration Tale: On the Role of Intimate Citizenship for Transforming Sexual Subjectivities

I enjoy the sun on my face while I walk slowly to coworking offices where I am meeting Emil, a Central Eastern European (CEE) migrant married to his same-sex partner in Belgium. An early spring Sunday morning is promising to turn into a glorious day, one of those that I treasure in this new country of mine. Still, my nervousness grows as I approach the interview site. Emil contacted me by e-mail the previous week, one of the first prospective research participants to do so, and the project's opening moves are both exciting and daunting. I arrive at the building a few minutes before Emil and wait for him. We enter together. The offices are abandoned, the only sound us talking while looking for the reserved room. This is trickier than expected and we settle finally in a small sun-drenched room with invitingly open doors. Armed with my tape-recorder, thick-paper notebook and the prepared script, I offer my opening: 'As you know, I am interested in families of same-sex partners. Please, tell me the story of your life. All the experiences and the events that were important to you personally.' I continue to explain that I will not interrupt his initial story, and Emil takes a few moments to consider where to begin. 'I will start from the moment I left [CEE home country] behind', he responds finally.

For Emil, migration is an opportunity for a new beginning. This echoes the experiences of many other lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals, both in this study and elsewhere (e.g. Brown, 2000). Like nearly all my research participants, Emil grew up in the late 1970s and the 1980s in a CEE country where narratives of sexual nonconformity were silenced or misrepresented. 'If I'm not sick, if I'm not pervert, if I'm not freak', Emil recalls trying to reconcile available images of homosexuality with his self-perception, 'I must be normal'. 'I even didn't know what this word meant, "lesbian", although I was very well read', Petra will tell me later, another CEE migrant in Belgium, now married and raising a child

with her same-sex partner. Though coming from a different country, Petra shares with Emil a migration tale that highlights the salience of the migration-as-liberation narrative through transforming sexual subjectivities tied to the intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003) post-migration junctures, such as access to same-sex marriage and parenthood. Both Petra and Emil left their CEE home countries – European Union (EU) member-states characterized by constitutional protection of heterosexual marriage and limited rights of same-sex families – to find a new normal in Belgium, a country that, like its neighbouring Netherlands, legalized same-sex marriage about 20 years ago, and extensively protects same-sex parenting rights (Waaldijk et al., 2017). While the movement towards full citizenship of LGBTIQ individuals and their families is among the EU policy focuses (European Commission, 2020), the Belgian and Dutch legislative frameworks are still extraordinary compared to many other EU states, particularly to those left behind by Emil and Petra. 'I couldn't have imagined that in [CEE home country]', Petra says, 'but since we live here […] we could get married and also we could have children legally'.

Even so, many nonheterosexual individuals establish same-sex families with limited or no legal recognition and, in increasing numbers, pursue planned parenthood in their countries in the European East (e.g. in Poland: Mizielińska and Stasińska, 2019; in Croatia: Štambuk et al., 2019) or the Global South (e.g. in China: Wei, 2021); regardless that these countries are often labeled 'oppressive' at the sexual freedoms maps of the world. Others in these countries also practice different forms of intimacies, transgressing hetero- and mono-normative models (see, e.g. Kong, 2011; Mishra, 2020). Yet many, like Petra, do desire marriage or marriage-like relationships and children. While some may label such desires homonormative (e.g. Luo, 2022), they also represent yearning for an 'ordinary' life, as a life nonheterosexual individuals can *choose* to live (cf. Plummer, 1995). As I have written elsewhere (Vuckovic Juros, 2019), some who desire such family lives, like Petra, do not want

to live them out in the grey areas and the legal uncertainty of the countries that grant same-sex families sparse legal and social -recognition. In this context, migration can create opportunities for new kinds of (family) lives and futures that were previously beyond reach.

Nonetheless, salient as the narratives of new freedoms in their post-migration lives are both for CEE LGB migrants in this and other studies (Mole et al., 2014; Stella et al., 2018) or other 'Global South' migrants (Cantú, 2009; Acosta, 2008; Kong, 2011; Carrillo, 2018), they are also as frequently complicated by failures and reversals of expected liberations, often stemming especially from gender, race/ethnic and class stratifications that the migrants encounter in their new countries, and the pervasive influences of these countries' restrictive and heteronormative immigration regimes (Manalansan, 2003; Acosta, 2008; Asencio, 2009; Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013; Carrillo, 2018; Mole, 2018a; Sólveigar-Guðmundsdóttir, 2018; Chauvin et al., 2021). Many of these new hierarchies, however, are avoided by migrants in this study. In a doubly privileged legal and class position, the study participants are Freedom-of-Movement CEE migrants who did not experience social deskilling or downward social mobility with their migration to Western Europe (WE) – unlike many of other young and well-educated CEE individuals (for general population of intra-European CEE migrants, see Ruspini, 2011; White, 2016; for intra-European CEE LGB migrants, see Stella et al., 2018; Sólveigar-Guðmundsdóttir, 2018). In addition, having migrated to Belgium or the Netherlands, the LGB migrants in this study also gained access to intimate citizenship to a degree that was just not available to LGB migrants participating in many earlier studies (for a partial exception, see emerging work on migrations of same-sex couples such as Nakamura et al., 2017). Yet, the stories of the study participants still reveal challenges and complexities of the migration-as-liberation narrative, especially when situated within transnational relations with their families-of-origin.

