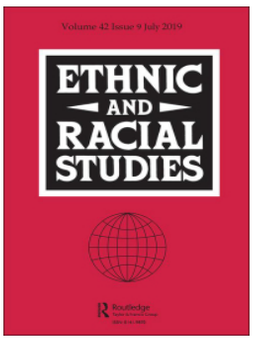

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Nina Held

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SPECIAL ISSUE: QUEER LIBERALISMS AND MARGINAL MOBILITY

"As queer refugees, we are out of category, we do not belong to one, or the other": LGBTIQ+ refugees' experiences in "ambivalent" queer spaces*

Nina Held**

Department of Sociology, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

ABSTRACT

While over the last twenty years, geographers of sexuality have explored the racialization of queer spaces, the experiences of LGBTIQ+ refugees in those spaces are rather absent in these studies. At the same time, while in recent years there has been an increasing amount of research on LGBTIQ+ asylum in Europe and beyond, the social experiences of LGBTIQ+ claimants and refugees in their host countries, including queer spaces, have only recently started to be examined. Drawing on research carried out in Germany, Italy and the UK, this article explores LGBTIQ+ refugees' experiences in different spaces such as LGBTIQ+ support groups and night-time leisure spaces, as well as intimate relationships. The article argues that these are "ambivalent" spaces for LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees and that to fully understand these spatial experiences, we need to look at the inter-dynamic relationship between gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, "race", religion and "refugeeness".

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Introduction

At the end of 2019, there were 79.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, and 33.8 million of those were seeking refuge in another country.[1] There are many reasons why people have to flee their country of origin. One of these reasons is fearing (further) persecution on the grounds of

CONTACT Nina Held n.held1@salford.ac.uk https://uk.linkedin.com/in/ninaeld-78394859 @SOGICA1, @NinaHeld1

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**Present address: Department of Social Policy, University of Salford, Manchester, UK

their sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI). There are also lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) people who escape their country of origin due to other reasons such as war and conflict. We do not know how many LGBTIQ+ people are displaced, and how many of those come to Europe, as these statistics are not available.[2] Even before the so-called European "refugee crisis" in 2015, it was estimated that there were an overall number of 10,000 LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants in Europe (Jansen and Spijkerboer 2011, 15–16). When LGBTIQ+ refugees arrive in Europe and claim asylum, decision-makers and others often assume – in a homonationlist vein –, that they find safety, liberation and freedom and are happy and keen to go to Gay Prides and queer spaces. However, LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees have rather ambivalent experiences in theses spaces.[3]

As a volunteer and supporter of the Lesbian Immigration Support Group (LISG)[4] in Manchester (UK), I have regularly witnessed the impact participation at Manchester Pride has on women who experienced persecution because of their sexuality – including imprisonment, rape and torture – in their countries of origin. Every year, it is the same ritual: we gather in the little park on Liverpool Street, everyone is excited, we chat, laugh, make last changes to costumes and make-up/face painting, and take photos of ourselves. When the parade slowly starts to move, we find our place according to the number we have been assigned and make contact with the groups before and behind us, then walk through a quiet alleyway until we suddenly come onto Deansgate, where hundreds of supporters flock the streets and show their support by waving rainbow flags, clapping and cheering. That is always an emotional moment and I never fail to look at the women's facial expressions, especially those for whom this is the first-ever Gay parade. Astonishment, excitement, tears. "Back in Uganda, this would never be possible" is the kind of phrase commonly uttered. However, these experiences are not always positive. One year, the Pride committee decided that we should walk behind the prison service section, where prison guards were dancing in a cell. Most women felt uncomfortable and, for some, it brought back memories of traumatic experiences. It was a stark reminder that Pride is now more a celebratory than a political movement, deeply white-washed and exclusionary, and not attuned to the intersectional experiences of LGBTIQ+ people (see Eithne Luibhéid's contribution to this Special Issue). When LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees march at Pride, they disrupt the racialization of this particular sexualized space, and while they might enjoy their new "freedom" of attending Pride and going to queer spaces, they are often excluded or feel "out of place" in these spaces, where they do not embody the "somatic norm" (Puwar 2004).

Sitting at the crossroads of the fields of geographies of sexualities and queer migration and drawing on empirical data collected by the *SOGICA* project[5] in three European states – Germany, Italy and the UK – this article

offers an intersectional analysis of the experiences of LGBTIQ+ refugees in queer social spaces. It argues that spaces, such as LGBTIQ+ support groups and queer night-time leisure spaces, are "ambivalent spaces" for LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees. The concept of "ambivalent spaces" is taken from two *SOGICA* participants (Halim and Kadir, see below), who both described how on the one hand, these spaces are important and can offer support, but on the other hand, they are shaped by intersectional differences and power relationships. The article argues that to fully understand these spatial experiences, we need to look at the inter-dynamic relationship between gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, "race", religion, "refugeeness" and space, amongst other categories.

