

# RAINBOW PILGRIMS

The Rites and Passages  
of LGBTQI Migrants in Britain



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The Rites and Passages of LGBTQI migrants in Britain



# INTRODUCTION

**Who are we? And where have we come from?**

**We are lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer/questioning and intersex (LGBTQI). We are migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and from travelling communities.**

**We have journeyed across seas, through airports and along unfamiliar streets within, or to, the UK. And we have all been in search of belonging: looking for words, love, home, community, faith and our authentic self.**

**We are Rainbow Pilgrims. Here we tell our stories about the personal journeys we have taken and the complex patchwork of our intersecting identities.**

A place to belong is something we all look for, but it is particularly relevant to our lived experience as Rainbow Pilgrims. Many of us have suffered from double, if not triple, marginalisation as LGBTQI migrants of all faiths and none. Many of us have also experienced conflict with others, or within ourselves, as a result of our sexuality, faith, ethnicity, gender, cultural or national identities.

We continue the pilgrim's tradition of telling our stories to those we meet along the way. Our stories are a reminder that we must be vigilant – prejudice and discrimination are everywhere. Yet they also celebrate humanity, diversity and freedom.

It is through projects like Rainbow Pilgrims that we can give a platform to marginalised voices, and preserve this rich heritage for future generations.

**#WeThePilgrims**

# FINDING THE WORDS

Finding the words to say I'm gay, I'm trans, or I'm queer is not easy. But having the freedom and ability to do so is important. Rainbow Pilgrims share stories of living in silence and coming out.



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**I was always pretending and it was always on my mind growing up. I loved gardening but my mum and dad thought gardening was girls' work. I used to hide when I potted plants. Looking back, why? I even watered plants in the evening so that people wouldn't see.**

Sharma

**I came out at university. I came out in a big way, where I met lots of friends and we became 'the freaks'. We called ourselves 'the freaks' because we dressed really differently from a small town in New Zealand.**

Arron

## FINDING THE WORDS

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**I came out to myself when I was 30, and I'm not talking about coming out, claiming the identity. Sexuality was so oppressed in my life that I just considered myself asexual for the most part until I moved to the US when I was 21.**

**When I came out to my sister it just took a lot of giggling and a lot of 'um ah um', but in the end I just said, I have a boyfriend. And that's when she said I'm gay too.**

**I finally told my mum when I was 33, the year of Jesus. I told her if I were to marry, I would marry a man. That was on the phone. So that's when I came out to my mum, not in a very pleasant way, not in the ideal way of sitting down together and talking heart to heart. She said something like, 'That's disgusting, that's so dirty'.**

Anom

## FINDING THE WORDS

Language can be unhelpful at times, forcing us into fixed ways of thinking about ourselves and how we describe ourselves to others. Two Rainbow Pilgrims share what it was like to grow up without being able to express their true identity in their own language.