Emil, for example, after opening his story with a new beginning after leaving his CEE

home country, goes on to talk about multiple new beginnings and the particular role of same-sex marriage (rather than migration) in renegotiating his disclosures and presentations to the family-of-origin in CEE. Petra, similarly, also highlights the birth of her child, happening quite some time after the migration, as the moment of the deepest assertion of her sexual identity vis-à-vis her family and relatives in CEE.

Therefore, taking advantage of a perspective offered by transnational CEE LGB migrants, married or raising children with a same-sex partner in Belgium and the Netherlands, this study seeks to explore the transformations of sexual subjectivities of this relatively privileged group. While, by design, this study leaves out the experience of LGB migrants who do not pursue marriage or parenthood in their host countries, its significance nevertheless lies in highlighting the transformative power of intimate citizenship on sexual subjectivities of family-oriented CEE LGB migrants, thus extending earlier conversations on migrations and sexualities which were rarely in a position to examine this particular subject.

Transformations of Sexual Subjectivities and Migrations

Transforming sexual subjectivities are often related to a modernist coming-out story (Plummer, 1995) or the sexual identity master-narrative of the Western gay liberation movement (Hammack and Cohler, 2009). This narrative paints an initial struggle or stigmatization, followed by coming to terms with nonheterosexual identity and, finally, the coming-out triumph. Despite challenges to such a linear (developmental) view (Plummer, 2009; Lewis, 2012; Coleman-Fountain, 2014), and portrayals of different models decentring the relevance of coming-out in other cultural contexts (e.g. Manalansan, 2003; Kong, 2011) or documenting the emergence of a post(closeted)-gay identity (Seidman, 2002), the coming-out master-narrative remains salient for many individuals in the Western world, including those in the European East (e.g. Švab and Kuhar, 2005; McCajor Hall, 2009).

In such coming-out stories, migrations have long occupied a key role, with the sexual

identity liberation often structured around movement from more to a less oppressive environment (Binnie, 2004; Lewis, 2014). These stories of transforming sexual subjectivities were, most notably, linked to internal, rural to urban, migrations. Cities, thus, provided an escape from homophobia or social control of the families-of-origin and small communities, and became the site of new identities and belongings (Weston, 1995; Brown et al., 2007). Adding further nuance to the stories of escape from rural oppression to urban freedom, researchers also focused on queer homes as spaces of comfort rather than on escape from childhood homes (Fortier, 2001; Gorman-Murray, 2009); emphasized nonlinear, segmented and ongoing nature of the coming-out journeys (Lewis, 2012), including stories of return and rural gay identifications (Annes and Redlin, 2012); or demonstrated the continuing emotional and socio-economic connections of migrants with families-of-origin (Wimark, 2016; Luo, 2022). Still, the narratives of transforming sexual subjectivities frequently remain closely tied to physical mobilities (Brown, 2000), with a change in social conditions functioning as a catalyst for coming out (Plummer, 1995).

In international migrations research, an escape from more to less oppressive (national) contexts is also a familiar theme (Binnie, 2004; Mole, 2018a), related likewise to transforming sexual subjectivities. For example, Cantú (2009) and Acosta (2008) show how the sexual identities of migrants from Latin America to the US were reconstituted through migration, even when mobilities were not motivated explicitly or solely by sexualities. Carrillo (2018) also sketches how many of the Mexican sexual migrants in his study adopted an 'openly gay' identity in the US. The emerging work on nonheterosexual CEE migrants in Western Europe (WE) further demonstrates how changing socio-institutional contexts affect sexual subjectivities of LGB individuals, from the changes in sexual behaviour (Mole et al., 2014) to shifting expectations of 'normal lives' (Stella et al., 2018).

At the same time, studies also highlight how the expected sexual emancipation in

another country does not always materialize (Cantú, 2009; Peumans, 2012; Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013; Kong, 2011), and how the migration-as-liberation narrative may obscure migrants' intersectional experiences (Luibhéid, 2005). In particular, three main challenges emerge in the form of (1) problematizing the free-oppressive binary; (2) highlighting the segmented and reversible nature of the coming-out migrations; and (3) complicating the escape from the family-of-origin, especially in a transnational social field.

First, studies on migrants from the Philippines (Manalansan, 2003) and Latin America to the US (Acosta, 2008; Asencio, 2009; Cantú, 2009; Carrillo, 2018) and from Hong Kong to the UK (Kong, 2011) demonstrate how these individuals experience new racial, class or cultural exclusions, both in the larger host societies and in the gay communities. Despite their whiteness, many CEE nonheterosexual migrants in WE share similar experiences (Mole, 2018a; Sólveigar-Guðmundsdóttir, 2018). They are often perceived as one of Europe's Others, coming from the (semi-)periphery that is frequently the source of cheap, exploitable labour for WE (Bogoeski, 2020), and continually depicted as 'lagging behind' or 'backwards' in terms of sexual freedoms, despite the CEE developments not fitting easily into such linear (progressive) frameworks (Kulpa and Mizielińska, 2016). Furthermore, most 'free' host countries still cannot claim more than partial citizenship for nonheterosexual individuals (e.g. in most Western countries that legalized it so far, same-sex marriage is a very recent development). These countries also exhibit their fair share of homonegativity, especially in certain locations and social contexts (Stella et al., 2018; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). Moreover, the 'oppressive' countries also have their spaces of sexual freedoms (Carrillo, 2018; Stella et al., 2018) and undergo internal transformations (see e.g. in Carrillo, 2018, on Mexico legalizing same-sex marriage before the US). Therefore, upon closer inspection, the movement from 'oppressive' to 'free' becomes a more fragile proposition.

