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# Housing policy with violent outcomes – the domestication of queer asylum seekers in a heteronormative society

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## ABSTRACT

Housing policies for refugees are a hot topic in many countries receiving refugees. However, most discussions tend to treat refugees monolithically despite the fact that they have diverse experiences. Individuals seeking asylum on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity face numerous obstacles during the asylum process. This article aims to explore how asylum accommodations are governed and how this process affects queer asylum seekers. Based on a range of sources, including interviews, documents and media articles, the results show that many queer asylum seekers have been victims of homo- and transphobic violence. The findings also indicate that the Swedish migration agency has implemented temporary solutions to mitigate such violence but refused to change the overall policy. In the analysis, I maintain that there are three underlying assumptions in the system, namely, the primacy of heteronormativity, the metropolitan nature of queers, and the need to adjust but not challenge heteronormativity. I argue that this process renders queer asylum seekers unfit and leaves them in unsafe housing situations to domesticise them in the context of a heteronormative society, i.e. a society in which they do not stand out or claim further rights.

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## Introduction

Currently, refugees and their integration processes are widely discussed themes in many countries. Some EU countries have received a large number of asylum seekers over a short time, leading to an uneven landscape of refugee reception (Malmberg et al. 2016). Policies for the dispersal of asylum seekers to all countries of the European Union have been put on the agenda. The uneven landscape is not only an issue between but also within countries. Some regions and cities have received a high share of refugees, while others either have refused to accept refugees or have been neglected as destinations by the refugees themselves (Kamann 2015; Svenneböck 2017). In light of these uneven developments, dispersal policies have become a hot topic in policy circles.

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In research, dispersal policies have been discussed mainly to explore the relationship between placement policies and labour market integration. A number of studies discussing different dispersal policies for asylum seekers highlight how to disperse them to facilitate a smoother integration process (e.g. see Bakker, Cheung, and Phillimore 2016; Bolzoni, Gargiulo, and Manocchi 2015; Darling 2016; Kissoon 2010). Moreover, the governance of the asylum system has been discussed, and researchers have argued that the asylum system is a place in which refugees are domesticised and taught to integrate in a ‘correct’ manner (Darling 2011; Walters 2004). This literature is linked to a wider engagement with the domestication of sexuality at the nation scale. According to this line of research, states use housing policies to steer ways of practising sexuality such that it becomes associated with a specific form of heterosexuality. Therefore, sexuality becomes a matter of the state and tied to citizenship and the nation (e.g. see, Manalansan Iv 2006; Oswin 2010; Puar 2007).

In this article, the aim is to contribute to the latter stream of literature by considering the ways in which the governance of asylum accommodation affects queer asylum seekers. In the last 20 years, an increasing number of countries in the West have adjusted their migration laws to include sexual orientation and gender identity reasons for applying for refugee status. Therefore, it became possible for queer individuals to migrate from repressive contexts and seek refuge in other countries. However, knowledge regarding how dispersal policies affect queer asylum seekers is scarce.<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to map the governance of the Swedish refugee accommodation system and analyse how it affects queer asylum seekers.

The results shed light on the ways in which a government agency attempts to govern queer asylum seekers in the accommodation system without questioning its heteronormative foundation. Acknowledging that many queer asylum seekers are subject to harassment and violence due to their sexual orientation and gender identity, the agency has applied (temporary) additive rather than systemic solutions to mitigate violence – leaving queer asylum seekers in a state of uncertainty. Moreover, the results show that the governance of asylum accommodations is permeated by a number of underlying expectations that render queer asylum seekers out of place –the primacy of heteronormativity, an assumed metropolitan nature of queers, and the need to adjust but not challenge heteronormativity. In line with previous research, these practices indicate that the nation is widely engaged in domesticising practices of sexuality and gender to align with heteronormativity.

## Previous studies

The field of migration policy often draws from Foucault’s ideas of governmentality. Governmentality, briefly, refers to a process in which power is not only something that governments exercise top-down but that, as a disciplining power, is inscribed in the everyday life of the citizens themselves (see Foucault 1980). Migration policy could be seen as one area in which this is occurring. Walters (2004), for example, argues that the process of governmentality can be seen in the current migration politics that invoke an image of the state as a home, something he refers to as domopolitics. He argues that increasingly enforced borders are being justified through a series of parables in which the state is figured as a home. Home is a place that we need to protect from others but is also a place in which

we need to domesticise newcomers to maintain stability within and keep threats away. Darling (2011) has suggested that asylum accommodation can be seen as part of domopolitics in that asylum seekers are kept away from the security and stability of the (state) home in order to domesticise them. In domopolitics, asylum accommodation is never safe. It can be revoked at any time, and it is inscribed with values and norms that need to be followed in order to gain asylum. Asylum seekers not following the prescribed rules run the risk of being deported and, thus, must adhere to the given norms.