Processes of exclusion in queer night-time leisure spaces have been researched for more than 20 years in the field of geographies of sexualities and elsewhere. It has been shown that mainstream queer spaces are homonormatively structured around a white, male, gay, middle-class identity and that exclusions are defined on the grounds of gender, class and "race" (Bell and Binnie 2004; Brown 2014; Taylor 2007). This literature has demonstrated that these spaces are not only sexualized but also racialized, and authors have looked specifically at the experiences of LGBTIQ+ people racialized as South Asian and Black in the UK (Bassi 2006; Held 2017; Kawale 2003), East Asian gay men in the US (Han 2015) and Australia (Caluya 2008), and Black men in the US (Andersson 2015; Nero 2005) and South Africa (Livermon 2014; Tucker 2009; Visser 2013). However, a focus on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ refugees in these spaces is missing.

At the same time, in recent years, there has been an increasing amount of research on LGBTIQ+ asylum claims in Europe and beyond, especially on the difficulties of being legally recognized as a refugee on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity (Danisi et al. 2021; Dustin and Held 2018; Shakhsari 2014; Spijkerboer 2013; Tschalaer 2021; Tschalaer 2020). There has also been increasing interest in the social experiences of LGBTIQ+ claimants and refugees, and their physical and mental health needs (Kahn et al. 2018; Namer and Razum 2018). Some of these studies also discuss LGBTIQ+ refugees' experience in queer spaces and mention experiences with racism in these spaces in Austria and the Netherlands (Alessi et al. 2018, 20), Canada (Lee and Brotman 2011, 261), Iceland (Guðmundsdóttir and Skaptadóttir 2017, 58–59), the UK (Metropolitan Migration Foundation 2012) and digital spaces in Germany (Bayramoğlu and Lünenborg 2018, 1031). None of these studies, however, focus explicitly on their experiences in different queer spaces.

It is important to analyse LGBTIQ+ claimants' experiences in LGBTIQ+ support groups and queer spaces for several reasons. First, when assessing credibility and the degree of "outness" of LGBTIQ+ claimants, decision-makers often place considerable importance on the involvement with

LGBTIQ+ groups and visiting queer spaces (Danisi et al. 2021, Ch. 7). Second, such analysis can help counteract homonationalist notions of Western nations and queer spaces as "liberal" and inclusionary, while other nations and spaces are "backward" and homophobic (Puar 2007). Third, as this article will show, LGBTIQ+ claimants experience the racialization of queer space differently, because they are not only racially marked but also marked as refugees. In the context of, on the one hand advancements in LGBTIQ+-friendly legislation and policies in the three country case studies, and on the other hand, increasing hostility towards refugees, LGBTIQ+ refugees occupy almost contrary positionalities.

This article takes "refugeeness" as a constructed and discursively produced subject position that has social, political and legal dimensions (Lacroix 2004). As this article will demonstrate, the subjective experience of refugeeness is not only shaped by refugee policies but also by spatial experience and intimate encounters.[6] Furthermore, the processes of "becoming" a refugee are intertwined with processes of racialization; the ways in which "race" is made in everyday practices, and in which bodies *become* racialized (Lewis 2007). Coined by Crenshaw (1989) but having a longer history in Black feminist thought, intersectionality is a key tool to understand LGBTIQ+ refugees' experiences in queer spaces; not only to grasp how "race" and "refugeeness" both shape these experiences, but also how they intersect with gender, sexuality, religion and ableism, amongst other categories.

In the following section, SOGICA's methodology will be explained, before exploring the spatial ambivalence of "freedom", and LGBTIQ+ refugees' experiences in LGBTIQ+ support spaces, queer spaces and intimate relationships.

Methodology

This article draws on data collected during the SOGICA project, which ran for four years (2016–2020). The project sought to determine how European asylum systems can treat asylum claims based on SOGI more fairly, and how the LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants' and refugees' social experiences can be improved.

The project used a mixed-method approach, consisting of 143 semi-structured interviews, 16 focus groups, 24 non-participant observations of court hearings, two online surveys, documentary analysis and freedom of information requests.[7] This article draws on the individual and group interviews that were held between September 2017 and March 2019. The individual interviews were conducted with policy-makers, decision-makers, members of the judiciary, legal representatives, SOGI asylum claimants and refugees, NGO staff and other professionals. The interviews broadly covered topics relating to the participants' arrival in the host country; the asylum interview

and preparation for it; legal advice and support; accommodation and detention. Experiences in LGBTIQ+ support and queer night-time leisure spaces were often addressed when participants were asked about their social life in Germany, Italy and the UK.[8]

The focus groups, which were conducted solely with SOGI asylum claimants and refugees,[9] offered an opportunity for participants to discuss their experiences with and views on the asylum process with each other. They were relatively small, having six participants on average, to keep them interactive and provide space for people to talk. They were mostly organized through local NGOs, thus participants often knew each other. Some participants fed back to us that sharing their experiences (often for the first time) with other LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants felt "cathartic" (Danisi et al. 2021, Ch. 2). Nevertheless, it is also important to acknowledge that differences between group members and between the researchers and participants existed and impacted on the group dynamics. For instance, there were differences in how confident participants were in speaking the particular language.[10] Speaking to white European researchers, and the implicit power differentials between the researchers and the researched may also have limited the degree to which participants felt able to open up to the researchers and speak openly and frankly about issues of concern (such as experiences with racism, for instance).

