Iranian Queer Refugees’ Thoughts about Home
Five Queer/Gay Men Interviewed about Their Sense of Belonging After Emigration

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Iran is a dangerous place for sexual minorities and transgender people to live in. Homosexuality is criminalized in the country and LGBTQ people face discrimination from the society and the state. Therefore, the only choice for Iranian LGBTQ people often is to flee and to become a refugee. The research question of this thesis is how do Iranian queer/gay refugee men living in Toronto, Canada view home, belonging and identity after emigration to Canada? The thesis is based on in-depth interviews as well as academic literature and Internet sources. The Iranian queer refugee perspective on home and belonging underline the importance of freedom. Freedom in Canada makes feeling at home possible for the Iranian Canadian queer/gay interviewees because of the human rights and laws that protect LGBTQ people. In turn, the former homeland is a place of no return and alienation due to the discriminatory and oppressive policies, while members of the Iranian diaspora in Toronto are avoided as they represent this discrimination. My empirical results suggest that migration and the experiences of injustice or acceptance along the way transformed the view of home, belonging and identity for the interviewees because, as I argue, the new country and domicile made it possible for them to be themselves.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Intro

Migrations across the globe are happening on a large scale and varying widely. Certain countries get and accept more immigration, while others experience emigration and phenomena such as brain drain linked to it. People migrate due to both economic and social pull factors. The social causes include religious, ethnic and political persecution and oppression for one’s sexual orientation and identity – the focus of this thesis. The UN’s Refugee Agency\(^1\) (UNHCR) estimates that globally there are 65.3 million forcibly displaced people of which 21.3 million are refugees. The question where do these people feel they belong interests me and is the reason for conducting this study. In this study I observe through interviewing the feelings of home and belonging of Iranian gay to queer male refugees.

Iran is a non-Arab, country in the Middle East with Farsi/Persian as the dominant and official language. Persians form the majority of the population, but the country has numerous and large ethnic minorities such as Azerbaijanis, Kurds and Arabs with theirs own languages. Iran has been relatively stable in difference to the surrounding countries that have experienced major unrests. In fact, Iran has the fourth largest number of hosted refugees in the world, 979,400 (UNHCR).

Iran has been socially conservative since the Islamic revolution of 1979. The worrisome human rights situation in the country has perhaps caught less attention due to the turbulence in the region. The strict interpretation of Sharia law and the conservative view on gender and sexuality have resulted in poor women’s rights and non-existent LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) rights. Other sexual identities than heterosexual are not recognized and particular hostility has been put towards gay men and lesbians.

According to Islamic Penal Code of Iran same-sex sexual intercourse is punishable with death penalty or lashes depending on the circumstances (IHRDC, 2013) and other same-sex expression with lashes or prison (ISHR). In addition to the official judgement, the attitude of the society is often harsh and homosexuals face discrimination and vilification. The Iranian state does acknowledge transgender people, as born in a wrong body and does at least partly support sex reassignment operation for them. The state support is based on the exclusive acceptance of heterosexual relations: the operation is seen to lead transgender people into heterosexual relations

\(^{1}\) UNHCR Figures at a Glance <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.
and into binary gender categories. However, even after the operation transgender people face widespread discrimination and harassment. There is also evidence of forcing the operation on gay men.

These reasons explain why so many Iranian LGBTQ people have chosen that there is no other way than becoming a refugee in a LGBTQ rights supportive country. Most Iranian queer refugees leave the country to the neighbouring Turkey. There they apply for an asylum in the UNHCR’s office in Ankara. For many also the time in Turkey is a struggle due to distress, uncertainty and the lack of support but also because of a similar, conservative atmosphere as in Iran. The Turkish placement policy of concentrating queer refugees in small or and conservative cities makes the situation worse.

Asylum process in Turkey takes often almost two years, after which the gay or queer refugees studied in this thesis landed to Canada, one of the leading countries in the world in respect of LGBTQ rights. Integration into the new society does not happen automatically and might be complicated by an unwelcoming attitude of natives. Being born into a society that has criminalized one’s sexual identity and being migrated to another, that cherishes it among other identities, how does a person identify oneself? Where does one feel at home?

1.2. Research Question

The research question of this thesis is what gay/ queer Iranian refugee men immigrated to Toronto, Canada, articulate about feelings concerning home, belonging and identity. How were the experiences during and before the emigration and how do they after all the hardships identify themselves, view their communities (belonging) and locate home? Has there been a revaluation of home and identity as a consequence of all the experiences, treatment and regulations throughout their migration (persecution and discrimination in Iran, being a refugee in Turkey, emigration to Canada and living in Toronto)? Thesis is based on in-depth interviews as well academic literature and Internet sources, with which material I explore the background and results of the emigration.

I got into the subject almost by coincidence. I did my internship in the Finnish Defence Attaché’s Office in the Embassy of Finland in the Turkish capital Ankara. There, I became acquainted with some Iranian queer refugees and had many conversations about their situation, which seemed difficult. Later on, several months after the internship I started thinking about the subject of my master’s thesis and talked with my contact in Toronto about the possibility of doing it on the situation of LGBTQ Iranian refugees. He seemed interested and eventually the plans were finalized when my contact agreed to organize meetings with potential interviewees in the city.
The question that most interests me in the situation of Iranian queer refugees is, where do they understand they belong: where do they locate their home and where do they anchor their identity after the discrimination and possibly traumatic experiences suffered in their native country. As Binnie (2004: 94) underlines, the “area of international migration of sexual dissidents brings to the fore the questions of national identity, citizenship and belonging.” The legal regulation of homosexual sex acts is “perhaps the clearest example of how the nation constitutes the experience of sexuality for its queer citizens” (Binnie, 2004; Gorman-Murray, 2015: 761). According to Binnie the distinctions between country of origin and host country may become central to the management and formation of identity. What is the limit to restricting and limiting your rights and living and what consequences this might have to your views and belonging? The contrast between Canadian and Iranian states in this is stark. I wanted to find out how the refugees’ feelings towards Iran had evolved during the refugee process. What had been the limit of restricting and suppressing their rights of living and what consequences this might have had on their views and sense of belonging? How was their new life in Canada, in Torontonian LGBTQ community and as past of Iranian diaspora?

I use queer theoretical framework in this research. Academic queer studies, especially in the disciplines of queer geography and queer migration, are extensively used throughout this thesis to support my own argumentation and contemplating. Exploring the academic discussion on the area of my research questions is also a major part of the thesis.

The academic discussions about queer sense of home, has mostly been focused on rural-urban internal migration. Previous research done on Iranian queer refugees has to my knowledge mostly treated their situation in the main transit country Turkey, except for example Rusi Jaspal’s (2014) similar research on gay Iranian migrants to the UK. My research is as well more based on the interviewees’ experiences and views after the migration, after all the regulations and procedures and experiences along the way. I focus on queer migrations on a more global context.

All of interviewees in this thesis are men who identify themselves as gay or queer. I focus on their views but also try to take into account the wider context of LGBTQ people in general. LGBTQ people often have to struggle with their sexuality even in countries seemingly open and supportive of LGBTQ rights due to the still prevailing prejudices and homophobia. Therefore, I find it important and potentially revealing to study queer people staying in a country where the prime minister participates in the gay pride, but coming from a country lacking all the laws to their protection and actively persecuting them. It is interesting how people eventually locate their sense
of home and identifies themselves with different, often conflicting, intersecting identities. Queer understanding of home in itself is a ground of conflicting tensions.

The experiences as a refugee or eventually an immigrant in a foreign country have implications on one’s identity. Experiences in the new country determine how one settles down and begins to feel “at home.” In the case of “sexual dissidents” sexual experiences, incidents and feelings in the new country as well as along the road are especially important. The experiences of LGBTQ migrants in the transit countries are often overlooked or simply not well known. The feeling of alienation seem to have often been strong, as felt by most of the interviewees at some point of their journey.

Gorman-Murray (2007: 105-106) underlines that “the nature of queer migration—individual migrants’ motivations and destinations, and paths, patterns and scales of relocation—remains little studied and inadequately conceptualized.” The Iranian queer refugee perspective studied in this thesis brings new insight into our understanding of the life of gay and queer men amid the horrid LGBT situation in Iran, the life on the road as a queer male refugee and the life as queer or homosexual immigrant in an officially tolerant society through the concept of “home.”

1.3. Methodology

The main material of my thesis is a set of five interviews conducted in Toronto, Canada. Along this new material specifically collected for the thesis I use previous academic research on identity, home and the sense of belonging of LGBTQ refugees. The five in-depth interviews conducted were semi-structured. Each had 49 questions, of which the first nine questions in the beginning formed basic information section to which the interviewees wrote their answers themselves. The later ones were asked by me or by the interpreter who accompanied me through the interviews and provided assistance if needed. He was also himself one of the interviewees and I interviewed him last.

The interviewees were gathered using non-probability snowball sampling. All of them identified themselves as men and either homosexual or queer (one). I had hoped to get wider LGBTQ sampling because previous research on LGBTQ Iranians mostly concerns gay men. This would have given wider perspective on my research questions and it would have been interesting to analyse and compare the results between different identity groups under the umbrella term. However, a master’s thesis is also rather limited in length and eventually it was quite a bit easier to focus on one group, while contextualising it to the wider LGBTQ frame.

My use of the concept “queer” is based on the fact that not all of my interviewees identified themselves as homosexual, and in the academic use “queer” can include every sexual category while also challenging their naturalness and stability. However, I try to keep as clear as possible,
whose ideas and point of view I am voicing at any given time and how the speaker/speakers identify themselves.

Essential in this thesis is that the interview material is strictly confidential and that the interviewees have complete anonymity. These two facts were mentioned in the beginning of each interview and every interviewee gave verbal consent for the interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards and these materials will eventually be destroyed.

I also have to highlight that even though I’m writing this thesis with an aim to be unbiased, I am also a gay man and even though I could be therefore potentially biased, the goal is to be objective and avoid making assumptions and unnecessary generalizations.

The interviews went quite well even though I perhaps followed the structure too obediently and might have asked too few additional questions. The pace of the interview was rather good as well but I often forgot to ask further questions when there was an interesting answer and thought it as too late to ask when we had already proceeded to the following questions. Sometimes it felt necessary and sensitive not to ask additional questions, since certain questions were clearly difficult for some of the interviewees to answer.

There were few things that I would have wanted to modify in the interview. I hope I had had more questions on the home section, of which the interviewees seemed most excited about. Furthermore, I should have altered the order and perhaps the contents of some questions of the section, because the interviewees got clearly confused by the consecutive questions ‘How do you understand the concept of home?’ and ‘Can you describe your home?’

All in all, all of the interviews had good atmosphere and were quite relaxed, even though the topic was sensitive and the answers were not always the most cheerful ones. I was really happy with the answers and positively surprised of how openly the interviewees talked about their experiences and voiced their opinions. The interviews provided really good material to work on and to analyse in the thesis. The amount of “just” five interviews might be considered as a weakness but I argue that I got really deep with the semi-structured, in depth interviews, completed with a few extra questions.

The opportunity to do the interviews on the spot in Toronto, being physically present in the situation, was crucial for this Master’s Thesis. I got to get to know my interviewees a bit and chat about many things related or unrelated to the topic. This created a mutually sympathetic atmosphere and encouraged both my sensitivity and the interviewees’ confidence in my reliability. The interviews were conducted separately in the interviewee’s apartments, except for one interview that
I conducted in my hotel room. The private setting probably contributed to the interviewees’ conceptualization of “home” and sense of belonging.

1.4. Interviewees

The interviewees have been given pseudo names of given male names that were popular in Canada in 2016 (Khoo, 2016). These names, Nathan, Liam, Mason, Aiden and Owen were selected randomly and there is no special meaning behind. The interviewees were all Persian, and their native language was Farsi. All had grown up and lived in big cities, provincial cities or the Iranian capital Tehran (Nathan in Kermanshah and Tehran, Liam in Shiraz, Mason in Bandar Abbas and Shiraz, Aiden and Owen in Tehran).

The average age was 29.6: Liam 28, Nathan 37, Owen 24, Aiden 29, and Mason 30, thus 29.6≈30. All of the interviewees identified their gender as male. Four marked their sexual identity to be gay/homosexual, while Owen identified his sexuality as queer. None of the interviewees were religious. They were either secular (Nathan and Liam), not religious (Mason and Aiden) or atheist (Owen). Most of the interviewees defined their ‘current marital status’ as single, except for one who was (in a relationship and) living with someone. No one was divorced or had been in a traditional marriage. Mason had been living in Canada for 8 years, Aiden for 4 years, Nathan for 3 years, and Liam and Owen for less than a year.

All of them had graduated at least from high school marking their highest achieved education as high school, high school/pre-university, university/Bachelor’s, electrical engineering and Master’s Degree. The social background of the interviewees differed maybe the most. Except for a one with a working-class background, all belonged to middle-class. One belonged to upper middle-class, one to lower middle-class, while two said that there is just middle-class in Iran, nothing lower or upper, and they belonged to that.

Another possible tool for defining the background of the interviewees could have been their social status, a concept strongly, though not necessarily exclusively dependant on the socioeconomic background. I didn’t go deep into the subject, but for example Merabet (2014) has highlighted the importance of social status in Lebanon. According to him (2014: 14) “social status or more correctly just benevolent or tolerant peers can either limit or enhance the “opening of the closet.”” Writing about an interviewee, Merabet (2014: 15) argues, “the awareness of his social class made it psychologically difficult for him to bond with some of the men of his age, whose local background he considered inferior.” Higher social status also usually enables better educational opportunities. Yip & Khalid (2010: 89) underline that “crucial piece of our findings that speaks to the theme of
transcending structural constraints is the significance of intellectual capital, closely associated with class.”

Four of the interviewees had emigrated during their adulthood and had been either working or studying in Iran.

Aiden: “I used to work as a hairstylist.”

Liam: “I was working at a private company. My positions was that in advertising and selling department and the company was working in a electronic systems and home security.”

