# Everyday Struggles of Queer Refugees for Homemaking

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**Abstract:** This article explores the meaning of home and homemaking in conditions of temporary displacement. Drawing on Catharine Brun and Anita Fábos' conceptual framework of the constellation of HOME-Home-home, my analysis focuses on the experiences of queer refugees who temporarily reside in Turkey while waiting for resettlement to a third country. Based on four in-depth interviews, I suggest that displaced people continue to think about and make homes while living in temporary conditions, such as transit countries. The case studies presented in this article have demonstrated that my participants have creatively engaged in homemaking within the tension of processes of marginalization and identity-making. Homemaking for them involves, not only an ongoing process of day-to-day negotiation of liminal and precarious circumstances of the transit country, but it also includes everyday struggles which enable queer identities, practices, and spaces. Informed by an intersectional analysis, I demonstrate that my participants have produced different strategies of homemaking, attending to their particular social positionalities.

**Keywords:** queer refugees, home, liminality, precarity, transit

What does it mean to make home in the absence of a fixated dwelling space, and in the midst of temporal, spatial, and legal uncertainties? Do forcibly displaced persons cease to think about home during temporary conditions of displacement? How do individuals, living in transit from one state to another, engage with homemaking? This article deals with the meaning of home and homemaking in one particular category of displaced persons: queer[1] refugees[2] temporarily residing in Turkey for resettlement.

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**1 |** I employ the term queer in this study to refer to all the persons transgressing the hegemonic forms of gender identity and sexual behaviour. The term reflects an anti-normative stance in terms of challenging the idea of identities as fixed, homogenous, and stable entities, subverting the heterosexual/homosexual binary, and underlying the diversity and fluidity of sexual identities.

**2 |** When talking about my interviewees as a group, I use the term refugee to refer to all the survivors of forced displacement regardless of their legal status before the Turkish authorities. I choose to rely on the definition stipulated in the Geneva Convention.

From the perspectives of nation states and international refugee organisations, refugees and forced migrants are seen at »home« when their case is resolved by a durable solution, in one of the internationally recognized pathways, including settlement, resettlement or voluntary repatriation (Doná 2015). Hence, homemaking in transit regions is considered irrelevant for the state-centered understanding of home, due to the temporary nature of settlement in these places. Transit regions as a case of liminal spaces are social spaces »between vulnerability and agential power« (Brun and Fábos 2015: 11). An increasing number of studies (Brun 2015; Brun and Fábos 2015; Čapo 2015; Doná 2015; Fábos 2015; Trapp 2015) have found that forced migrants and refugees living in temporary conditions of displacement produce their own meanings of home and creative practices of homemaking, thus exemplifying a case of »agency-in-waiting« (Brun and Fábos 2015: 12).

Informed by Catharine Brun and Anita Fábos' conceptual framework on the constellation of HOME-Home-home (2015) and feminist intersectional analysis (Lykke 2010), this article explores the meaning of home and homemaking in conditions of temporary displacement. My analysis is based on four indepth interviews I conducted with queer refugees from Iran, North African and South Asian countries. Based on my analysis of the interviews, I suggest that my participants have creatively engaged in homemaking within the tension of processes of marginalization and identity-making. Homemaking for them has involved, not only an ongoing process of day-to-day negotiation of liminal and precarious cimcumstances of the transit country, but it also included everyday struggles which have enabled queer identities, practices, and spaces.

This article is divided as follows: after a brief background on the situation of queer refugees in Turkey, I provide an overview of feminist and queer perspectives on home. The following section presents conceptual perspectives on homemaking in temporary conditions. I then report the details regarding methodology, followed by the final section, which concludes by analysing the findings.

## THE CONTEXT

Since the 1980s, Turkey has turned into a key transit point for asylum seekers and migrants from Asia, the Middle East and Africa, who are aiming at reaching Western Europe and North America (Icduygu 2012: 448). Although Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention, the country limits the granting of refugee statuses to citizens of European Council member states (Simsek 2018). Until recently, nationals of non-European countries have had to register their asylum claims with both the

United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Turkish Ministry of the Interior. If their claims are recognised by the UNHCR, non-European refugees are considered for resettlement in a third country (Shakhsari 2014: 1001).[3] While they wait for a final decision in their cases, claimants are allowed to temporarily reside in Turkey. Hence, under the Turkish asylum system, a durable solution is hardly guaranteed for the displaced persons as such. Regarding the nature of the international protection regime in Turkey, Senses underlines that »minimal protection under the roof of an unclear and ambivalent regime of ›human rights‹« leads to a particular form of vulnerability and precarity (2016: 113). This situation also resonates with the life circumstances of queer refugees in Turkey. Existing research points to the precarious circumstances that the queer refugees face in accessing education, health, accommodation and employment (Arac and Aydin 2015; Kara and Calik 2016; Ordek 2017). Under these circumstances, similar to other groups of displaced populations, queer refugees use Turkey as a transit asylum country until a settlment opportunity arises. With this, they sustain their lives under the constraints of a »neither here nor there« kind of situation between different territories, facing uncertainty, suspense and long years of waiting (Kara and Calik 2016).