Many of the asylum claimant and refugee participants were recruited through contacts with local, national and international NGOs offering support to asylum claimants and through legal practitioners. Snowballing played a major role in the process, whereas participants referred us to other potential participants. All of the interview and focus group audio files were transcribed and analysed according to a coding framework with the software programme NVivo. Participants chose whether or not they wanted their accounts to be anonymized; therefore in this article, some participants are referred to by their real names and others by pseudonyms.

As LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees find themselves in vulnerable positions and have often experienced trauma, consideration of ethical issues was particularly important.[11] Hence, phrasing questions in a way that decreases the risk of potential re-traumatization, giving comprehensive information about the project (including translated versions) and obtaining informed consent (with the option to withdraw), were all important considerations. The project aimed to give a voice to LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees while at the same time being aware of and reflecting on power imbalances between researchers and researched. While we were aware that power differentials could not be eliminated, we aimed to conduct research that brought reciprocal benefits and establish "ethical relationships between researchers and participants that are responsive to the needs,

concerns and values of participants" (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007, 307).[12]

The spatial ambivalence of "freedom"

When considering the reasons why LGBTIQ+ people flee their countries of origin and come to Europe, the regularly updated ILGA-map is often a reference point. It colourfully illustrates the division of the world according to "gay rights" along the lines of North/South; West/East.[13] While the "West" is (mainly) marked by liberal gay rights in terms of same-sex partnerships and adoption rights, the rest of the world is characterized both by the absence of these rights and also by the criminalization of same-sex sexual activities. As Jasbir Puar (2007) has pointed out, this liberal gay rights discourse is deeply problematic as it creates a binary of "gay-friendly" vs. "homophobic" nations. Within this discourse, there is the assumption that once LGBTIQ+ people arrive on the shores of Europe (or the "West" in general), they reach safety, freedom and happiness. This is accompanied by the assumption of a "teleological time of progress" implying that the threat of transphobic and homophobic violence and violations of their human rights is left behind (Shakhsari 2014).

Many of the LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees we interviewed fled their country of origin to escape violence, and even potential imprisonment, and live their SOGI "freely", often embarking on horrendous journeys:

> If I [had] the freedom in my country, I don't think I will risk all the odd[s] to pass through the desert, to the sea, to Italy. So even to the European country that I can't speak their language. It is very difficult for me. Where I have nobody, it is like, if the life in my country was not so difficult about homosexual, I don't have to, I can't even imagine to take such risk. (Just Me, focus group, Italy)

In that respect, participants talked about the relief they felt to be able to be free "who they are" (for instance, Aisha, Germany; Amis, focus group, Germany; Diarra, Italy; Prince Emrah, Germany; Rosette, Germany; Siri, Italy) and especially in Italy, participants spoke about the difference it made to be legally protected (Dev, Italy; Kennedy, Italy; Momo, Italy; Silver, Italy; Siri; Italy). Being able to be visibly LGBTIQ+ can contribute to LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants' sense of "freedom", as many did not have a "queer community" in their country of origin, or if they had, could only meet in secret. For instance, Stephina (UK) described the powerful effect of being able to live her sexuality openly:

> I knew I would be fighting my case, but at least I am outside, I have got that freedom to go places, meet people, hang out with people and because I am coming from a country where you can't say out loud that you are LGBT and being here, it was like I can breathe. I don't even have to explain myself. I

> can date whoever I want to date, go places where I want to go, if I go to a gay bar, whoever sees me I really don't care, because I didn't have to explain myself to them. So I think that freedom is what kept me going, even when I knew my case was still going, because you can see from 2014 I just got my stay now [2018], so it has been a journey, but (laughs) yes.

Some participants talked about visiting Gay Pride for the first time. Odosa (Italy) described his first Pride as "fantastic" and said: "That day. I felt well, I felt good. *Si* [Yes]. On that day, I liked everything about that day". Patti (UK) described showing her housemate pictures of Pride and telling her that "people queue just to cheer us up […] They love us, they just love who we are", and her housemate commented on how happy she looked on the pictures, "I was happy, so … (laughs)". For Marhoon (Germany), Pride was an important way to be visible, and on the second Pride he attended, he decided "to go full traditional clothes, to show, not only here in Germany, but also my gay community in Oman, to show them that they're not alone, that I'm here marching on their behalf".

These accounts could confirm the stereotypical view of a "typical" LGBTIQ+ refugee asylum story that affirms homonationalist discourses, which decision-makers often look for and which are also constructed by NGOs and the media (Hiller 2021; McGuirk 2018). These discourses frame the experiences of LGBTIQ+ refugees in binary terms, where fear/safety, oppression/freedom, homophobic structures/LGBTIQ+ tolerance, suffering/happiness, invisibility/visibility, and violence/kindness, refer to LGBTIQ+ refugees' (imagined) experiences in their country of origin vs. their host country (McGuirk 2018; Saleh 2020; Shakhsari 2014; Tschalaer 2020). Although such accounts are only part of the story and do not represent the complexity of LGBTIQ+ refugees' experiences, they have become the dominant discourses, through which queer refugees' identities are made "intelligible to Western humanitarian efforts", asylum institutions as well as the media and its audiences, as Fadi Saleh (2020, 51) argues with regard to Syrian queer and trans refugees. Many aspects of our participants' lives in their countries of origin were not defined by suffering, and many participants had enjoyed a wealth of economic, social and cultural capital, all of which was lost on coming to Europe. Subsequently, in the host countries, their lives are far from free, happy and/or safe. In fact, many participants talked about the ambivalence of freedom. For instance, Halim (Germany) described how on one hand he can access more spaces now that feel safe, but that on the other

> I miss my home, because I miss my family, I miss the experiences that I had, so it's still this ambivalent feeling. Because I'm here, safe, but safety doesn't mean necessarily feeling happy, or feeling completely satisfied, they don't mean each other, they don't complement each other.

