# LGBT migrants and refugees' search for home:
# An intersectional struggle

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**Abstract**

Migration is, in many ways, a search for home. Independently from its cause, migration is a process that has to do as much with 'uprooting' one's home as with 'regrounding' it. However, migration is not experienced in the same way by everyone: LGBT migrants face increased risks related to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Particularly, I maintain that, in their host countries, LGBT migrants and refugees are exposed to the phenomenon of 'homelessness': ostracised from ethnic and migrant communities because of their queer identity, and isolated from the local LGBT communities because of their migrant/refugee status. However, I display how LGBT migrants can combat this process by finding home and sense of belonging within collective frameworks, such as in the spaces provided by NGOs. In this article, I therefore highlight the intersectional struggle of LGBT migrants in their search for home, focusing on the de/construction of 'home/lessness'.

**Introduction**

In recent years, the topic of LGBT migration has started to receive more attention, not only in academia and research, but also in campaigning and mainstream media. In particular, the focus has been on aspects such as the increased dangers and forms of victimisation experienced by LGBT migrants and refugees[1] throughout their migration journeys (cf. Freedman et al., 2017; Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011), as well as in refugee communities (cf. Kivilcim, 2017; Myrttinen et al., 2017), and on the difficulties of the asylum-seeking process, during which LGBT asylum-seekers are asked to provide 'proof' of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (cf. Danisi et al., 2020; Held, 2019; Dustin, 2018; Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014). At the same time, however, not as much attention has been dedicated to the concepts of 'home' and 'homelessness' in relation to LGBT migration, despite findings suggesting that LGBT migrants and refugees tend to struggle particularly in this regard: one of their major issues is that of feeling unsafe inside reception centres, leading many to live on the streets (cf. Torrisi, 2017; Women for Refugee Women, 2020). At the same time, many LGBT migrants experience extreme isolation, an 'emotional homelessness' in which they are unable to create for themselves a sense of belonging to their host community, and therefore to develop a new concept of home and family in the country where they are seeking asylum, on account of their double ostracization from both ethnic and migrant communities because of their queer identity, and from local LGBT communities because of their migrant/refugee status (cf. Wimark, 2019). In this article, I focus on the topic of LGBT migration through the concepts of 'home' and 'homelessness', arguing that an intersectional perspective is required to understand the specific experiences of LGBT migrants and refugees. I therefore ask:

> How can intersectionality help us understand LGBT migrants and refugees' experience of 'home' and 'homelessness'?

I have chosen to approach this topic by focusing on the Italian context, not only because of this country's role as a bridge to Europe, but also because of its current social and political environment. Migration has become one of the main political battlefields, and, in recent years,

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[1] "At UNHCR we say 'refugees and migrants' when referring to movements of people by sea or in other circumstances where we think both groups may be present. We say 'refugees' when we mean people fleeing war or persecution across an international border. And we say 'migrants' when we mean people moving for reasons not included in the legal definition of a refugee. We hope that others will give thought to doing the same. Choices about words do matter." (Edwards, 2016). Throughout this article, I will apply this same principle, referring to both 'migrants' and 'refugees' to encompass all possible experiences of migration.

populist leaders have been building their following around their anti-immigration stance. This has rendered the Italian context a particularly interesting case because "being a laboratory for populism, Italy has been and is a laboratory for citizen mobilization against right-wing populism" (Campani, 2019, p.187): if, on one hand, Italy has seen an increase in right-wing populism, on the other hand, it has also seen a 'bubbling up' of social movements, activist networks, non-governmental organisations, cultural associations, and informal citizen groups interested in social justice issues. Furthermore, in recent years Italian LGBT associations have developed projects and practices aimed specifically at LGBT migrants and refugees, from helpdesks providing psychological and legal assistence, to meeting groups and even housing programs, such as the state of the art project of 'Casa Caterina' in Bologna, "the first protected home in Europe for transgender refugees and asylum seekers" ('MIT Italia-Chi siamo – WordPress', n.d.).