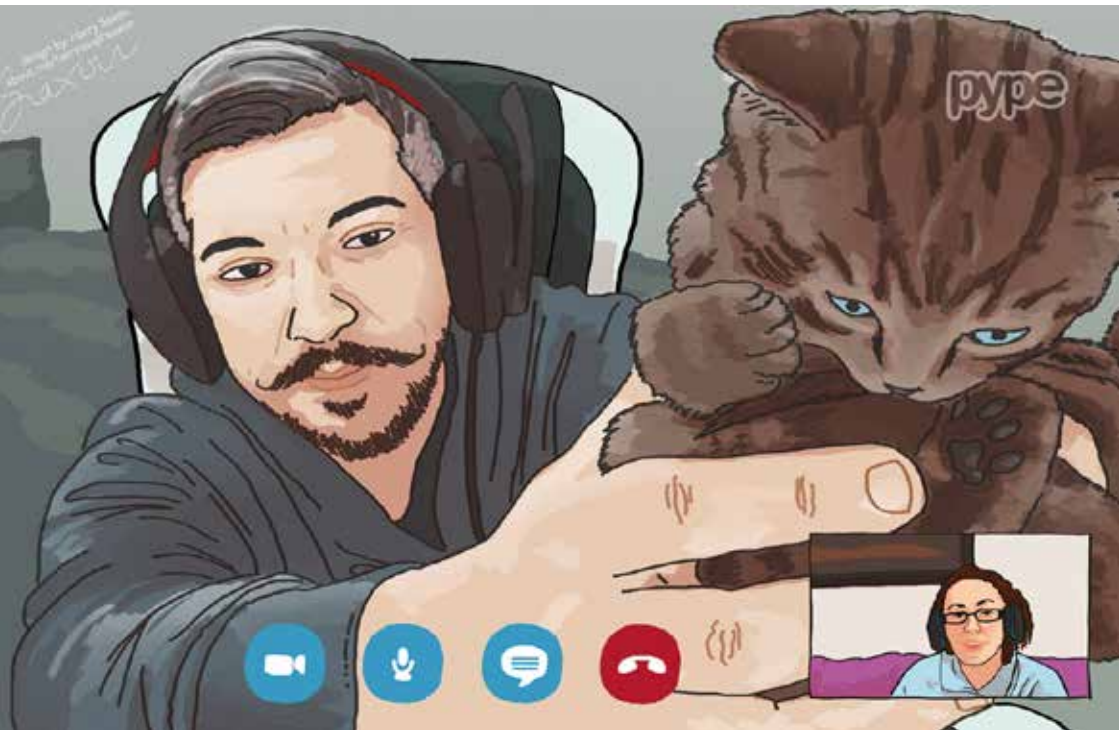
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**Where I'm from, people are already confused about lesbians, so how do I even start explaining myself as transgender? They would want to know what genitals I have. They would say, 'Oh you're a trans man, what's that? Are you a full man, or are you a woman, or are you a lesbian?' I can't even explain what a trans man is in Zulu, there is no word for it. I would say 'I'm a woman born in the wrong body', but they would still just assume I'm a lesbian.**

Scotch

## FINDING THE WORDS



**In Greece, when I was younger, most people didn't know about being trans. Either they didn't know about it at all, or they thought that everybody who comes out as trans is – their words, not mine – a man pretending to be a woman, and a prostitute. It was very difficult to come out as trans because it's really difficult to explain. Sometimes you have to use terms that are not supported by the community. Like the whole thing, 'I'm a man trapped in a woman's body'. I've had to use that a lot in the past, which is wrong. When you say, 'I am a man trapped in a woman's body', it alienates you from your own body. The thing is, I don't see my body as a woman's body. It's my body, and I'm not a woman, hence it's a man's body, because that's what I am. I don't just identify as a man, I am a man.**

Harry

# FINDING LOVE

Many of us left friends and family so that we could be free to love, free to meet others like us and free to have our romantic relationships recognised.

**I can't stay in Benin because I am not safe. I had to run away and find somewhere I can be free and open about my sexuality.**

Nonyeme

**Since I arrived in the UK and joined the Metropolitan Community Church my life has really changed. I've made friends. And I met my partner. I love her so much. We met at a church picnic, that's when I asked her out. She's so nice. She's calm, she's understanding, she's loving and always there for me. I feel so happy and relieved that I can live the way I want. I can hold my partner's hand, I can hug her, I can kiss her.**

MJ



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Godfrey celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act that passed in Britain on 27 July 1967. It was a significant step in the process of decriminalising homosexuality.

**I'm proud to be here because it's the 50th anniversary. If I hadn't escaped from Uganda, I wouldn't be here today. So I'm proud to be here and I'm proud to talk publicly. What I want today is to tell the public and the whole world that being gay is not a criminal act.**

Godfrey



## FINDING LOVE

Jacob and Eugene have been together for nearly 40 years. They met at a gay community centre in Alaska and have travelled many countries together. Eugene shares the story of how they met, and Jacob shares why they moved to the UK.



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**I walk in and there's this guy named Jacob, and I said 'Hi, I'd like to volunteer! I don't know how long I'm going to be here but I've got some time.' So he put me to work doing some renovations on the place working with him. And the rest, as they say, is history. We fell in love and I stayed for almost 30 years.**

Eugene

**It wasn't money. It wasn't the NHS. It was equality and recognition of our relationship that drew of us as [LGBTQI] activists.**

Jacob

# FINDING A HOME

What does home mean to you? There isn't one set definition. Some Rainbow Pilgrims consider the UK to be their only home. For others, it is just one of their homes.

