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Sometimes Rolling Stones Gather Moss: Liminality and Queer Intimacy

*And Breathe Normally* (2018), or *Andið eðlilega*, is an Icelandic film directed by Ísold Uggadóttir that made its debut at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival. In the film, Lara (Kristín Þóra Haraldsdóttir), a young single mother struggling to escape poverty, becomes emotionally involved with Adja (Babetida Sadjo), an undocumented immigrant from Guinea-Bissau seeking asylum in Iceland, after her new job as a border security worker forces her to flag the women's counterfeit passport. While the two characters do not engage in an outright romantic or sexual relationship, both women are, in fact, queer. Lara is shown to be involved with a married mother at her son's school, and it is revealed that Adja has fled Guinea-Bissau for her safety after her partner was beaten to death. *And Breathe Normally* should be considered as a film to be taught in later versions of this course because it explores the dynamics of queer intimacy and the effects that state-sanctioned liminality has on the queer homemaking process.

Towards the beginning of the film, Lara's son Eldar (Patrik Nökkvi Pétursson) reminds her that she promised to take him to an animal shelter to adopt a cat. In this scene, the camera is placed on the opposite side of the cages so that Lara and Eldar are the subjects that appear to be behind bars. Eldar asks Lara why the cats must live in cages, and she tells them that it is because they have no one to look after them. The camera moves so that Lara and Eldar are in the middle of the frame with a wall of cages behind them and flanking both their sides. When Eldar asks

why the cats are not allowed to simply take care of themselves, his mother responds that someone just decided it should be that way but becomes frustrated when Eldar fixates on knowing the identity of these decision-makers. Once again, the camera moves so that Lara is seen through the blocks of the wired cages. Eldar reaches into the cage to pick up his cat of choice, also reaching through the allegorical prison that the visuals create as he adds another addition to his family. Lara closes the cage, and the scene transitions to the three of them standing at the front desk, attempting to finalize the adoption. In the establishing shot of this next scene, a distanced over-the-head shot shows Lara, Eldar, and the cat framed tightly against the three cages again but now with the added constraint of being framed by a small service window. At this point in the film, the audience can gather that Lara is having trouble supporting her small family, and the act of purchasing a cat may seem counterintuitive, another added expense to her already overwhelming load. However, there is a quiet commonality between Lara and Eldar and the cats in the animal shelter. Throughout the film, Lara struggles to feed herself and Eldar, gets evicted from their apartment, and eventually is left with no other option than to live out of her car. The cats in the animal shelter have been taken away off the streets, with the intention of being rescued, only to sit in cages for months or even years so that they can be adopted by a new owner. Both subjects are forced into a state of liminality because they are deemed unworthy of living in the world on their own terms. To be a person, to be a part of the state, one must always be beholden to the rules and regulations of the state; hence, they both remain in cages.

In “Journeys and Returns: Home, Life Narratives and Remapping Sexuality in a Regional City,” Waitt and Gorman-Murray use conversations with queer identified people who have returned to their hometown of Townsville, Queensland, Australia after leaving to escape intolerance and homophobia to explore queer migration and homemaking. They say, “A

performative approach to home highlight the instability of domestic heterosexuality, and the possibilities for subversion and remapping the meaning of the family home” (Waitt and Gorman-Murray 1242). For the heterosexual, nuclear family structure home is usually regarded as a stable home in the suburbs with the husband, wife, and kids all staying static in their identities and belief systems. Domestic heterosexuality is an old ideal coming from the 17<sup>th</sup> century that led women to equate emotional intimacy and sexual desire with marriage so that intimate relationships between women were then considered taboo. Therefore, feelings of home and belonging have often been tethered to a heterosexuality, stability, and tradition. In the film, Lara is a poor, single mother that can only provide Eldar the illusion of a family home in spurts, and her car becomes her sanctuary after being evicted. Furthermore, Lara also engages in a secret, sexual relationship with a mother from Eldar’s school who is also married. While Eldar and his friend play in the next room, Lara and her unnamed lover share a frantic, intimate scene within the confines of her small bathroom. Not only does their liaison queer the domestic, homosocial space of a playdate amongst two young boys, but it also reveals the instability of domestic life altogether. If domestic heterosexuality is to grant complete happiness, then it would prove unnecessary for Lara’s lover to seek sex and intimacy outside of her marriage.