Second, the studies on CEE (Stella et al., 2018) and Latin American nonheterosexual migrants (Cantú, 2009; Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013; Carrillo, 2018) show how they, especially when more vulnerable socio-economically, often need to rely on immigrant and kinship networks in the host countries for support and information. As a result, gender, racial and class inequalities of home societies can be reproduced in diaspora (Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013). Some individuals, regardless, experience their migrations as new beginnings that allow them to live openly gay lives in their host countries or to come out to their families more easily, from a distance (Cantú, 2009; Carrillo, 2018). Others, however, often continue patterns typical of homonegative contexts (cf. Švab and Kuhar, 2014; Jhang, 2018), such as open secrets (Manalansan, 2003; Acosta, 2008; Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013) or hidden/separate lives, whether in diaspora communities or during visits home (Acosta, 2008; Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013; Barglowski et al., 2018). Yet others transgress the coming-out models and sustain other types of sexual identities in which 'gay identity' does not play a central role or may be reversed in certain circumstances and contexts (Manalansan, 2003; Cantú, 2009; Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013; Carrillo, 2018). Therefore, a closer look reveals segmented and discontinuous nature of coming-out processes in the context also of international migrations.

Finally, family-of-origin often plays a central – and complicated – role in these processes. In line with the escape narrative, the accounts of LGB individuals show them using international migrations to leave homophobic families-of-origin behind (Carrillo, 2018) or to distance themselves from families' heteronormative expectations (Manalansan, 2003; Barglowski et al., 2018; Carrillo, 2018). At the same time, international migrations of nonheterosexual individuals are also often family projects (Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013; Carrillo, 2018). Moreover, regardless of migrations being family projects or not, Filipino, Latin American and CEE nonheterosexual migrants report sustaining economic ties (support

from the family initially, and remittances to the family later), social interactions and emotional connections with the family-of-origin within a transnational social field (Manalansan, 2003; Cantú, 2009; Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013; Sólveigar-Guðmundsdóttir, 2018). Therefore, in light of the migrants' desire to preserve family ties and their place in the family networks (Manalansan, 2003; Barglowski et al., 2018), the disclosures and presentations of the nonheterosexual identities are negotiated in complicated ways with the families-of-origin, transcending the narrative of escape.

In this study, I build on this work – both supporting and complicating migration-as-liberation narrative – to explore how international migrations and post-migration junctures associated with full intimate citizenship (notably, same-sex marriage and parenthood) contribute to the transformations of sexual subjectivities of transnational CEE LGB migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands. I look at sexual subjectivities narrowly, as disclosures and presentations of nonheterosexual identities vis-à-vis the immediate environment and the family-of-origin in a transnational social field. Inspired by the work on the transformations of gendered subjectivities of CEE migrants in WE (Bell and Domecka, 2018; Erdal and Pawlak, 2018), I approach international migrations as potentially (but not necessarily) empowering, and I explore how migrations and post-migration junctures such as marriage and parenthood shape LGB migrants' sense of agency. While both the privileged access of this study's participants to same-sex marriage and protected parenthood and their specific migration trajectories are also distinctly tied to their social class (which I have described extensively in Vuckovic Juros, 2022), in this study I use them to highlight a different matter: a transformative power of intimate citizenship for sexual subjectivities in the migration context.

This Study

I draw on the data from a larger project (TransNorm/TOFNITW, 2017-2019) using biographic-narrative-interpretative (BNIM) interviews with LGB migrants in Belgium and

the Netherlands, and semi-structured interviews with their family members and friends in five CEE EU-member states with constitutional definition of marriage as a union between a woman and a man (Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia). At the centre of the present study are eleven migrants' life stories collected through BNIM interviews in which the participants are first asked an opening question (to share the story of their life) to which they respond without interruptions. In the second part of the interview, they are asked the follow-up questions strictly following the structure of their initial account (Wengraf, 2001). Despite the general nature of the opening question, the participants are subtly guided towards the study focus (in this case, same-sex families) by the previously provided study information and by the introduction to the interview. Yet, in this context, the participants are provided no further guidance and they structure the story of their life as they see fit.

As a heterosexual cis-woman, I was an outsider to the studied group, though I shared other commonalities with many participants: CEE migrant in WE status; age between early 30s and early 40s (and a recent experience of young parenthood); similar educational background (all were university-graduates, some also with MA or PhD degrees); and current middle-class status. Most participants also came from middle-class backgrounds, having university-educated parents. Of eleven migrants (five cis-men and six cis-women), nine were married to a same-sex partner and six became parents in the context of their current same-sex relationship in Belgium and the Netherlands. With two exceptions (both involving migrations as a child), the participating migrants spent their childhoods and adolescence in CEE and sustain transnational interactions with their parents or the family-of-origin there.