When asylum accommodations are never safe, the asylum process becomes a liminal state for asylum seekers. Recently, a number of studies have begun to conceptualise refugees as being in liminal *spaces*. These studies highlight spaces such as detention centres (Mountz et al. 2013), refugee camps (Mountz 2011; Ramadan 2013), and waiting rooms (Seitz 2017). Studies focussing on queer asylum seekers or refugees have mainly discussed (the lack of) legal rights and authorities' normative expectations of queer asylum seekers to express lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) identities (e.g. see Akin 2017; Dhoest 2019; El-Tayeb 2012; Giametta 2020; Murray 2016; Shuman and Bohmer 2014; Spijkerboer 2013). Generally, these studies adopt heteronormativity as the starting point, indicating a notion of intimacy in which norms of sex, gender, race, class and nation are fixed (see Manalansan Iv 2006; Oswin 2010). Many studies rely on theories of homonormativity and homonationalism. Homonormativity refers to a process of inclusion in which some parts of the queer community, such as stable and long-term same-sex monogamous relationships, become accepted in society, while other ways of being and acting remain unaccepted (Duggan 2002). Homonationalism refers to a process in which LGBT rights and individuals become accepted and united with the self-identity of the nation, e.g. through delineating other countries or cultures as barbaric for not tolerating LGBT individuals (Puar 2007). For example, the legal inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity asylum rights can be considered both homonormative and homonational processes (Wimark and Hedlund 2017). However, no studies have discussed housing queer asylum claimants, and asylum accommodation has not been considered as a way to discipline queer asylum seekers. In the following, an overview of Swedish asylum accommodation is given.

### *Housing asylum seekers in Sweden*

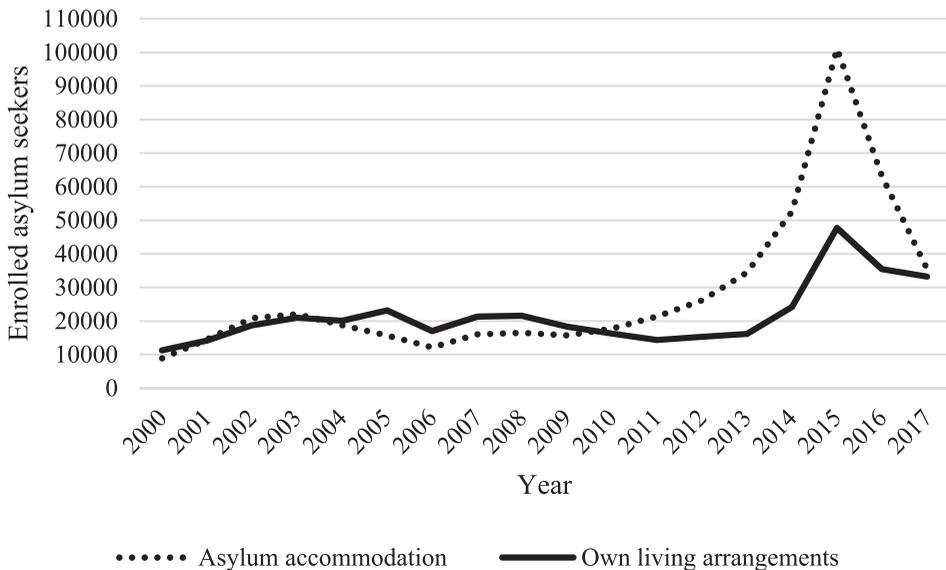
According to Swedish law (1994, 137 § 1-3), the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) has the main responsibility for the care of refugees from the time they apply for asylum until they are registered (*folkbokförd*) with a residence permit. During this time, the SMA must offer the asylum seeker accommodation in one of its asylum housing facilities. Until 1994, asylum seekers were obliged to stay in the assigned asylum housing, but currently, they can also arrange their own living accommodation.

All asylum seekers that file an application at any of the SMA reception offices are offered short-term accommodation until their application review starts (Riksrevisionen 2016). These accommodations are operated by the SMA, and applicants should (ideally) spend only approximately 1–7 days there. Thereafter, asylum seekers are assigned a place in any of the long-term accommodations available. Specific rules apply for unaccompanied minors, for which municipalities have the responsibility to arrange accommodation, and for asylum seekers in need of nursing or sheltered accommodation. The latter

are placed in institutional accommodations, procured but not operated by the SMA (SMA 2016a, 2017a). Until the beginning of the 1990s, long-term accommodation was typically isolated from general society, being organised in former hospitals or military compounds (SOU 2003, 75). Subsequently, the SMA changed its approach and began to disperse asylum seekers in society by acquiring housing units or apartments in the general rental housing market; this became the only accommodation option the SMA used until 2003 (Riksrevisionen 2016).

Currently, the SMA organises long-term accommodation in three categories: apartment accommodation, corridor accommodation, and temporary private accommodation (Riksrevisionen 2016; SMA 2013, 2017c). Apartment accommodation generally consists of ordinary apartments that the SMA rents from different property owners. Families are generally placed in such accommodation if apartments are available, but singles may also share rooms. Corridor accommodations are operated by the SMA and generally comprise a bed in a shared bedroom. The rooms are arranged along a corridor with a communal (kitchen) area where cooking is possible. Single asylum applicants are placed in these when they are available and apartment accommodation is not available. Temporary private accommodations are procured through contracts with external private contractors. These are generally hostels or hotels with freeboard or self-catering. Both singles and families can be placed in these if the first two options are not available.