**I miss my country, but I can't do anything. I have to be realistic, I have to be pragmatic. I can't live there, because I am already labelled.**

Ray

**When I came to this country, I just wanted to eat fish and chips like an English person. And English breakfast. It was nice.**

Cee



©Harry Saxon

**I am so settled in the UK that I stood for council member on the Green Party ticket in Southwark. And I think that was kind of my coming out, as this is now home.**

Eugene

## FINDING A HOME

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**I love Manchester so much because it's me, it defines Tafadzwa as a gay man. In the UK I can freely express myself as a gay person without fear of intimidation, of persecution, without fear of people criticising me. And I feel home.**

Tafadzwa

**This country is a good place but the values are very different and the sense of self-fulfillment is lower for me here than it would be in Sri Lanka. I'm going to go home when I can. It's not a question of disliking this country. There's just nothing like being in your own country where you know people and you know the way things are and how things work. And you're connected with the culture.**

Rani

## FINDING A HOME

Arriving in the UK is not necessarily the happy ending we might expect and being an immigrant is not easy. Many face economic hardships. Racial prejudice and discrimination persist. And those seeking asylum have a long journey ahead with the Home Office.

**There is no welcome wagon.**

Jacob

**It's a very complicated situation to find yourself in, because it feels like your joy and your achievement in getting here is such a tainted privilege. You're just the lucky one that got away. So it comes with a lot of guilt.**

Eliza



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**Because I sent two asylum-seeker applications and I didn't mention my sexuality in one, the Home Office don't believe that I am a lesbian.**

Monica

## FINDING A HOME



@HarrySaxon

**I got the job and my only request to my manager was this – 'I'm allowed 20 hours of work a week, because of my student visa. I would not ask you to give me a 21st hour, but I would ask you to give me work on all seven days. The busiest hours, I can come, work my butt off in those three hours, just give me every day.' He did not realise why I was asking. I had a Danish supervisor. She understood that it was so I could get the employee meal on those days. Ten years on, I've never asked for a penny from this system. It gives me value, that I can proudly say that I'm not here as a leech against the system, because there is a phobia against immigrants and refugees.**

Muhammad

## We the pilgrims

Here is a visual interpretation of the journeys that Rainbow Pilgrims have been on and the personal milestones they have shared. It can only hint at each pilgrim's unique experience. We hope it encourages you to explore the exhibition and listen to their stories.