The participants were recruited through personal networks and LGBTQ* organizations using advertisements that looked for migrants from specific CEE countries, married or raising children with a same-sex partner. This yielded a small and homogenous group of participants. I initially reached primarily the migrants affiliated with the European

institutions and international organizations in Belgium, and my attempt to diversify (including expanding the research to the Netherlands) was only partially successful. Nevertheless, for this study, I treat this limitation of homogeneity and a relatively privileged migrant and class position of participants also as a strength that allows adopting a 'critical case' approach (Patton, 1990). In this framework, participants' privileged position is not the main point of analysis (this I did elsewhere, see Vuckovic Juros, 2022). Instead, I use the perspective it provides to identify theoretically meaningful patterns (Gobo, 2008) that become highlighted by an examination of both typical and extraordinary elements of CEE LGB migrants' narratives.

To this purpose, I used narrative thematic analysis (Kohler Riessman, 2008) to identify themes within each migrant's life story (the latter being the unit of analysis), rather than themes across all interviews. Accordingly, I first constructed short outlines of migrants' initial stories – these were organized chronologically, around the main biographical episodes the migrants narrated in their interviews. Then, for each migrant, I identified main themes marking their biographical episodes. Analytically, I focused on how themes connected within each narrative, and how these patterns of connections compared across participants' biographical narratives. The three themes I interpreted as central were: (1) the coming-of-age in a homonegative context, (2) migration as a transformative moment, and (3) a significant post-migration juncture (same-sex marriage, parenthood). For each of these themes, there were also others that were different, or contradictory – e.g. the coming-of-age that was not shaped by a perceived homonegative context, a migration or post-migration juncture that was not transformative or significant. Still, as the main three themes described above appeared in some form in most migrants' non-structured interviews, I treated them as elements of an ideal-typical narrative. Then, in the next analytical stage, I returned to the migrants' full accounts, and I situated each narrative relative to the ideal-typical narrative. Emil's and

Petra's narratives are among those following the ideal-typical narrative most closely, which is why I selected them for an in-depth presentation. But, I also noted deviations and discrepancies (negative cases) from the ideal-typical narrative, and further complexities within the stories that generally followed it, including Emil and Petra's stories.

The results of this analysis are presented below. To protect the confidentiality of participants, I use pseudonyms and aggregate the presented data wherever possible, also modifying slightly some quotes and removing identifying information (such as country of origin) that is not necessary for the understanding of the data.

In the first section, I focus on Emil and Petra's narratives to present their migration-as-liberation tales of a shift in managing nonheterosexuality and changed expectations of future lives in their host countries. Next, I complicate the migration-as-liberation narrative by exploring the fragility of the free-oppressive binary, drawing on the story of Adam whose profile makes him a negative case to a privileged migrant position of most participants. Finally, in the third section, I return to Emil and Petra, situated in their transnational social fields, to present their stories of multiple new beginnings and key post-migration junctures (access to same-sex marriage and protected parenthood), which I use to highlight the role of full intimate citizenship for transforming sexual subjectivities of CEE migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands.

A Liberation Tale: Migrating into the New Normal

Situating their coming-of-age in countries where presentations of homosexuality were silenced or distorted, many participants in this study recalled a strong desire to escape their national contexts. Indeed, Emil starts his life story with the moment of leaving, now perceived as an 'escape from the life that people were expecting me to have'. To this purpose, he was actively looking for the opportunities – but also excuses – to leave. He leaves twice, once for a PhD study in another European country, and later for a job in Belgium. Petra's

story is similar: she selected her professional specialization hoping it would open doors for a job offer abroad, which eventually comes from Belgium.

For Emil and Petra, as for most others in this study, Belgium or the Netherlands are not selected specifically for their extensive protection of LGB rights. Instead, they are the destinations of (educational or job) opportunity. Still, they fit the imagery of the 'West' as the place of freedom (for similar imagery, see Cantú, 2009; Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013; Peumans, 2012), as they provide the CEE migrants with socio-institutional contexts critically contrasted to their home countries. Petra thus highlights how her 'life changed quite dramatically':

> *I could feel immediately how the atmosphere was different. So how the media, the society in general, it was more accepting and I didn't feel like in [home country] before, just reading a newspaper article about gay people….So I felt like every day or every week there was some kind of attack on me. Of course, not on me personally, but as a part of the community, I felt attacked by these people. […] I saw the difference immediately in Belgium. I remember reading an article about some talent show where the girl who won the contest or who was a very good runner-up, I don't remember, that she got married to another girl…It was just saying, 'Congratulation to the young couple!' and I was totally shocked. Like, you can even present something like that in a newspaper. It was not even the fact that she got married to a woman, it was just the fact that she got married. So I felt it would have been written in the same way if she got married to a man.*

Although Petra is initially cautious at work, she soon starts feeling that, in her very international work community, the nonheterosexuality is 'just normal':