The number of asylum seekers registered with the SMA fluctuates. However, in 2015, an all-time high of 160 000 new applicants was reached, primarily due to the civil war in Syria. The number of registered asylum seekers in asylum housing and their own living arrangements is illustrated in Figure 1. The all-time high is important to highlight in the context of accommodation. Due to the extreme increase in the number of new asylum applicants, the SMA became overburdened and entered a state of emergency (see Riksrevisionen 2016).



**Figure 1.** Enrolled asylum seekers divided per asylum accommodation and own living arrangements for the years 2000-2017. Please note that unaccompanied children and asylum seekers with special needs are not part of this compilation. Source: Swedish Migration Agency 2018.

The first action the SMA took was to densify all available apartment accommodations. An apartment with one room that previously had two beds got three. An apartment with two rooms that ordinarily had four beds got six. The same was the case for corridor and private accommodations, in which the square metres per person was lowered from five to three, generally resulting in an increase in the number of beds from four to six. This was not enough to accommodate all asylum seekers, and the SMA was temporarily forced to resort to extreme measures, such as municipal evacuation placements in schools and sports halls. In 2016, the number of applicants living in asylum housing dropped off sharply, and (most) contracts with privately operated accommodations were terminated.

## Methods

This article uses a range of sources – (un)published material from the SMA, interviews, and newspaper articles. The material was first combined and compiled using triangulation to map the governance of asylum accommodation. In a few cases, there were inconsistencies between sources that were resolved through additional discussion with the individuals involved or by omitting the information. Second, a qualitative analysis was conducted in which the material was coded, developed into themes and then categorised into overarching concepts.

The published and unpublished documents by the SMA regarding accommodation placement and policy consist of annual reports by the SMA (2010–2017) and the information available on the official Internet webpage [www.migrationsverket.se](http://www.migrationsverket.se) (accessed 2018–02–01 if not otherwise stated). The unpublished material was handed over by the SMA after an official request for the instructions for placement strategies in February 2018.

Interviews were conducted with 34 queer asylum seekers from across Sweden during 2016 and 2017. These participants were recruited in cooperation with an LGBTQ organisation (6 participants) and through social media (23 participants). Those interviewed were also asked to refer others who could be interviewed (5 participants). Among the participants, gender expression varied from normative to non-normative. Their mean age was 29 years old, ranging from 18 to 48. They came from countries in West Asia (24), North Africa (4), East Africa (3), West Africa (2) and South Asia (1). Most of the participants had a diploma from upper-secondary school (16) or higher education (10), but some had less schooling (8). The interviews were semi-structured migration accounts: asylum seekers were asked to narrate their migration trajectory from their country of origin to Sweden at the present moment. Specific follow-up questions were asked to map their housing trajectories.

Expert interviews were conducted with officials working at the SMA or SMA-contracted asylum accommodations and representatives of an LGBTQ organisation. These participants were recruited through convenience sampling: persons whose names were mentioned in the above-described interviews and news articles (see below) were asked to participate, as were those whose names were mentioned during volunteering in the local LGBTQ organisation. All interviews were semi-structured and organised based on a timeline of the development of accommodation policy and placement strategy.<sup>2</sup> All interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the author.

Finally, newspaper articles were used. These were collected by searching a media archive to collect all newspaper articles from the main Swedish media outlets

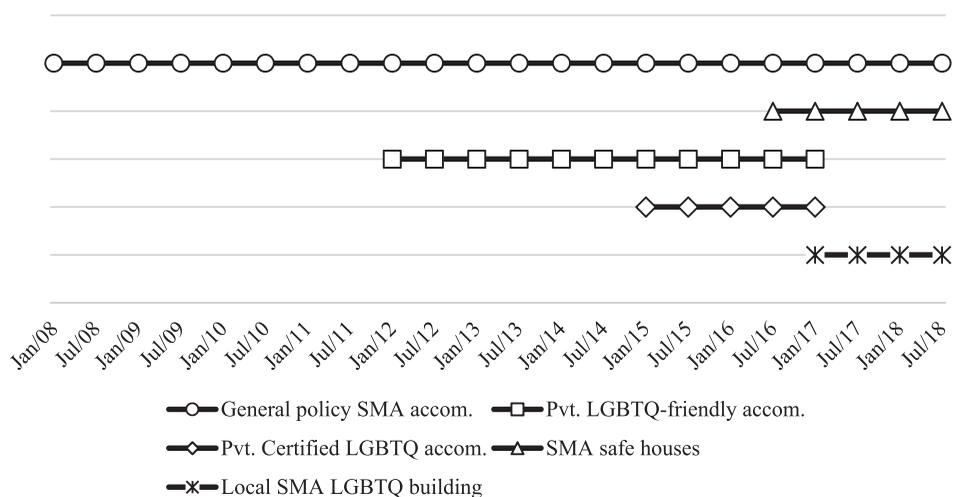
(Mediearkivet). The archive has articles from 1987 until today from 460 newspapers and magazines. The search was conducted at the beginning of January 2018 using two keyword combinations. One set of keywords related to sexuality (HBT, Homosexuell, homosexualitet) and the other to SMA housing (förläggning, asylboende, migrationsverket). A total of 335 articles were found, and all of these were scanned. One hundred duplicates were identified and removed. A total of 198 articles were deemed not relevant and removed. The remaining 37 articles were used. The first article was published in 2014, and the last article was published at the beginning of 2018. All transcripts used in the article were translated by the author. The research was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm (Dnr: 2016/1596-31).