Two interviewees had been students. Owen had emigrated when he was ten years old:

“So I left really early. As a child, so I was a student. But I also worked in some stores in Iran. Like part-time jobs and stuff.”

Two of the interviewees said their families were traditional, though not religious.

Researcher: “Could you tell me a bit about your family, was it big or traditional and were you close?”

Mason: “Hmm. Religious no but traditional yes. Not a very advanced family but we, me and my younger sister lived with my mom. But we were bigger family, my dad and one more sister. (Two sisters and I so we were five?).”

Nathan (through the interpreter): “Ok, so, his parent were quite open-minded, like compared to their generation, or like their family or friends around them, but they still had the, the traditional way of relationships and everything.”

Mason had told his family that he was gay at the age of sixteen. Nathan had told his family only at the time he left Iran. Both were still in contact with their families, Mason with his mom and Nathan with some of his family members, but not all.

One of the interviewees came from a religious, but in his words not that traditional family.

Liam: “Ah, I have one brother and two sisters, and my father and mother. And they are not that traditional but ah, mostly religious, so, and I was, I wasn’t close with all of them, and the closest person in my family was my mother and my younger sister.”

He had not come out to his family, with who he was still in contact.

Two of the interviewees came from families that they described as untraditional and close.

Owen: “We were close; it’s not a traditional family at all. And it’s not big either, like the structure is kinda like really detached, like... There are all these family members but there’s like, not a like chain you know?”

Researcher: “Is it because of the distance and?”

Owen: “I don’t it’s because my mom and dad they separated like since I was really young like three or four, like as far as I remember. So I never like, had this vision of how family is, like how many member you know what I mean?”
Researcher: “Yeah like core [nuclear] family?”

Owen: “Yeah. It was more like detached but still there was like really strong bonds with all the members.”

He hadn’t told his family that he was gay and was in contact with them only occasionally.

Aiden had come out to his mom only after she had told him that she knew about it:

“But after my father passed away, like one year later my mom talked to me that I know that something wrong with you. And she talked to me like one hour and I got that she knows that I’m gay. I just you know accept that her and he got so angry and ... That’s all. But we were close. She, she rejected me at first, but she is ok with me now.”

He told that they talked everyday with his mom and that his family are not traditional.

The interviewees had started to acknowledge their own sexuality in the childhood or in their early teens. Most of them saw the self-acknowledgement as a process. Liam, Mason and Owen place the beginning of their realization in the childhood. Owen mentioned it more as a process than sudden acknowledgement.

Owen: “I don’t really know how to like, explain it, but there, there wasn’t really any acknowledgement. Like, it was like very natural. Like just overflowing you know? Like since I was a child. Like, it happened from a very young age I noticed that I was very attracted to male more than female. But I also got this letter form the government that I could start to study at the age of three, because like my mind was hyperactive and like... So my mom took me too the therapist and the guy said like he already knows about the sexual stuff and like, he knows what’s up. You know? So I was totally like aware of the difference of like, I was also very attracted to the women’s body. But, if there was like an specific event, like the first time I was like, consciously like in attraction with a guy, it was like, like my legal age when I was 18 or 17.”

Aiden and Nathan told that their self-acknowledgement had been in their teens.

Aiden: ”I think, when I was thirteen. You know, I am experienced now, I know a lot and you know when I go back [in time] I see that and for example in movies, I loved guys, everything (laugh)... You know and then, but when I was thirteen or fourteen, I could understand everything and when I was fifteen I had my first date. But yeah, took one year to find what’s the gay but the sexuality and everything, all the gay people...”

Nathan: “Like when I was fourteen.”

Four of the interviewees (Nathan, Liam, Aiden, Owen) had told at least something about their sexuality to at least some of their friends and it seemed to have gone rather well with most of them.

Owen: “No I didn’t [tell], well for some of my friends I did, but, no not really. Like I didn’t have ‘a coming-out.’”

Interestingly Mason told he was being labelled as mostly transsexual, as the Iranian state does not acknowledge homosexual identity.
Mason: “Ah, I was sixteen, and I told my mom, using ah counsellor, so basically my counsellor talked to my mom but she told my mom more about trans sexuality than homosexuality.”

In this case the official line seems to have been to avoid speaking about homosexuality and instead equate the same sex desire being transsexual.

Aiden saw the lack of information as a major obstacle to the average people’s acceptance to LGBTQ people.

Researcher: “And in your opinion, how does the average Iranian view the LGBT people?”

Aiden: “Mostly they don’t know about that. I didn’t talk to, you know a lot of people about that but my family, like, my uncles, my aunts or my cousins know about me now. They’re ok. You know I think about it depends on person. How strong are you or how you describe being gay, I tried my best and they were ok with me. They are ok, now. But if I want, if I wanted to average people, to middle-class people... They don’t know a lot, because they don’t have the opportunity to know. That’s why.”

Mason underlined the importance of knowledge as well, though he thought that there were people informed about homosexuality.

Mason: “That’s a really tough question. Because I had straight friends... And ah, from my personal experience I have all my problems from government. More than I can find example from people. I think, I would say their view is growing, and they had knowledge when I was in Iran, I had friends who had knowledge about it too, so.”

Nathan and Liam thought that homosexuality was slowly becoming more accepted among the young people.

Liam: “I think in my opinion that in younger generation ah people can accept it and they have ah good view. But it’s still I can’t say, most of people in Iran like, more than half or like seventy per cent they have bad view like, they don’t like it or. They can’t just accept it.”

One had been away for so long that he didn’t think he could answer the question.

Owen: “I don’t know if I can like, answer that, like, like any accurate, you know, because I haven’t been in touch with the community for so long. But like, I don’t know, it’s not like really... I’m sure it’s not willing, the view.”

1.5. Structure

This thesis is divided into seven main chapters with related subheadings. Interview paper with all the questions can be found from the last three pages. Introduction from Intro to presenting the Structure will present and display the aims and background of this thesis. The Research Question underlines the core idea researched and interest behind, while Methodology part analyses the interview process and Interviewees presents the interviewees researched and their background.
The theory part will focus on the theoretical writings and discussions, which will help in argumentation and forms major part of the thesis. Theoretical key areas are Queer, Identity and Home, which will support the analysing of the interview materials in the following chapter.

Background to the Refugee Process will focus on the interviewees and I will analyse the answers and add related academic discussion to support the chapter discussed with information. Situation in Iran aims to grasp the situation there for LGBTQs and add interviewees’ views to the discussion and has Public Harassment and The Decision to Leave and Possibility of Return subheadings. Queer(s) Religion focuses on Islam’s different interpretations on homosexuality and interviewees opinions. Turkey as Transit Country for Iranian LGBTQs is finding out what are the circumstances in Turkey for queer refugees, while Asylum, Canada is finding out whether the interviewees have started to feel at home in their new country and about their views for example on belonging.

Home & Belonging go further to the discussions on queer feelings on home and belonging and adds interviewees’ opinions and feelings about how they feel of and understand home and of their attachments to the communities in Toronto with support of related research and literature. The Multiple Identities go into academic discussions around different identities especially among immigrants and adds how my interviewees self-identify.

The Conclusions will be more of my own discussion on and around all the matters gone through and summing up all the main points and answering to the research question. The sources from books and articles can be found from Bibliography, while Internet Sources are listed after and finally the Interview Paper with all the questions interviewed in the last three pages.
2. Theory

2.1. Queer

As a researcher I locate this thesis on the field of queer studies. Originally, the word queer was used to describe something strange or unusual and it has been used in derogatory way. Today it is often used as an umbrella term for sexual (lesbian, gay, bi) as well as gender (transgender) minorities. Queer is used in alleviating fixed identities and Halperin (1995: 62) crystallizes it being “an identity without an essence.” Gorman-Murray & McKinnon (2015: 759) underline that “queer can be defined as a process which highlights fluidity and complexity and which specifically disrupts sexual and gender identity labels” and that to queer theorists “‘queer’ is not an identity but a process; not a noun but a verb.”

Queer is an umbrella term for lots of identities that instead of binary identities such as heterosexual/homosexual, it fills the gap with “categorical emptiness.” Barale (2003: 92) highlights how “woman/man, like black/white, depends on relationships of unequal power for its meaning”, however, “such categories themselves are neither natural nor usefully descriptive” and therefore “the usefulness of a category called “queer.””

According to Halperin (1995: 44) the “heterosexual/homosexual binarism is itself a homophobic production, just as the man/woman binarism is a sexist production,” for each “consists of two terms, the first of which is unmarked and unproblematised – it designates “the category to which everyone is assumed to belong” (unless someone is specifically marked as different) – whereas the second term is marked and problematised: it designates a category of persons whom something differentiates from normal, unmarked people.”

The meaning of ‘queer’ seems almost like something vague without a proper, specific description. For some, identifying as queer might be the best choice. Not everybody can, or feel unable to be categorized easily. Halperin (1995: 62) underlines, as “the very word implies, “queer” does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm” and there “is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.” For example, in order to alleviate the problematic binary thinking, some want or see it easier to identify as queer. Therefore in its essence, it is categorically empty. Genderqueer is an example of a catchall category for gender identities not exclusively male or female, masculine or feminine.

Queer theory has grown out of feminism. The differences between the queer and feminist theories are not as fundamentally significant as often thought. Richardson et al. (2006: 6-7) underline that
both “accounts regards sexuality not as a ‘private matter’ or individual ‘choice’ or ‘fate’ that is somehow divorced from wider social and material contexts, but as a ‘public matter’” and Richardson suggesting that “any theoretical “division” between the two is a rather tenuous one, a division constituted – at least in part – out of the material interests of those who invoke such theory borders and the political and historical contexts associated with the emergence of such interests.” Both theories understand sexuality as not just about ‘sexual lives’, but being central to organisation of the public world, encoding wide range of social institutions and practises to being conceptual frameworks deployed to making sense of the social worlds inhabited (Richardson, 2006: 32-33).

Some feminists see queer theory’s deconstructionist approach as undermining importance of gender.² Richardson (2006: 22) highlight that queer theory’s deconstructionist approach to gender aims “to disrupt and denaturalise sexual and gender categories in ways that recognise the fluidity, instability and fragmentation of identities and a plurality of gendered subject positions.”

In this thesis I am aware of the problem of the lack of e.g. lesbian and trans views and the consequent, potentially phallocentric (perspective predominantly male) definition of “queer” (as much as I would have liked to include wider spectrum of interviewees, availability constituted natural limits for the selection of people). For this reason I try to keep as clear as possible, whose ideas and point of view I am voicing at any given time, which are the ones I call “queer.” It has also been very important for me to give the subjects of the thesis a wide opportunity to verbalize their own ideas about identity and sexuality.

“Queer” could also be seen as a problematic concept in this study, because it seems not have been available as a concept or identity for most of my interviewees who lives have been affected instead specifically by a rigid binarism of heterosexual vs. homosexual. However, I see queer as a tool to challenge that system and therefore the origin of sexuality-based discrimination. Contemporarily, at the individual level, the inclusive nature of queer and the elasticity of its use give people the power to identify themselves either inside or outside of categories or both, without being dictated from above.

The unquestioned binary system of heterosexuality vs. homosexuality is at the core of discrimination based on sexual object choice. Being the prevalent sexual orientation,

² “An important zone of contestation, as I have noted, is that the elimination of the very idea of gender reflects the theoretical perspective of many feminists, which contrasts with the queer project of the deconstruction of gender (and sexual) categories that is productive of plurality and multiplicity of genders” (Richardson, 2006: 37). “Gender, it seems, is often displaced in queer theory’s discussion of heterosexuality” (Richardson, 2006: 37).
heterosexuality is not under scrutiny. Halperin (1995: 44) underlines that heterosexuality “defines itself without problematizing itself, it elevates itself as a privileged and unmarked term, by abjecting and problematizing homosexuality” and therefore, heterosexuality, ”then, depends on homosexuality to lend it substance – and to enable it to acquire by default its status as a default, as a lack of difference or an absence of abnormality.” Homosexuality in turn is “constructed by homophobic discourse” and a homosexual is seen as “fatally contradictory creature”, for “‘the homosexual’ is simultaneously (1) a social misfit, (2) an unnatural monster or freak, (3) a moral failure, and (4) a sexual pervert” (Halperin, 1995: 46).

The worst LGBT rights situation is usually in countries, where homophobic public discourse is prevalent and where the LGBT rights NGOs are forbidden or harassed. There are often no channels for independent, objective public discussions, let alone safe spaces for LGBTQ people. Such is the situation for example in Iran; the NGOs working to support Iranian LGBTQ people are based abroad.

The rising queer theory and the importance of the concept of space in geographic research have brought new perspectives. According to Gorman-Murray & McKinnon (2015: 759), into “the 1990s, the influence of queer theory – drawing particularly on the work of Judith Butler – located performance and representation as critical factors in studies of sexuality and space.” Queer research brought “new visibility for the role of sexuality in how space is constituted, imagined, and experienced, and just as importantly, for the role of space in the development and construction of sexual identities and behaviors” (Gorman-Murray & McKinnon, 2015: 759).

Importantly, the queer geography doesn’t want to highlight queerness as equalling to being different. The discipline of queer geography doesn’t examine “homosexual (or queer) space as the non-normative ‘other’ to the normative of heterosexual space, but instead urges a queer approach to space which rejects any such binary” (Oswin, 2008; Gorman-Murray & McKinnon, 2015: 759).

Thus, the space being examined as “categorically empty.”

When thinking of sexuality, the first obvious factor is the body, ourselves, which can exclude us in the space. Gorman-Murray & McKinnon (2015: 760) underline that our bodies “operate both as space and in space and determine ways in which we are included or excluded; experience regulatory approval or disapproval; are materialized as sexualized and gendered beings; and physically or metaphorically move within and through space.”

Certain situations can be hostile when the heterosexual norms are not met. Therefore many of us have to be constantly aware of our behaviour, performance in space. Gorman-Murray & McKinnon
(2015: 760) underline that “body is a heavily monitored space, which is subject to the same socially constructed discursive regulation as wider scales, and thus has become a significant site of interest for geographers seeking to understand the spatial aspects of sex, gender, and sexuality.”