> *I felt like I could live my life normally. I don't have to hide anymore. So I don't have to be quiet when they say, you know, 'What have you done at the weekend? Where did you go?' I don't have to say, what do I say now? I cannot say that I went to, you know, to a gay bar or whatever. I could just say what I did. I didn't have to hide things anymore. It was a very nice experience that I could just be myself, I didn't have to make up a story or just be quiet if people say, you know, 'Where did you go?' because then you have to say you went with whom. Then they ask questions, 'Who is this person?' So it was just easy. It was very easy.*

Emil, similarly, describes how in Belgium he restarted his life and became openly gay in circumstances that did not necessitate constant coming-out. Instead, he could just refer to his same-sex partner in an everyday conversation like it was nothing out of the ordinary.

> *You do not come out to people. You just tell them. 'What did you do last Sunday? I went out with my boyfriend to the cinema. Ah, okay.' So, it's not something that you always have to [introduce with] 'Listen, I have to tell you something' [whispering].[…] And I think there is something beautiful about it. That you don't feel that… oh my god, here's another coming out.*

In these stories of new beginnings, lives in Belgium are compared to lives in CEE especially related to differently managing nonheterosexuality in contrasting contexts of social acceptance. Therefore, while in Emil's home country, the 'implicit and under the skin homophobia' requires a constant effort of thought, this becomes a non-topic in Belgium's 'new normal'. Petra, likewise, highlights how she no longer has to 'face every day something about being gay or lesbian' or to have a 'hidden life'. Instead, she can live 'peacefully here'.

Others in this study often echoed these stories of the 'new beginning' and sentiments of contrast, testifying thus to the power of institutionalized normative frameworks they encountered in their host countries. In my participants' view, publicly expressed homophobia (still) did not lead to real social sanction in their CEE home countries, while this was no longer the case in Belgium and the Netherlands. Far from suggesting that this equals a homophobia-free world in either of these countries, it is nonetheless significant due to liberating the LGB individuals from the responsibility to manage the visibility of their nonheterosexuality in order to avoid homophobia. Instead, the responsibility for managing the visibility of their prejudice – making it a private matter (Valentine and Harris, 2016) – falls to others in the society, those who, like Petra specifies when talking about her marriage in Belgium, maybe 'have their opinion but they keep it to themselves'.

Valentine and Harris (2016) argue that such privatization of prejudice, emerging as a consequence of expanding equality legislature, is not genuinely socially transformative. Still, it can be empowering at the personal level, as it indeed was for CEE LGB migrants in Scotland (Stella et al., 2018) and for the participants in this study. The perception of 'new normality' developed in contexts that structurally safeguard LGB rights contributed to the

study participants' greater sense of control over their lives, even if it had not removed homonegativity and heteronormativity from these lives. It is this change, then, that is reflected in the 'new beginning' narratives that underlay Petra and Emil's migration-as-liberation tales presented above.

Moreover, at a deeper level, the strengthening of LGB migrants' sense of agency is seen also in the reimagining of their futures that becomes possible after a 'new beginning'. In Emil and Petra's stories, same-sex marriage or family were not exactly part of the plan before the migration. Like others in this study, they emphasize economic and educational motives for leaving, regardless of these frequently being intertwined with a desire for freer lives. But, as I have written elsewhere (Vuckovic Juros, 2019), once freer lives are experienced, the imagination of possible and probable future changes. 'We decided also to start a family', explains Petra, 'because […] I saw that in this country it would be possible for me to have a life like any other person, like a normal life, you know, getting married, having kids and all that.' But, despite that she always wanted to have children, previously she 'didn't know how so, in [CEE home country] it wasn't really a reality.' In Emil's story, a similar sense of changed expectations for what he calls a 'normal LGBT life' is reflected in imagining the future he might have had 'if I had not left [home country]':

> *Would I be one of these people I know? That in spite of being gay…get married, have children…and continue with their life as a homosexual person in …a heterosexual marriage. Which some people decide on purpose because […] they want to have family. And this is the only way of having it.*

There is still cost to this new future, though – as specified by another study participant, a parent: they now cannot easily leave their host countries, even if they would have liked to, for the risk of losing the family protection gained is too great.

Still, an important element of migration-as-liberation in these stories is that the 'new beginning' in the migration context also creates new possible futures of a 'normal life'. The concept of a 'normal life' is, indeed, central also to the narratives of CEE migrants in general

(Bygnes and Erdal, 2017) and CEE LGB migrants in other studies, where the LGB migrants are specifically adding a sense of emotional security stemming from LGBT-affirmative legislation to a sense of economic security that becomes embedded in their imagined future in the host country (Stella et al., 2018). Nonetheless, salient as this liberation tale is for most migrants in the present study, it is also challenged and complicated by the fragility of the free-oppressive binary, and multiple new beginnings in a transnational social field. To this I turn in the next two sections.