Others, whose asylum claims had been rejected or who were still waiting for a decision, spoke about not being able to feel free until they receive legal status (Ahmed, focus group, Germany; Mary and Zaro, UK: Moses, Italy; Niceguy, focus group, Italy). As Stephina's account above indicates, and as has been widely discussed by queer migration scholars, LGBTIQ+ people claiming asylum in Europe have to "fight" hard for their cases and are often stuck in a long process during which time, many of their basic rights are restricted (Danisi et al. 2021; Spijkerboer 2013).

Like all asylum claimants, LGBTIQ+ claimants' sense of freedom is seriously hampered by repressive asylum regimes that force people to live in shared, often over-crowed and large accommodation centres, with strict rules and regulations. For LGBTIQ+ claimants, these repressive regimes also mean that it is often not possible to connect with other LGBTIQ+ people, especially for those housed in rural areas, where their mobility is restricted and where they feel isolated and are unable to access LGBTIQ+ support and spaces (see Mengia Tschalaer's contribution to this Special Issue). As Mamaka (Italy) described:

> We are here for freedom, but in this case almost two years I am in the camp, there is nothing like freedom still. Because I am caged like a chain, could not go out, could not go sleep out, could not go to a club, that is out of me.

A sense of freedom and safety was, therefore, dependant on the spatial context and some participants pointed out that while they felt safe when they came to the city, for example, to access LGBTIQ+ support, they did not feel safe in their isolated rural accommodation centres (for instance, Angel, Germany; Amis, focus group, Germany; Winifred, focus group, Germany). In fact, many of our participants went back "into the closet" out of the fear of experiencing homophobic and/or transphobic violence in the asylum accommodation centres in which they were living and which are, like most spaces in society, heteronormative and cis-gendered spaces (Tschalaer's contribution to this Special Issue; Wimark 2020).[14] There is a lack of support in the centres and LGBTIQ+ claimants are often told by staff to keep their sexuality hidden (Julia, Germany; Julian, focus group, Germany; Marhoon, Germany; see also Dustin and Held 2021).

LGBTIQ+ claimants' lives in the host countries are shaped by continuous experiences of homophobia and transphobia as well as racism and anti-refugeeness in different spaces, such as asylum accommodation and surrounding neighbourhoods, on public transport, in language classes, in shops, and when accessing public services such as job centres. Hence, a sense of freedom is experienced in ambivalent ways and juxtaposed by repressive asylum regimes and complex intersectional forms of oppression. The intersections of being queer *and* a refugee in particular shape these experiences in specific ways. As Halim (Germany) described it: "As queer refugees, we are

out of category, we do not belong to one [Germans], or the other [refugees]". He argued that because of this, LGBTIQ+ refugees can feel particularly isolated, which is why ensuring safety alone is not enough but needs to be accompanied by other kinds of support.

Ambivalent LGBTIQ+ support spaces

Because of the intersectional nature of identities, particular constructions of space shape feelings of comfort and safety (Held 2015). LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees belong to different marginalized groups and are often marginalized within different support groups. Therefore, they can experience "complex intersectional experiences of exclusion" (Lee and Brotman 2011, 259) and feel "out of place" in most spaces. For instance, they can access general asylum support groups but here they often experience, or fear that they will experience, homophobia, as April (focus group, UK) described it:

> So, because if it is asylum obviously it is people from countries that we are running away from in the group and if they are not, if it is not an LGBT group, obviously 9 out of 10 most of them are homophobic, they don't want to know. (April, focus group, UK)

They may access LGBTIQ+ organizations but here they might "worry about experiencing discrimination based on race/ethnicity, religion, or immigration status" (Alessi et al. 2018, 15).

Some studies conclude that LGBTIQ+ groups that specifically cater for queer refugees are experienced by LGBTIQ+ claimants as the most supportive (Lee and Brotman 2011, 261; Metropolitan Migration Foundation 2012). In our study, we found that the support such groups offer is wide-ranging and invaluable, and often has an incredible impact on people's wellbeing, and may also have a positive impact on the legal outcome of LGBTIQ+ claimants' cases (Dustin and Held 2021). Participants talked about LGBTIQ+ specific asylum groups as being surrounded by "like-minded people" (SGW, focus group, UK), where you can be open about your sexuality, people give you confidence and support you in what is often a difficult asylum process, and give you strength when facing traumatizing experiences, such as detention (Mary and April, focus group, UK). Some participants described LGBTIQ+ groups and support networks as being akin to "family" or in similar terms (Alphaeus, focus group, Germany; Amos, focus group, UK, Fares, focus group, Germany; Mary, focus group, UK; Zaro, focus group UK; Giulia-LGBT group volunteer). Many of these groups were led, for the most part, by white German/Italian/British LGBTIQ+ workers and volunteers, and although the emotional and practical support LGBTIQ+ claimants and refugees receive in such groups is invaluable, like all spaces, also in LGBTIQ+ (asylum) support

spaces, differences and power differentials might exist that shape these spaces in certain ways.