Body in a space is used to describe the feeling of restraining yourself. Gorman-Murray & McKinnon (2015: 760) highlight how homosexual “people are frequently described as being in or out of the closet” and how this is “an explicitly spatial metaphor in which the body is materialized as a site of identity performance.” The public pressure to be or behave hetero-normatively in public can be intense. Gorman-Murray & McKinnon (2015: 760) underline this pressure, for “conforming to this binary through the space of the body – for example, by wearing clothing deemed ‘appropriate’ to our gender and comporting ourselves according to masculine or feminine expectations – we may ease the process of our participation in public space.”

2.2. Identity

Identity evolves though time, changes and each person identify with various different groups. One dominating feature of identity is for example our native language with which we piece together the world. Identification is often seen as being built on common origin and allegiance felt for shared characteristics, but unlike naturalist assumption, the discursive approach, also used in this thesis, understands it as constantly evolving construction.3

Identity is thus changing but also sustained. According to Joseph (2010: 15), “features of recent work on language and identity include the view that identity is something constructed rather than essential, and performed rather than possessed – features which the term ‘identity’ itself tends to mask, suggesting as it does something singular, objective and reified.”

Identity as well as whole identity categories adapt and modify anew through time. According to Brah (1996: 20) ”we are all constantly changing but this changing illusion is precisely what we see as real and concrete about ourselves and others” and “this seeing is both a social and a psychological process.” Identity “then is an enigma which, by its very nature, defies a precise definition” (Brah, 1996: 20). Luibhéid (2008: 170) emphasizes, how queer migration scholarship

3 “In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the national closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (Hall, 2000: 16). “In contrast with the ‘naturalism’ of this definition, the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed – always ‘in process’” (Hall, 2000: 16).
“has consistently explored how overlapping regimes of power and knowledge generate and transform identity categories.”

Identities also reflect themselves from the other, binary identity. Barale (2003: 92) underlines that central “to queer theorists is the insistence that all categories of identity—woman, heterosexual, lesbian, and faggot, for example—depend on culture and history for their meanings” and that these don’t have “significance apart from their existence as half of a binary.” “Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’, abjected” (Hall, 2000: 17-18).

The ‘othering’ or excluding is often done deliberately. “So ‘unities’ which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion, and are the result, not a natural and inevitable or primordial totality but of the naturalized, over-determined process of ‘closure’” (Hall, 1992; Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 2000: 18). Massey (1994: 169-170) underlines that while “it is frequently accepted that identities are relational, the possibilities are often closed down by the assumption that such relations must be those of bounded, negative counterpositions, of inclusion and exclusion.”

People don’t experience the world similarly and a person is not always going through it the same way either. However connecting threads in these ‘multi-realities’ provide individuals the sense of self. Therefore identity is simultaneously subjective and social and is constituted in and through culture, culture and identity being inextricably linked concepts. (Brah, 1996: 20-21).

Culture and history are helpful, when observing the development of any identity; meanwhile, culture changes throughout history and often, being in interaction with other influences. Different cultural spheres have had different interpretations on sexuality. “Fixing of types into homo- and heterosexual may not have existed before this moment in the history of sexuality, but it would be a mistake to think that prior to that time there were no identifications whatsoever by desire types” (Najmabadi, 2005: 19-20).

When coming out, the sexual identity can become overbearing, dominating the rest. “Historically, lesbians and gay men were typically understood through their sexuality: to be ‘homosexual’ was to be nothing but ‘a homosexual’” (Richardson et al. 2006: x). The view to brand homosexuals as being nothing but homosexual because of their sexual identity seems still to be quite widespread.

On the other hand Richardson et al. (2006: ix-x) underline how “the desire to be seen as ‘ordinary’ can also be understood in terms of a claim for individuality” and that this ordinariness “in this sense
can be seen as a desire for ‘difference’ to be incidental, one aspect of a person’s life and identity, allowing lesbians and gay men an individualised personhood” (Coleman-Fountain 2011).

The ‘othering’ – branding someone intentionally as the unaccepted other – is exercising power. This is ultimately what Iran does upon LGBTQ people. Hall (2000: 17) underlines that identities “emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity – an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation).”

When people feel that they themselves and their rights are being discriminated against, it is natural to start to question the surrounding society. Furthermore in the polarized world “some people today feel less loyalty than earlier generations to their country and more to their social group with whom they share an identity based upon, for example, ethnicity, disability, gender, and/or sexuality” (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010: 99). Johnston and Longhurst (2010: 99) further underline that often they “are not seen as fitting the national identity and are not offered full rights of citizenship.”

Identity is a significant factor in encouraging or forcing migration. There are several other important reasons that weight in the decision to move. Social and economic factors are for example often inseparable from sexual motivations (Binnie, 2004: 76). However, “for many queer migrants the quest for self-understanding and self-identity figure in the decision to migrate and the choice of destination” (Gorman-Murray, 2007: 105) while for queer refugees the migration to the asylum country cannot only mean safety but also freedom to be you.

Migration away may able you to develop your identity. Away from the pressures of family and community, LGBTQ people are able to develop new lives for themselves, to find their own voices and to explore their own histories in a new light (Cant, 1997: 7). For the research subjects in this thesis, sexual identity is the reason for their emigration. When emigrating and leaving behind or even refusing their home, queer migrants can reclaim a new space to be called ‘home’ (Fortier, 2002: 190). Binnie (2004: 76) point out that “desire to produce a queer self means people are willing to make economic sacrifices to leave settled lives and jobs behind to relocate to the big city and make do with temporary, less well-paid jobs” and underlines that these “difficulties are obviously multiplied for those sexual dissidents crossing national borders.”

The nationalist feelings of belonging can be quite exclusionary not only for queers but especially to immigrants. Binnie (2004: 17) underlines that “for immigrant queers, such a strong sense of
nationalist belonging and sentiments may seem alien, indeed alarming given the racism and xenophobia they may be exposed to.”

2.3. Home & Place

A special place and concept, home has obvious meanings for everyone. For most people it may give a sense of safety, comfort or belonging. While for some, when faced with events that distraught those feelings, alienation or fear. “As a space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear, the home is invested with meanings, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life” (Blunt & Varley, 2004: 3). As Blunt & Dowling (2006: 10) underline, for such “spatialized feelings,” “the spatialities of home are broader and more complex than just housing.” The definitions of ‘home’ can vary depending on the person and hers or his experiences. According to Blunt & Dowling (2006: 2), home “is a place, a site in which we live” and “a spatial imaginary: a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings, which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places.”

According to Gorman-Murray & McKinnon (2015: 760) sexuality “often plays an important role in this construction across various scales from, for example, the body to the home, the community, the city, the rural, the nation, and the globe” and that these “geographical scales have themselves come to be understood as socially constructed, negotiated, and reproduced.”

‘Place’ itself is an interesting term, how can it be conceptualized? According to Massey (1994: 155), if “places can be conceptualized in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time” but instead “processes.” Places have different communities with different views, identities. According to Massey (1994: 155), “clearly places do not have single, unique ‘identities’; they are full of internal conflicts” and that the “specificity of a place is continually reproduced, but it is not a specificity which result from long, internalized history.” Thus, places are not frozen in time but are processes without clear border with inside and outside and therefore have multiple identities. Identity of a place is not fixed nor geographically limited.

Furthermore, a particular place is often compared to other places, identifying it by comparing, as happens also in the case of identity. Massey (1994: 155) argues, “places do not have to have boundaries in the sense of divisions which frame simple enclosures” and definition “can come, in part, precisely through the particularity of linkage to the ‘outside’ which is therefore itself part of what constitutes the place.”
A place evokes feelings, and feelings of a place tend to change over time through various experiences and events. “Put most simply, home is: a place/site, a set of feelings/cultural meanings, and the relations between the two” (Blunt & Dowling, 2006: 2-3). Thus the place called home can shift, often many times, following the experiences and events of an individual life. Feelings of belonging can shake and change.

How does one perceive home after moving away and leaving one’s hometown and native country? This depends on the experiences along the journey, but also on the person’s conception of her/his childhood home regardless of the country. Especially in the case of LGBTQ–people, this can be complicated. The response can uproot people and force to emigrate somewhere, where they feel safe and “at home.” “Story after story and study after study features people who are either rejected by or voluntarily disavow their roots and then move (often literally, but sometimes by radically remapping their worlds and their places in it) in order to ‘find themselves’ (or, more modestly, simply to protect themselves)” (Larry, 2004: 123). Knopp (2004: 123) further underlines that “Such experiences are common not only for gays and lesbians from unsupportive families and communities but, interestingly, for those from supportive ones as well.”

Home is also strongly linked to the idea of family, which, as the most common institution for procreation, is associated with heterosexuality. “To assert that straight people “naturally” have access to family, while gay people are destined to move toward a future of solitude and loneliness, is not only to tie kinship closely to procreation, but also to treat gay men and lesbians as members of a nonprocreative species set apart from the rest of humanity” (cf. Foucault 1978; Weston: 1997: 22-23). Weston further underlines that it is “a short step from positioning lesbians and gay men somewhere beyond “the family” – unencumbered by relations of kinship, responsibility, or affection – to portraying them as a menace to family and society (Weston: 1997: 23).

Therefore, ‘coming out’ can be seen to have potentially disastrous consequences on a person’s family life. “Looking backward and forward across the life cycle, people who equated their adoption of a lesbian or gay identity with a renunciation of family did so in the double-sided sense of fearing rejection by the families in which they had grown up, and not expecting to marry or have children as adults” (Weston, 1997: 25). However, the progress of recent years in LGBT rights in many countries with new permissive legislation on gay marriage and adoption in Europe and Americas has widened the concept of family and shown that a queer sexual identity does not equal being prevented from marriage and children.

Another option for the traditional nuclear family is the so-called “chosen family.” According to Weston (1997: 109) chosen families in the San Francisco Bay Area “resembled networks in the
sense that they could cross household lines, and both were based on ties that radiated outward from individuals like spokes on a wheel.” However, she argue (1997: 109) that, “gay families differed from networks to the extent that they quite consciously incorporated symbolic demonstrations of love, shared history, material and emotional assistance, and other signs of enduring solidarity”, and while “many gay families included friends, not just any friend would do.”

Parallel to the fact that families are not always based on heterosexual relations, home does not always equal the childhood family home. Fortier (2003: 122) writes, “Though all the texts begin with a story about the ‘original’ home, it soon becomes one among many other places that could be called ‘home’, even temporarily. Each is inhabited by different people – friends, colleagues, family, lovers – who touched the authors differently – in caring, friendly or even, but to a lesser extent, antagonistic encounters.” “Home is understood as not only multiple, fluid and ambiguous, but also spatially contingent upon lived experiences at the intersections of social constructions of sexuality with gender, race and class” (Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2011: 1382).

Most of the academic research concerning queer home is not focusing on refugees, but rather on migrations inside the countries, between cities, away from the childhood home or hometown. Eli Clare (2015: 48) underlines the difficulties of being queer in rural areas and the urban character of queer culture, the “forced choice between rural roots and urban queer life.” Migration inside a country from a less tolerant to a more open-minded area enables the person to maintain her/his national identity. In some cases the native home can even become more important for one’s identity after the migration. Hooks noticed that living away from her native place she became more consciously Kentuckian than she was while I living at home (Hooks, 2009: 13). She (2009: 13) further underlines how “this is what the experience of exile can do, change your mind, utterly transform one’s perception of the world of home.”

On the contrary to Hooks, I didn’t find such intensifying of Iranian or Persian identity amongst my interviewees. The feeling of alienation, both in the transit and the native country, seemed to be quite common with my research subjects. This is probably linked to the attitudes of the surrounding society, causing discouraging feelings towards national identification. According to Eng (1997: 32) “Suspended between an ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the closet–between origin and destination, and between private and public space–queer entitlements to home and a nation-state remain doubtful.”

The place remembered usually changes, as does the memories. Rushdie mentions his native country India and the memories, concrete and imagined, that build the image of the former home. “If we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that out physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming
precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (Rushdie, 1991: 10). Fortier (2003: 124) writes in turn that “memories of home conjure up images of places, people, houses, events, all of which attach ‘home’ to physical locations, things and bodies” and thus home “is also a site which is attached, fixed into place, in acts of remembering ‘what is was like’, so that I can move on, into another place, another becoming.” Space evolves into meaningful site and place through habitual usage or utilisation.

Canada has been seen as one of the most progressive countries in regards to LGBT rights, and on contrary to the native and transit country, most of the interviewees of this thesis mentioned feeling that they belong, felt at home there. As Fortier (2003: 117) points out, for some “queer migrations constitute migration as emancipation.” Fortier (2002: 190) further emphasizes how “the widespread narrative of migration as homecoming, within queer culture, establishes an equation between leaving and becoming, and creates a distinctively queer migrant subject: one who is forced to get out in order to come out.”
3. Background to the Refugee Process

3.1. Situation in Iran

“Is there one? I don’t think there are any human rights for LGBT in Iran. Nothing.”

Situation for the LGBTQ people in Iran is dire. Homosexuality is forbidden and illegal and homosexual acts can lead to capital punishment or lashes. Najmabadi (2005: 56) highlights how radical their aim of the punishment is: “The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is set on eradicating homosexuality, especially male same-sex practices, in the name of eradicating Western cultural and secular moral corruption.” Jafari (2014: 32-33) underlines that “governmental authorities in the Islamic Republic do not recognize homosexuality as an identity, but rather as a performance—what one does.” Furthermore, he states that the “absence of a language or discourse in Iranian society regarding non-heteronormative sexuality demonstrates the rejection of a homosexual or identity.”