## FEMINIST AND QUEER PERSPECTIVES ON HOME

There is little agreement in the literature on how »home« differs from other types of places that human beings inhabit. According to Smyth and Croft, a home is distinguished from a house in that the former hosts »complex human practices« (Smyth and Croft 2006, quoted according to Briganti and Mezei 2012: 5-6). Douglas (1991: 289) also emphasizes this point by arguing that »having shelter is not having a home, nor is having a house, nor is home the same as household«. For Mallett, home space in the literature of home studies has often been associated with various affirmative feelings and experiences (2004). The home space has been thought of as catering to basic human needs for security, comfort, freedom, creativity, regeneration, and close and caring relationships. It has also been appreciated for offer human beings a space

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3 | As of 10 September 2018, the UNHCR ceased conducting mandate Refugee Status Determination procedures. and the Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) declared itself, with the support of the UNHCR, as the single authority responsible for individual case processing for asylum-seekers in Turkey. The UNHCR identifies the most vulnerable refugees for resettlement processing. See: (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2018)

»to retreat and relax«, and to remove the self from »public surveillance and external role expectations« (Mallett 2004: 70). Mallet underlines that there is also a tendency in the literature to use home almost as a synonym for family. In this view, home is understood as the place a person is born into, and where he or she is nurtured and dwelt on until the coming of age. This idea is often reflected in the sentence: »without the family a home is only a house« (ibid. :73-74). Thus, the concept of home has been discussed in the literature in relation to a variety of feelings, affects, imaginations, and experiences.

Feminists have criticized these accounts of home for their blindness to power relations, historically embedded within home space. As Shelley Mallet demonstrates in her article *Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature,* feminist scholars, like Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir, underline that affirmative accounts of home as such reflect an »idealized, romanticized, even nostalgic notion of home«. They find that such accounts do not do justice to reflecting the authentic experiences of some groups, including women and girls (Mallett 2004: 72). The main feminist critique, including that which is levelled by second-wave feminist scholars, purports that home space has historically functioned and was constructed and as »a site of oppression, tyranny and patriarchal domination of women« (ibid.: 75). This body of work also emphasizes that the positive value associated with home has been produced at the expense of women's labor (ibid.: 75). Moreover, the patriarchal construction of home has led to »homelessness«, sometimes at the level of feelings but in other times »homelessness« in the literal sense of the word, by forcing the unfit individuals to move away from the home space (Wardhaugh 1999).

Likewise, the politics of home space has also become a concern for queer scholars who have increasingly demonstrated that home is a highly heterosexualized space (Gorman-Murray 2006; Gorman-Murray 2007; Barrett 2015; Pilkey 2014). This scholarship has emphasized that the common understanding of home space has been conflated with the heterosexual nuclear family, and has reflected the heterosexual ideals of family life, through its material and normative construction. Gorman-Murray, for instance, argues that »home is a crucial site for both normalizing and contesting acceptable modes of sexual identity, desire and behavior« (Gorman-Murray 2007: 195).

Acknowledging the essence of the feminist critique, Iris Marion Young (2012) warns us of the possible dangers which a complete rejection of the value of home poses for women. Young invites us to rethink the possibilities of democratizing the home space (see ibid.: 192-193). Referring to Bell Hooks's idea of home as a site of resistance (1991), she underlines the »critical liberating potential« of home space (ibid.:190) in enabling personal and collective identities as well as political agency

(see ibid.: 192-193). Bell Hooks argues (1991), in her article *Homeplace: a Site of Resistance*, that black women have historically constructed the homeplace as »a site of resistance and liberation« against the oppression of white supremacy.

Queer scholars have also demonstrated that home space enables queer identities and queer agency (Barrett 2015; Gorman-Murray 2006; Gorman-Murray 2007; Pilkey 2014). This body of scholarship has showed that queer individuals have challenged the heteronormative construction of home in everyday life through various mundane domestic practices, re-organizing the material aspects of domestic space like house design, re-thinking division of domestic labor and roles, carrying queer socialites and relationships, unacknowledged in the public space, to home space (Gorman-Murray 2006; Gorman-Murray 2007; Barrett 2015; Pilkey 2014). Gorman-Murray (2007) defines the transformation of home in this way as the practice of »queering home«. Gorman-Murray (2007) also emphasizes that these practices, taken together, help to »consolidate gay/lesbian identities, relationships and communities, and thus affirm their sexual difference« (ibid.: 195).

Building on the above-mentioned feminist and queer perspectives on home, this article acknowledges the »liberating potential of home«, and discusses how the home-making practices of queer refugees in transit countries, like Turkey, enable identities and agencies.

## CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES ON HOME-MAKING IN TEMPORARY CONDITIONS

Often associated with geographical and temporal fixity, home-making in temporary conditions, including transit countries for asylum seekers like Turkey, has received little attention from the migration research. Notwithstanding, there is a nascent research which has begun to demonstrate that despite the paired uncertainty of prolonged displacement and immobility, refugees continue to imagine and create the idea of home. To this, researchers like Brun and Fábos (2015) and Wimark (2019) have proposed liminality as a productive concept for the broadening of the contemporary understanding of home-making during displacement. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) coined the concept of liminality, referring to a period of transition or a state of »in-between-ness« wherein the individual goes from one stage to another. (Turner 1967, quoted in O'Reilly 2018: 831). Turner defines the people in liminality as »neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony« (ibid.). Building on this, liminality has been used to understand the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in migration lit-

erature with regard to their positioning vis-a-vis time, space, and political or legal status. »Waiting, suspense and uncertainty« have been seen as the defining features of liminal experience of asylum seekers, including queer refugees (Kara and Calik 2016). Based on this, life experiences of refugees in transit countries might also be considered as a liminal condition.