A Liberation Tale Challenged: The Fragility of the Free – Oppressive Binary

Although the narrated experiences of CEE migrants in this study generally fit the divide between migrants' WE host and CEE home countries along the sexuality dimension, these are also the experiences narrated from a position of relative privilege. For example, while Emil's account of not having to constantly come out and the relief that is created by just referring casually to a same-sex partner is echoed by many participants in this study, it also stands in stark contrast with descriptions of some other nonheterosexual migrants who do not live similar lives of socio-economic independence in their host countries. For instance, the openly gay Peruvian immigrants in Vasquez Del Aguila's study (2013) speak instead of a neverending (exhausting) process of coming out within their families and diaspora communities which differ from the mainstream society in social acceptance of nonheterosexuality. The choice of many other nonheterosexual migrants is, therefore, to keep this part of their lives hidden from their diaspora communities, even if they are openly gay otherwise (Vasquez Del Aguila, 2013; Barglowski et al., 2018; Carrillo, 2018). The participants in this study, however, sidestep this difficult decision by disconnecting from the diaspora, on which they are not dependent for help or support; the mention of diaspora connections in the narratives of these free-mover CEE professionals in Belgium and the Netherlands are conspicuously absent. In fact, several participants confess to avoiding or

feeling unease meeting co-patriots or other CEE migrants in their host countries, due to the expectation that they may encounter less tolerant attitudes.

One of these participants is Adam, a married CEE LGB migrant whose story closely resembles the ideal-typical narrative illustrated by Emil and Petra. However, unlike most study participants, Adam has arrived in Belgium on a university fellowship more than a decade before the Freedom-of-Movement status applied to him. Also, unlike most study participants, Adam's social and professional circles do not gravitate mainly towards the international ('expat') community nor the Belgian 'EU bubble'. Yet, the same as the CEE LGB free-mover migrants coming later, Adam avoided reaching out to the diaspora for support, even though, initially, he might have needed help more than others who moved specifically for their well-paid professional positions, or who found such jobs not long after arrival.

> *I avoided awfully hard any contact with [people] who came here [earlier], although-, I had a friend from [home country] who had some family […] 'Get in touch with them, bla, bla, bla'. And for me, all this was 'No, no, I just don't want it', because I don't want here again double [life], to pretend, you know.*

While Adam acknowledges 'things have improved' and that the people from his region would not necessarily react negatively now, he still preserves this same pattern of behaviour as a 'protective attitude': 'every time I come in contact with people from [the region]' […] you try to feel out how much you can be what you are, or if you need to protect yourself a little bit'.

At the same time, Adam's relatively stronger integration into the Belgian society also allows seeing more clearly some of its cracks that most other study participants, in their firm entrenchment in the international 'expat'/'EU bubble' communities, only hint at: that their experiences are very specific, and that new, freer environments are also always experiences of specific social locations and contexts. Adam's account, on the other hand, explicitly verbalizes this situated unease related to the way he presents himself or expresses publicly the intimacy with his husband, as reactions also 'depend on the segment of society in which you move and […] the types of contacts you establish'.

Complicating a Liberation Tale: Multiple New Beginnings and Post-Migration Family Junctures in a Transnational Social Field

Still, their double privilege (of class and migrant position) notwithstanding, the narratives of most study participants complicate the migration-as-liberation tale in other ways, including demonstrating partial, disconnected and non-linear transformations of sexual subjectivities, especially as situated in transnational interactions with the family-of-origin. Revisiting Emil's narrative of coming to Belgium, he notably describes this as 'another' possibility to restart his life, following his first international migration that was also transformative, but only to a degree.

> *So, while being in [Southern European country], I also realized that I, indeed, could be more free when it comes to…expressing myself. […] I felt that my move to [Southern European country] was actually necessary in order for me…to take this step. So, the first few years of me being homosexual and living…in this relationship, was still a sort of…schizophrenic situation. Because I was out to myself, I lived, I was living with my partner in the same household, almost from the very beginning. I was hanging out with his friends. But at the same time, nobody from my university circles knew about me. Nobody from my friends from country, from country where I'm coming from […] And also, my family didn't know about me. So, for the first few years, it was…a life of basically constant white lies. 'What did you do last weekend? I went out to a cinema. Wow, what did you see? Who did you go with? Ah, with friends.' That would be a big question of my mom, on Skype, that I had to, basically, lie to.*

His first migration helped Emil come to terms with his sexual identity, but he preserved a hidden dimension, especially in relation to his CEE family-of-origin. Distance facilitated the management of this double life, as communication remained virtual and parents' visits were avoided by various excuses (for strategic communication with the family-of-origin in the home country, see also Sólveigar-Guðmundsdóttir, 2018; Barglowski et al., 2018). But, as distance functioned as a buffer, its preservation also had its cost in the decreased intimacy with his family, which Emil regretted.

Then, coming to Belgium, Emil initially continues with the same pattern, keeping his nonheterosexuality hidden from new colleagues and his parents in CEE, and negotiating the disclosures only with friends coming to visit him. Only at a later point, encouraged by his

new partner's support and the desire not to hide this part of himself from his family anymore, Emil uses one of his visits home to disclose his sexual identity and same-sex relationship to his parents. This personally transformative moment in home country allows him then to change his pattern in Belgium.