The idea of homosexuality as Western corruption has little foundation. Same-sex desire exists in every culture although in different forms. However, the state led homophobia seen in Iran seems to be of Western origin. “Oblivious to the irony of its shared ground with secular modernists and with Orientalizing Europeans, the IRI [Islamic Republic of Iran] depends on a concept of homosexuality—sexual deviancy, inhıraf-i jınsı—more akin to late nineteenth-century western European concepts than to anything from Islam’s own classical heritage” (Najmabadi, 2005: 56).

Same-sex desire and sexual expressions had historically been widespread in Qajar Iran, while they were not conceptualized as a heterosexual or homosexual sexual orientation or identity. As Najmabadi (2008: 276) writes the “recording of sexual inclination does not record some innate homo- or heterosexuality, as all men are assumed to be sexually inclined to both women or amrads.” Amrad denotes a beardless youth who was seen as desirable already by the ancient Greeks and Romans and other Mediterranean civilizations. He was normatively thought to be the “passive” partner whom the older man could have also kept as a companion (Najmabadi, 2005: 24).

However, according to Najmabadi (2005: 20), “sexual preferences, at least for men, did not go unnoted” though any preference (or a default choice of women) was not taken for granted. Furthermore, there was a pressure to continue the family line though heterosexual union and the recording of exclusivity or excess of homoerotic desire was marked as socially unacceptable (failure of one’s reproductive obligation) or individually destructive (men who die of excess of love for young males) (Najmabadi, 2008: 276). According to Murray (1997: 16) “even frequent and
recurring homosexual behaviour does not matter in Islamic societies as long as a man continues his family line.”

When femininity became seen as a weakness, passivity was seen as acceptable. “Some of the currently accepted ‘typologies’ of male homosexuality in Islamicate cultures assume the hypermasculinity of ‘active’ and the femininity of ‘passive’ males involved in homosexual practices” (Najmabadi, 2005: 59). Murray (1997: 41) takes this further, for his “hypothesized model of the trans-Islamic native domain is that ‘sexuality’ is distinguished not between ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ but between taking pleasure and submitting to someone (being used for pleasure).”

The Western political and cultural influence with rising nationalism in the 19th and 20th century caused modernists to seek modernizing/heterosocializing the population.4 “If we name the social regime of Qajar Iran as one of compulsory homosociality combined with procreative heterosexuality that left the structure of sexual desire indeterminate, we can say that Iranian modernity insisted on a regime of compulsory heterosociality that was to underwrite normative heterosexuality” (Najmabadi, 2008: 289). The Islamic revolution changed the country’s direction from secular to religious, while the stance on homosexuality turned more hostile and strict.

Najmabadi (2008: 289) underlines that the current Islamic Republic, “has been trying to preserve the modernist “achievement” of normative heterosexuality while reinstituting compulsory homosociality.”

Many of my interviewees thought traditions and religion as the biggest reasons to the bad LGBT human rights situation in their native country. The first question got quite frank answers, especially from the first cited interviewee.

    Researcher: “How do you perceive the LGBT human rights situation in Iran at the moment?”
    Mason: “Is there one? I don’t think there are any human rights for LGBT in Iran. Nothing.”

Liam had the same view.

4 “European reports on Iranians’ sexual mores, in particular on male same-sex practices, continued throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth” (Najmabadi, 2005: 37) “the Europeans were misreading homosociality for homosexuality” (Najmabadi, 2005: 38). “As Europeans characterized Iran by homosocial and homosexual practices, Iranian modernity simultaneously identified itself with and disavowed this abject position, emerging through a triangular interaction of gender, sexuality, and nationalism with paradoxical effects” (Najmabadi, 2005: 39).
Liam: “Not good. Actually I think there is no human rights, not in Iran. Secondly I think there is no situation for gay people, for LGBTs. So it’s not good at all. You know as long as you can’t be yourself, that means that’s not good for you.”

According to Owen the society is nowadays more informed, but the official line is not getting any better.

Owen: “There hasn’t been like any progress. But it’s more going backward. So... I think it’s coming a little bit more acknowledged among the society, but... As a matter of human rights, laws and stuff, there is like almost no protection or anything. It’s more like suppression and oppression against [the LGBTQ] community.”

Nathan thought that the traditions and religion are the ones to blame for the poor situation of LGBT people in the country.

Nathan (through interpreter): “Ok, so he thinks that they have absolutely no rights neither by law nor by society because it is always been attacked by the society, like the traditions, and also religion. So even for like those who are not religious, they still have like, tradition and other things to make an excuse to not accept this whole idea.”

He also pointed out that women’s rights could be considered as a champion for LGBTQ rights.

Nathan (through interpreter): “In the countries which are more ahead now, in the LGBT aspect, its also because they are also ahead in women’s right, which is still very like important issue in Iran.”

Dramatic change happened after the regime of the last shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was toppled down in 1979 and the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded. The punitive sodomy laws that followed were extreme, but also the women’s rights deteriorated. After the Islamic revolution, the control over women presented itself for example with mandatory use of headscarf in the public space, while some public buildings were strictly separated by gender. Furthermore, as Moghissi (1999: 22-23) states the Shiite “jurisdiction in Iran ... lays down the rights and obligations of women, based on the view that it is the woman’s religious duty to submit to all sexual demands of her husband.” “Ayatollah Khomeini clarifies this point beyond any doubt: ‘A woman who has been contracted permanently, must not leave the house without the husband’s permission and must surrender herself for any pleasure that he wants and must not prevent him from having intercourse with her without a religious excuse’” (Khomeini, 1980: 318 in Moghissi, 1999: 23).

As the homo–and heterosociality have been taking turns since the Qajar dynasty, Pahlavi dynasty and Islamic republic, the controlling women and their access in public life has varied. It’s also tied to control of sexuality. According to Najmabadi (2008: 287), in Iran “the modernist project of compulsory heterosocialization was premised on the expectation that once women became “available” to men, homosexual practices would disappear.” Najmabadi (2005: 58) underlines that “Although legal punishment against female same-sex practices is less severe than for men, women
come under harsher social scrutiny and familial control,” and “continue to carry the load of being “objects of traffic among men,” and thus subject to the “protecting” power of men (fathers, brothers, husbands) and of the nation.”

The situation for transgender people is different. “In accordance with dominant religious and cultural ideology in Iran, gender norms are supposed to map neatly onto biological map” (Jaspal, 2014: 45). Therefore, the state even pays for the gender reassignment surgery for transsexuals. However, there is not much choice to be non-binary or gender-fluid and in the everyday life transgender people face similar harsh discrimination as homosexuals.

The clerical leadership determine the prescriptive sexual norms. Jafari (2014: 39) underlines how the “state jurists employ Shari’atized tactics—namely fatwas, the Qur’an, Hadith, and fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence)—to legitimize their stance on transsexuals and ultimately to enforce heteronormative behavior” and to keep and maintain heteronormativity and the distinction between man and women. The narrow-minded interpretation of centuries old texts has serious consequences. The state aims to classify homosexuals as transgender and therefore the gender reassignment surgery can be forced upon people who are not transgender. “State powers don’t acknowledge the legitimacy of a homosexual identity but maintain that SRS [sex reassignment surgery] is a remedy for the “disease” of homosexuality” (Jafari, 2014: 41). Jafari (2014: 40-41) further underlines: “while information on state-enforced SRS on homosexuals not interested in the surgery is closely guarded, there is increasing evidence that such a state program or policy exists.”

One of my interviewee told how he was being diagnosed as trans, on contrary to his own identification. “Instead of recognizing homosexual identity, the Iranian clergy intertwines issues of sexual orientation and gender identity so that the distinction between them is blurred” (Jafari, 2014: 44). Thus, as the line of the clergy reflects on the laws, doctors and psychiatrists have to follow. The only choice for many is to flee the unwanted sex change and discrimination abroad (Doezema, 2013).

Another worrying aspect of the state’s policy is the medicalization of homosexuals. One of the interviewees mentioned that this could enable one to evade the military service (I wish I had asked more about it).

Liam: “I think they actually have less rights, like the minimum right for, being LGBT people, they have no human rights. So there is some things like escaping...”

Interpreter: “Like the dismissal from army.”
Liam: “Yeah, but it has side effect, like so much side effects for people who apply for that program or application or whatever is it... But ah, almost they have no human rights in Iran. We have no rights.”

Jaspal (2014: 52) cites Afary (2009) who mentions Pouya and Ahmad, who “were able to capitalise on their sexual orientation in order to evade military service due to the ‘medicalisation’ of homosexuality in Iranian social discourse.”

The medicalization can be destructive on one’s wellbeing and identity. Jaspal (2014: 52) points out that this “was clearly evidenced in Pouya’s account of being spoken to ‘like a patient’ and in Ahmad’s perception that he was treated as if he ‘needed to be cured of a disease’” and underline that “the medicalization of homosexuality in Iranian society is so potent that even Pouya himself was convinced that ‘there’s something wrong with me.’”

**Public Harassment**

To challenge behaviour or performance seen as normatively appropriate in a country like Iran, which has government based on religious doctrine, is difficult. The morality police patrol the streets and give fines and berate people not meeting the modesty test even for minor reasons, ranging from men’s “homosexual spiky or long hairstyle” to women exposing too much hair. In the worst cases people can be arrested and taken in a van to a police station.

The question about fear of being caught or exposed by the authorities revealed a shocking scenario of an arrestment.

Researcher: “And when you were living in Iran, how frightened were you of being caught or exposed by the authorities?”

Aiden: “Actually I have been raped by, I don’t know have you ever heard the basij-e people, there are a lot of them, they are part of... they are part of what, can you tell me, they are part of what can you tell me? Sepah? Or what?”

Interpreter: “Basij? So it’s like governmental, religious [paramilitary volunteer militia]”

Aiden: “And they have power, they have power.”

Interpreter: “And they have like guns. And they are like extremists.”

Aiden: “Yeah, like it was 12AM or 12:30 and ... They caught me, in a street and then took me to a place, they raped me and then, yeah... Well, I’ve been. So if you want to know the details you can ask, I don’t have any problem.”

Researcher: “If you want to tell, it’s really up to you.”

Aiden: “They were two people... One of them was 35 and one like 27, 20, like that. And they got me there, they asked me that you are gay or not and I said I am not gay. And they had gun. One of them put the gun on my brow, head and he said no, you are gay and you know what you want, and I am giving you. Get naked. And ... It took like
two, three hours... Because we had argument as well, and ... Argh, they got photo, they took pictures of me, when I was naked. First the younger started to have sex with me. He told me that whatever he wants, he is not gonna you know; give you the chance of leaving him there. We had sex and I left the place, yeah...”

Researcher: “I am so sorry...”

Aiden: “Hmm ... I’m sorry but... at the same time you know the problems make you stronger. Actually after that I came out as a gay to my mom because I thought that... I should do that. Because, as long as you are living in a... you are not yourself, people can use you. But I tried to not come out as a gay, I tried to show myself, I felt better, I felt better after that. Because that... you know I couldn’t call my mom. The two people got me, they wanted rape me, they wanted have sex with me. But now I can tell. That is why. ”

Interviewees talked about sexual and mental abuse also in more private, civilian settings.

Aiden: “You know. We have a masculine culture. So... whenever they feel that you’re gay... They want to use you. A lot of, you know, a lot of experiences that I have. Or other guys I don’t know if you have had, but in high school, in university, in workplace or whatever, as soon as they feel you are gay... Two things are going to happen. Maybe. One, they don’t see you as a man, as a guy, or they want to use you, in any way. One of them is sex [having sex with you].”

Nathan had gone into a peculiar situation (through interpreter):

“He hasn’t personally experienced any persecution but he knows so many that have, and also he had a connection with someone very close to the government, and, like he was dating him, so this person was like kinda, mentally torturing him, to change and to get closer to god and stuff.”

The interpreter told that Nathan said the authorities started to increasingly chase gays in the beginning of the millennium.

Nathan (through interpreter): “So he says he was very frightened, especially during the, like starting the year 2000. Ah, for a decade they have been like monitoring all the chat rooms and stuff, in Iran, in order to like ah detect and arrest gay people.”

Liam underlined how tense the atmosphere had been.

Liam: “Hmm, it didn’t happen to me, well like that but ah, it was bad. It happened to my friend. So ah, hmm they got... they went to jail without nothing... they just arrested them as a gay people in airport, so it was, yeah, so, but I had no experience of that.”

Mason mentioned that he was arrested and that the next time he would have faced dire consequences.

Mason: “I was actually, caught. I was threatened, and ah, I was threatened that I shouldn’t be even seen on the streets. In a city of Shiraz. There was a some small court but there they can always pay money and, they bail your out, or who ever pays for you, should be your family, but in my case it was my friend’s sister, who paid for us, but we had an actual court, in where they arrested us. But ah... It was more like, there, there is 80 lashes for you, but if we arrest you the next time, we are gonna execute that.”
The authorities try to enforce the “approved” style or outlook on people. These norms are enforced and patrolled by the morality police, which are known to be corrupt and using force and intimidation.

Owen: “They always have these large vans, which can like feed up to 20 people. So they get the women like one by one and then they take them to this crazy place, and they take their picture, they like make a case. And they call their families or someone to bring [more conservative] clothes to them and then they release them. But like for so many people it’s very typical thing, like so many people have been arrested by these guys.”

Researcher: “Because of clothing?”

Owen: “Yeah. So I have been caught, by those guys.”

Researcher: “Remember what was the reason?”

Owen: “The reason was like because I like, had my hair styled. And I had like, necklaces, nothing really like weird. Not even weird, like I was still in the norms and stuff, under the society but... They would just, like they don’t like to see the expression in anyways. You know?”

Even though people are pressured, they still help each other out.

Researcher: “So these personal styles or individuality are not seen as a positive thing?”

Owen: “No, no, no. They actually like arrest them and force to wear their ideal clothes and they can go home.”

Researcher: “Yeah. So people can’t really differ from the majority?”

Owen: “They can, they’ll do. I remember again once we were walking on one of the very busy streets of up North Tehran. And there was one of these vans, a little further from there. And there was so many peoples crossing every second. So people, like tell each other that there is these vans [and to] wear your hair [in the “approved” way] so they wouldn’t like, fuck your day you know?”