The analysis will focus firstly on 'homelessness', both physical and emotional, displaying how it is constructed by the LGBT migrants, and secondly, on how they can find 'home' and belonging in the collective frameworks provided by NGOs and activist networks. Here, the importance of an intersectional perspective will be highlighted, thus allowing me to answer my research question.

**Methodology**

This article relies on primary data collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews carried out with LGBT migrants and refugees. The subjects to interview were identified through "snowball sampling" (Bryman, 2012, pp.202-203): after establishing initial contact with various organisations, I relied on them to provide me with the contacts of LGBT migrants and refugees who might be interested in participating in my research.

The data collected was then organised and processed through the software NVivo. Within the software, I created 'nodes' in which to categorise the various instances where 'homelessness', 'home', and 'belonging' were addressed by the research participants. The interview transcripts were therefore analysed through this framework. This process has indeed been interpretative, and therefore subjective in some ways. Nonetheless, I maintain that these categorisations have contributed to the creation of a useful framework through which to approach and structure the analysis.

**Theoretical Framework**

In order to approach the topic of 'home' and 'homelessness' in relation to LGBT migrants and refugees, this article's theoretical framework relies on three main theoretical approaches: intersectionality, queer diaspora, and politics of belonging.

In particular, intersectionality, first theorised by Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides the main lens through which this research can be carried out, as it lays down the groundwork for understanding oppression at the intersection of different categories. Brah and Phoenix refer to intersectionality

> "as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands." (2004, p.76).

By approaching the topic of LGBT migration and home/lessness intersectionally, then, I seek to acknowledge and emphasise the multifaceted and complex nature of LGBT migrants and refugees, and therefore to look at how this complex nature is addressed by organisations and projects which are aimed at them. More specifically, intersectionality here functions analytically as a research paradigm, because of its benefits of simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity, meaning that it deals with multiple analytical categories at the same time, that it manages to capture experiential and structural complexity, that it does not reduce oppression to one main aspect or category, and that it is inclusive, making visible those groups that tend to be overlooked in hegemonic feminist theory (Carastathis, 2014, pp.307-309). In this article, I therefore acknowledge the intersecting identities of LGBT migrants on the axis of sex, gender, sexuality, migrant/refugee status, and ethnicity/nationality, however, I am not interested in highlighting one above the others, but rather, I focus on how these intersections impact their experience of finding home and belonging, and on how the organisations working with LGBT migration can also apply intersectionality to create state of the art practices.

As for queer diaspora and politics of belonging, each of them serves to address a specific aspect discussed throughout this article. The former, queer diaspora, defined by Fortier as the

intersection between theories of diaspora and queer theories, serves to conceptualise the sense of emotional and physical 'homelessness' experienced by LGBT migrants and refugees, as it "constitutes a rich heuristic device to think about questions of belonging, continuity, and solidarity in the context of dispersal and transnational networks of connection" (2002, p.184). Through queer diaspora, it becomes possible to define the undefinable and to think about community "in terms of difference, dispersal, disconnection, diversity, and multilocality" (ibid., p.192) rather than exclusively in terms of commonality.

Thus, while queer diaspora allows us to conceptualise and analyse 'homelessness', the latter, politics of belonging, theorised by Yuval-Davis (2006; 2011), serves on the other hand to focus on sense of belonging and therefore on 'home' and how it is constructed. According to Yuval-Davis, when 'belonging' becomes problematised, such as due to forced displacement, 'politics of belonging' emerges by exercising power and constructing boundaries focusing on the inclusion/exclusion of individuals and social categories. Thus, the politics of belonging are concerned with maintaining and reproducing boundaries of belonging, with resisting those who seek to challenge these boundaries, and with the "struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging" (ibid., p.20). Within the context of this article, politics of belonging is utilised to approach the empirical data and highlight how the construction of a sense of belonging and of 'home' in LGBT migrants and refugees happens, focusing on how this category gains 'power of' their life and migration path when involved in the activities of LGBT organisations.

**Constructing Homelessness**

This section analyses how the LGBT migrants and refugees interviewed discuss their migrant experience in relation to the concepts of 'home/lessness', focusing on their construction of both physical and emotional homelessness.