In further discussion of refugee experiences in transit, Brun and Fábos locate liminal spaces »between vulnerability and agential power« (2015: 11). They see life in liminal spaces as characterized by the simultaneous interplay of processes of marginalization. On the other hand, they find that liminal spaces are an equally transformative process. Although individuals living in liminal places often continue to make their homes under vulnerable legal status and precarious socio-economic circumstances, the ways they make their homes during forced displacement cannot be reduced to precarious experiences. Their home making processes might involve possibilities for creative engagement. This is what Brun defines as »agency-in-waiting« (ibid.: 12). Wimark (2019) underlines the transformative power of the liminal spaces as such for queer refugees. He argues that »the process of liminal homemaking designates queer movements, spaces and temporalities created in opposition to prevailing heterosexual, familial and normative structures« (ibid.: 15).

Building on a feminist approach that is attentive to the agency of individuals in liminal spaces, Brun and Fábos offer »constellations of home« as a conceptual framework to theorizing »making home« in the particular context of forced displacement (2015: 12). Brun and Fábos define »making home« as »the process through which people try to gain control over their lives and involves negotiating specific understandings of home, particular regimes of control and assistance, and specific locations and material structures« (ibid.: 14). Considering that making home is a complex and dynamic process which requires taking multidimensional and interconnected dimensions of home into consideration, the two authors suggest that conceptualizing home-making should involve a constellation of three dimensions. To point to the different layers which constitute this constellation, they use the terms »home«, »Home«, and »HOME« (ibid.).

The first dimension of home-making, or »home«, involves daily practices which make up the place, including improvements or investments, daily routines that people carry out in their place, and social connections that people form in their living environment (ibid.). The second dimension of home-making, or »Home«, refers to particular types of values, traditions, memories, and subjective feelings of individuals toward home during the displacement. An imagination of ideal home constitutes an important part of these feelings, which is reflected in the lived experiences and domestic practices of home making. The subjective feelings of displaced persons on home

are shaped by their experiences and imaginations vis-à-vis lost homes, past homes, future homes or ideal homes. The third dimension of home-making, or »HOME«, is associated with how displaced individuals negotiate the larger political and historical structures and processes of inclusion and exclusion during displacement. This dimension also involves how individuals affected by displacement formulate and reformulate their identities at the tension of losing home and being labelled as refugees.

Brun and Fábos (2015) emphasizes that different dimensions of home, Home, and HOME work in parallel but, depending on geographical and temporal circumstances, each dimension might have a different weight in the configuration of home for each person. Notwithstanding, the particular social positions of the displaced persons may also produce different strategies of home-making in liminal spaces. Thus, this article's intersectional approach to the individual experience of transit complements Brun and Fábos' framework. Instead of focusing on certain commonly agreed categories such as race, class, and gender, the feminist intersectional approach permit revealing the dimensions or combination of dimensions of a person's identity that are relevant for the person's home-making experience in a certain time and place, (Lykke 2010: 50). In short, intersectionality helps us discover the possibilities for more nuanced understandings of home-making experiences during prolonged displacement. It does so by both attending to the unique ways by which displaced persons make homes, and underlining »the inseparability of their domestic practices from the oftentimes masculine politics of exile and global responses to displacement« (Brun and Fábos 2015: 14).

## METHODOLOGY

In this research, my data collection mostly relies on the life stories of my participants. These life stories were collected through semi-structured interviews. Life stories as a method were chosen as they offer a rich source of information which permit the study of complex relationships between home, identity and everyday life (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 33). Life stories also allow one to see changing understandings of home over time and space. Moreover, by going beyond the everyday accounts of domestic life, they provide the data necessary for the analysis of the politics of home in relation to wider political contexts, such as gender, »race«, class, sexuality, and legal status (ibid. :34-35). As life stories are an immense source of data, I chose to focus on a very few cases. The material used for the analysis consists of 4 semi-structured interviews with the persons who identify themselves as one of the non-heteronormative identity categories. In selecting the interviewees, I relied on my

previous research contacts. My main priority was to focus on the cases which might be viewed as »intrinsically interesting«, »illustrative« and »typical« (6 and Bellamy 2012: 112).

The interviewees were between 24 and 27 years old, with a mean age of 26. All interviewees were temporarily residing in Turkey and waiting for the UNHCR to decide on their resettlement to a third country. They were registered with the Turkish authorities and acquired the status which, in the official discourse calls »beneficiary of international protection«. The shortest period of stay was 9 months while the longest was 48 months, with a mean stay of 27 months. Among the interviewees, one interviewee self-identified as lesbian (Iran), another one as transgender woman (South Asia), and two interviewees, separately, as gay (Iran and North Africa). All the interviews were held through skype video conference. The interviews lasted approximately one and half hour and were conducted in English.[4]

The beneficiaries of international protection in Turkey are required to reside in the satellite cities they are assigned to by the authorities. All my interviewees have been registered with the *Yenikent* provincial area. However, the North African interviewee was later transferred to Istanbul. *Yenikent* is a city on the eastern coast of the Marmara Sea.[5]

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**4 |** Due to some limitations related to time and budget, I had to prefer online interviewing. These were not my first contacts with the interviewees. With two of them, Jude and Reza, I was in contact for approximately two years, beginning with my professional experience in a refugee support center. I met other interviewees, Mariam and Ahmad, during my field work that I conducted for my master thesis in July of 2019. Thus, I had had regular communication with each of the interviewees. Since I had already built relations of trust with all the interviewees, I believe that conducting online interviews did not produce significant impact on the reliability and validity of the collected data.