Researcher: “So people support each other and help.”

Owen: “Oh yeah, like I can totally say like, 99 per cent is against this whole thing.”

**The Decision to Leave and Possibility to Return**

The reason for the interviewees to decide to leave Iran followed the oppressing atmosphere.

Nathan (through interpreter): “The main thing (contributing to his decision to leave) was socially he was being harassed a lot, and, he just like couldn’t take it anymore, he had no mental or social security, for example at his work, at his job, ah even though they kinda like pretend their acceptance and like that but they still abused him verbally. And then also, the, the political situation didn’t fit with his views so.”

Owen: “My daily life maybe was the main reason to make this decision. Because I couldn’t, I didn’t feel like I was living there. Like, always saw myself like out of
everybodies situation, like, I don’t know I was always watching from outside, somehow.”

Liam: “The biggest one was the right to live, so as a LGBT person in Iran you have no right for living there, there’s no place for you. And the biggest one was that, specific one.”

Mason underlined that because of the threats he received, there was no space for him and that the situation became more difficult due to the feeling of alienation from his own family:

“The threats that I got and ah, and basically my whole family couldn’t understand me well. And so I think they are all good reasons, there was no stay so.”

Aiden’s boyfriend was pressured by the family to get married, which prompted him to leave:

“I had a boyfriend, we had been together like four years and one day (laugh), we went to his place and his mother talked to me that we want him to get married and he has rejected us every time, you know what’s the reason? And I knew the reason, the reason was me, ok but I couldn’t tell anything, I asked my boyfriend that we could leave Iran and if he would go we would be together. And he said ok, and he asked me to leave Iran first and I came to Turkey and he came to Turkey and he came back and he called me and said I can’t leave my family. I said ok, that’s your choice and I left Iran and I’m not going back anymore. And the problem actually was, I was trying to, you know, save my relationship but I couldn’t. And I knew, that I didn’t have life there. You know, everything is the same for me here, I’m living, I’m working, I’m trying to go to college and you know what else, but now I feel free. Maybe the most, it’s not event, it’s a reason, freedom.”

Sexual identity was, for all, the main factor for leaving Iran. One mentioned how all the troubles stemmed from obeying of sharia law, which didn’t leave much choice as a gay man.

Researcher: “And, was your sexual identity the main factor to leave Iran?”

Mason: “Yes, my sexual identity, because I got a lot of troubles. Because of that, because of being gay, so... That was that I, I had no idea of information about and ah, that’s what got me in trouble. To feel, to be, threatened for that. To be gay, like to be bad, and like, they execute Islamic law there so.”

Aiden underlined how all the other aspects of his life were there for a good life.

Aiden: “Yeah, yeah it was. It was because I had a good family, I had a good situation. I had my job. And yeah, I was going to university, but yeah.”

The possibility of moving back to Iran, even in the case of a major political change, was seen as distant by the interviewees.

Mason: “You know, I’ve been thinking about that from the first day I arrived in Canada. So, I love Canada. I don’t think I can live in Iran anymore even if the political situation changes. Because I… I have trouble understanding my own family. So… I don’t think it’s gonna work but I would love to go and see.”

Nathan (through interpreter): “I don’t think so, ah, even if the political situation changed into something better, it, it would still take so long for the society to ah accept me as a LGBT person, like…”
Liam: “I’m not sure at the moment about this question. It’s going to be good if there’s any change in human rights or LGBT rights in Iran but I’m not sure if I move back.”

Another two were much more sceptical and pointed out the culture or values as preventing the possible return.

Researcher: “And would you ever consider moving back Iran if...?

Aiden: “No, never, never. I’m, I’m trying to make my life here. After four year, actually I left Iran like six years ago. It’s really hard for me to go back there. And the other thing is... Ah everything is not political, something’s are cultural. I don’t wanna face with that culture anymore. And mostly I came... I left Iran because of that culture.”

Owen mentioned he had felt since his early age that he didn’t belong:

“I don’t know, I don’t think so. Since the age of like my puberty I started to like be mature and I never felt that I belong there. I always had this vision of my life starting somewhere out of there. Like I never wanted to build something when I was there. Never had like a dream of like even what job I would have. You know? I have like really extreme cultural problems with the majority of the people there. Like it’s just, you know most of the values in culture are like actually against my values, so.”

When intimidated with violence is that serious as it is in Iran for LGBTQ people, there is no other choice but to emigrate elsewhere or staying in the closet. According to Brown (2000: 50), “spatiality of the closet is a quite powerful part of the performativity of gender and sexuality” and that “resisting the hetero-patriarchal script does not just entail changing one’s attitude, behaviour, dress or style; it means having to relocate oneself, to leave home and reconfigure it elsewhere.”

3.2. Queer(s) Religion

The tough situation for LGBTQ people in today’s Iran gives a picture of a conservative country, intolerant towards homosexuals and unaccepting to differing sexual identity for observing religious laws. The Persian and Islamic cultures had, however, traditionally more tolerant, or perhaps more specifically unresponsive, attitude towards same-sex desire as long as it stayed in the private.

Najmabadi (2005 & 2008) emphasizes in her book and article that there are clear evidences of revering of male beauty or/and love in the famous Persian poetry as well as in the Islamic literature. She (2005: 17) underlines that “Premodern Islamic literature considered gender irrelevant to love and beauty.” Term Islamic is however often too sweeping and Babayan & Najmabadi (2008) underline that they used “Marshall G.S. Hogson’s coinage, Islamicate”, intending “to highlight a complex of attitudes and practices that pertain to cultures and societies that live by various versions of the religion Islam.”
According to Najmabadi (2005: 20) in Iran and much of the Islamic world, “sexual practices were generally not considered fixed into lifelong patterns of sexual orientation.” Murray & Roscoe (1997: 7) also underline that the “Persian and Arabic poets who drew their inspiration from beautiful youth and speculated on the spiritual dimensions of same-sex love developed a self-conscious homoerotic literary genre unrivalled until quite recent times.”

The influence of Western culture and norms brought changes as Iran started to be in more frequent interaction with the Western world. According to Najmabadi (2005: 32-34) by “the early nineteenth century, Iranian men had become acutely and increasingly aware that Europeans considered Iranian older man–younger man love and sexual practice a vice.” “As “another gaze” entered the scene of desire, as if an intruder had entered one’s private chamber, the scene of homoerotic desire had to be disguised” (Najmabadi, 2005: 38).

The normative pressure had effect on art as well. Portrayal of beauty became gendered and feminized by the end of 19th century, which meant not only the disappearing of depiction of male beauty and male same-sex loving couples, but also feminized representation of abstract or ungendered figures such as angels. Furthermore, Najmabadi (2005: 26) highlights that by “the end of the century, all embodied representations, such as the nation or the homeland, acquired sexed bodies” and thus “the language of representation underwent important shifts.” This had huge impact on the view of homosexuality. “By feminizing beauty and male-love in addition to the new normative pressure, homosexuality was made a taboo, marked with effeminacy and abjection” (Najmabadi, 2005: 59).

The strictness of condemnation of homosexuality in Qur’an depends on how one interprets the book. The discussions of course vary from ultra-conservative, literal word-to-word interpretations such as in Wahhabism and Salafism, to interpreting the text so that it conforms to the norms of the surrounding modern society. According to Jafari (2014: 33) “In general, the Qur’an makes no specific mention of homosexuals, although it explicitly states that sex is between spouses and/or masters and slave girls” and “since two men cannot marry, these verses exclude homosexual intercourse.”

5 “By the end of the nineteenth century, portrayal of beauty became differentiated by gender” (Najmabadi, 2005: 26). “Depictions of male beauty and male-male loving couples disappear” (Najmabadi, 2005: 26). ”In this process, beauty became not simply gender differentiated but feminized” (Najmabadi, 2005: 26). “As beauty became feminized, even abstract, previously ungendered figures, such as angels, became feminized” (Najmabadi, 2005: 26).
The sexual intercourse, sodomy is more directly condemned in other related religious texts. “It is in the tafsir and hadith literature (respectively, interpretations of the Qur’an and narratives attributed to the prophet Muhammad) that the full condemnation is formulated, with similar punishments for liwat and zina (heterosexual intercourse outside marriage)” (Najmabadi, 2005: 18).

As mentioned, the text can be interpreted differently. Yip & Khalid (2010: 90) underline the importance of modern interpretation “while the sanctity of the and the content of the text are upheld, the text needs to be interpreted through the lens of contemporary socio-cultural realities and knowledge, buttressed by the well-established Islamic practise of ijtihad or independent reasoning.”

The problem in Iran for example is the immense influence that the ayatollahs and the clerical leadership hold and who can intervene if the Islamic Republics values are in their minds jeopardized. Power and influence is very limited in the democratically elected parliament. Iran’s Guardians’ Council of 12 Islamic jurists for example decide whether laws passed by the parliament conform to the Constitution and Islam and if not they can veto (Borden, 2016). The clerical institution supervises the elections and decides who qualifies the criteria to run as candidate in the parliamentary and in the assembly of experts (designating and dismissing the supreme leader of Iran) elections, accepting record-low percentage of candidates in the 2016 elections (Borden & Maloney, 2016) and the majority of the reformist candidates were disqualified (HRW, 2016).

The lack of open democracy thus prevents for example the improvements of women’s and LGBT rights. Situation for the civic society is difficult in the country because hardliners who are backed by the supreme leader, block liberalization efforts and are against strong civic society (Freedom House). The interpretation of religious texts in Iran’s case is of immense importance for it has direct consequence on human rights situation there. Jafari (2014: 34) underlines that “exegetical interpretations are not provided by ulama or Islamic authorities but by Islamic scholars in academia” and “while these interpretations are useful in adding different perspectives to the field, they are ultimately eclipsed by all the sources that exist claiming Islam’s objectionable stance on homosexuality.”

The faith is nevertheless always personal and in more accepting, open-minded countries there are mosques profiling as accepting openly LGBTQ people. In Copenhagen there is also a female-run mosque. ETJC Unity Mosque in the downtown Toronto for example profiles itself as being “gender-equal, queer-affirming places of healing.” The mosque and its nonjudgmental spiritual community are not segregated by gender (Habib, 2016). There are also many queer Muslim movements, projects and activists striving for their place in the religious communities. One such is
for example ‘Just Me and Allah: A Queer Muslim Photo Project’ –blog6 gathering experiences of various people who are openly both, queer and Muslim.

The religious interpretation depends on the person, but it also reflects one’s social status. Yip & Khalid (2010: 89) mentioned how some of their participants, often those who were mainly highly educated “had access to, and were able to mobilise online and offline resources that challenged traditional and heterosexist exegesis of religious texts, and at times offered LGBTQI-friendly re-interpretations.” Thus in addition to the religious devotion, they had education and access to sources that made it possible to challenge the conservative interpretations. Yip & Khalid (2010: 92) emphasize that marginal “position often sensitises LGBTQI people to the taken-for-granted power relations embedded in the production and perpetuation of heteronormative and homonegative religious ‘truths’: ‘truths’ that enslave them in, rather than that free them from, the category of the sinful; ‘truths’ that undermine rather than affirm their human worth; and ‘truths’ that disempower rather than enable their spiritual growth.”

The question, “in your opinion is it possible to be both LGBT and Muslim?” proved hard to answer for the interviewees. I tried to soften the question by adding, “to be religious”, so that it didn’t sound outright ridiculous and potentially offensive. The formulation of the original question sounds as if two words would exclude each other or be in huge contrast, although it really depends on one’s personal faith. The question has, however, been often presented in such way in the media and as the interviewees native country happened to be Iran, and as the state is officially Islamic Republic it is relevant question that needed to be asked. Especially since the law and punishments against the Iranian LGBTQ people are interpreted from religious precepts of Islam, such as Qur’an and Hadith.

The interviewees had mostly secular backgrounds and most belonged to the middle-class. None of them were, or had hardly ever been, religious, though this didn’t equal to not being spiritual. Many saw the religious influence in politics as problematic and as the clear reason for the horrid situation of LGBTQ -people in Iran. Though most of the interviewees separated the public religion from public religious views, their own experiences had lead most to be sceptical towards combining LGBTQ –identity and Islam.

Aiden underlined it as a personal matter, though he felt the conflict with the religion deployed by the society:

6 Queer Muslim project <http://queermuslimproject.tumblr.com>.
“Being LGBT and Muslim at the same time. It’s very personal. Two different things... I am not a Muslim anymore. I was born as a Muslim, but... Ah, I don’t know, because... it’s two different things because, ah, it depends in your mind. No I don’t think so. How you can believe, you know...”

Researcher: “Combine?”

Aiden: “Yeah. It doesn’t work for me, it doesn’t work. How you can believe you know Islam, if they say you should get executed if you are gay? It’s like, I say that I’m gay, and I know Canada is my home and the Canadian government say that you should get executed, is it possible to, you know, how do I feel Canada is my home, if I’m not safe here? No, it’s, it’s not going, you can’t combine them. It’s personal.”

The extreme interpretation of Islam and the extreme punishments e.g. capital punishment, clearly effects to the feeling of belonging to such country. As Aiden highlighted, the lack of safety in such environment reflects to the impossibility of thinking your native country as your home. Not only are you persecuted, but also your identity is taken away, as unacceptable citizen.

Mason had a similar opinion, but maybe more direct or tough line:

“I don’t understand people who are gay and they ah... They are Muslim. Because I think, I think, I don’t think like Qur’an talks about it. And ah... People basically... There is a death penalty so... This is hard. I don’t want to get in an argue with someone who agrees with that cause I know the, conversation is not gonna get anywhere good but ah that’s my view on that. I don’t understand.”

When the religious identity is seen as disallowing or preventing your sexual identity due to the hostile attitudes of the religious community, it might cause you to question either one. Jaspal (2014: 53) mentions how some “participants were empowered to re-negotiate their relationship with their religious identity, which was seen as contradicting their sexual identity.”