The climax of the film occurs when, Adja, the Guinea-Bissau refugee who Lara flagged at border security, decides to join a group of other undocumented immigrants in a plan to smuggle themselves out of Iceland on a cargo ship. Desperate after being denied asylum, she flees in the middle of the night to escape deportation back to the place in which her partner was brutally beat to death for her sexual identity. The scene begins with Lara, who Adja has befriended and opened her temporary housing to at this point, anxiously driving around town to find Adja. The camera is situated in the backseat so that the audience can only see Lara’s

silhouette and the front windshield is a mess of rain droplets and distorted lights. In the next shot, a huge storage container fills up almost the entire frame, a sliver of light from a streetlamp illuminates the infinitesimally small strip of concrete between the containers, three shadowed figures creep search for a particular container. The camera moves into a close-up of Adja's profile, as she visibly begins to panic, as if she is just now realizing the true danger of the situation. When the group finds the correct storage container, the audience sees a depressing sight: three sleeping bags lined up in a row and a pile of water bottles in the corner—flashlight acting as the sole source of light. As Adja runs away from the container, the camera develops a shaky, handheld quality, and the tension of the scene intensifies. The scene shifts to Lara, once again looking through a set of bars, as she finally spots Adja who looks tiny amongst the industrial background of the shipping yard. Lara screams Adja's name—both concerned and furious. Adja looks up at Lara and her entire body sags in relief, her eyes finally filling up with tears. It is in this scene where the film title begins to make sense. For queer people, especially queer people who have been forced into liminality, who are neither here nor there, home becomes more than a suburban home with a white picket fence. Instead, home becomes the feeling of belonging, inclusivity, and intimacy. Adja, whose need to survive has driven her to such drastic measures, finally has someone willing to come back for her and later risk their own livelihood to aid in her journey to safety.

All the crucial scenes in this film occur at places associated with travel or transience: airports, shipping yards, animal shelters, waiting room, and temporary housing units. None of these places are meant to be destinations, but the main characters still manage to find home in all these places. In "Homemaking and perpetual liminality among queer refugees," Wimark writes, "Home is also always in the making and not a finished project; it does not have to be a

place...As home space are built and created, they also become potential sites of negotiation, struggle, and conflict” (Wimark 4). In most cases, refugees seeking asylum in foreign countries have either been displaced by war or identify as something that is culturally or socially incompatible with the laws of their home country. In many countries, especially the United States, the road to legal citizenship can be long, exhausting, and sometimes even dehumanizing. Like with Adja, home becomes a flexible state of existence that can withstand constant migration. Later in the article, Wimark also argues that “liminality transgresses state-controlled spaces and can be experienced everywhere” (Wimark 5). Liminality is a time of transience and transformation, the endless line connecting one point to another. When a person is liminal, they are attached to neither the old or the new; therefore, they are inherently in opposition to the state which is a force of linearity, structure, and appellation. This means that Anja’s presence in Iceland, as someone who is not quite Guinea-Bissauan but not quite Icelandic, presents a danger to the state in the same way that Lara’s homelessness and single motherhood presents a danger to the patriarchal structure of the nuclear family.

Midway through the film, Eldar asks Lara which was her favorite country that had weather warm enough to wear shorts, and Lara laughingly admitted that she had never been to a country outside of Iceland. I found this moment, while subtle, to be quite meaningful. Many people have not had the privilege to travel outside of the country and engage with cultures outside of their own. I believe this film should be taught in later versions of this course because it emphasizes the importance of intimacy among queer folks in who occupy transient spaces or modes of existing. For many people in the United States, immigration has become a political buzz word more than a genuine consideration of the people who uprooted their lives for their survival and the survival of future generations. Although natural-born citizenship requires

nothing more than being birthed in the within the right jurisdiction, we pretend that people from other places are immediately dangerous or inferior. Even the most radical of us are still unlearning the ingrained American exceptionalism that has been ingrained in us by our very own nation. Therefore, I feel that this film would work to challenge our conceptions of home, queer intimacy, and citizenship.

Works Cited

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