For ethical reasons, all names were anonymized. I assigned aliases to the informants to guarantee their confidentiality. In the queer refugee community, most people were known to have come from certain countries like Iran. I presented such interviewees with their countries of origin. Yet, very few persons were known to have come from countries where they represent a small minority among the overall queer refugee community. Since presenting these interviewees with their country of origin might lead to the exposure of their identities, I preferred to employ wider geographical terms, such as South Asia and North Africa, instead of the country names. I avoided disclosing any sensitive information which might pose risk to my interviewees.

**5 |** The word *Yenikent* has been employed as a fictive name in order to anonymize the real place against the risk of violating confidentiality. My main rationale in choosing *Yenikent* as

Before presenting the findings, it is important to note a number of reservations about the broader transferability of these cases. Acknowledging the limited number of the interviews conducted for this research, the findings are not exhaustive or summative. I believe that a thorough understanding of experiences of homemaking requires ethnographic engagement with the field through observing people's lives in their everyday settings and in private domains for longer time periods. Acknowledging all the delimitations, I present the below-mentioned findings as prompts for critical reflection and further research.

## JUDE'S STORY: HOW I BECAME A WOMAN

Jude is a transgender person of 24 years old who self-identifies as a woman. She initiated her sex reassignment treatment in Turkey. Coming from a South Asian country, Jude is known in her community for being the only transgeder person from her country, which put her in an absolute social lacuna, once arrived in Turkey. She acquired a considerable wealth back in her country of origin, but she lost all her wealth when she was forced to flee for asylum, right after her sexual identity was exposed and she was given a death warrant. Although her displacement brings a material dispossession, in the aftermath of the first year of her asylum, she begins to secure the basic costs of her life with regular support from her brother and mother residing in her country of origin.

Jude's experience of home-making during her temporary asylum in Turkey reflects a simultaneous and interwoven interplay of Brun and Fábos' »constellations of home«. Jude mainly employed three strategies for making home in different stages of her asylum.

Jude's first strategy of home-making aims at finding a place for accommodation and basic life needs. Her first engagement with home-making reflects the day-to-day practices that negotiate the precarious circumstances she faced in the early days of her asylum experience.

My interview with Jude reveals that her very first homemaking experience introduced her to a new source of insecurity. As she had to take an asylum decision very fast, due to the high risk of persecution, she did not manage to secure enough money,

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the study area was that, because of my previous work experience as social worker, I am familiar with this area and I had already built contacts with many queer refugees living there.

and she had little prior information on asylum life in Turkey. Having no idea where to stay, she approached an Islamic community for accommodation. She explains:

> Nobody was giving me home, telling so expensive, telling me in dollars which I could not afford. I called my friend... He is my childhood friend. He called another guy who have some connections. He told there is an Islamic *cemaat*. Kind of an Islamic community. They will give you a place, tell them you don't have the local card, identity card... The instruction my friend gave me »behave very manly«. »If you can't pray, just act you praying. Because you need the place till you get your Turkish card«. They gave me the place with very cheap like 400 lira per month. It was seven guys. I am the trans one. They used to wake me up five times for the prayer. They were forcing me to read Quran. I did not know how to read but they were teaching me. There was a kind of *sohbet*. Kind of Islamic meetings. I did not understand but they told me you have to sit. My six months was there. After six months when I got my card, the first thing I did was to take my home. I remember I took my first home.

> I was just going out, walking and crying what happened to my life. In one day, my life changed. I was so afraid that one day they will catch me. Maybe somebody will kill me in that house. Nobody would even notice. It was a kind of fear every time.

The interview excerpt implies that while fleeing the persecution in her country of origin, Jude found herself in another form of insecurity in the country where she was seeking protection.

After the six months of stay in the shared house of the Islamic community, Jude was able to secure a flat of her own. Once Jude secured a physical space for living, she added a new layer to her engagement in home-making. Jude's second strategy of home-making was to use home space as a base to enable her queer transformation. Her new engagement in home-making includes some day-to-day practices that enable her to experience woman-becoming and bringing queer social connections and socialites to home space. This engagement requires some efforts, for her to break from the oppressive past home(s) and experiment the ideal home(s) during the liminal conditions of forced displacement.

The connection between home and identity is a widely acknowledged fact in the literature. However, home is not as taken for granted. According to Young (2012), »Even if people have minimal shelter of their own [...] they need a certain level of material comfort in their home for it to serve as a place of identity construction and

the development of the spirit of resistance that Hooks discusses« (2012: 193). In parallel with this, my interview with Jude shows that her beginning to explore and experience her gender identity occurred in parallel to her making of her first home. At that stage, she decides to go through sex reassignment treatment, including the use of hormones and public display of femininity. Since then, the home becomes the stage for various physical, affective, and intimate explorations and experimentations. She states:

> It was great feeling in the first night... I met a Hornet guy.[6] I really liked him. I told him let's meet and I was feeling so free. That was the first free meeting I had. I messaged him and next day he came and we slept together. We had this relationship together. We cooked together. For long time he really wanted to taste some Asian food. I cooked for him. It was a great feeling. Actually, that night was the best night I had after long time. I drank that night actually after long time. Like six seven months later you drink alcohol. It was freedom. It was great. I was drinking but I wanted more but I could not afford. I still remember I really wanted. I told the guy I really need more. He told me you can share half of mine if you like. I remember I shared his beer.