Nathan pointed out that there are religious queers, but also that he sees the attitude of not just Islam, but also other religions as offensive towards LGBTQ people.

Nathan (through interpreter): “So he says there are people who self identify both as Muslim and also as religious and also as homosexual. And they seem to be living happily. But for himself, he doesn’t, he doesn’t get it somehow. It’s like something is missing in there, not only in Islam, but the religions, he thinks there is something that is extremely attacking the very being of him, as a homosexual.”

Liam and Owen were perhaps the most open towards a personal, gay-approving view on Islam.

Liam: “It could be [possible to be both LGBT and Muslim]. Everything is possible but it depends on the person, who believe in Islam and how he struggle with Islam and like contrast between Islam and being LGBT, gay or lesbian or homosexual, so yeah, it could be possible.”

Owen underlined that it depends on one’s own faith and how strictly one interprets the holy book though he saw rigorous following as potentially destructive.
Owen: “Of course it’s possible [to be both LGBT and Muslim], because there are so many Muslims who are also LGBT. But Muslim doesn’t necessarily mean religious or radical. So I would like to note that. But if, if, if you want to know like, if it’s possible to be LGBT and a radical or extremist Muslim. Then the answer would be no. Because the whole, the book, is like, well not just towards homosexuality, but towards everything else is like so harsh and like, so violent. Like it’s really violent. It’s like you should obey or you will be punished, so.”

Researcher: “If you strictly follow instructions in Qur’an?”

Owen: “Yeah, people would go insane. If someone is like, less fortunate and has been in very extremely religious family and then homosexual, it’s really small chance that they would survive. Because they would go mad, you know. Because of their’ own beliefs and what they really are.”

Only one of the interviewees told that his religious views had undergone a change that had something to do with emigrating. He saw the change as vital, in order for him to be happy.

Aiden: “It happened you know, it happened... before I came to Canada. But the religious view, what changed... When I came to Canada I just understood that, you shouldn’t have any religion. You don’t need it. You don’t need it. Maybe the best answer, you don’t need to be religious person to live. If you want to be happy, you don’t need it. If you don’t want to (be) happy, I think you need it (laugh).”

Owen underlined that he did process and undergo a phase of getting-to-know religion/s, but eventually found it wasn’t for him:

There was at some point in my life, ah, I tried to experiment religions, like, I wanted to know more. So kinda went after it a little. But then it got me like I was like no thanks, you know.”

Researcher: “Yeah, how old were you if I can ask?”

Owen: “I’m not sure, is, it’s also been a process, so it’s been through the years. But maybe beginning the age of nine to like thirteen or twelve, like when I was thirteen. It was like, it was, period that I was like looking for the answer in religions and stuff.”

Mason interestingly pointed out that he was basically having a language barrier, when reading Qur’an.

Mason: “I have never had one. I don’t come from a religious family. But, ah I, I never believed even as I child. I tried. But it was funny so I tell you something, to understand where we come from. Like we are Iranian, we read Farsi, and then we have to pray in Arabic. It’s like a French person or English person reading French, or French person reading English. So they can basically read it, it’s the same alphabet but you don’t understand what it says. So when it’s translated into Farsi it’s, bizarre kind of Farsi. The, when you finish the sentence it doesn’t make sense. So you pray to your god in another language, which when you read the meaning, you still don’t understand it, all again so... That will definitely make you an atheist.”
3.3. Turkey as Transit Country for Iranian LGBTQs

The time in the transit country while applying for the asylum is an important phase not only during the migration but also during the lives of refugees. It is a critical stop on the way for the asylum but also the refugees spend a considerable time there: the process can take years in uncertainty of whether your application will be accepted along with all the other possible difficulties of coping everyday life in foreign environment. This purgatory-like intermediate phase is bound to have an effect on the refugees’ experience between the earlier home in Iran and the ultimate home in the country of asylum.

Turkey is the most important transit country for the Iranian refugees. There are more than 26,500 registered Iranian refugees as of May 2016; in June 2016 1,046 were registered Iranian LGBT refugees (of total 1,177 LGBT refugees), 80% identified as gay men, 13% as lesbians and 7% as transgender) according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Ankara (IRQR, 2016).

All of the interviewees of this thesis applied for asylum in Turkey. “Iranian refugee applicants are required to register with the Turkish Ministry of the Interior, and with the UNHCR, the applicants are assigned to small ‘satellite towns’, where they are registered by the Turkish police and are required to stay during the time they are interviewed and evaluated through medical and sometimes psychological examination by the UNHCR and the embassy of the country of asylum” (Haritaworn et al. 2014: 99-100).

Liam’s refugee process had a rough start in the beginning:

“Ah the journey wasn’t that good. So I have, all I have was, the bad memories from Iran and the day I was coming to, so I decided to move to Turkey. Ah, the first step was asking my family, but they were, they didn’t let me, they didn’t accept it. So ah, it was, I came out from my home and no one didn’t say goodbye. So it was all by myself. Moved to Tehran. And after the day I just found [bought] a ticket and moved to Turkey.”

Aiden had also some difficulties when arriving to Ankara:

“I left Iran by bus; I got a ticket and I left, I came to Ankara, you know the capital city of Turkey and ... It was really hard because I didn’t know Turkish I couldn’t talk. And I got lost, first day and you know just one months before I had nose surgery. Yeah and when I came to Turkey I had everything on my nose and it was really hard, the first week was really hard.”

Owen had a quite different journey from the others, because he had been living abroad for a long time, though returning on a regular basis. He applied for the asylum in Turkey but he came there
from Dubai and Malaysia. The last time he left Iran was “a little sad,” because he already knew that
it was going to be the last time:

“...And like when I was on the plane I was like, fine, like bye. You know? And I was like
so used to going back to Iran, once a year, because I was living in Dubai so close. But
then I knew that I’m not gonna come back anymore.”

After arriving to Ankara (straight from Iran, except for Owen) the interviewees applied promptly
for an asylum. Nathan for example applied for refuge at the UNHCR the second day of his stay. All
applied after arriving and after this they had to wait for their process to come to conclusion. Aiden’s
precise date count reflects the frustration he felt for waiting:

“No I went to Turkey and stayed there like 18 months, 18 days and 18 months, like
that. And after that I came to Canada.”

The Iranian LGBTQ asylum seekers have to wait the decision a considerable time, considering as
Shakhsari (2014: 1001) underlines, they “are required to pay for their own basic expenses such as
housing, food, transportation, and healthcare.” The process took 15 months for Mason, almost 17
months for Nathan, 23 months and ten days for Owen and two years for Liam.

Nathan and Owen acknowledged that the situation in Turkey for Iranian LGBTQ refugees is
different from the other asylum applicants. They thought that the process was faster, because the
group is more vulnerable.

Nathan (through interpreter): “Yes, it’s, it’s quite different, it goes faster than the
other asylum seekers, because Turkey is also like traditional country, and because
they, it’s, it’s, difficult to provide the mental and social security to LGBT people, so
it’s, it’s faster than the other asylum seekers’ process.”

Owen: “Of course, it’s different in many ways. But it depends about what aspect
matter to people. The office work, the paperwork and everything goes faster than for
everything else, every other case. Because it’s considered as the first priority among
like women who are widowed or young girls who have no like, support or job or.”

The others were more sceptical about the difference in the process.

Liam: “They say it’s different but no, I don’t think so. It’s just the same.”

Mason: “I don’t know about that. Ah, so I wasn’t in touch with them and that’s very
personal, nobody talks about it so...”

Mason thus pointed out that the subject is obviously sensitive and that he wasn’t personally in touch
with other than LGBTQ -asylum seekers.

All of the interviewees had felt their stay in Turkey as difficult. Owen talked about the lack of a
support network, family.

Owen: “But then again like for LGBT people it’s, it’s also like the whole process as
like from their point of view, is so much more difficult because like there are so many
other cases that are just like with their families or like you know very much had this
like kinda planned... Like have a plan I mean. Like for their future, but like LGBTs are mostly like... Because they run away like... They like... I think it’s harder mentally, like, emotionally, to take it.”

Researcher: “Being alone.”

Owen: “Yeah like other people, well at least they have the connection with the families, you know, they have the support. But most of the LGBTs they have, like, no support, the bridge is broken, like, it’s behind you, there is no way back.”

The most common complain, however, was the conservativeness of the society. Almost all of the interviewees likened the atmosphere in the Turkish society as being similar to Iran. Liam for example answered:

“The difficulty is being in Turkey and the timing is too long. As you may know, Turkey, the society and people, they think like exactly as Iranians.”

Researcher: “So conservative and?”

Liam: “Yeah. And that just you have government freedom there but it’s just like Iran, which doesn’t happen any change.”

Mason: “[I believe it is more difficult for the LGBT asylum seekers], at least in Turkey, because in Turkey it’s just the government that is different, people have the same mind-set, of... being born Muslim, but that’s just my opinion. Not a lot of people like that but I think we were questioned more than if, I don’t know if you were political refugee there or you have wife or husband and have kids, so they look at you as normal people. But when you are gay people in your neighbour... It was, you could see they change, so...”

Aiden similarly highlights the asylum process is difficult for all, but the conservative atmosphere is making the time more difficult for the LGBTQ refugees.

Aiden: “It’s difficult because of; because of that point (waiting long time for the decision) but it’s difficult because you don’t have money you should, you should very, you should be careful. The government is not gonna support you. OR, for me you know, because I left Turkey... Turkish people are not very welcoming to you, you know.”

Researcher: “Conservative?”

Aiden: “Same culture, as I had in Iran. Still you know masculine. That’s why. And yeah it’s difficult. And yeah it’s more difficult for LGBTs. Yeah it’s more difficult.”

The conservative atmosphere is probably highlighted due to the placement policy of Iranian LGBTQ refugees in Turkey. According to Shakhsari (2014: 1012), Turkey’s placement policy is based on two points: “In order to prevent ‘‘illegal’’ entrance of refugee applicants to Europe, most Iranian queer and transgender refugee applicants are assigned to Denizli, Kayseri, Eskisehir, Nevsehir, and other small towns that are far from cosmopolitan centers or major ports near Europe” and that “the Turkish government sends queer and transgender refugees to conservative cities in order to expose the local population to queers in order to ‘‘open their minds.’’”
The policy of the Turkish government is alarming and extremely confusing and questionable. Shakhsari (2014: 1012) mention that “Considering Turkey’s pending case with the European Union, where being gay-friendly marks progress, this strategy is a normalizing move to regulate and manage both the local population and the queer and trans refugees.” This is basically the same as using the Iranian LGBT refugees as some kind of guinea pigs in an experimentation without really caring much about theirs wellbeing.

The ominous aim of this policy seems to be “normalizing” the queer refugees. The queer and trans placement policy is paradoxical to the protection of rights of queer refugees and is used to force ‘decent-seen’ behaviour on queers in order to avoid harassment and tension in the conservative cities (Shakhsari, 2014: 1012). Shakhsari also mentions the aim to “train the ‘homophobic locals’ in the regions of Turkey that are less ‘European’ in being ‘gay-friendly’ by exposing them to foreign queers, and to keep the boundaries of Europe from the dangers of non-European refugee influx through Turkish borders,” which are probably unlikely when thinking of the conservative regime and consequent threatening of Europe with refugees (e.g. Shaheen et al., 2016).

Nathan pointed out through the interpreter that even though most interviewees, including himself mentioned the normative pressure towards LGBTQ -people as coming from the society, he had noticed a conservative change also in the government’s policy.

Researcher: “Did you experience harassment or homophobia in Turkey?”

Nathan (through interpreter): “So he didn’t have any experience himself, but he had a Turkish friend that told him stories about the homophobia, and harassments that are going on. So the pressure is more from the society than the government, except for recently, but in general, the society is more harassing LGBT people than the government.”

Two of my interviewees pointed out that they were living in small or conservative cities and that the atmosphere over there was intolerant towards LGBTQ people and one of them had experienced homophobic violence.

Researcher: “And did you feel at home while in Turkey?”

Mason: “No. Not at all, unfortunately.”

Researcher: “Can you describe like why did you feel like...?”

Mason: “I was beaten off for, ah, along with my friends. On the streets, we were named, called, shout at and ah...”

All in all, I am sceptical about the will of the current Turkish government in correcting and liberating homophobic attitudes. The Ak–party has been under the control of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who is the current sitting president and who along with the party’s leadership has given
homophobic comments and been openly vocal against LGBTQ rights and politics aiming to improve the situation (Kaos GL, 2015). Turkey has been sliding towards more authoritarian, conservative direction with highlight evermore on religion. Erdoğan uses the religious and nationalist sentiments in enhancing his status. Istanbul Pride for example, a huge event, has been banned and violently supressed for the past two years for being held during Islam’s holy month Ramadan (Cunningham, 2016 & Vice News, 2016). Furthermore, the neutrality and objectivity of legal system has been undermined in both countries and Turkey’s failed coup in July 2016 caused purges in the court, media and elsewhere with more than 125,000 state employees sacked or suspended (Whewell, 2016). Policy of neutrality seems to fade from various sectors of governance on the pretence of Hizmet –movement’s involvement and threat.

The time spent in Turkey was considered by all to have been a stressful waste of time. Aiden put the palpable frustration in words:

“It’s difficult, for all, for everyone because the time that you spent there. You, it’s gonna become part of your life that you loose. Like two years, three years, one year and half, whatever you are staying there. You are gonna loose that time, you can’t do anything. You may learn, you know language that you don’t use anymore. Or you are gonna work somewhere that you don’t like. Or... it’s gonna become you know... Hope you pass very fast, as soon as you leave Turkey or what, wherever you go. You, you lost it.”

The fear of rejection is constantly present.

Researcher: “And how would you describe this process, was it simple or bureaucratic or?”

Liam: “It, for now it looks simple, but it wasn’t simple. It was like huge ah problem for me. Ah it takes two years. We had ah like three interviews, which has lots of stress. And we, all we can do was, waiting for phone call to know about our results, what happens to us, and it was, every, all the time fear of rejection.”