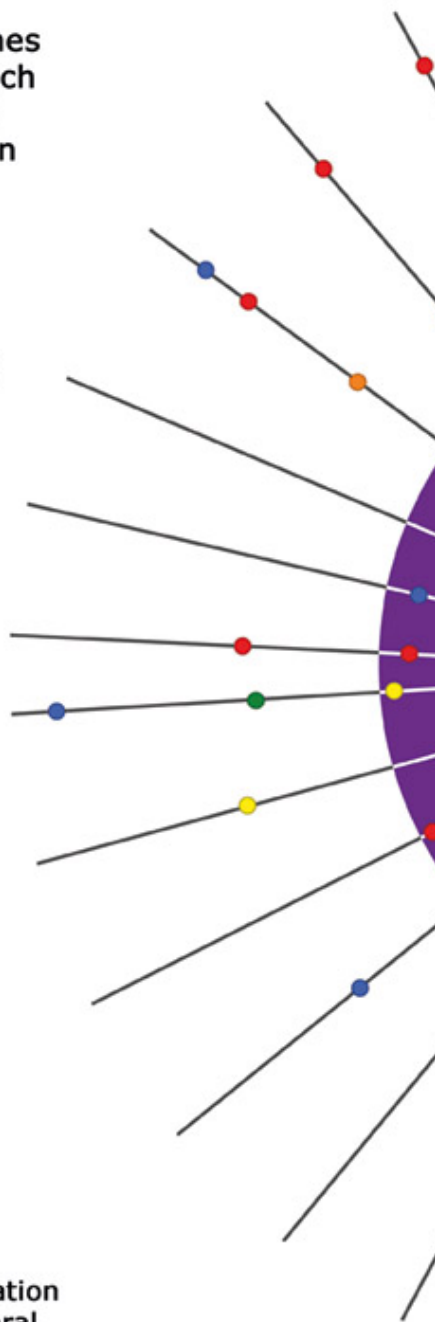
### How to read it

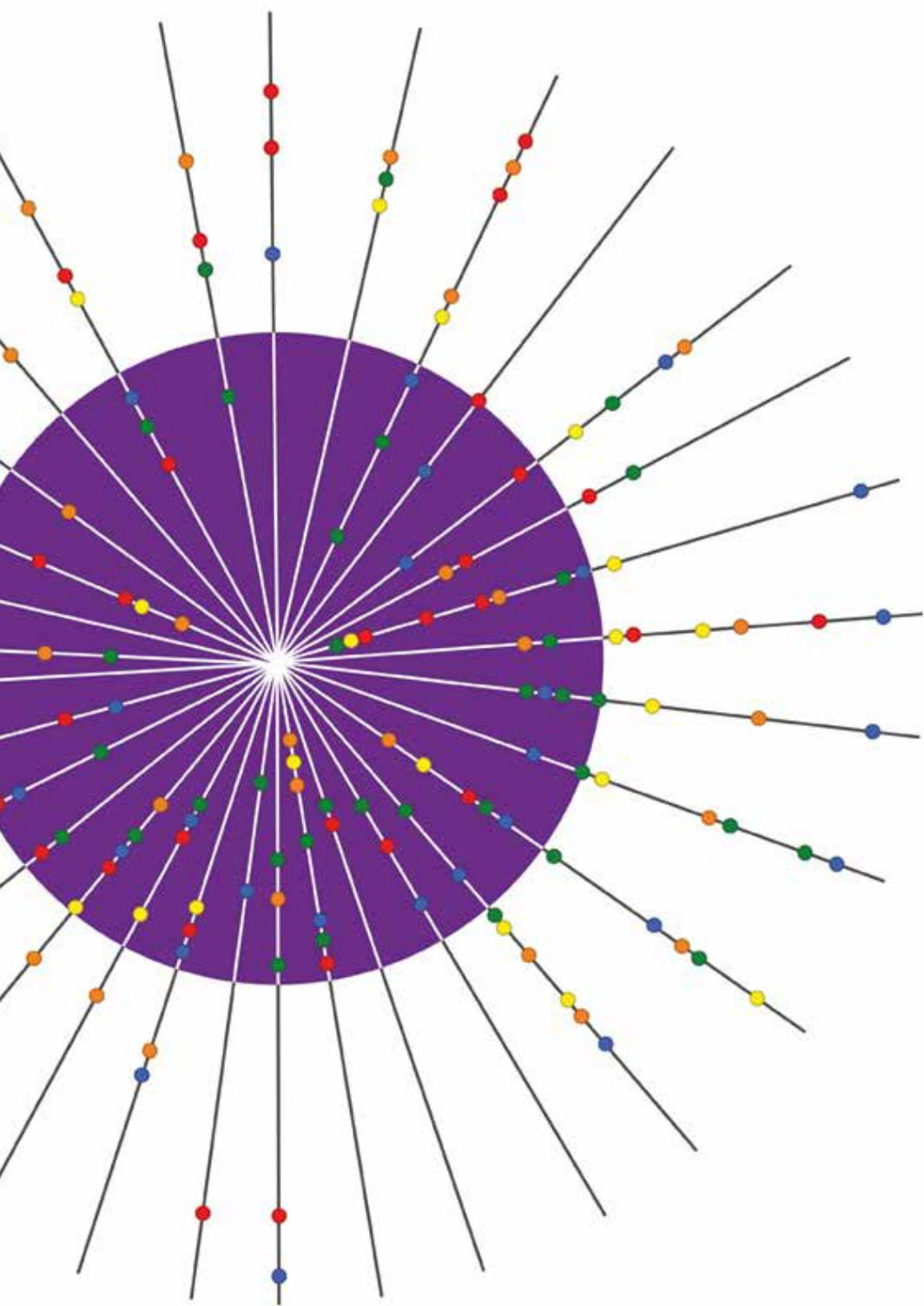
Each line represents the journey of one Rainbow Pilgrim. Each coloured dot represents a milestone they shared, placed roughly in chronological order. The inner circle divides the pilgrim's journey before and after the UK.

### Milestones

- Coming out
- Love
- Loss
- Support
- Faith
- Arrived in the UK

Please note: this visualisation is an interpretation of what each pilgrim chose to share in their oral history. An absence of a dot does not mean an absence of that milestone.





# FINDING A COMMUNITY

A supportive community can have a transformative effect on someone's life, providing a place of belonging in a hostile world. Rainbow Pilgrims share stories of feeling hidden, but also inspired and empowered by our communities.