## Results

The results are organised in two sections. In the first section, the governance of asylum accommodation over time is illustrated. Here, processes occurring at the institutional policy level and at local levels (the process level) in relation to the placement of queer refugees are discussed. Running through the analysis is a timeline that begins with the central placement policy that has been in use continuously since its implementation, see [Figure 2](#). In the second section, assumptions underlying the governance of asylum accommodation are discussed, as are the general consequences these have for queer asylum seekers.

### *Institutional placement policy and placement practice*

The foundational principle of the governance of SMA accommodation is to create housing solutions that are similar to the housing conditions found in society at large, which means ‘accommodations where individuals with different experiences and from different countries are mixed’ (SMA 2016b). According to the SMA (2016d, 2017c, 2017e, Interview A, C), the placement of asylum seekers is based on cis-gender, family status and, to a lesser degree, language region and country of origin. Families are always placed in their own



**Figure 2.** Placement of queer asylum seekers over time.



house was to be reserved for replacements and only secondarily for initial placements (SMA 2016b). The number of placements was initially 45 (SMA 2016b, Article, Q), but after 2017, only approximately 30 remained (SMA 2017d, Interview, A, C).

In response to the common occurrence of threats and violence towards queer asylum seekers, there have been (at least) three local-level solutions to finding safe housing for this group. In the wake of the refugee boom in 2015-2016, the SMA procured a large number of privately operated asylum accommodations to provide sufficient housing. In two of these, a large number of queer asylum seekers were placed. After the boom, the SMA terminated its contracts with private operators and focussed on accommodation solutions operated by the SMA (Article, P; Interview, C). Consequently, the contracts with the two private operators previously housing queer asylum seekers were terminated, and a local initiative at a local branch became a new solution for housing queer asylum seekers.

The first privately operated accommodation was located in a town in northern Sweden that the central booking team favoured for the placement or replacement of queer individuals. They started placing queer asylum seekers there in 2012 until the accommodations closed in 2017 (Interview, C). The operator himself stated that replacements of queer individuals started in 2015, and it is possible that queer asylum seekers were placed there before but without his knowledge (Interview, G). In the accommodation, the operator mixed asylum seekers in smaller housing units (Interview, G, H).

In June 2015, the SMA announced that the first LGBTQ-certified temporary private accommodation in a small rural town in central Sweden had opened (Article, I). This was not an SMA initiative but originated with the private operator. The LGBTQ certification was undertaken in cooperation with the national LGBTQ organisation and aimed at raising LGBTQ competence among the staff. The operator initially mixed asylum seekers regardless of sexual orientation and gender expression (Interview, B), but after many cases of threats and violence, they divided the accommodation into different parts, with one part reserved for queer asylum seekers, who had separate mealtimes.

After the privately operated solutions were closed down, a local initiative for placing queer asylum seekers in apartments in one building commenced (Interview, B, D, E, F). As the LGBTQ-certified accommodation discussed above was in the region of the local unit and the local unit could not accommodate all asylum seekers in safe houses, the idea of placing all queer asylum seekers in one apartment building emerged. In May 2017, it started to move queer asylum seekers to apartments in a small town in central Sweden. Word spread inside the SMA, and the central booking team also began placing queer asylum seekers there (Interview, B, C). In the next section, the assumptions underlying the governance of asylum accommodation are reported.

### *A housing policy giving primacy to heteronormativity*

Previous research has argued that migration policy is increasingly discussed in terms of a home in which refugees need to be domesticised and from which others, i.e. unwanted individuals, need to be kept out (Walters 2004). Darling (2011) states that one of the key ways that domestication operates is through the governance of asylum accommodation by constantly rendering refugees unsafe in their homes. Scholars of home have long argued that home is not a place of stability and security but rather a constantly

contested place (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Brickell 2012). In fact, creating and maintaining a home is often induced by forms of regulation and exclusion rendering some people unfit (Brickell 2012). Thus, for some, a home is association with the fear of expulsion and violence (Blunt and Varley 2004). Queer scholars argue that home has become 'synonymous with the heterosexual family and the ideal of family life' (Johnston and Valentine 1995, 99), making queer individuals unfit and leading to displacement (Tunåker 2015). The housing policy, which places cis-gender and family status at the forefront, and its maintenance can be considered to give primacy to heteronormativity in the asylum system. The consequence is that queer asylum seekers become outcasts.