Mason highlights that frustration of just waiting and it seems that the place he was living in was making it worse.

Mason: “It was definitely hard. Yeah, so you go there, you speak, you don’t know what is gonna happen, you don’t know and then it’s long. I was one of the people who had the shortest time or process, whatever they say... I think about it right now and the fifteen months, and that’s a lot. But I know a lot of people and much longer they have to stay and... And basically you just wait. For someone like me, it was just staying in, I didn’t want to go outside, so... It was hard, and then you don’t know the language and then, they don’t speak English, a lot of them, or at least in the city where I was. So...”

Researcher: “In which city did you stay?”

Mason: “Kayseri, it’s a city close to Ankara (four hours or something like that).”
Mason mentioned how he had experienced homophobic harassment and violence there.

Endless-seeming bureaucracy and unfriendly officials were part of the process.

Nathan (through interpreter): “He doesn’t think it was simple at all, because there are so many different stages that you have to take. First you have to register and then you are pre-interviewed, being interview, which is for him, has been five hours session of questions, so he didn’t find it simple at all. He knows people whose interviews were longer than that.”

Owen: “It wasn’t any simple. It was very frustrating. Was like too much paperwork. That I really... I don’t know like... It’s like everyone has this giant case that is like you’re a criminal or something, and actually the view of the people who work in the office sometimes is really terrible. And then there are so many stages in different organisations and everything, then you have to do the embassy, and also the whole time you have to deal with the Turkish government and the police too so. It just comes with the process you know?”

Aiden got mental support from a boyfriend:

“Yeah it’s difficult, it’s really difficult, waiting, waiting and waiting and waiting. It’s really hard, when you that its one months. Every single day you are going to check the website. And nothing is going to be updated. You know, it’s hard. And I had my boyfriend, because after I came to Turkey, after like four months I got in a relationship with another guy. But, a lot of people are alone there. It’s going to be harder.”

The subject matter of the asylum bureaucracy can also be emotionally tough, with all the phases and questions that somehow aim to determine whether you really are a homosexual or trans. According to Haritaworn et al. (2014: 99), while “the UNHCR has improved its guidelines and produced literature to educate its staff, many asylum seekers have reported being asked invasive questions by the Ministry of the Interior in Turkey and the UNHCR about their preferred sexual position or the number of sexual partners they have had” and these “questions are meant to verify that applicants are ‘true refugees’, ‘true gay and lesbians’ or ‘true transgender’ individuals.”

Owen talked about his feelings of humiliation and untruthfulness in front of the Turkish officials:

[the refugees] ... “And considering like the Turkish government is receiving like so much money through the United Nations and also by the refugees themselves, because they bring so much wealth right. But still it’s like, they don’t want to spend any of it on them, like they still want to take, you know. Like they are doing it as a pity you know. Not that they are being paid for it. Like in my interaction with the, governmental people in Turkey I never, I always have this impression that they’re doing this for pity and like they are not being paid and like I have to thank them a lot and be like, you know.”

Researcher: “Apologetic?”

Interviewee: “Yeah.”
The situation for many queer refugees, in addition to the sometimes-hostile environment, is also financially extremely difficult. Day-to-day living can be extremely difficult. Haritaworn et al. (2014: 99) concludes that “According to a June 2009 report by ORAM (Organisation for Refuge, Asylum, and Migration), queer asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey often have limited or no access to financial support, face constant harassment from local townspeople, and experience work and housing discrimination (Unsafe Haven).”

Furthermore, the LGBTQ Iranians often lack the support network for the possible cut of ties with their families and friends in Iran. Bureaucratic hoops make it difficult for refugees to find work legally, so most asylum seekers get off-the-books jobs that pay enough money to pay rent for a small, shared room (Kalantari, 2015). According to (Kalantari, 2015) many “transgender Iranian women turn to prostitution to survive in Turkey.” My interviewees didn’t mention of experiencing or witnessing prostitution.

Nathan had received some kind of support from the Turkish health services. Nathan (through interpreter):

“So there isn’t insurance, so he hasn’t been receiving any help directly from government but he has been visiting like doctors and also like psychiatrists, which was paid by the government, so it was, it’s that kinda of help.”

Mason mentioned of monthly financial support.

Mason: “Yes, I did, it’s like something like $80 a month but it was very little, but helpful. So, very helpful.”

According to Shakhsari (2014: 1001) the “social security and solidarity fund, established under local governments, are responsible to help any person who arrives in Turkey and applies for financial aid” and that the “Provincial boards that are led by the deputy governor and members of the civil society meet to decide on the distribution of small amounts of financial aid to applicants.” However, the policy of placing queer refugees to conservative cities means that the political leadership there decides who will get assistance. “According to a Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly advocate, the boards in satellite cities are often conservative and therefore reject queer and trans refugee applications” (Shakhsari, 2014: 1001). Thus, the politics in Turkey have real life impacts on the placement and support of queer refugees, and the current government’s conservative line will most definitely also reflect to their lives there.

Most of the interviewees, except Liam, had received some kinds of help from at least one of various different kinds of NGOs helping refugees, queer refugees, Iranian refugees or LGBTQ -people in
Turkey. Aiden mentioned ASAM (Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants) that is an NGO helping refugees in Turkey.

Aiden: “There is an organisation there, which you know, which they call it ASAM. They help a little bit.”

Researcher: “Financially or...?”

Aiden: “No, just little, maybe they call, you know they call UNHCR or. No I didn’t get any financial help from any organisation.

Researcher: “So more like advices and....”

Aiden: “Yeah, like advices.”

Mason received support from Toronto-based IRQR (Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees).

Mason: “No nothing like... But financial I got, one time I got 500 dollars from IRQR. That time it was called IRQR, it’s IRQO (Iranian Queer Organization) I guess, I don’t know, if it’s the same, but, and ah but nothing more than that and basically a letter.”

Nathan mentioned being helped by Kaos GL (Kaos Gay and Lesbian Cultural Research and Solidarity Association).

Nathan (through interpreter): “So, at first when he arrived, he has been helped a lot by Kaos GL, it’s, it’s an LGBTQ support organisation in Turkey, which is very active, and also from different people he has been receiving help.”

Owen received some help from an INGO.

Owen: “Yeah I received, ah, some financial help once. By, by an organisation based in the States, who were focused on helping Iranian refugees in general, not specifically like LGBTs or anything.”

Owen told about the costs of being a refugee in Turkey, including the foreign identity card (kimlik):

“No financial help, no advice, more like orders than advice. And no accommodation, they actually charge people, like I had to pay, for my citizenship book. Well not the citizenship but the resident-ship [booklet]. Like kimlik, so I think that is really unnecessary and when you go to register yourself, like it’s something traumatizing. But they still ask you to go by this like folder-thingy-like [kimlik]. You know they make you to do things that are not necessary. I mean like if the police is like charging me 75 dollars for this little booklet that I can show to the police again, like I’m legal here. I would have appreciated it if they would have just given me this folder like for free, they can afford it.”

Furthermore the language barrier complicates procuring the kimlik.

Owen: “But they still sell it in the cafeteria for like three four bucks you know? And it’s like mental crash because so many people don’t speak like any Turkish so then they don’t understand when they are asking for this folder [kimlik]. This is something that I have witnessed myself, so the cop just starts yelling at them and insulting them in Turkish so. That’s like so traumatizing.”
Kimlik is necessity if one could even apply for medical or social services. Shakhsari (2014: 1001) underlines that albeit “the Turkish government provides limited social and medical services to refugees, this requires a fee-based foreign identity card (kimlik) and a temporary resident permit, which has to be renewed every six months,” however the “high cost of the kimlik and the resident permit are unaffordable for most refugee applicants who cannot find work, or work “illegally” and are paid low wages.”

However, not all the stories of the interviewees were about the frustrating subjection to the will of the bureaucrats. Aiden also told about his taking agency against an abusive ASAM official with the (perhaps involuntary) help of his landlord and the Turkish police:

“You know what, I have an experience in Turkey. I went to ASAM to get help, to get financial help. The officer, that they sent to check my house, you know, what they call it, owner. Yeah landlord. They said that I’m gay. And they have a bad word you know, they use, they don’t say that he is... And then I asked my landlord that what he said, he said you are like that. I went to police and I you know complained him.”

This took a lot of courage, because people often avoid being in contact with, especially foreign, officials. Haritaworn et al. (2014: 99) for example underlines that when “filing complaints with the Turkish police, they are encouraged to ‘dress like real men or women’ in order to avoid being harassed.” Aiden continues:

“And the government helped me in that. They asked him to apologize me, yeah, but I know that’s happening there, but many people don’t go for that. This is another thing that I feel strong. Because I said no you shouldn’t call me that. And, you know I had bad, I had a lot of bad experiences in my country, that’s enough for me. I came to get my freedom so I’m not gonna suffer here. And the government helped me, yeah.”

Furthermore Aiden thinks the law and freedom have the fundamental importance in helping the queer refugees.

Aiden: “I just wanna say something: that yeah, we got help because the freedom that I have here... The Turkey is part of that. I know if the government is not gonna help you then the UNHCR are. What would people do you know, gay people. So, maybe the law helped us. I don’t know, I think so, what do you think?”

Interviewees, especially Aiden, underlined the importance of freedom. Brown (2000: 48) mention that for lesbians and gay men, to “find a community through which they can be themselves, be ‘out’, they must migrate” and that “here the closet is a place that constrains freedom to act upon desire.” In contrast to Turkey, all felt they could be and fulfil themselves in Toronto.
3.4. Asylum, Canada

Canada has been applauded for its open immigration policy and multicultural approach. It also had the highest per capita immigration rate in the world in 2015 and the number has grown from 18,85 in 2005, 20,55 in 2010 to 21,08 in 2015 (Kirk, 2016). In 2015 it received 271,847 permanent residents of which Iranians were the fourth biggest group with 11,669 persons (16,772 in 2014) and 15,407 resettled refugees in 2015 of which 3,210 government-assisted, 4,365 privately sponsored, 240 blended sponsored, and 7,592 protected persons in Canada (Government of Canada)\(^7\). Toronto has one of the largest concentrations of Iranian Canadians. According to McLellan (2009) the Iranian diaspora in the city is “more than 150,000” in the greater Toronto area, including expats and political refugees. Toronto has also been mentioned as the unofficial capital for gay Iranian refugees (Strochlic 08.10.2014). All of the interviewees of this thesis were staying in Toronto during the interviews.

Canada’s refugee system is rather unique in respect to its Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSR). Private citizens can sponsor a “named” refugee; a relative or friend but often a total stranger and the sponsors are committed to providing emotional, material and financial support for one full year (Omidvar, 2015). Canada’s private sponsorships program started in 1978 in response to Indochinese refugees uprooted by the Vietnam War (Lum, 2015). It has facilitated resettlement of more than 275,000 privately sponsored refugees and Canada is beginning to export it around the world with the help of United Nations and billionaire George Soros (Raj, 2016).

Canada has been prioritising in resettling LGBTQ Iranians in Turkey to Canada. According to Robertson (Robertson, 2017a) “In late 2010, the government of former prime minister Stephen Harper made LGBT Iranians a priority for resettlement, asking the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) to refer to Canada any Iranians in Turkey fleeing persecution on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity” and that “Howard Anglin recalls the program starting just before becoming chief of staff to former immigration minister Jason Kenney in January 2011.” Canada allowed in roughly a hundred LGBT Iranians between 2009 and 2012, and doubled that rate by mid-2014 (Robertson, 2017a).

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However, the liberal government of Justin Trudeau pledged to take thousand of Syrian refugees in a tight schedule. For example in November 2015, Canada agreed to take 25,000 Syrian refugees before the end of the year in addition to Canada’s earlier pledge to receive 10,000 places for Syrian refugees before September 2016 (UNHCR, 2015). The prioritizing of Syrian refugees has unfortunately ensued Canada to stop taking LGBTQ Iranians with the exception of the privately sponsored refugees program. Robertson (2017b) mentions Arsham Parsi, the founder and executive director of IRQR, according to whom “it’s been more than 18 months when no one came to Canada,” except for three privately sponsored refugees.”

Therefore, Australia might be the only country of the three aforesaid countries (Canada, the United States, Australia) currently taking in Iranian LGBTQ refugees. According to Robertson (2017b) the weekly “arrivals gradually slowed in late 2015, and by 2016 the UNHCR started referring these Iranians to the United States, which has now barred Iranians from entry following President Donald Trump’s executive order on several predominantly Muslim countries” and that even though “US federal court has temporarily suspended the ban, it’s unclear whether the US government has resumed processing new or incomplete refugee claims.”

The Iranian LGBTQ refugees in Turkey fear they might be deported back to Iran for many on-going asylum application have been cancelled (Deghan, 2017). The second executive order travel ban for six majority-Muslim countries was blocked again by two federal court judges (from Hawaii and Maryland) however the case will go on (Laughland, 2017). As Canada and the US at the moment either no longer accept or cancel the UNHCR asylum applications, the Iranian refugees are left to permanent uncertainty.

Albeit Canada has been seen as the leading country in taking immigrants and refugees and being truly multicultural, the system has also received some criticism. Canada has been criticised for accepting only skilled, educated immigrants, which has caused brain waste due to the difficulty of finding corresponding job to their education and experience level (Challinor, 2011). The insufficient support has also been criticized. Refugees can be severely traumatized, depressed and unable or too powerless to find work.

Haritaworn et al. (2014: 95) point out to the death of Mahtab, Iranian transgender refugee who applied for asylum to Canada from Turkey and who, months after getting to Canada, eventually killed herself in her apartment after being asked to vacate her apartment as the terms of her subsidized housing had come to an end. The story of liberation was made into a film. “Mahtab’s statement ‘I know I am’ became the title of an award-winning Canadian documentary film that represents transsexual Iranians as victims of a fundamentalist state, in need of rescue by the ‘free
world” (Haritaworn et al., 2014: 101). However, according to Haritaworn et al. (2014: 102), while “Mahtab’s life in Iran was represented as an example of horrific situation of transsexual people in Iran, her story in Canada was never publicized in queer or mainstream media, neither did her story in Canada make it to any documentary films.” The Syrians coming to Canada have also told of being worried of how to support themselves after the one year monthly living allowance from the government ends, from which on they have to support themselves or enrol in the provincial social assistance program (Kassam, 2016).