As mentioned in the introduction, Halim and Kadir defined such spaces as "ambivalent spaces". For them, this ambivalence arose from the fact that these spaces can be supportive, but at the same time also oppressive and characterized by unequal power relationships:

> It's hard to generalise the experience, because people make different experiences in the queer space for us as refugees. Because sometimes you can feel like "oh, this is our home", and sometimes you can also feel you're still not the same [as the others in that space]. (Halim, Germany)

> … " queer" does not automatically mean to recognise and accept and to be open towards diversity in all its dimensions. People are not necessarily supportive of categories that they are not affected by themselves, also not in queer structures. (Kadir, NGO worker, Germany)

Kadir further explained that the ambivalence of the spaces arose out of the fact that, on one hand, there have been improvements and there was support, solidarity and voluntary engagement; on the other hand, predominantly white queer structures would often not cater for queer migrants' or queer refugees' needs. In a similar vein, Halim described that while there were efforts to include and support queer refugees, this can happen in a tokenistic or exploitative way or in a way that fetishizes people. He told us of an initiative where LGBTIQ+ people were asked by organizations to offer a room to a queer refugee (before queer refugee accommodation centres were established) and then "they sent somebody from Russia who was a 40 year old Russian man to the host. And the host was like 'no, I expected a young Syrian refugee guy'". Potential sexual exploitation was also mentioned by other participants, who cautioned that there are not always good intentions when people offer support: "Some supporters come, say 'yes, I want to support a gay refugee' or something, and eventually they have another intention in their mind" (Ibrahim, Germany). In that respect, we were told about sexual favours sometimes being expected in exchange for help and offers of accommodation (Eleanor, NGO worker, UK; Gary, NGO staff, UK; Halim, Germany; Joseph, NGO volunteer, UK; Juliane, public official, Germany; Kadir, NGO worker, Germany).

There are also groups that have been created and are led by LGBTIQ+ refugees and cater for their needs (for example, African Rainbow Family in the UK, Sofra in Germany), and although this paper focuses more on support groups and social spaces provided by "mainstream" LGBTIQ+ organizations, it is important to recognize asylum claimants' and refugees' agency in establishing networks, support groups, and other forms of refugee activism (Bhimji 2016). Some participants had been activists in

their country of origin and have continued with their activism in the host country. For instance, Ibrahim (Germany) created and leads a support group for LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees (Sofra Cologne) that meets once a month and where members cook, eat and dance together, and share information. Such refugee-led support groups are immensely important for empowerment, diminishing power inequalities and increasing the visibility of LGBTIQ+ refugees. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees are not a homogenous group and differences exist that can also make someone feel out of place within LGBTIQ+ refugee spaces. Whether self-organized or not, most groups predominantly cater for cis-gendered gay men, and support groups specifically for bisexual and lesbian refugee women, like LISG in the UK or LeTRa in Germany, are rare. As Sandy (focus group, Germany) described: "For me, as a lesbian, I don't have a scene. The only scene I have is the meeting [for queer migrant women] that I go to in [city in Hesse], one time a month. And not every month". Claimants who identify as bisexual or queer are expected to fit into the groups that are available, and also trans asylum claimants face difficulties in finding specific social support and community groups, which leads to particular forms of isolation (TGEU - Transgender Europe 2016, 7). As a study in Italy highlights, the need for LGBTQ+ organizations to do more to include trans refugees is increasing because there "has been a high level of violence against trans people in the past years" (Bassetti 2019, 338) and trans refugees face particular challenges. Transphobia also exists within mainstream LGBTIQ+ organizations and within LGBTIQ+ refugee groups, gender dynamics (between cis-gender gay men and trans women, for instance) are also sometimes prevalent (Louis, NGO volunteer, Germany). In addition, there are other identifiers that can make LGBTIQ+ refugees feel "out of place" in such groups. For instance, Betty (focus group, Germany) talked about her experiences as a disabled lesbian asylum claimant in different spaces and the discrimination she experiences. In the accommodation centre, she feels that people think she is "a curse and that they will have to help me every time, people think I am useless, they do not want to associate with us, most of the time". She had similar experiences within a lesbian asylum support group:

> Even the other women, I want to associate with the ladies but when they see me they think I am not equal, I am not supposed to be with them, maybe they think that I have another category of people where I should go to.

Hence, LGBTIQ+ refugees can feel "out of place" in LGBTIQ+ support spaces when they do not represent the "somatic norm", and this is also the case in LGBTIQ+ night-time leisure spaces.

Queer spaces and intimate relationships

As mentioned in the introduction, geographers of sexuality have demonstrated that mainstream queer night-time leisure spaces are structured around a white, male, gay, middle-class identity and that exclusions are defined on the grounds of gender, class and "race" (see, for instance, Andersson 2015; Caluya 2008; Nero 2005; Taylor 2007; Tucker 2009; Visser 2013). When LGBTIQ+ refugees access these spaces and seek intimate relationships, their experiences are also shaped by their "refugeeness".