> *I think the moment when I came out to my parents, back home, as much as difficult it was, it empowered me to be totally, totally open about it here. […] So in a way, me solving the issues back in my… in my family, solving to the extent it could be solved, finally liberated me…from feeling any kind of constraints here at work, in my, for example, professional relationships. So, I think, yes, that was not such a groundbreaking moment here, it was rather there. And developments there helped me to, sort of, be at ease here.*

Emil's narrative testifies both to the fragmentary transformations and to the non-linearity of sexual subjectivities through migrations. On the one hand, migration facilitates the coming out to parents due to Emil living his separate, independent life in another country, with his partner standing by his side. On the other hand, it is also the coming out to parents that helps Emil to truly embark on a new beginning in the circumstances of the 'new normal'.

Other study participants, even those who were openly gay in their home countries, share this tale of migration into the new normal and, similarly to Emil, their stories of new beginnings also become more ambivalent when situated in the field of sustained emotional connections and social interactions with the family-of-origin in CEE. While individual trajectories of disclosures and presentations to parents and relatives vary considerably depending on other factors identified in the literature – e.g. the quality of the previous relationship (Heatherington and Lavner, 2008), intensity and emotional relevance of transnational contact (Barglowski et al., 2018), partnership status (D'Amico et al., 2015; Jhang, 2018) – two post-migration junctions carry special significance for most (though not all) migrants in this study. One is same-sex marriage, and the other is planned parenthood.

For Emil, his marriage is significant because it pushes him to renegotiate the relationship with the family-of-origin. While his second new beginning in Belgium helped him

end the hidden dimension of his life, with his marriage – perceived as an emotionally significant point of his same-sex relationship – tolerance becomes insufficient. Instead, Emil now demands a stronger family acceptance of his partner. By this act, Emil also demonstrates a new empowerment he feels by accessing same-sex marriage in Belgium – everything less is 'not what we are looking for. We're looking for equality and […] acceptance'. This is also, then, what he now demands from his family in CEE. There is a cost to it – not all family members are willing to demonstrate acceptance in practice, though they were willing to show tolerance from a distance. But, in Emil's view, time for compromise is now behind him: he will no longer join holiday family gatherings where his husband is not welcome.

Not all migrants in this study accorded same-sex marriage similar weight. Some rejected the idea of marriage, and others kept the visibility of their marriages contained to their host country, even after disclosing them to the parents or relatives – and, in one case, the marriage was not disclosed at all. Still, for many study participants, access to marriage was an important juncture (see also Vuckovic Juros, 2021), even though its significance was not quite as transformative as planned and legally protected parenthood.

Petra's story illustrates this pattern particularly well. She disclosed her same-sex relationship to her parents while still in her home country, though at the time her parents refused to acknowledge it (for similar parental reactions see Švab and Kuhar, 2014; Jhang, 2018). Afterwards, Petra continues a hidden life, but after migrating she comes out to her mother again – which I learn not from Petra but from a separate interview with her mother who describes the first visit to Belgium as the one in which they 'finally cleared the matters up' and Petra 'gathered the courage to come clean'. Despite this silence in Petra's narrative, the post-migration timing of this disclosure is worth noting in light of Denes and Afifi's (2014) observation that the second coming out to parents is related to asserting sexual identity and attempting to improve the relationship within the renegotiated framework. Still, in Petra's narrative, her migration

features as significant mostly relative to her Belgian environment. The key juncture in the disclosures and presentations to the CEE family-of-origin comes only when Petra has a child.

> *That was also something very important for my coming out. So once our child was born, then I just, I had to come out, or I wanted to come out to all my family, so even more distant relatives, because I'm not really in touch with my cousins, but because my son was born, I had to tell them about it because it was such an important event that I had to explain everything, you know, and that I was living with another woman and we had a child together and all that. So then after the birth of my son, I just didn't care. So I was, I came out to even people I thought I would never come out, because I don't really see them much very often. And otherwise I could've just, you know, stay silent or not say anything about it, but because our son arrived, of course I had to tell them how it was.*

Therefore, the pursuit of the family trajectory and the birth of the child push Petra to extend her openly nonheterosexual life in Belgium fully towards her transnational social field, no longer using distance to preserve the hidden dimension of her life from her family-of-origin in CEE. Other LGB parents in this study also find that the arrival of their children pushes them to assert greater control in a transnational social field, and no longer only in their Belgian or Dutch environments. For example, while most study participants deferred to their parents the management of information about their nonheterosexuality in their home country, such compromises come to an end with the arrival of children. After becoming accustomed to full recognition, protection and visibility as LGB parents in their host country, the study participants are no longer willing to put their same-sex families back in the closet, not even during occasional visits to the home country.

These accounts suggest that international migrations can be transformative for sexual subjectivities by empowering LGB migrants to take greater control over their disclosures and presentations in relation not only to their new, more LGB-friendly environments but also by expanding this empowerment towards their transnational social fields, including the family-of-origin in more homonegative communities. At the same time, these accounts also highlight how migrations are emancipatory only in potential, and that the full 'liberation' is not necessarily realized even in cases of privileged migrants not enmeshed in diaspora

communities or dependent on socio-economic support from family members in home countries. While migration may indeed strengthen a sense of agency through personal reflection and reinvention (Knopp, 2007), these transformations are also ongoing, segmented and even reversible (Lewis, 2012). Furthermore, when situated in transnational social fields, reinventions ('new beginnings') may involve parallel and asynchronous developments across various social networks into which the nonheterosexual individuals remain embedded even after leaving their childhood/family homes and contexts.