For instance, one interviewee, Joy, identifies one main issue of being an LGBT migrant hosted in a reception centre, which, in theory, should provide a 'home' for her:

> It's just like taking you out of [country of origin], where you know that gay people are not accepted… and putting you back with the same [people you were escaping from]. The place changed. The emotion... my mindset stayed the same. Nothing changes for

you personally because it's just like... If you don't have the courage, then you are not free to be who you want to be.

The kind of homelessness she experiences is therefore physical, as the reception centre does not represent a 'safe home'. Instead, the proximity to her fellow nationals forces her back into the situation she had been trying to escape from by seeking refuge in Italy. This is a paradox that many, if not all, LGBT migrants and refugees have to face: when placed in a migrant reception centre, the categories of migrant/refugee and sex are usually the only ones taken into account. However, this lack of a more intersectional understanding on behalf of the asylum system places individuals in danger, as it fails to acknowledge the existence of LGBT migrants, the victimisation they can experience in relation to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and therefore that being accommodated with fellow nationals is not beneficial, but dangerous. Later in the interview, Joy explicitly addresses this, discussing how LGBT migrants and refugees are in need of a "different kind of help" precisely because of their intersecting identities, relating to her specific experiences as a black, migrant, lesbian woman.

Another interviewee, Maruf, a transgender man who was hosted in a reception center with other men, expressed similar criticism of the migrant reception centres' ability to provide a 'home': even though his identity was respected by the Italian asylum system, as he was provided accommodation according to his gender identity rather than his biological sex, he still felt in danger, afraid that the other residents would find out about his transgender status. He therefore concluded that living in the reception centre felt more like a prison: in this sense, then, he experienced a form of homelessness since, while the accommodation did provide shelter, it failed at giving him the intimate space and privacy needed to feel safe and comfortable, 'at home'. Analysing his case intersectionally, one can argue that part of his struggle derives from the ways in which the asylum system has dealt with his axis of oppressions, prioritising some above the others: while respecting his gender identity, his transgender status has been erased, thus exposing him to increased dangers.

The interviewees also addressed in various ways the emotional aspect of homelessness, for instance by expressing a longing for family and a place where to belong. Recounting her experience with finding love inside a reception center, Joy told me:

I met my girlfriend actually in the camp and it got to a point where they started telling us things like 'you can't let the rest of the girls know you are together'. They were trying to separate us and they transferred her to a very far city. Just to keep us apart. And at that moment I was wishing that... I wish there was camps for gay people, specifically lesbians. Then I would have been happy.

In Joy's case, her attempt at finding love and building an 'emotional home' in the reception centre was quickly obstructed by the reception system itself, which first imposed secrecy upon her lesbian relationship, and, subsequently, tried to break it off entirely by keeping the two women apart. This event precipitated Joy into a deep emotional homelessness, leading her to wish for a place reserved for people like her, where to belong and live truthfully without any of the consequences which she has had to endure attempting to live as a black, migrant, lesbian woman. Similarly to the examples addressed above, intersectionality plays an important role, as emerges from Joy's own words: in the asylum system she is perceived only as a woman and a migrant, while her identity as a lesbian is actively erased. This is particularly problematic, as it is through her lesbian identity that she finds belonging, amongst other lesbians as well as within the broader LGBT community.

Although these were only a few examples, I have experienced, throughout the interviewing process, that the LGBT migrants and refugees therefore not only can relate to 'homelessness' as a concept, but can operationalise it themselves and utilise it to address their particular situation, relating it to their intersecting identities as members of the LGBT community, as migrants/refugees, as ethnic minorities. In Joy's words, for instance, it is possible to observe how she conceptualises her experiences as a lesbian refugee through the lens of homelessness, or, referring to my own theoretical approach, of queer diaspora. In particular, Joy is pushed to inhabit the "diaspora space" (Brah, 1996, p.209) because the queer narrative of "migration as emancipation" (Fortier, 2002, p.186) has failed her: moving out by migrating has not emancipated her, instead it has isolated her, as she has been rendered extraneous to her ethnic network because of her lesbian identity, and alien to the mainstream Italian LGBT community because of her body marked as 'Other': migrant, racialised, different. Hers is, thus, a homeless condition. Similarly, other interviewees' experiences in asylum centres evidence a discomfort in having to share a living space with their fellow nationals, not necessarily because of a past negative incident, but also because of generalised anxiety and fear surrounding their LGBT identity, particularly in the context of their ethnic and cultural background.