In the material of this study, this was a recurring theme. There was a general recognition at all levels of the existence of homo- and transphobia in asylum accommodations, leading to threats, harassment and violence towards queer asylum seekers. This was evident in the interviews conducted with asylum seekers (the first incident was narrated in 2013), in news media (the first case was reported in 2014) and in interviews with the SMA and the LGBTQ organisation. In 2013, the SMA acknowledged the following:

We are aware that ongoing conflicts in the home country can follow one to Sweden and into the accommodation situation here. Homo- and transphobia is one example that also can take place in the accommodation. To the extent that we know all circumstances in your individual situation, we can try to arrange an accommodation that is as good as possible. (SMA 2013)

At some point in 2016, the SMA considered creating a distinct accommodation solution for queer asylum seekers due to pressure from the LGBTQ organisation and related incidents, but this idea was not carried out (Interview, A, C). Since then, the SMA has communicated that it intends to keep the (cis-gender and family status) housing policy and that no specific accommodation for queer asylum seekers, i.e. no LGBTQ accommodation, will be created (Interview, A):

[SMA official] We can't have special accommodation depending on if you are, for example, an LGBTQ person or a Christian. Article G

We don't want accommodations for specific groups divided by sexual orientation, ethnic background or religious orientation. We want the asylum accommodations to some extent reflect society in general, says [SMA official]. Article H

Although this finding is interesting and provides proof that the asylum system can be considered a heterosexual home, it is also remarkable from two angles. First, the assumption is that Swedish society is mixed. The assumption of mixing builds upon the idea that social and economic integration in society is achieved by mixing individuals from different classes and ethnicities in residential areas. Since the 1970s, the municipalities in Sweden have been required to build mixed residential areas to curb residential segregation (Holmqvist 2009). However, by now, many studies have shown that Swedish society is more socioeconomically and ethnically segregated (Andersson et al. 2018), and even sexually segregated (Wimark and Östh 2014), than mixed. Thus, if the SMA aimed to create accommodations reflecting society in general, this would require segregation in the asylum accommodations. Instead, it is likely that the mixing policy is part of an effort to domesticise asylum seekers in a 'good' society in which all citizens are willing to mix with each other.

Second, the SMA has a cis-gender- and nuclear family-based exemption to mixing. This heteronormative division, which does not recognise transgender asylum seekers, gives primacy to heteronormative over queer ways of life. If the SMA wished to create accommodations reflecting Swedish society at large, it should have looked for other divisions. The primacy of heterosexuals was recurrent in the material. For example, in placement practice, the placement staff would commonly relocate queer asylum seekers when they had been victims of homo- or transphobic assaults instead of relocating the (heterosexual) perpetrators. Commonly, this would be handled within the asylum accommodation unit (Interview, A, B, C), or asylum seekers would be moved to a different unit, as discussed in the interviews with queer asylum seekers and exemplified in media.

Many are harassed at the asylum accommodation and are very scared. [...] [Queer asylum seeker] was moved around between four different asylum accommodations but has his own apartment today. Article A

At times, victims would have to wait in the same accommodation over the weekend in the same room as the perpetrator. The material shows that transgender asylum seekers were perhaps the most affected by this practice. For example:

[Transgender asylum seeker] first lived in asylum housing in Gothenburg. First, they were placed with men only but then replaced in an accommodation for families. That was better, but they were still harassed by men. – People continued to harass and spit at me. That was really hard. Article B

Interviews (D, E) established that this was a challenge for the placement staff as they were supposed to assign placement according to cis-gender and did not know where to place transgender asylum seekers. In general, queer asylum seekers were encouraged by the SMA to report harassment to the police or contact the staff at the accommodation or local SMA if homo- and/or transphobia were experienced. The asylum seekers themselves confirmed in the interviews that they had been given the advice to contact the police if harassment occurred or to get in touch with the staff about homo- and transphobia. However, reporting did not necessarily mean a change would result; sometimes, queer asylum seekers were asked to endure. In one case, for example, an asylum seeker was told not to go to the police by the staff at the accommodation (Article, E), and other accommodation staff asked asylum seekers to tone down their sexuality (all these events were refuted by staff themselves):

This morning, we report the story that transgender people and homosexuals who have been harassed by other co-living asylum seekers in asylum housing in [town] are given the advice to tone down their sexual orientation. Article F

Interviews with the queer asylum seekers also provided examples of SMA placement staff or accommodation staff asking them to hide and blend in (and Interview, E), which is contradictory to the way they are expected to behave in the asylum process. Most often, they are expected to explore and live their sexual and gender identities in order to gain asylum (Akin 2017). Moreover, the interviews showed signs of how the accommodation became a subtle place of fear.

