`

‘Sexual/Orientation: Navigating the Asylum System as a Queer Black Man in Edafe Okporo’s *Asylum* (2022)’
Author: Alisha Mathers
Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol. 15, ‘Movement’ (2023-24)
DOI: 10.14324/111.444.1755-4527.1793

Moveable Type is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

Sexual/Orientation: Navigating the Asylum System as a Queer Black Man in Edafe Okporo's *Asylum* (2022)

Alisha Mathers

Asylum: A Memoir & Manifesto. By Edafe Okporo. 2022. 211p. £18.99. Simon & Schuster. ISBN 9781982183745.

Unable to live in his homeland of Nigeria because of his sexuality, Edafe Okporo fled to America. Seeking asylum in the so-called Land of the Free, however, proved harder than he expected. In his memoir and manifesto *Asylum,* Okporo traces his search for refuge from Nigeria to New York City. The result is a harrowing tale of loss, detailing Okporo's tiresome fight to find refuge from persecution.

Recent ethnographic studies have explored the experiences of queer refugees, specifically how queer community groups have supported and excluded queer refugees in asylum, but also how the safety of queer refugees within the asylum system is extremely precarious. *Asylum,* however, provides a rare insight into an asylum system from a queer refugee's perspective. The narrative also offers an in-depth exploration into the often-hidden parts of the asylum process, such as his initial moments of exile and life in detention in the United States.

Okporo's recollections function not just as a memoir, but also a manifesto. By grounding the discourse around immigration laws and political debates on migration in his own lived experience, Okporo positions *Asylum* as a 'blaring call to action' to reform the world's approach to refugees.[1] Okporo, who founded the charity Refuge America and whose previous works include the play *Edojah: Risking It All For Freedom* (2019) and political book *Compassion Is Worth More!: Using Your Civil Power to Create Change* (2020), continues in *Asylum* to marry his personal experiences with a broader call for a more compassionate response to refugees globally. His memoir employs the language of directionality, alignment, and spatiality to articulate his experiences of being othered as a gay Black refugee, relaying a relentless, ongoing navigation towards freedom in the face of discrimination and bigotry. 'I wasn't ready to give my life for my freedom,' he writes. 'I wanted both' (53).

Okporo, who is gay, grew up surrounded by homophobic rhetoric. His attempts to explore his sexuality led to violent attacks. Even after moving away from the small village of Warri, where he was born, to the city of Abuja, the spaces where he sought refuge could not protect him against the country's escalating anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. The Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, signed in 2014, criminalised same-sex-relationships as well as activism and groups supporting gay rights. This threatened Okporo's life as a gay man and his job as a program officer for a campaign to improve sexual health. Though it was his sexuality that caused him to be discriminated against back home, Okporo experienced

[1] Edafe Okporo, *Asylum: A Memoir & Manifesto* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022). Subsequent citations will be cited parenthetically in the text.

other kinds of hatred upon his arrival in America, predicated upon not just his queerness, but also his Blackness and new status as a refugee.

Okporo recounts how, beginning in Warri, his life was planned out for him before he had a chance to know what he wanted. While 'outrageous displays of masculinity' colour his boyhood, he is not considered 'a true Warri boy' (10). Okporo's father grows uncomfortable with his son's behaviour, such as playing with dolls and preferring to be in the company of women. Told to 'man up', Okporo is made aware that his performance of masculinity deviates from the norm (14). This results in his parents sending him away to an all-male boarding school—the first of many moves that, while not a displacement in a refugee sense, would come to represent the rejection of his identity within a particular space.

Though not yet fully aware that he is gay, the teenage Okporo is cognisant of the repercussions of even questioning his sexuality and the direction it would force his life to take:

> I would have to change my sexual orientation, by way of starving the demon within me by fasting, praying, and forcing myself to sleep with women. I was too young to sleep with a woman, but I was introduced to a wife-to-be—Esther—whom I would wed when I was old enough to marry. (19)

As a spatial term, orientation often refers to how one is positioned and directed within a particular space. Sexual orientation, according to intersectional theorist Sara Ahmed, is no different. Ahmed argues that the term sexual orientation does not 'position the figures of the homosexual and heterosexual in relation of equivalence', but rather, 'it is the homosexual who is constituted as having an "orientation": the heterosexual would be presumed to be neutral'.[2] Okporo's family attempt to force him towards heterosexuality by literally directing him to marry a woman; his behaviour and sexuality are treated as a deviation. To be straight, Ahmed writes, is to be considered 'in line', aligning oneself with the family's desire to continue the 'reproduction of the family line'.[3] Sexual 'orientation', therefore, like any other form of displacement, is out of the subject's control.