Confirming Gorman-Murray's previous studies (2006 and 2007), the interview shows that as Jude increasingly chose to express her identity in queer ways, her home also turned to a queer space, which, in return, enabled the further queering of her identity. In doing this, she uses gay social media as the main medium of communication to reach potential partners or friends. She uses the home to form her small queer community or »queer family« as she preferred to call them during the interviews. The interview found that she often organized home socialites with queer friends or acquaintances which helped her to learn about queer identities, such as the ways of becoming-woman through make up, clothing and the use of hormones as well as how to experience it all without fear. In Hooks' words, the home in the presence of the queer connections functioned as the place »where *they* could affirm one another« and »restore to *themselves* the dignity denied *themselves* on the outside in the public world« (Hooks 1991: 384).

The third dimension of home-making, or »HOME«, attends to Jude's entire asylum experience. Jude negotiates various processes of exclusion starting with her very first engagement in home-making. Notwithstanding, as Jude actively reclaims her gender

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6 | Hornet is an international gay social network with over 30 million users across the world.

expression, politics of exclusion turns more visible and more dire. In return, she begins to employ a third strategy of home-making. This time, home becomes a ground where she negotiates the processes of exclusion to reclaim her identity. Home space turns into a microcosm of broader political structures of power, increasingly involving her day-to-day efforts to negotiate everyday reflections of heteronormativity.

On the other hand, she mentions that as she proceeds with her bodily transformation, she becomes more visible in public, and thereby more vulnerable to assaults, violence, and discrimination of various forms. At those times, supporting once again Hooks' standpoint, the home becomes the place »where *she* returns for renewal and self-recovery, where *she* can heal *her* wounds and become whole« (Hooks 1991: 389).

Nevertheless, the increasing visibility of the feminized body in the public space and her home turning to a venue for queer gatherings all came at a cost. According to the interview excerpt, she ended up being thrown out of her homes almost every three to six months, for the sake of family-based ideology of home. She says:

> When the owner sees, my friends are kind of gay and I am doing make up and have little long hair, so he told me »this is a family community, this is a family building, you cannot have this transgender« in a very rude way. He told me to empty the house in three days. I told him to give my advance and he told me when you empty the house, we will give you the advance. . . He never returned my security back.

> I had a transgender friend. She was coming and she was kind of noisy. Neighbors complained. When the owner came to my flat, that transgender guy was with me. On the same time when he saw him, he said »please empty the house«. . . He told families are not comfortable with you here. I never completed one year in any house. . . Mostly transgender friends and me and my make-up, my hormones. My body changed. My breast came. Mostly these homosexual and LGBTI people around me. My friends. They (neighbors) could not handle it. . . We never disturbed anyone. In the second house, yes, I can say we were noisy. In the other houses, no, it was only sexuality reason. It was so like families and they don't like us. They have children and they get bad image. Most excuses I get. They were so entrusted in how many people we are living in my house, what I am buying. I don't know this family thing, especially in the small cities everybody is entrusted in your house what you are doing, what are you eating, what are buying, how many people are there.

Throughout the interview, it became evident that a relatively secured economic income, in the form of family support, enabled her to have a home of her own but it was not able to ensure the sustainability of home. This also might suggest that although social class positions might have a role in producing this result for some other queer refugees, the other aspects of identity, like the non-conforming gender identity and behavior, seem to more likely account for the fragility of the home space, confirming the intersectional workings of oppression.

## AHMAD'S STORY: HOME IS A PRIVILEGE

Ahmad is a self-identified gay man of 27 years old. Originating from a North African country from which very few persons seek asylum in Turkey, he found himself in a disadvantageous position in the first months of his asylum, with little social ties and connections which would otherwise benefit him. While he had a working class background back in his country of origin, since the very beginning of his asylum, he increasingly ends up falling into a precarious socio-economic status. His situation gets even more complicated because he has a life-threatening illness. He pursues a life completely dependent on the financial support of his larger family abroad and the care of his mother in Turkey.

Confirming Brun and Fábos' »constellations of home«, Ahmed's experience of home-making involves a composition of different dimensions. The interview excerpts demonstrate that his homemaking has been shaped within a tension of identity concerns and survival needs, under the constraints of the asylum system and deep precarisation.

As intersectionality suggests, an interplay of particular social positions produce unique experiences. Ahmed, as a gay refugee from North Africa, who is economically disadvantaged and lacking any type of ethnic social networks that can help him navigate a new society, felt the most impact of the precarious socio-economic circumstances in the asylum country. The interview shows that the day-to-day struggles to find temporary shelters constituted a big part of Ahmad's homemaking during his displacement. Volatility and fragility characterized the essence of his homemaking. For instance, the interview excerpt illustrates that Ahmad has moved between many places and barely has he had a flat of his own. Throughout his almost two years of asylum, the sketch of all the living places he has resided in can be drawn as such: cheap and crowded hostels he occasionally spent a few weeks; flats of queer partners with whom he met through gay dating applications; urban parks where he slept when he had no option; flats of his own which lasted very short time; places of other queer

refugee friends he met through some social events in NGOs; hospital rooms where he received cancer treatment; and single rooms shared with his mother in the shared flats. The interview excerpt implies that most of these places assumed the function of accommodation or shelter for him, which would have been equally assumed by any hotel room. He has perceived very few of these places as home. Aligning well with the previous literature, his case underlines that a home is more than a place of accommodation.