I was in a straight camp and I was afraid of staying there, because I heard of the treatment of gays in the camp. Many times I asked at the reception in the camp to put me alone in a room, but they told me it is crowded and no places. Tamam (queer asylum seeker)

In this section, I have illustrated how the SMA views and justifies its system as reflecting society in general. The idea is that treating asylum seekers similarly renders the SMA neutral. However, as I have shown, the governance of asylum accommodation has a heteronormative basis, where cis-gender and family formation are the key features that divide asylum seekers in the housing system. The justification of the system as neutral only obscures its heteronormative basis and creates suffering and insecurity among queer asylum seekers. Building upon the idea of domopolitics in asylum accommodations (Darling 2011), I argue that this situation implies that queer asylum seekers are constantly kept unsafe and taught that heteronormativity is the main basis of Swedish society.

### *The idea of the queer metropolis*

One of the most persistent geographical imaginaries is that cities harbour protection for disempowered individuals (Wilson 1992) and offer a liberating space for queer citizens. In the West, the ‘gay imaginary’ (Weston 1995) or ‘metronormative’ view (Halberstam 2005) provides the understanding that larger cities have become equated with sexual liberty and identity development, while smaller cities and towns are considered normative places of loneliness for queer citizens. Research has been pivotal in questioning this dichotomous view, showing examples of queer citizens and queer communities in rural places and spaces (e.g. see Annes and Redlin 2012; Phillips, Watt, and Shuttleton 2000), even, recently, in Sweden (Liliequist and Olovsson 2019).

In the regulatory documents, a distinct perception of the geographical needs of queer asylum seekers is present. Queer asylum seekers should be placed such that they have ‘access to networks and public transport’, and placements considered ‘good’ are ‘placements that are centrally located’ (SMA 2016b). Moreover, as the general policy was expanded to accommodate individuals with ‘special needs’, it was also determined that these locations would be present only in the three largest cities in Sweden, i.e. in metropolitan areas. In a regulatory document, it was stated that ‘organisations and networks are generally not present in locations where our accommodations are placed’ and that safe houses (Trygghetsboenden) should be procured in the metropolitan cities of Malmö, Göteborg and Stockholm. The media articles also support the perception of metropolitan areas as superior places for queer asylum seekers. In 2016, for example, the SMA made several public statements on the matter. The SMA process owner for asylum accommodations claimed that the SMA was creating better routines for the ‘replacements of asylum seeking LGBTQ individuals to accommodations closer to metropolitan cities where [the LGBTQ organisation] is present’ (Article, C) and that ‘it is in the metropolitan cities where the wider social networks are present for minorities’ (Article, K). Another SMA official, similarly, claimed that ‘networks are present in a completely different manner in the metropolitan cities for affected [queer] people’ (Article, Q).

The assumption that networks valuable to queer asylum seekers are not present in places outside the metropolis is consistent with the metronormative view. However, by now, there is vast research showing that queer networks are present in many places other than larger cities, e.g. many smaller cities and towns in Sweden now have their own pride festivals (Liliequist and Olovsson 2019). Networks have

also been created in many spaces, making a rural-urban, or in this case non-metropolitan-metropolitan, distinction insignificant. Social media represents one of these spaces that has been shown to be meaningful for the networking of queer migrants (Dhoest 2019). One of the most common ways to create networks discussed by the interviewees was also through internet-based applications. Although this situation is by no means unproblematic as sexual favours can be expected in return for friendship and assistance (Wimark 2019), queer people could connect with each other over large distances:

I have friends I found on [social media], I tell you, I have friends. It's about three years now since I met a friend, he lives in Stockholm, with his Swedish partner. And I found another friend, he has been my friend for a long time. He is gay too, and he lives in [rural town], and he is an asylum seeker too. I found them on applications. I found another one, he is in Stockholm [...] Actually, I have found lots of friends here, also lots of [country] friends. Mårten (queer asylum seeker)

Moreover, the assumption is contradictory to the placement practice within the SMA. When the SMA gave directions to open safe houses, they aimed for 45 places in the metropolises. However, when they opened, only 15 were in Stockholm, and the rest were in two smaller towns. The organisation of the safe houses also created barriers. To be placed in the safe houses, asylum seekers needed to actively request to be placed there and had to be interviewed as part of the appeal (SMA 2016c, Interview, B, D, F). The low number of placements made it difficult for queer asylum seekers to get accommodations in a safe house (Article, P). The instruction for safe houses also stated that places in safe houses should be reserved for replacements and only secondarily be used for new placements (SMA 2016b). Thus, in essence, most queer asylum seekers were not placed in metropolitan cities.

The notion of equating being queer with the need to live in a metropolis was a recurrent theme in the interviews with the queer asylum seekers but by far not the only theme. For some, the idea of living in the metropolis was related to discomfort and stress, as the following quotations exemplify:

I live in a quiet area. I have my aunt that lives in [larger city]. So we went there last summer. And it was chaos there, cars, and I couldn't sleep. I couldn't cope because, around nine, maximum at ten, it goes quiet here, that makes me sleep nicely. But there at twelve, one, two o'clock people are on their way still and cars all night. No, I didn't like it. I stayed perhaps two days, and then came back here, I came back here to [rural town], lovely. Tahir (queer asylum seeker)

I lived in my apartment, I lived alone, but now I am living with people. It is very hard if you want to meet someone. [...] And it is a lot of stress here. Every day, running for the bus, running for the subway. And that is very hard for me. I liked [rural town] much better than Stockholm. Jabril (queer asylum seeker)

In this section, I argued that a metronormative view exists in the governance of asylum accommodations such that metropolitan cities are considered superior for queer asylum seekers. However, I have shown that in the governance of the asylum accommodation system, refugees are led away from the metropolises. This is not necessarily negative, as some queer asylum seekers also find ways of connecting with others in smaller cities and towns around Sweden and not only in the metropolis.