Okporo's relationship with his sexuality becomes one of shame and self-punishment. Part of his attempts to 'mask' his sexuality involves becoming a student pastor (24). Though he wants church to 'change' him, he continues to explore his sexuality; he must be 'seen as upright: but being *seen* as upright didn't mean always having to *be* upright' (25). The notion of uprightness, synonymous with straightness and correctness, is embedded in Okporo's exploration of his sexuality at this point in his life. Identity being inextricable from directionality, Okporo living as his true self would have been deemed as not just *going* in the 'wrong' direction, but rather, *being* wayward.

Due to the 'anti-gay messages' spread by the Church, Okporo decides to leave his role as a pastor out of fear of his safety (25). His attempt to have a tryst with a man also leads to him being 'kitoed', a common scam within the gay community in Nigeria in which people pretend to be gay only to violently ambush those they connect with (27). In this attack, Okporo is held hostage and suffers verbal and physical violence while the attackers rob his bank account. Though difficult to read, this passage reveals the necessity of queer

---

[2] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 69.

[3] Ibid., p. 74.

refugee protection and in doing so, problematises the omission of fleeing in fear of persecution for one's sexuality in the 1951 Refugee Convention.

After the attack, Okporo flees for Abuja and the brutality of his persecution is laid bare. In a passage that further emphasises how he was conditioned to associate straightness with moral righteousness and homosexuality with directional deviancy, he writes:

> I was struggling to be somebody I wasn't—I wanted to be upright and righteous, yet popular and accepted, also with a desire to be free of the burden I carried […] Opening up would be a reminder that I don't fit in on the path I was expected to follow. (32)

In Abuja, Okporo experiences a sense of belonging that he could not find in Warri. Living with members of the queer community, he feels 'seen [and] welcomed' for perhaps the first time in his life: 'I knew immediately that night that there was no way I could return to Warri. Abuja was the place for me' (38). However, he is still subject to the stigma of being a gay man in Nigeria. Outside his living space, he experiences verbal abuse from 'vigilantes' 'who attempt to scrutinise and punish homosexuality in the lack of police presence (47). This level of surveillance throughout the community leads him to attempt to hide and police his sexuality once more: 'Getting dressed in the mornings, I'd ask myself if I looked passing enough. Passing is dressing as a masculine man, which meant not deviating from gender norms' (47). 'Passing' echoes Ahmed's concept of the 'line' as an act which attempts to realign oneself to the direction dictated by heteronormativity. The growing homophobia around Okporo makes his space smaller, forcing him to hide in fear of being killed and eventually causing him to flee Nigeria altogether; 'the farther, the better' (50). This heartbreaking recollection emphasises the often-unseen battle people go through to remain in the country they consider to be home.

The moment Okporo decides to seek refuge elsewhere, another layer is added to his identity: asylum seeker. On his arrival at JFK airport in New York, he realises there is simply 'no guidebook for seeking asylum' (57). Pulled aside by airport security, he is questioned and searched. Upon discovering his birth documentation, the security staff suspect Okporo's intentions to seek asylum; after he admits his status, he is sent immediately to the Elizabeth Detention Center in New Jersey. Confined within an 'abandoned warehouse' with only a single sunroof through which one can catch a glimpse of the outside, Okporo describes feeling a sense of spatial puzzlement (63). He recounts that inside the centre, 'your name is replaced with a nine-digit alien number' and that 'after seven days, I had lost my name and my sense of time. I became disoriented' (67). His feelings of disorientation as a refugee add another dimension to the spatial limitations imposed on him. Here, the memoir exposes the physical and mental toll of detention; though technically in America, Okporo is forced to occupy a liminal space between two states: potential deportation to the place which threatens his life, and the chance to rebuild a new one.

To attain the latter, Okporo attempts to prove his credibility as a refugee in conjunction with the 1951 Refugee Convention—a case that takes months to complete.[4]

---

[4] UNHCR, 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. https://www.unhcr.org/media/28185 [accessed 21 April 2021], p. 3: 'A refugee, according to the Convention, is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.'