LGBTIQ+ night-time leisure spaces are spaces of consumption, so people who are not able to afford the entrance fee or the price of drinks are excluded from these spaces. Asylum claimants, who receive a small amount of asylum support and have no or limited right to work, thus find it difficult to access these spaces:

> A lot of people go through what I am going through and they feel really alone, nobody to talk to, especially if you are going through asylum […] you feel alone, you don't have any friends, you can't really pick yourself up and say "you know what, I am going to go to a gay pub and sit and try to make some friends", because you barely get enough money to survive, [let] alone go and have a drink. (Christina, UK)

While the profit-orientation of these spaces works as "silent" exclusionary practices, other practices of exclusion are not so subtle. LGBTIQ+ refugees might not only be prevented from visiting queer spaces because of economic reasons, but exclusions on the grounds of "race" also play a role. Research on the racialization of queer night-time leisure spaces has shown that the door policies of queer bars and clubs can contribute to keeping these spaces white (Held 2017; Kawale 2003). This was also experienced by some of our participants. As Ibrahim (Germany) told us, there is:

> also discrimination within the community, within the LGBT community. For example, we have this issue here in Köln [Cologne, Germany]. A lot of gay refugees are not allowed to go into bars [LGBTIQ+ venues] because they are brown-skinned, and if you are brown […] you are not allowed to go in. So … imagine at some point, I've had some people say: "Ibrahim … okay, I live here but I don't want to go to the scene." They feel tired from the scene at some point.

For Amis (focus group, Germany), these exclusionary practices went so far that he was only let into gay bars when he was with a white person:

> For me, I've gone to several bars because I'm a proud gay, many people know me and my partner in Munich, a lot of people, and know I'm gay. I've gone to many bars and have a profile, like I even know the bouncers. They tell me "go!", unless when I'm with a white man or a white friend, they let me enter. But when I'm alone … but they know me of course. So I've seen it and I have proof. (Amis, focus group, Germany)

At other times, LGBTIQ+ refugees' sexual identities might be questioned at the door. NGO workers Sofia and Emma (Germany) told us that they heard from black queer refugee women they supported that they were told "'By the way, this is a lesbian party', as if it needs an extra check because Black women can't be lesbian or as such. So, clearly, racism simply exists" (see also Kawale 2003). Other NGO workers and volunteers were also sceptical about the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ refugees in predominantly white gay spaces and the levels of acceptance within them. As Joseph (volunteer, UK) pointedly described: "the LGBT community likes to say it is welcoming and supportive and inclusive, but it can be just as nasty, racist and predatory". Caroline (NGO worker, UK) expressed quite frankly that exclusionary practices were based on racism: "They don't really want them [asylum claimants] here [Manchester's Gay Village]".

When LGBTIQ+ claimants are able to enter queer spaces, they often encounter racism. Alphaeus (Germany) said that in gay clubs "sometimes you may find some people who discriminate you, but they will discriminate you because of your colour, not [for] being a gay". He told us of an experience where he and his friends were "bullied" by "fellow gay people" in a gay club in Munich, who "are bullying because you are Black" and questioned "why are you here?" Alphaeus further explained that "You face two things at a go: you are Black, and you are gay". We can see here how queer space is marked as white, so that Black gay refugees are made to feel "out of place". This can also happen in the spaces where LGBTIQ+ asylum groups meet, as these are often predominantly white spaces. For instance, Louis (NGO volunteer, Germany) told us that the patrons of a gay café/bar, where their LGBTIQ+ support group meets every week, sometimes complain (loudly) about the group (the majority of whom are Muslim gay men from the Middle East) "taking up too much space". This gay café/bar is a particular gendered, sexualized and racialised space (I had visited it a few times during my research), mainly visited by white gay men, so the group of LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees – sometimes up to 15–20 people – disrupts the racialization of the space quite visibly. The critique of "taking up too much space" signals a sense of ownership of the space, an entitlement to the space, and indicates that queer refugees are not perceived as belonging. Furthermore, as critical "race" scholars have highlighted, white people often feel threatened by a group of people racialized as "other", imagine them to be in larger numbers than they actually are, and often perceive them as being "loud" (Gunaratnam and Lewis 2001; Puwar 2004). The additional layer of "refugeeness", and experiencing discrimination in other spaces, makes this café important as a meeting space for LGBTIQ+ refugees, but because of the different intersectional layers, it might not be experienced as an inclusive space. Louis recounted these incidents as examples of Islamophobia in the queer "community", something also mentioned by other participants (Seth,

NGO worker, UK). This adds another layer of intersectional experience and points towards "the regulation of space, the question of who has legitimate claims to it and to whose needs it is meant to cater to" in the current political context marked by homonationalism and increased Islamophobia in Europe (El-Tayeb 2011, 125).