**Mauritius is quite a small, insular country. While growing up I felt very much alone, not knowing anyone else who was gay, or LGBT. Later when I was a student, there was nothing really for us being gay. No place to be safe, no representation in the media at all. Things have changed now, but growing up we were almost completely invisible. I do think it's important to be visible. Because, from experience, people that have been homophobic, people that have prejudices, are bigoted, once they have been in contact with somebody who is LGBT, they see them around, they see actually, yes, they are gay, so what? There is a journey, people do shift, people do change, it does happen. And I think visibility plays a big role in shifting this attitude.**

Pliny



## FINDING A COMMUNITY



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**For English Romany travellers like myself, there's nothing about being LGBT. So I started looking on the internet and I found this traveller forum for gay travellers. I couldn't believe how many people were on there and just wanted to talk. So I had a swift conversation with my mum and told her that I really need to push this agenda. I'm going to try and make Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) services aware of this. When you learn about LGBT and what it stands for – acceptance, love and equality – you see that the inequalities that this community face are very similar to those that the GRT community face. But I'm fighting GRT services to identify me as a gay man in the GRT community. I remember speaking to one officer who said, 'There are no gays or lesbians in the GRT community'. I hope I can inspire people to come out and be gay as a traveller. I want to surround them with love and acceptance. But I can't do that until we get everyone on board.**

Henry

## FINDING A COMMUNITY

The LGBTQI community in the UK has much to be proud of and can offer a welcoming place for many. However, the fact that some experience prejudice within the gay community shows that there is no room for complacency in the battle for equality.

**It is nice to know that there are people like us, there is a community there. Even if you only meet one other person, there is a strength that you can take from that. Like any other community, the LGBTQI community doesn't only consist of the good people. There are good and bad and everything. But at least it gives us the possibility of being whatever we want to be in relation to our gender, our sexuality, our personal identities.**

Cano



©HarrySaxon

**I was the President of the Sheffield branch of my teachers union's LGBT committee. I'm quite proud about that. Actually in my union, sexuality aside, I've only seen another two or three Chinese union activists in the whole country. So I suppose you could say I was a pioneer in that respect.**

Joe

## FINDING A COMMUNITY

**The tour bus was going around to Trafalgar Square and the guide said 'Here's famous Trafalgar Square, and we have one of our events going on here, looks like a protest, what is it, oh! Gay rights, look at 'em all! This is really unusual, never seen anything like this before'. Turns out, this was the first gay rights event in Trafalgar Square. Ever. And so we're circling around and two women with short haircuts sitting together in the front of the bus gave him a dirty look. And he said 'Well, I guess I really shouldn't make fun of those people because it's an illness, so uh, it's really sad to see this going on.' I went, well, that's my first introduction to London.**

Eugene



@HarrySaxon

**The standard complaint that a lot of gay Asian men have with applications like Grindr is that there are heaps of people who say things like, 'No fats, no femmes, no Asians'. And the people who've created these apps, they try to defend the people with these preferences. They say, yes everyone should be equal, but a person's own preferences are private and they almost put it in sacred, religious terms. But I question this.**

Alexander

**The main thing I discovered about the gay fetish scene was that not all of them were hot people with amazing bodies. You could see everything, skinny guys, fat dudes with muscle Mary's. And it was so exciting and so relieving in a way. It was like, oh my god, there's a place here for everyone. I discovered that the fetish scene is really empowering, because of what it all boils down to: we're all people.**

Ido

# FINDING FAITH

Many Rainbow Pilgrims have experienced rejection from religion, just as many of us have stories of acceptance and inclusivity through faith.