He sees the process as 'clearing [his] path to freedom' (76). The procedure is difficult enough to navigate for all asylum seekers, but queer refugees face additional complexities. In this section of the book, Okporo's writing moves in the direction of a manifesto: he highlights the history of anti-queer immigration legislature in the US in the last century, from the Immigration Act of 1917 to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. He observes that 'homosexuality is illegal in nearly seventy countries' (61), extending his criticism towards the global extent of queer displacement. He also notes that as the 1951 Refugee Convention does not specifically mention people fleeing persecution for their sexuality, queer refugees must fit their cases into the 'particular social group' category. However, queer refugees are often more vulnerable than those part of a 'particular social group' as 'queer identity […] often alienates individuals even from their immediate family, which is not usually true of people who belong to persecuted religious or political groups' (61).[5] In so doing, he highlights the gaps in the 1951 Refugee Convention through which queer people like himself often fall.

To make things worse, Okporo's case places him in a precarious position within the detention centre, revealing the lack of support available for queer refugees in detention. The success of his case hinges on his ability to prove that he has a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted' as a gay man in Nigeria. Being open about his sexuality at the centre exposes him, however, to discrimination from other inmates or staff who believe his homosexuality to be a myth. He writes: 'I felt like I was reliving my life in Nigeria, fearful to express myself' (71). The detention centre not only spatially disorients Okporo by disconnecting him from time and the world outside, but also allows for a continuation of the hostility he fled. He observes that the centres are 'designed to derail and detour us, to break us down, to abandon our hope for safety in the United States' (94). Okporo proposes here that detention is created not just to detain and impose limits, but in fact to deter the asylum seeker from even attempting to navigate it.

In America, Okporo is identified not only by his queerness and migrant status, but also his race: 'It wasn't until I arrived in America that I came to understand it was no safe haven—not only as a gay man, but as a Black gay man' (147). He adds:

> Any American who visits Nigeria is not considered white or Black; they are all considered Americans. When a Black person travels to America, he may be Haitian or Nigerian, but first and foremost, he is Black. (149)

He finds himself oriented once again as an Other, someone who is misplaced and does not belong.

Anti-Blackness is not, however, entirely new to Okporo. He recounts his first encounter with whiteness as a child attending a wedding in Nigeria; he wanted to be close to the white bride as he 'felt important in her presence, civilised in a sense' (142). This goes on to reshape his perception of others; he admits that he 'started arranging people in my mind across an invisible line—those who had seen a real white person and those who had not' (142). Whiteness is seen as 'the best way to live life' (141). If one cannot be white, then at least one can achieve proximity to it.

Okporo's actions here reiterate Ahmed's understanding of orientalism and power, that being 'orientated around something means to make that thing central'.[6] Okporo

---

[5] UNHCR 1951 Refugee Convention.

[6] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 116.

internalises the Orientalist gaze, reorienting others in his mind as being more Other than himself. He believes that the way to succeed in America is to 'adopt whiteness in all its forms […] now I have to ask myself how I dress based on my race' (150). As with his attempts to mask his sexuality in Nigeria, his adoption of what he considers 'whiteness' is not simply a choice but a strategy for survival. He details the pushback that he and his partner Nicolas, a white man, both receive for dating outside their races.

Okporo ultimately orients his narrative towards hope. He writes of his future with his partner in the US:

> I will be getting married one day. We will build a family. We will fight for equality, together. […] I carry that hope with me in my work for a better future […] I believe our love is a radical activism, challenging the concept of love beyond skin colour. (165)

He tempers this hopefulness, however, with the tragic fates of others like him, such as Daunte Wright, a young Black man shot and killed during a traffic stop in Minneapolis in 2021 (165). He reminds the reader that even after his resettlement, nationwide systemic issues stand in his path towards 'freedom'.

Refugee studies scholar Andrew Nelson argues that 'refugee resettlement' is 'a tragedy of enduring displacement'.[7] Okporo's detailed and distressing stories of persecution pre-exile and discrimination post-exile deepen this conceptualisation of displacement. Non-fictional stories of refugee resettlement—especially those found in cookbooks and documentaries—tend to not only romanticise the process but also frame the attitude of their subjects as one of unqualified gratitude for the refuge they have received. Okporo's story reveals, however, that striving towards 'freedom' has been a constant battle for him even after resettling in the US, thus drawing attention to the complexities of refugee resettlement. The book concludes that the fight for his safety—and that of refugees globally—is far from over. It closes with a request for compassion, 'to see [refugees] for who we are and to give us a genuine opportunity to build a life of our design' (208-9). Okporo uses his story to make a compelling, unignorable plea for change in policies and laws, to ensure that his experiences of suffering and rejection are not repeated.

[7] Andrew Nelson, 'From Romance to Tragedy: House Ownership and Relocation in the Resettlement Narratives of Nepali Bhutanese Refugees', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34.4 (2020), 4053-71 (p. 2).