### *To adjust but not to challenge the heteronormative society*

Some argue that Swedes consider themselves part of a moral super power (e.g. see Pred 2000). This aligns well with the desire to rescue refugees from war and persecution. Much research discusses the desire to rescue queer asylum seekers from 'repressive' regimes in light of Puar's (2007) concept of 'homonationalism', signifying a tendency among Western citizens to consider themselves advanced with respect to LGBT politics. However, although previous research indicates that queer asylum seekers are highly diverse and express sexuality and gender in many ways, they are only accepted in the asylum system if they adhere to the Western concept of LGBT identities (Akin 2017). This means that queer asylum seekers have to adjust to the system.

In the research material, this was visible not only through the ways that queer asylum seekers needed to adjust but also through how placement staff sought to adjust accommodations to fit the needs of queer asylum seekers and to educate staff on how to treat them. As shown above, queer asylum seekers were continuously moved around in the system. Instead of challenging the heteronormativity permeating the system and accommodations, the SMA focussed on how to treat queer asylum seekers. A telling example of this is when the first LGBTQ-certified temporary private accommodation opened. The LGBTQ certification was conducted in cooperation with the national LGBTQ organisation and aimed at raising LGBTQ competence among the *staff*, not the asylum seekers living there. The training included norm-critical pedagogy and methods for making the environment more LGBTQ-friendly. The operator raised a large rainbow flag at the entrance to the accommodation (Article, J). Almost immediately after the announcement, the news media reported that the other refugees rejected the initiative:

A large group of people does not think it is ok [to be gay] and many heavy discussions have arisen, says the operation manager [name]. Article L

Many times, the situations escalated: asylum seekers tore down the rainbow flag (Article, M), started a fire (Article, N) and participated in a group beating of a queer asylum seeker (Article, O, Interview, F). The queer asylum seekers with experience living there narrated extensive homo- and transphobia and cases of threats and violence (also Interview, B, D, F, B). Instead of actively working to address the heteronorms permeating the asylum accommodation, placement staff considered the problem to be the mixing of asylum seekers regardless of sexual orientation and gender expression (Interview, B). The solution was to divide the accommodations into different parts such that one part was reserved for *LGBT* asylum seekers and to establish separate mealtimes and communal areas, such as the gym (Interview, F). In the interviews, the asylum seekers who had experience living there also reported that their placement staff had (mistakenly) told them that the accommodation was for *LGBT* asylum seekers only (confirmed in Interview, F).

The example is telling in two regards. First, the changes are directed toward the staff and queer asylum seekers but never to the majority population in the asylum accommodations – the heterosexual asylum seekers. This means that heterosexuality is never challenged, and queer asylum seekers are rendered others in the accommodation. Second, the practice shows that the needs of queer asylum seekers are associated with a specific repertoire of actions. For example, raising the flag and creating an 'LGBT' section signifies a Western concept of LGBT politics in which a proud identity should be proclaimed.

Among the queer asylum seekers, the idea of being proud of their sexual orientation or gender identity was far from the most persistent narrative as described in the following example:

We are here now [in the LGBT section], and now they all know that we are LGBT people, you know, flag, flag, flag, flag. Nano (queer asylum seeker)

I did not have contact with [LGBTQ organization] then. I didn't want to have contact with anyone [queer], I didn't want to speak about my sexuality. [...] I was ashamed. Björn (queer asylum seeker)

The final quotation illustrates a common way for marginalised refugees to deal with their identities in the refugee system – non-disclosure (Bögner, Brewin, and Herlihy 2010). The governance of the asylum accommodation system is, however, inconsistent, and there are examples of more nuanced ways of governing that align better with queer asylum seekers' coping strategies. The operator of the LGBTQ-'friendly' asylum accommodation, for example, applied a tactic contrary to that described above. He arranged an office for the local LGBTQ organisation on the grounds (Interview, G, H). Instead of raising a rainbow flag on the premises, the office of the organisation was placed next to the office of the main manager to make it easier for non-open queer asylum seekers to pretend they were just going to see the manager (Interview, G, H). Moreover, if there were cases of violence, they would be solved by dealing with the *perpetrator*, through talks and replacements (Interview, C, G, H). In all material, this was the only asylum accommodation where a queer asylum seeker spoke about being open about his sexual orientation without repercussions from other asylum seekers as follows:

It was not an easy period in the asylum camp, but I told all straight people there that I am gay and I did not have any problem from that. [...] I had a really good connection with the families and straight people there. We spent a lot of time together. Houman (queer asylum seeker)

In this section, I have argued that the governance of asylum accommodation is permeated by the idea of saving queer asylum seekers that are part of an LGBT politics in which queer asylum seekers are reduced to a specific way of being and acting. In this governance, staff need to be educated to treat queer asylum seekers in the 'correct' manner, and queer asylum seekers need to adjust to the way of being and acting LGBT in Sweden. The overall asylum accommodation system, with its wide range of regular refugees and in which heterosexuality is the norm, however, does not seem to be challenged.