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**I was about 15, in a science lesson about reproduction. The teacher started saying that a man should marry a woman and have sex with a woman, but you can't have a man with a man, or a woman with a woman. He said people like that are not allowed in this country and those kind of people cannot be Christians. After that I stopped going to church. I only started going to church again when I arrived in this country. The moment I stepped in, I started smiling. I love going there because it makes me feel that no matter who I am, God loves me and God loves everybody. I am thankful to be part of that church. Through it, I lead a life of hope.**

Rumbic

## FINDING FAITH



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**My grandparents' Presbyterian faith was really important to them and their faith was probably something that turned me away from them. I never told my grandparents in New Zealand that I was gay, because my mother said their religion wouldn't allow things like that. So I never got to tell them. That was a regret. When they died, my mum, she sent over this thing. It was a swan, it's a terrible thing. It's crystal or something. I used to love it as a kid, I thought it was quite camp and sparkly. It sits on my dressing table now and it reminds me of my grandparents a lot. It represents the antithesis of my grandparents, because they were quite frugal and sour. But I suppose it represents the fact that they had this little bit of them, the bit I got of them. And that little camp, sparkly thing now sits in my house.**

Arron

## FINDING FAITH



@HarrySaxon

**I've been taught by the Metropolitan Community Church that you can be a Christian and be gay. They respect my sexuality and my faith. They mix it.**

Stephen



@SusanneHakuba

**What's great, is my synagogue holds a Pride service. And for World Aids day, my synagogue will have a specific service for it. It's very inclusive. Progressive Judaism is all about inclusivity.**

Shiraz

## FINDING FAITH



@HarrySaxon

**I had to figure out religion. Real quick. You know, where do I stand, if by the quality of who I am I cannot be possibly welcomed into eternal life? The gay thing for me was what first let me rupture with faith. First let me stand on my own haunches and say 'no'. It was what let me become, it's a silly thing to say but to become a man. If I were a woman, to be a woman. If I was trans, to be trans. I have the name Jacob, of all things. This is the man who wrestled with an angel, in the great traditions. Basically said to God 'I'm not taking that deal'. Quakers allowed me to emancipate the notion 'I'm responsible'. So that faith tradition is a good one. I'm glad I found it, and it took coming to this country to really become part of it.**

Jacob

# FINDING OURSELVES

We all have to negotiate a range of overlapping and evolving identities in order to work out who we are. From gender to sexuality, faith, nationality, ethnicity and profession, Rainbow Pilgrims share where they've got to on their personal journeys.



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Victoria is pictured in front of Royal Vauxhall Tavern, one of London's oldest drag pubs and believed to be Britain's longest-running site for the LGBT community.

**My gender identity, sexual orientation, my faith and my culture, they're all obviously connected, because that is who I am, that is what's moulded me as a human being. I couldn't live without one missing. I couldn't live with only just two or three in me, it seems like they're all united. Now I'm more comfortable with myself, I'm more confident to face my future and to be authentically, confidently me. My own me.**

Victoria



## FINDING OURSELVES

**My identity as a gay man is not the predominant one. It's part of who I am, but I am other things before I am gay. I consider myself an artist, Israeli, a husband, brother, son, friend. Gay is just part of it.**

Ido

©HarrySaxon



Born in Ireland, Jen was brought up male and told by psychiatrists that she was gay. She later learned she was intersex and transitioned in 2013. She has shared a piece of artwork that means a lot to her. It's a board with letters cut out that she has on her window. The original art piece is by UK street artist, Mohammed Ali.

**I was being identified as male. Myself, I didn't identify as male or female. I observed gay people from a distance, to try and get the ambience, I suppose, or see, could I belong here? Because I didn't believe I belonged anywhere else. For the first 18 years I was, not confused, but I knew in my heart of hearts who I was. On the outside, outwardly appearing, it might have looked like there was some confusion going on there. I quickly realised nothing about the gay life appealed to me at all.**

Jen

**I don't actually identify as a gay person. I like the label 'queer' more. I think it's more comprehensive, more ambiguous.**

Alexander

**I'm first of all, black. Because that's a political colour. Second of all, I'm Asian, because that's my continent. Third, I am a member of the Dravidian because that's my parent race, and after that I am Sri Lankan and then after that I'm Tamil. All of those come first, and then I'm LGBT. So my ethnic and cultural identity is slightly more important because that's longer established.**

Rani

## FINDING OURSELVES

We want to ensure that experiences like ours are not left at the margins of UK history and heritage. We hope reading our stories will inspire you to reflect on, and share, your own.



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**I'm from Africa and I'm gay and I'm here at Rainbow Pilgrims, doing an interview. That inspires me already. I feel like I am something in life. My message to everyone, – in Africa, Europe, Asia, everywhere – is you get born, or you get created. You don't choose who you want to be, where you want to be, what colour you want to be, what school you want to be at, and what name you want to be called. It's no one's fault that they're born or created the way they are. Everyone should love each other, and you should love yourself as you love others.**

JK

**It's very important to be able to voice, to be able to share. That's what this pilgrimage is all about.**

Ray

# SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

We are all on a journey of some kind. Share your story and show your solidarity by using the hashtag, **#WeThePilgrims**.

## THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

### Visit the online exhibition

To discover more Rainbow Pilgrims' stories, visit [rainbowpilgrims.atavist.com](http://rainbowpilgrims.atavist.com)

### Visit the archive

From June 2018, the Rainbow Pilgrims archive collection will be available to access for free at the London Metropolitan Archive in Clerkenwell.

### Book the exhibition

Bring the Rainbow Pilgrims legacy to your community. If you want to book the pop-up touring exhibition for display at your local museum, library, or community space, please contact us via [rainbowpilgrims.com](http://rainbowpilgrims.com).

### Get in touch

For more information about the project, or to get in touch, please visit the Rainbow Pilgrims website at [rainbowpilgrims.com](http://rainbowpilgrims.com). And if you would like to contribute to our growing oral history and memorabilia archive of LGBTQI migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and GRT communities, we would love to hear from you.

# GLOSSARY

**ASYLUM SEEKER** A person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country – often because of persecution – but whose application has not yet been decided on. Not all asylum seekers will be recognised as a refugee.

**COMING OUT** Understanding yourself, and telling other people that you are lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer or another identity.

**GAY** Someone who is attracted to people of the same gender.

**GENDER** Often expressed in terms of masculinity and femininity, gender is largely culturally determined.

**GENDER IDENTITY** An individual's internal understanding of themselves as female, male, transgender – and other identities.

**GRT** Umbrella acronym for the Gypsy Roma and Traveller community. A collective term used to describe a wide variety of cultural and ethnic groups.

**IMMIGRANT** A person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country.

**INTERSEX** A term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female. Intersex people may identify as male, female, non-binary and other.

**LESBIAN** A woman who is attracted to other women.

**LGBT/LGBTQI+** Umbrella term often used for Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer/Questioning and Intersex people. This acronym does not encompass everybody and different organisations may use fewer or more letters for inclusivity. Sometimes a + ('plus') symbolises this.

**MIGRANT** A person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions.

**METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCH** Founded in 1968, Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) are particularly inclusive.

**PRESBYTERIAN** Presbyterianism is a part of the Reformed tradition within Protestantism with its origins in the British Isles. In the US particularly, the Presbyterian Church tends to be supportive of LGBTQI communities.

**PRIDE** The annual celebration of LGBTQI communities held around the world.

**PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM** A liberal strand of Judaism that embraces tradition and works to make it meaningful in contemporary life.

**QUAKERISM** A liberal and welcoming faith group without hierarchy that strongly supports human rights. Quakers in Britain decided in 2009 to campaign for the right to marry same-sex couples in Quaker meetings.

**QUEER** Individuals who experience fluidity in their experience of sexuality or gender and therefore may not identify strictly as LGB or T. The term 'queer' can also include those who do not identify as either gender e.g. genderqueer. It is viewed to be derogatory by some however reclaimed increasingly by the younger generation.

**REFUGEE** A person who meets the eligibility criteria under the applicable refugee definition, as provided for in international or regional refugee instruments, under UNHCR's mandate, and/or in national legislation.

**SEX** Assigned to a person on the basis of primary sex characteristics (genitalia) and reproductive functions.

**TRANSGENDER OR TRANS** Someone whose gender identity differs from the one they were assigned at birth. They may identify as male, female, non-binary, or maybe neither label fits them.

**TRAVELLER** See GRT.

**ZULU** The Zulu (Zulu: amaZulu) are a Bantu ethnic group of Southern Africa and the largest ethnic group in South Africa, with an estimated 10–11 million people living mainly in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

This is an abridged version of our glossary. To see the full version, please visit [rainbowpilgrims.atavist.com/glossary](http://rainbowpilgrims.atavist.com/glossary)

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Ella Hollowood | Curator

Charlotte Kingston | Mentor

Surat-Shaan Knan | Project manager

Harry Saxon | Illustrator

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**We are Rainbow Pilgrims.  
This groundbreaking exhibition  
uncovers our hidden histories  
as LGBTQI migrants, refugees  
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the UK. We invite you to discover  
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**liberal judaism**