The second dimension of Ahmad's home-making is characterized by his emphasis on social connections he formed around home(s), mostly queer ones, and some particular feelings and affections he directed towards home(s). In my interview with him, it became evident that the lack of a fixated home space in his life did not prevent him from experiencing the feeling of being at home during his asylum. While talking about very few places where he felt at home, his narrative has not been concerned with the materiality and physical quality of the places. Particular social relationships, attachments, affects and feelings that he experienced around the materiality marked his narrative of home. Queer character of such connections was salient in the interview. For instance, I observed that the very few places he called home were the places he enjoyed the utmost freedom to openly and freely experience queer love, intimacy, and friendships which are based on mutual trust, practices of solidarity, and non-monetary exchanges. For him, home is more of a matter of feelings and connections with a queer tone, independent of any engagement with the materiality and ownership or tenantry of a house.

The third dimension of Ahmad's home-making can be defined as day-to-day struggles for bare survival under the precarity produced by the asylum system and immobility brought by his illness. During the interview, it became clear that Ahmad's diagnosis with a life-threatening illness and the loss of his leg's moving ability became the turning point in his experience. In the course of time, while losing all his productive abilities to make a living and lacking all social support mechanisms except modest family support, he ended up living in a small room of fifteen square meters with his mother. With this, he reached at a point where he had neither a material comfort nor an ontological safety. While home turned to a place of confinement, immediate survival replaced the identity concerns. His case resonates with the idea that »having a home is indeed today having a privilege« (Young 2012: 193) and Ahmad lacked this class privilege.

## MARIAM AND REZA'S STORIES:
## WHAT IS HOME WHEN YOU HAVE NO CHOICE?

Mariam is a self-identified lesbian woman of 27 years old from Iran. She fled her country of origin with her significant other and continued to share her life with her during the whole asylum. She comes from a middle class family background. Her class privileges awarded her with a previous migration experience for studying in an Asian country at the age of 16 or 17, before having fled to Turkey. She also experiences a dramatic decline in her class position during her asylum. She sustains her life with insecure and low-paid jobs.

Reza is a self-identified gay man of 26 years old from Iran. Coming from a middle class family background, he continues to benefit from his family's support to secure a decent life during his asylum. Among the interviewees, Reza has the longest experience of migration, amounting to almost nine years in total, four of them spent in Turkey. Prior to Turkey, he spent five years in an Asian country for studying. He is the only person among the interviewees who has a regular job with a monthly secured income. He accumulated a significant capacity of social and cultural capital, excelled himself at getting connected to a large network of persons, and blended with local and transnational ties.

Mariam and Reza show parallelisms in the ways they engage in homemaking, but each of their case also involves unique qualities. They are two unrelated persons, but I chose to analyze their cases together as a certain commonality in their life histories offers invites one to think about the impact of different migration contexts on homemaking. This commonality is that they both had a previous experience of migration before Turkey. They stated that they left Iran to two different Asian countries at a quite early age, like 16-17, for university education. According to their statements, fleeing to Turkey was a decision taken under forced circumstances. On the other hand, the nature of their previous migration decision was not fully a case of forced migration. It was also not fully a voluntary one. They left the country to the Asian countries seeking a free life by securing economic privileges offered by the families and by privileges of having an Iranian passport.

Their history of multiple migration has a weight in shaping their homemaking experience in the asylum country. The ways they imagine and construct homes in the transit were shaped by the interplay of their past experiences of home and their aspirations for future homes. Their homemaking strategy is to negotiate the prolonged uncertainty of the asylum life with the lessons learned from the past homes, as well as with the hopes to obtain future homes. In other words, past and future are embodied in the present imaginations and practices of homemaking.

In line with the "constellations of home" framework, the interview excerpts show that two distinct migration experiences refer to two different cases of HOME, where participants make homes under different social, political and economic circumstances. Different HOME contexts also involve varying opportunities for identity making. During the interviews, it became clear that the way they narrate their previous migration experience is drastically distinguished from the way they narrate their current experience of displacement. Their previous migration experience became more enabling for identities. Within these processes of identity making at different HOMEs, they have attributed different qualities to their experiences of homemaking. For them, the home in the asylum country reflects more of unsettled, liminal, and in-between experience, shaped under the legal, social and economic constraints of the refugee status. For instance, Mariam says:

> I always adore $X^7$ because it is like my second country. I really miss it a lot. It is very special for me. I really want to stay there... It completely feels like home.... It (*Turkey*) does not give me the feeling of home actually. I never felt home in Turkey... It is just like I am living to live.... Nothing here is my choice.... In *X* I had my best time. I never worked in *X*. It was fun time. I was studying. I was teenager... Now I am in Turkey. We have to live in present. I am not choosing Turkey for living. I am just surviving myself and Turkey was the only option to come. I try to live it like home but it is not home actually. But if I live like this, I cannot continue. I will be aimless and hopeless.