However, in most interviews, the exploration of this sense of homelessness, both physical and emotional, led to discuss also 'the other side': home. Therefore, while the LGBT migrants and refugees recounted the difficulties and struggles that they have faced, constructing 'homelessness', they also talked in a more positive light about their current situation, often in relation to the sense of belonging and home that they have been able to find through the LGBT organisations that welcomed them.

**Finding Home and Belonging**

This section analyses some instances in which the LGBT migrants and refugees illustrate their "homing processes" (Ahmed et al., 2003, p. 9) through which they are able to reconstruct a sense of home, safety and belonging for themselves. This allows them to escape, or at least alleviate, their 'homelessness'.

One interviewee, Omar, explained in this way the relationship that he has established with his LGBT migrant group:

> When we're [at the LGBT organisation's headquarters] there's no difference, we're all equals. Sometimes when we're at [coordinator]'s home it's like our home […] it's like a family. […] It doesn't end there, we can go get coffee together, we eat together and so… it's family. It's a family.

In his statement, Omar highlights the "homing processes" (Ahmed et al., 2003, p.9) carried out by the group, which transform it into a family: spending time together in and outside the organisation's offices, eating together, meeting up for coffee. They are small, everyday, insignificant gestures, and yet, the meaning that is attached to them is greater, allowing Omar to feel a sense of belonging and, in many ways, to find 'home'. Furthermore, he highlights that, within the shared space of the LGBT organisation, 'they are all equal': this does not signify that their differences are erased, but rather, that their different identities are all cherished, without one axis being placed above the other, an approach reminiscent of the "careful attention to working within, through and across cultural differences" of proto-intersectional feminism (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p.79).

Similar feelings were echoed by Joy:

When I joined [LGBT migrant group] I really felt the connection because I saw people that relate to me, something that I can relate to because it's like a family. We are trying to elevate one another and trying to help one another. We have the same goal and we have the same vision.

She therefore acknowledges a sort of euphoria in relation to meeting 'people like her', i.e. in recognising and actualising the self through the other – what Yuval-Davis calls "the dialogical construction of identity" (2011, p. 16) – and in establishing a connection that she never imagined available for her. Her newfound community 'feels like a family' because of the understanding of mutual support in fighting the same battles to achieve a united goal. Like Omar above, Joy's words refer to a familiar setting where differences are understood and then set aside, while commonalities and shared goals are prioritised.

These examples thus show how LGBT migrants are able to build an 'emotional home' for themselves by engaging with local LGBT organisations, and the connections that they establish contribute to liberate them from their 'homelessness'.

Another aspect of belonging has to do with what Yuval-Davis calls "the performative dimension" of the construction of belonging (2011, p. 15), which I have been able to observe in the LGBT migrants and refugees interviewed when discussing the topic of Pride: from eagerly looking forward to Pride month, to making personalised Pride t-shirts and buying all the rainbow merchandise sold by the LGBT organisations. Indeed, Pride provides an opportunity to both construct a sense of belonging, and proudly display it through meaningful symbols that signify belonging, such as rainbow-striped flags and clothing items. An important event for the LGBT community, Pride, in and of itself, is about belonging, about finding one's own community, about getting together as a large, loud, colourful family. It is not surprising then that LGBT migrants and refugees have so wholly embraced Pride events: being at Pride reinforces their sense of belonging, and, through their participation, they make themselves visible and known within the local LGBT communities, rejecting their liminal and homeless condition as migrants and refugees, and instead fighting for, and finding, home and belonging as lesbian migrant and refugee women, as gay migrants and refugees, as transgender migrants and refugees.