While most participants talked positively about Gay Pride events (see above), Kamel (Italy) told us about an experience of overt racism at the third Pride event that he attended in Bologna: when he gave a speech on stage, two women shouted "go back to your home" and someone else shouted "Viva Salvini".[15] Such experiences are not surprising given that over the last decade, international Pride events have been in the limelight for being racist, white-washed and adapting homonationalist politics by closely collaborating with the police and prison service, for instance (see Introduction, and also Eithne Luibhéid's contribution to this Special Issue).[16]

While Kamel did not relate this experience to his trans identity ("I am trans, but nobody thinks I'm trans; I am a refugee and of colour"), for other trans claimants not only "race", religion and "refugeeness" shape their experiences but also their gender identity and expression in predominantly cis-gendered queer spaces. Prince Emrah (Germany) said that their gender identity is often questioned. "In the clubs it's the same, they come, and they ask me, are you a girl or a boy?". Diana (Germany) spoke directly about the intersectional experience of being a person of colour, a refugee and trans: "I also get transphobia here. In Iran, too, is transphobia, but here is transphobia with racism about it". She thought that the white trans community also had no interest in trans refugees.

Processes of racialization are deeply interwoven with sexuality. This becomes obvious, for example, through sexualized racialized stereotypes. For instance, giving an example of racism on the gay scene, Riccardo (LGBT group volunteer, Italy) said: "the most common example is that if you see a guy of Arab origin in a nightclub, 80% of people think it's a hustler". And, as he further explained, it is often assumed that Black gay men prostitute themselves. This was also reported by the bisexual men of colour participants in Castro's and Carnassale's study (2019, 217) in Northern Italy, who told the researchers of episodes where they were perceived as sex workers and because of that were often denied access to gay bars. Stereotypes, hostility and exoticization also impact on sexual encounters, and the possibility of finding a partner "on the scene". Fares (Germany), who is a student, described that on the one hand, some gay men would assume that he was "stupid" and not well educated when they find out he was from Syria, who would not "want to have anything to do with gay refugees". On the other hand, some gay men, who were looking specifically for Arab gay men, were uninterested in him, as he did not confirm to their stereotypes of Arab men having dark hair and eyes, being hairy and having a beard, for instance.

A study conducted in Italy found that because of experiences with racism and Islamophobia in Italian gay communities, some gay migrants[17] felt that online dating was a safer way to get in touch with other gay men, rather than visiting local gay bars (Masullo 2018, 60). However, being exoticized and fetishized in queer digital spaces was also a common experience by gay refugees in our study, who encounter other stereotypes such as that Arab gay men are aggressive (Marhoon, Germany), or Black gay men are hyper-sexual (Stephen, focus group, Germany; William, focus group, Germany) (see also Castro and Carnassale 2019, 217; GALOP 2001, 19). Zouhair (Germany) explained how on dating apps some gay men would specify "only southerners [Südländer]", or "southerners preferred", while others would say things like "please no foreigner", "no southerner [Südländer]", "no Arab", "no Turk", "no Asian … no fat, no Black, no Latino". In response, some gay men would include on their profile "please no German". Though not defined by our participants as such, Islamophobia can also play a role in these experiences of rejections and exotifications, as Alessi et al. 2018 (p.21) found in their study conducted in Amsterdam (The Netherlands) and Vienna (Austria). As Bayramoğlu and Lünenborg (2018, 1031) argue, such online platforms thus "foster a racialized economy of desire", where queer migrants can feel "reduced to objects of white desire within a post-colonial continuation of geopolitical hierarchies and constructed otherness". Hence, these forms of fetishization and "eating the Other" are not just sexual preferences but practices through which racial domination is further established (hooks 1992).

Through such economics of sexual desire LGBTIQ+ claimants are further marginalized when their "refugeeness" marks them as "exotic", only "good for one night, but then it all ends up there, because it's never a serious relationship with a migrant" (Antonella, NGO volunteer, Italy) (see also Masullo 2018). Some participants told us that they find it difficult to find a partner or be in a relationship with someone, as potential partners might assume that they are only looking for a relationship to gain citizenship rights (Emroy, focus group, Germany; Sandy, focus group, Germany). Others described difficulties in relationships because of power inequalities, language and cultural differences (Julian, focus group, Germany), and not being seen as "a person who fought for life", but just "as a victim" (Diana, Germany). As these accounts demonstrate, because of the intersections of class, "race", gender identity and expression, religion and "refugeeness", negotiating intimate relationships and mainstream queer spaces can be challenging for LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees.

While the focus here has been on exclusionary practices in "mainstream", predominantly white, queer spaces, it needs to be mentioned that in many European urban spaces "alternative" queer spaces and networks have been created by queer BPOC[18] in response to the racism prevalent in these

white spaces (El-Tayeb 2011). Some of our participants had been involved in the creation of queer parties organized for queer refugees, such as a queer Arabic party in Hannover (Zouhair, Germany) and a performance party in Berlin aiming to build solidarity with trans and queer refugees (Prince Emrah, Germany), both of which attract queer refugees from far and wide. As Zouhair explained, such events are also important in increasing the visibility of queer refugees. At these events, instead of policing patron's sexual identity at the door, when entering, people are asked to take and visibly wear a sticker with a slogan such as

> "gays, they are my friends" or "gays, they are nice" or … "me, I am gay" (provided in different languages such as Arabic, Russian and Kurdish). Such practices are designed to help make the space more inclusive and follow an intersectional approach to identity and community, and "a denaturalized concept of belonging that is both fluent and open. (El-Tayeb 2011, 158)

Conclusion

Homonationalist ideas divide the world into "liberal" and "homophobic" nations and, in these imaginaries, Western countries "save the brown queers" (Sharif 2015). In the same logic, decision-makers and others expect that when LGBTIQ+ refugees arrive at the shores of "gay-friendly" Europe, they are then "freed" and can live their SOGI openly and find pleasure in accessing LGBTIQ+ support and night-time leisure spaces. If they do not visit these spaces, or have same-sex relationships, though they are "free to do so", then this can go against their claim (Tschalaer 2020, 10–11). What this article has demonstrated, however, is the ambivalent nature of such experiences. While some LGBTIQ+ refugees might feel "freer" to be visibly queer, their freedom is limited due to regulatory asylum regimes that confine claimants to particular spaces and restrict their movement and resources. They are also faced with a complex web of oppression on the grounds of sexuality, gender, (dis)ability, religion, "race" and "refugeeness" in their host countries Germany, Italy and the UK.