On the other hand, the home in the previous migration country reflects a greater potential in terms of life enriching and liberating experiences. The interview excerpts demonstrate that the two interviewees had their first queer interactions and explorations in the previous migration countries. Having the privilege of a home of their own had an enabling role in this process. Mariam says:

> I was crying and I asked the universe please just show me the way if I have to be with a boy, put some boy in my life and if I have to continue with girls, then put one girl in my life. Maybe it will be funny for you but just in the same week, one girl from Iran she came from Iran for English courses. So, she talked to me about courses... I went to her house and we talked... She showed me a lot of kindness. Slowly slowly in a month we went to relationship. I can tell you both of us was zero

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7 | I replaced the name of the Asian country she had lived to guarantee the confidentiality.

in information about who we are, about our orientation and about our sexual thing. I did not even know the sex positions... Because with my ex-girlfriends, we did not have much sexual activities... I did not even let them touch my body... But with this girl we searched everything about being homosexual, we searched movies. We came to know who we are together... From that time on, I am so strict about myself. Even someone has a problem about my orientation, I was like just go fuck yourself. This is who I am.

Likewise, Reza explained:

When I was in Iran, I had no space to try to express or to manifest my gay identity because at home I was always with my family and they did not know about me and at school I was not supposed to let them know about me because it was something forbidden. When I was in Y,[8] I did not know, especially when I go to university, if I should express myself or my sexuality or not because I never known how it is going to be. Are my classmates going to accept me or deny me? At my home space, I was for the first time allowed to experiment at least clothing what to wear, how to react or how to behave.

Memories of past home, including the pain of losing a beloved home, in the previous migration country influences their current domestic practices. Moreover, ambiguity and uncertainty of the life in asylum country shape their ability to make home in the transit country. Hoping that they will be ressettled to a third country one day, they construct their homes in relation to an imagined place, ideally a Western country, they have never been to. This bounded imagination of the home in the transit country is reflected in the day-to-day organization of the physical domesticity of home place. Mariam explains how she and her partner have approached the material investments they made on their current home:

All of the stuff is for the owner. We did not buy anything because it is useless if we buy anything. But we bought some flowers, cactuses, some small stuff which my partner likes them. Try to decorate the house in the way we like. For example, the cover of the sofas was very bad. We bought some covers, for our bedroom we bought some bed sheets we loved and we decorated like this but it is not the dream home. It is a

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**8** | I replaced the name of the Asian country she had lived to guarantee the confidentiality.

> simple home to live. It has everything but the things it has are not the things we love. It is the owner's choice.

Reza also says:

> Since the beginning you come here, you know that you are going to leave one day. I will give you one simple example of making a home for yourself. When you get an apartment, you want to embellish it the best you can, to buy the best furniture or slowly work and save money to buy the perfect things for your house but I can never do this because I know that one day I am going to leave...Even if I want to make it a home, there is always the thought back of my head what if tomorrow they call you and say you are leaving. You cannot even make a home for yourself free of this worry. Because I can't carry these things with me. This happened once to me in Y. I had a home and when I was leaving Y, I had sold everything and it was the hardest thing I have ever done because you have memory in everything. Because I can only carry thirty kilograms. You cannot carry your home, your furniture. You have to sell them. I went through that once, I am not going to go through this again...Maybe if the circumstances are different, maybe If I was actually citizen here, maybe I would think of settling down here. But because you are not, you are stateless somehow, it is just impossible to think of it.

The interview excerpts align well with Michael Jackson's argument, »Home is lived in the tension between the given and the chosen, then and now, here and there« (Jackson 1995, quoted in Mallett 2004: 80). Although they choose to invest only the minimum in physical domesticity, they continue to find ways to increase their ability to feel at home. Maryam's strategy to do so is to form a lesbian family of her own with her Iranian partner in displacement. In transit, home space for them continues to enable identities in a varying degree. Likewise, Reza finds his own way to feel at home, such as using virtual spaces for homemaking, which will be discussed in the next section along with Ahmad's experience of virtual homemaking.

## VIRTUAL HOMEMAKING

A recent study highlights that forced migrants find creative ways of homemaking in conditions of prolonged displacement and uncertain temporariness, by utilizing »unexpected, invisible, and de-territorialized spaces« like digital media (Doná 2015: 72).

»Virtual homemaking«, as coined by Giordia Doná, is one of the creative homemaking practices. Doná argues that »Forced territorial and bureaucratic immobility is reversed in virtual spaces, where forced migrants are free to navigate, to feel »at home« among online communities«, and to enter in dialogue with co-ethnic, co-national, and also transnational and trans-generational others (2015: 71).

Interviews with my participants, Ahmad and Reza, indicate that they engaged in creative ways of making homes in virtual spaces, confirming the cited literature. Their virtual homemaking strategy involved experiencing intimacy at distance by using online social media, such as gay dating websites, skype calls, Facebook and other social media platforms, allowing them to communicate with the partners and friends in the places where they cannot physically visit.

The interview shows that Reza formed close emotional bonds and relationships with nationals of European countries living abroad. These connections involved day to day communication, mutual emotional sharing, economic solidarity, regular face-to-face visits, and sometimes marriage plans. He experienced types of relationships which people could form in normal circumstances, for instance within the home or in face-to-face communication. These connections suggest that Reza extended the boundaries of his current physical home in the transit to the transnational virtual space. Having a hope of a future ideal home in the West but feeling the fatigue of waiting for it, he began to construct it from that moment on. In doing this, he has actively used the channels of digital communication. To negotiate the tension between what he actually has and what he desires, he created some form of home domesticity mediated through digital space.