Ultimately, then, I argue that LGBT migrants and refugees can deconstruct their 'homelessness' and instead find 'home' through the contexts and spaces provided by LGBT organisations that address this particular issue both by acknowledging the specific experience of migration of LGBT migrants and refugees, and through a focus on sense of belonging, by facilitating "homing processes" which entail "the reclaiming and reprocessing of habits, objects, names and histories that have been uprooted – in migration, displacement or colonization" (Ahmed et al., 2003, p.9). As I have displayed, these processes are remarkably ordinary actions: sitting together in someone's living room, having dinner, and then going out to get coffee; opening up to the other members of the LGBT migrant group; connecting to the people in the organisation by sharing the same goals and aspirations; wanting to offer to other LGBT migrants the same help received. Therefore, I highlight the importance for the organisations to work intersectionally to understand the multiple and specific struggles of LGBT migrants and refugees, as well as to recognise the need for home and family and provide ways for "homing processes" to take place, by creating safe and welcoming environments, by implementing 'good practices' that seek to tackle the LGBT migrants' 'homelessness', and by taking on a 'from below' rather than an 'institutional' approach. Referring to Yuval-Davis' politics of belonging (2011): to define belonging one must create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, however, in this case, the focus is on the intersectional, inclusionary power exercised in the re-creation of home and family within the Italian LGBT community.

**Conclusion**

With this article, I have sought to focus on the topic of LGBT migration through the concepts of 'home/lessness', displaying how LGBT migrants and refugees construct their sense of homelessness as both a physical and emotional condition, and, subsequently, how they can instead find home and belonging within the organisational spaces and contexts provided by LGBT associations. I have approached this subject arguing in favour of an intersectional perspective, displaying the intersectional approach adopted by the LGBT migrants and refugees themselves to describe their lived experiences, and the inclusive and intersectional practices implemented by the LGBT organisations offering support to migrants. As I have shown, these practices allow LGBT migrants and refugees to escape their homelessness and find an 'emotional home' by providing the necessary conditions for the establishment of meaningful relationships related not necessarily to a physical space, but to a collective framework that acknowledges and values the different, intersecting identities that exist under the umbrella of 'LGBT migrant'.

While the development of a sense of belonging within organisational contexts contributes to improve the situation of LGBT migrants and refugees and to alleviate their sense of homelessness, a number of issues remain, that should also be addressed through further research and the development of targeted practices. Specifically, the issue of physical homelessness, of a lack of safe and secure accommodation for LGBT migrants and refugees, remains pressing, and yet difficult to solve. The existing exceptional cases, however, such as the few projects providing specific accommodation for transgender migrants and refugees, are laying down the groundwork for the development of future projects to follow. Furthermore, this signifies that, even more so, the LGBT organisations' physical space becomes the essential locus for LGBT migrants and refugees to re-construct home, even if only for a few hours a week, as it represents for many the only physical space where they can exist fully and comfortably in their identities.

Another issue that remains unsolved is that of the alienation from migrant/ethnic networks experienced by LGBT migrants and refugees. As Wimark denotes, these networks "help refugees along the road through Europe as well as within the new country [and] assist with information about the new society, accommodations, finding work and creating stability and social attachments in the new country" (2019, p.8). However, ethnic networks rely on cis- and heteronormative values, and those who express non-normative sexual desires and perform gender 'incorrectly', as is the case for LGBT migrants, cannot access the resources provided by them. In my own research, no interviewee has been able to address ways to reconcile with ethnic networks. On the other hand, some proposed the idea that ethnic networks have lost their intrinsic value, as more and more LGBT migrants in need of support turn to LGBT networks instead, and, more importantly, as they create new LGBT migrant networks that are able to address both the alienation from ethnic communities, and the issues within Western-centered LGBT communities.

In conclusion, for future developments within research, I envision perspectives on LGBT migration and home/lessness that are intersectional, that center bottom-up approaches, the establishment of new solidarity networks and of collective frameworks, and that understand the voices of LGBT migrants and refugees as those of experts in the field.

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