Experiences in LGBTIQ+ support groups and queer spaces are also ambivalent. On the one hand, LGBTIQ+ refugees receive vital support from LGBTIQ+ support groups; on the other hand, power imbalances often exist within them. In queer spaces, LGBTIQ+ refugees experience exclusionary practices such as door policies and exoticizations, and other racializing practices that signal their non-belonging to the (white) space. These experiences demonstrate that LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants have many reasons for not visiting queer spaces.

While exclusionary practices in queer spaces relate to "race", as has been demonstrated widely, for LGBTIQ+ refugees these experiences are also impacted by their "refugeeness", for example, when they are not taken

seriously as sexual partners. This is a result of power imbalances on grounds of citizenship status, gender, sexuality, "race", and refugeeness. Though intersecting with "race", processes of "refugeeness" are distinct, and therefore need to be taken into account as a distinct category when doing intersectional analysis. Furthermore, "citizenship status", which is sometimes named as one of the social categories of intersectional thinking (see, for instance, Collins and Bilge 2016), does not fully grasp these processes. The experiences of LGBTIQ+ refugees, and how these experiences are shaped by "refugeeness", among other social categories, need to be included in intersectional analysis in order to avoid contributing to what Crenshaw (2019, 18) calls "intersectional erasures".

As this article has argued, LGBTIQ+ refugees' experiences in LGBTIQ+ support groups and queer spaces are not just a matter of being "in" or "out of place", but by taking an intersectional approach, we can see the ambivalence in these experiences. Ambivalence signals relationality, one of the core ideas of intersectionality as an analytical tool. As Collins and Bilge (2016, 17) explain: "Relational thinking rejects either/or binary thinking […] Instead, relationality embraces a both/and frame". With this in mind, the accounts by LGBTIQ+ refugees included here powerfully show that they are not just "victims" of these experiences. They are carriers of intersectional knowledge and experience and have a clear understanding of the exclusionary and oppressive practices that affect them, exposing them as such.

Notes

1. https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html (accessed September 5, 2020).
2. However, we do know that the people seeking refuge in Europe in general are only a small proportion of the refugees worldwide, as 85% of displaced people are hosted in developing countries.
3. A note on terminology: while asylum seeker/claimant and refugee are different legal constructs that involve different sets of rights and therefore experiences, in this article, at times, the term 'LGBTIQ+ refugee' is used as an umbrella term referring to both.
4. LISG is a support group for bisexual and lesbian asylum claimants and refugees.
5. www.sogica.org
6. Important to note here is that "refugeeness" does not only include the experiences *after* being legally accepted as a refugee but also whilst still being in the process (Lacroix 2004).
7. See https://www.sogica.org/en/fieldwork/ for all SOGICA fieldwork materials.
8. Although information about the research was provided in different languages and we offered (potential) participants to conduct the interviews in any preferred language, we reached mostly English-speaking LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees, and those who had already acquired the language of the host country. In the UK, all interviews were conducted in English; in Germany, five interviews were conducted in German, one with an Arabic

translator and the rest in English; in Italy, three interviews were conducted in French, three in Italian and the rest in English.

9. In total, 158 asylum claimants and refugees participated in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups.
10. Most focus groups were conducted in English; in Germany one was held in a mixture of German and Arabic; in Italy one was conducted in French and one in a mixture of English and French.
11. Before we started the project fieldwork, several ethical issues were identified and ethical approval from the University of Sussex' Ethics Committee obtained (Certificate of Approval for Ethical Review ER/NH285/1).
12. For more on the project's methodology, see Danisi et al. (2021, chapter 2).
13. "Protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation" is represented in blue and 'criminalisation of consensual same-sex sexual acts between adults in red', https://ilga.org/sites/default/files/ENG_ILGA_World_map_sexual_orientation_laws_dec2019_update.png (accessed September 5, 2020).
14. There have also been some LGBTIQ+ asylum accommodation facilities specifically for LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants established (there are several in Germany, and a few in Italy and the UK).
15. Matteo Salvini, leader of the Centre-right coalition, was the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior from 1 June 2018 to 5 September 2019, when he introduced strong anti-immigration policies.
16. See also press release by SUSPECT, 20 June 2010, available at http://nohomonationalism.blogspot.com/2010/06/judith-butler-refuses-berlin-pride.html (accessed May 10, 2021).
17. The author defines the group of his research participants as 'foreigners' and migrants but refers mainly to asylum claimants and refugees.
18. BPOC stands for Black people and People of Colour.

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