The interview indicates that Ahmad also used online dating as a homemaking strategy. Gay dating applications and social media platforms became an instrument of connecting him to the far-flung dwellings across territorial borders. Ahmad used dating applications to form both platonic and romantic relationships. In the quote below, he details an experience in those terms:

> I had a gay friend from Germany. He kind of saved my life basically. He supported me financially, even though we do not know each other. When I came here, in the first days, he sent me money. I met him on [Gay] Romeo. He was sending me about 100 Euro per month, just as a help. We became kind of good friends [...] I am being so emotional about this. Because when he sent the money that first time, I did not believe it is because he believed in me. He believed me I am a good person. I was kind of shocked because even your family does not help you. I have uncles in France. Actually, they did not help at all, and I

> found help in a complete stranger I have never met in my life [...] I found humanity. People still care and still want to help, even though they don't know you. They want to help you from the bottom of their heart. I was very happy. I had hope again.

Ahmad's interactions with another European friend also confirm how virtual spaces enabled him to experience intimacy at distance:

> I had a friend from Poland. He was a very nice guy. We were chatting on Facebook. It was really nice to know someone from another country and to speak about how people are living in other countries. I first connected with him on [Gay] Romeo. He was telling me all about his life. I was so attached to him. I was talking to him all the time: I was telling him everything about my life and he was telling his life. He had HIV and was in a very bad health situation [...] I was really feeling something for him. We were just talking on Facebook. Sometimes on video calls. We got so attached over time. He actually wanted to come to my country and meet me and bring me to his country and wanted to have a life together and marry me.

The experiences of Ahmad and Reza suggest that they tried to negotiate the forced territorial and legal immobility through some virtual homemaking practices. In doing this, they virtually engaged in experiencing affective geography of home where queer connections can become possible.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I examined the meaning of home and homemaking in conditions of temporary displacement. Drawing on Catharine Brun and Anita Fábos' conceptual framework of the constellation of HOME-Home-home (2015), my analysis focused on the experiences of queer refugees who temporarily reside in Turkey while waiting for resettlement to a third country. In this study, I suggested that displaced people continue to think about and make homes while living in temporary conditions, such as transit countries, in connection to past homes, current homes, and future homes. My participants' experiences challenge state-centered understanding of home for which homemaking is seen only relevant for the contexts where refugees are able to reach a durable solution like resettlement and repatriation. My participants' experience of homemaking in transit have been actualized through their engagement with a combination of different dimensions of the above-mentioned home triad. Confirming

Catharine Brun and Anita Fábos' framework, the meaning of home for each participant has constantly been negotiated within the dynamic interplay of the understandings of home as everyday practices and connections, Home as memories and imaginations, and HOME as broader processes of exclusion and inclusion that operate over the lives of individuals. Some of the salient strategies of homemaking that my participants employ are as follows: daily struggles to be able to find and afford accommodation and secure the accommodation one possess; carrying queer socialities to home; queer reorganisation of home space through practices and relationships with the support of digital media; seeking out de-territorialised forms of home to negotiate forced immobility and expanding the boundaries of territorialised space of home with virtual space.

The case studies presented here demonstrate that my participants have creatively engaged in homemaking within the tension of processes of marginalization and identity-making. Homemaking for queer refugees have been shaped by a varying interplay of economic difficulties, everyday discrimination directed at queer displays of gender and sexuality, and feelings of in-betweenness and uncertainty resulting from the temporariness of protection status. These processes of marginalisation have put homemaking for my participants on a fragile and volatile ground, varying with particular combinations of economic, social, and cultural capital possessed by each individual. Notwithstanding such constraints, the transit country has offered some possibilities for enabling queer identities, within the bounds of limited protection provided by he tTurkish asylum system and insecurities imposed by a highly heteronormative social order. Hence, I have argued that homemaking for my participants has involved not only an ongoing process of day-to-day negotiation of liminal and precarious cimcumstances of the transit country, but it also included everyday struggles which have enabled queer identities, practices and spaces. Lending support to Wimark's previous research, my participants' agency has helped them to experience »queer movements, spaces and temporalities created in opposition to prevailing heterosexual, familial and normative structures of both origin and host societies«, thereby allowing to create a form of »liminal homemaking« (Wimark 2019: 15) and a case of »agency-in-waiting« (Brun and Fábos 2015: 12). Informed by an intersectional analysis, I have demonstrated that my participants have produced different strategies of homemaking, attending to particular dimensions or a combination of dimensions of their social positions such as class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and ability. Grounded in the intersection of home studies, migration studies, feminist and queer studies, the homemaking experiences of my participants contribute to our understanding of the creative agency of the displaced people in temporary conditions.

This study has gone some way towards introducing possibilities of thinking about making homes in uncertain temporariness, such as transit regions, and it triggered some questions in need of further investigation. For instance, queer way(s) of home-making, liminal homemaking and de-territorialised ways of homemaking, such as »virtual homemaking«, are interesting issues for future research.

*I would like to thank my participants who shared their experiences with me, to Dr. İclal Ayşe Küçükkırca who introduced home studies to me and to the reviewers and editors.*

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# Inhalt

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# Rezension/Ankündigung

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