## Conclusion

Dispersal policies for refugees are becoming an increasingly discussed theme in many countries. As the geographically uneven reception of refugees continues, both between and within countries, new placement policies are called for. In these appeals for change, refugees are often seen monolithically, and queer asylum seekers are overlooked. Likewise, available research highlighting dispersal policies often fails to consider differences between refugee groups. As recent research has stressed, queer asylum seekers in the asylum system are under pressure from multiple sides, ranging from the state defining their sexual and gender identities (Akin 2017; Dhoest 2019) to ethnic and queer communities trying to

make them intelligible (Wimark 2019). However, we know very little of how dispersal policies affect them. In this article, the aim has been to explore how queer asylum seekers are governed in the asylum accommodation system.

The mapping shows that the response from the SMA to the need for housing for queer asylum seekers has been additive rather than systemic. The dispersal of queer asylum seekers across asylum accommodations has mainly been governed by a general cis-gender and family policy. Over time, the policy has persisted without any universal attempts to change it to accommodate the needs of queer asylum seekers. Instead of evaluating and rethinking the accommodation policy at the institutional level, new (temporary) solutions involving shelter deemed safe have been added to the accommodation palette – safe houses, LGBTQ-‘friendly’/certified accommodations, and the placement of queer asylum seekers in one building. The additive solutions to the systemic problem have given rise to an experimental process that seems to give only temporary relief to queer asylum seekers in the asylum system, while the systemic problem is reproduced with every new applicant.

Moreover, the analysis indicates that there are three overarching themes running through the governance of asylum accommodation. First, asylum accommodations give primacy to heteronormativity such that gender is binary, and the nuclear family is based on children. This has the consequence that queer asylum seekers become the victims of widespread homo- and transphobic harassment and violence. Second, the accommodation policy contains an assumption of queer asylum seekers being oriented toward metropolitan cities. However, in the governance of accommodations, queer refugees are instead directed away from metropolises. Third, the governance of accommodations is directed towards changing the staff to become more LGBTQ-‘friendly’ rather than changing the overall underlying heteronormative basis. This has the effect that heterosexuality is never challenged in asylum accommodations, and queer asylum seekers are rendered unfit and must cope and endure.

The results make sense from a domopolitical lens (Darling 2011; Walters 2004). When considering the asylum accommodation system as part of domopolitics, it plays a role in socially domesticising refugees. The domestication of queer asylum seekers occurs implicitly in the way that the SMA reacts to issues of homo- and transphobia. By claiming that all refugees are treated as equals and denying queer asylum seekers safety, the SMA creates a constant state of insecurity. Through this lens, queer asylum seekers are left in homes where there is a constant potential of suffering from homo- and transphobic-induced threats and violence. Instead of creating stable and secure solutions, the SMA has kept queer asylum seekers in a system where they are forced to adhere to the heteronormative expectations of society and fellow refugees. This creates a paradox, since queer asylum seekers are expected to adjust and proclaim their sexuality and gender identity in order to obtain refuge (Akin 2017; Dhoest 2019) but must also hide them to survive in the asylum system. Thus, the overall asylum process is domesticising them in Swedish heteronormative society, where they are accepted as LGBT individuals but taught not to stand out or claim further rights. This finding resonates with previous explorations showing not only that the state uses housing policies to govern sexuality but also that sexuality becomes conflated with the nation and race (e.g. Oswin 2010; Oswin and Olund 2010).

This is not to deny that queer asylum seekers, as an ‘invented’ group, are as diverse as other refugee categories, and essentialising them into an always-existing vulnerable

category might aid many but silence others within the group (c.f. Carpenter 2005). Undeniably, the asylum system is fraught with expectations and requirements that lead asylum seekers to adjust their narratives to conform to expectations regardless of the ‘truth’ of their sexual desires as suggested by Bohmer and Shuman (2017). Thus, a solution that treats all queer asylum seekers monolithically could be difficult, as some queer asylum seekers are perhaps not queer.

## Notes

1. The use of queer asylum seekers in this article refers to both individuals seeking asylum based on their sexual orientation or gender identity and individuals in the asylum system that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) but have other asylum claims. In other parts of the article, the terms LGBT and LGBTQ are used to reflect documents in which the terms are used. These terms should not be considered synonymous. LGBT represents a specific set of sexual and gender identity politics typically based on a Western concept in which the act of coming out and proclaiming one’s identity is essential. The addition of Q signifies that individuals can identify as queer or reject categorizations in general.
2. One interview was conducted during fieldwork and was not recorded but was summarised afterwards and sent to the informant for confirmation.
3. Henceforth referred to as placement staff.

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