The 'new normal' of the Belgian and Dutch societies empowered migrants in this study to embark on new beginnings in their new environments. Still, they did not necessarily feel similarly empowered in relationships with the family-of-origin in CEE, even though this eased coming out in some cases. But with other stepping stones to the full intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003) in their post-migration trajectories – such as marriage in some cases, and especially parenthood – the empowerment grows. Being able to increasingly choose the kinds of lives they can live (Plummer, 1995) – being openly gay or keeping it private for reasons of preference and not avoidance of discrimination; marrying if desired; having children with fully recognized parenting rights – strengthens the sense of control over one's life. This normalizes nonheterosexuality, or same-sex marriages, or same-sex parenting, in ways that can translate to other contexts as well – so that the decisions about disclosures and presentations are no longer made primarily in relation to, for example, the expected responses of the homophobic others (who need not fear social sanction), or parents who may be supportive but want to keep 'it' a family secret anyway. With children, especially, the emotional balance changes, pushing migrants to be more assertive in standing up for both their children and themselves across their transnational social fields.

Conclusion

This study examined the transformative potential of migrations for sexual

subjectivities on a case of CEE LGB migrants married or raising children with a same-sex partner in Belgium and the Netherlands. The migrants in this study narrate their international mobilities as transformative experiences situated in the 'new normal' of Belgian and Dutch socio-institutional frameworks, where the LGB rights are extensively protected by the state, resulting in the 'ordinariness' of nonheterosexuality. In many ways, these stories evoke the 'beyond the closet' narrative Seidman (2002) presents as emerging in the context of diminished homophobia, where closeted identities are a matter of the past, replaced by a new sense of entitlement to equality. Migrants in this study, similarly, feel empowered to reinvent themselves (to have new beginnings) in environments where the expected homonegative reactions do not have a central role in their presentations. Rather, the control over the disclosures and presentation is asserted by the migrants, strengthening their sense of agency – and making their migration a tale of liberation.

The salience of the migration-as-liberation narrative has been identified in previous research on LGB international migrations (e.g. Acosta, 2008; Cantú, 2009; Carrillo, 2018), and this study brings a different case of CEE LGB migrants to testify to the strength of this pattern. At the same time, this study also extends the earlier research by showing how the challenges and complications of the migration-as-liberation narrative – demonstrated previously mostly by intersecting hierarchies of class, race/ethnicity and gender (re)created in host countries (Manalansan, 2003; Acosta, 2008; Asencio, 2009; Cantú, 2009; Kong, 2011; Carrillo, 2018) – appear also in a case of a relatively privileged group of migrants such as free-movers middle-class migrants in this study, who also benefit from being able to access intimate citizenship to a degree that was often not possible to migrants in earlier studies.

In this case, then, the challenges and complications of the migration-as-liberation narrative are seen most vividly when the migrants are situated within transnational family relations. From this perspective, this study highlights how the migrations are only potentially

transformative, and how even the narratives of migrations as transformative experiences are complicated by fragmentations and non-linearity (cf. Lewis, 2012). In this context, migrants' stories reveal more difficult and variable negotiations of new beginnings, including parallel and asynchronous developments across transnational social networks. Still, same-sex parenthood in Belgian and Dutch contexts presents a notable post-migration juncture, empowering migrants to extend the control over the presentations and disclosures of nonheterosexuality to the whole transnational field.

These patterns do not mean that the LGB individuals who do not migrate are not agentic or that they do not take control over their disclosures and presentations in homonegative (and other) contexts, with or without children. But, they do highlight how much, indeed, sexual subjectivities are mediated by social conditions (Plummer, 1995; Weeks, 2007). Specifically, this study shows how the strong source of personal empowerment stems from society's citizenship markers, including equal recognition of family rights that, once exercised to the full, can extend empowerment to other contexts as well.

The CEE LGB migrants in this study form a very specific group and their experiences are extraordinary in terms of both the migrants' privileged socio-economic positions and their host countries' outlier status, even in WE, regarding extensive protection of LGB individuals and families. Still, this very specificity – which makes them a critical case (Patton, 1990) for an exploration of the role of migrations in the transformations of sexual subjectivities – is also what makes these patterns identifiable, and available for theoretical reflection. Therefore, this study contributes to the sexualities studies both by extending the growing but still limited research on queer and LGBT migrations (e.g. Acosta, 2008; Cantú, 2009; Gorman-Murray, 2009; Browne and Brown, 2016; Mole, 2018b; Stella et al., 2018), and by using international migrations to reflect on the role of changing social conditions on sexual subjectivities (Plummer, 1995; Weeks, 2007). To these areas, this study offers a migration tale that shows

how mobility to an LGB-protective country can strengthen the LGB migrants' sense of agency, but also that the transformations of sexual subjectivities are fragmented and non-linear and that the international migrations are only potentially, but not necessarily transformative.

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