The interviewees were without exception flattered from the reception of the Canadian authorities, as it was seen as a pleasant experience. Owen was amazed of the reception after the 32 hours long flight:

“The reception was amazing, so respectful and nice. As if like, you know, I knew it’s like that, but I still was like, ‘oh my god.’ You know what I mean, it’s just when you realize the difference, when it actually hit you, you know. Like I had the knowledge but when it actually saw it I was like wow. So it’s like that different.”

He was not only comparing the authorities handling in Turkey, but also in being and getting accepted.

Researcher: “Compared for example Turkey?”

Owen: “Yeah where I was, in Turkey right before. And not even, that far, like airport in Turkey to airport of Toronto you know. Because still in the airport like, you feel like okay you know. But it has been amazing, like I’m really, like really grateful. And from the airport they took a cap and took us to this centre, like they would do everything, they would do the, all the banking.”

Researcher: “Paperwork?”

Owen: “Yeah all the paperwork for like insurance like, your social insurance number, everything. And they do it for free, so like super helpful right? For someone who just arrived and has no clue.”

Liam also seemed to underline the contrast to his previous experiences with authorities.

Liam: “Ah, I can say it was the best part of my immigration. Ah, I was tired of like waiting, like all the time in Iran and Turkey. But by the, as I came to Canada, I met some good people and the officers, everyone, they are nice. They are good, they are, like, behave very well, like, like humane. It was a big help for me. Like they did all my paper works at the airport, which was, if I wanted to do that by myself was very complicated, so mostly good for me.”

Nathan gave a specific account of how well managed the reception was.

Nathan (though interpreter): “First of all, when your [his] case is approved, when he was still in Turkey, his ticket was paid by the Canadian government, as a loan, that he has to pay back, and then when they arrived because it was cold, they gave them really warm clothes in the airport, which was really nice, and it helped him a lot. And
then also in the beginning, the government helps you with getting your PR cards, getting your insurance, like opening a bank account, and also giving you advices on different aspects as such as medical or like also if you are looking for a house, and also for the first year, um the government gives you 800$ a month in order for you to settle down or find a job or decide what you wanna do here.”

When leaving behind the frustration of waiting and also the countries – both native and transit – where the attitudes towards sexual minorities were harsh, it can be liberating. Gorman-Murray (2007; 2015: 760) underlines how the “migration from a town, city, or nation considered homophobic (and in which one’s sexuality must be kept private) to a location in which homosexuality is more widely accepted (and in which a gay identity can be publicly performed) can therefore be seen as both a migration across wider scales and also as a move from in to out of the closet at the scale of the body.”

Aiden and Mason had equally positive experiences about the arrival in Canada.

Aiden: “Actually they kinda helped us a lot. Because when you come you know, when I came here, I didn’t know English. I didn’t have any friends. They helped us you know financially, so we could, we could you know rent apartment. And for one year, they helped us to (a lot of things?) like find a doctor, they way to get into college or, a lot, a lot. And I’m, I’m so happy. That I chose Canada.”

Mason: “At first I arrived at Montreal. Yes, they were very helpful, even there was this lady who spoke Farsi. She was social worker, so they brought her to us, cause we didn’t know French. My English wasn’t that good at that time. And ah so that was a big help, but whole process was very smooth so I arrived in the airport, so they give me, the moment I arrived, I was a landed immigrant, so I wasn’t a refugee anymore. And then, everything went smoothly, it was perfect.”

The interviewees told about certain practical difficulties in settling down. Three mentioned having language barrier in the beginning and the different climate was something to get used to for some. Mason arrived in Montreal, so he had to learn another new language, French. Liam and Owen mentioned the cultural differences.

Liam: “The difficult in Canada, for some of us, when we come to Canada, the culture is maybe, have some difficulty, although it’s not that hard cause we have Iranian around and same cultures around but it’s different. And ah, but I, I had some help, although I didn’t feel any difficulty.”

Owen: “It took me a month, to just realize where I am. Like for one month everything was so vague and I was like what is happening you know, because everything changes right. Like everything I would see in a street is like different, the weather is different, you know everything.”

However, Owen took the differences from the point of view of exploring, and all the three generally rejoiced about the beginning of their stay.
Aiden told almost exactly the same things about having language barrier and the cold weather in February when he arrived but regardless getting along very well. He however put an emphasis on his own willingness to do well:

“I knew that I have to make my life, you know so. The only thing that is was expecting was help me, you know, help me to find a way, and they helped me.”

Nathan also mentioned the difficulty of language barrier with which he struggled. Nathan (through interpreter):

“It’s possible to settle down in a year or two easily, but because he wasn’t in a happy place mentally when he arrived, it took him longer than that.”

Nathan thus thought that his initial problems were his private ones, which didn’t have much to do with the new country. He also pondered that five years might be enough to integrate into the society in best scenario.

The multiculturalism of the Canadian society was mentioned by several of the interviewees as an important facilitator of integrating into Canadian society.

Owen: “I think this is really good point in history of human beings like cities like this that have people from over one hundred countries. All living in a same place but still coexisting you know. Without considering race or religion or stuff, well there are still of course exception but like... I think when there are so many nationalities living in a place then it would be really hard not accept people who are different than you. It would, it would depend on the person more than other you know. Because everything you see is different. But I find it very positive and it was kind of like that in Dubai, too.”

Most of the interviewees also told they had a contact in Canada. Nathan knew some LGBT members, who helped him a lot in the beginning. Mason who arrived in Montreal, met people through Internet:

“So while I was in Turkey, I chatted, made friends, I used to be smart.”

Mason also underlined importance of learning the language as a key to integration:

“Yeah. I think it’s difficult if you don’t know the language well. Yes, and I see it, like, a lot of people take side of their background, their ethnicity, they struggle with the language a lot. So when you want to go to a job interview or you wanna make friends in classroom... It’s important to know English well. So I think that is the only difficulty. The rest just comes forth.”

Liam was underlining the open-mindedness of Canadians, which makes it easier.

The competence in language as a gate to a job or other occupation in the society and consequently to integration was visible in the career paths of the interviewees. Liam and Nathan were studying English and Nathan and Aiden had jobs were the language was not a barrier. All of the three told
about the help of the community. Liam was pushed to study by a sponsorship group that also helped him to find the school and helped him in his studies. Nathan, besides studying English, got a part-time job as a cleaner through some close friends, while Aiden was working as a cook for a Persian guy.

Aiden: “Someone told me there is [a restaurant] there and the owner is Persian. You don’t know to know English, and I went there a lot and he wasn’t hiring anyone. But because I went there many times he said okay, come here I have like three hours in a week. Three years ago. And I started to work there.”

Owen was really enthusiastic about his job in a vegan and gluten-free restaurant:

“It’s been so amazing for me to start with this job, because it happened like three months after I started become vegetarian. So I’ve been like really passionate about it and like, it has been my main focus since I started it. My manager gives me so good feedbacks. She like actually told me that you can be a manager at one point, at one of the branches.”

Mason was currently studying finance. He used to have a career, but he had to take some time of because his brother had died more than a year ago. He was starting to study again in a month.

The freedom to express one’s sexual identity in Canada was seen as undeniable. Liam seemed almost incredulous of the question:

“Oh, of course (laugh).”

Aiden underlined the importance of self-acceptance before the society:

“Easier than anything else. Actually I’m okay with that, I don’t care if I’m gay and I wanna say that, anyone has problems or not. That’s why I feel free.”

Owen saw the situation from a slightly different angle, emphasizing how the excellent LGBT rights situation reflects in the easiness of being yourself without being too conscious about your being:

“I am not very conscious about that [the freedom of sexual expression] to be honest. Like, it’s so free that it’s not really in my control. So…”

Cities often attract LGBTQ people who in certain bigger towns used to, and still do gather into so-called gayborhoods. Although I didn’t ask the interviewees’ opinion on the city’s gayborhood, centred on Church St and Wellesley St, all underlined the easiness of living in Toronto as an openly gay man. Gay neighbourhoods or villages are sometimes seen as diminishing as the increasing LGBTQ rights are making cities safer for the LGBTQ people, nonetheless Ghaziani (2014: 168-169) for example underlines that “Antigay bias, both real and perceived, will sustain a need for gay neighbourhoods, regardless of whether sexual minorities ever achieve full equality.”

Mason was however more sceptical [about being able to express one’s sexual identity freely in Canada] and had interesting insight:
“Not always, no. No all the time, but... you need to know the boundaries. And the limits... But like some of it makes sense, so. But some of it takes the freedom away. But it’s not extreme or something that bother you or. Five years ago I moved to Toronto from Montreal. So I wanted to start working at a café, and then the first thing that... the manager told me that you have to take your brow piercing, I used to have a brow piercing, take off your earring, and ah... So that was too much for me, like I didn’t expect that.”

Mason was underlining the boundaries as becoming evident in the workplaces, public places where you have to be and behave according to public norms and regulations.

Mason: “I could do that in Iran, at least at some parties (laugh) and then but, when I thought about it after, I was like yeah that is working place. You are gonna work, you are not going there for style or you are gonna tone it down, somehow, but I didn’t know it that time. But I think a lot of people think that way, so... That’s the kind of boundaries I meant.”

The LGBT community in Toronto was seen as being active, strong and powerful with good and useful NGOs and workshops. Most of the interviewees had taken some part in community activities, though not very actively. Mason was the least active for personal reasons, but wished he were more involved.

Mason: “Not actively unfortunately not I, because I’ve been dealing with my own issues, my own problems and I didn’t think I was a good candidate to help anybody else. I’m not in the right path myself yet. But ah... I try to get involved in support groups, I think ah... It’s good they are doing well. They are doing, they’re doing their best. And I gladly, anytime I contribute anything as such so I, I try to do it.”

Aiden emphasized the appreciation he felt, while on the other hand feeling that he had a full like without the need to be involved.

Aiden: “I’m a sociable person but you know the problem is as long as I have my life, I don’t wanna get involved. But I know about the LGBT communities, for example there is an organisation, which is called five nineteen⁸ (519), we know about that, they give us a lot of information, but I don’t go there a lot because I’m working, I’ve had boyfriend for five years and that’s why.”

Aiden experienced the city’s LGBT community as very good where he feels happy:

“I see a lot of people, you know, they are older than me. They are 40, 50, 60 and they are happy. You know they had bad times as well, but whenever I got there, I feel free. That’s why I feel happy. And I see, I am not alone. A lot of people, you know older than me are gay and they, they are happy and they are free and they have their life, they have their kids. So I see my future and also I see that the society is accepting me.”

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⁸ The 519, according to their website is a City of Toronto agency, which “is committed to the health, happiness and full participation of the LGBTQ community” with innovation model to make a real difference in people’s lives, while working to promote inclusion, understanding and respect.
The answer was extremely interesting. I felt that he compared his past to theirs, while pointing how the future can be bright.

Nathan had been involved in workshop that had been in Farsi, held by Canadian Iranian LGBT community. Owen had attended some workshops and was currently part of an interesting bridge building project with an organization called Iranian Women of Ontario.

Owen: “Actually it’s called introducing the LGBT society to the Iranian community. So it’s like building a bond just letting them get to know each other. Yeah and I’m also like... very willing and trying to participate as much as I can, especially in these non-profit organizations, they are like, they are doing the best they can, you know.”

I regret not asking each of my interviewees a separate question of whether they went to gay bars and how they experience those spaces. Liam said he did not go to gay bars or clubs “a lot” (since I accidently asked if he went there “a lot”):

“No, maybe just once in two months.”

Mason told as well that he didn’t go out much, but added:

“There was like a Persian New Year [Nowruz] party. Not long ago, I attended that. You know it’s the vibe, the music, you can, you know, it brings you back like, it’s spring, so it’s two weeks of holiday so you, I... You can never forget that... I think the events that people plan, like that, they are amazing, they so cool because it gives you that vibe, it makes you happy. You try to act like that time. When you were happy, so it’s beautiful, so... But I think this is bad that I only go to parties (laugh).”

The bar and club scene was connected also to the way the interviewees told they had met their friends in Toronto. Nathan said [to question where he had made friends] “everywhere” and listed outdoors, clubs, gay clubs, Pride, profile pages, Grindr, social apps:

“Yeah I was so busy when I came here.”

Aiden also mentioned parties:

“Yeah, I’ve made friends here. In my workplace or community’s, parties, finding friends you know, in applications things like that. Yeah, and what should I say... Yeah, I’ve made friends. Are you asking about Canadian friends or what? Yeah I have Canadian friends, Korean friends, Persian friends...”

Social apps were used by at least three interviewees. However, Mason underlined that the difficulty in making friends was the issue with trust.

Mason: “I met people through online apps and social media, plenty of ways, I donno, there are lot. And then at school, at work and sometimes parties or clubs or. But ah yeah, it’s hard to make friends in here. It’s... the matter of trust, so... It takes time but I’ve done it. So I have few friends so...”

Most interviewees still mentioned school and work, face-to face environments, as important places to meet new people.
Liam: “Yes I did, now I make friends ah, I made them socially, and ah I made them at school, and I met them at work. And so, we started meeting each other as a friend.”

Owen mentioned that the other side of meeting new people is that one also often loses some:

“I have made friends. I have met them through my other friends mostly. Or, I have made friends in the workshops I was attending. And I’ve also lost friends, so... It’s like a balance you know, like... Getting some new people in your life and then also letting go some others.”

I hope I would have asked additional questions of how the friendships endure during the migration.

The interviewees’ perspective to social problems in Toronto was mostly not personally experienced, but often witnessed.

Researcher: “And have you experienced any social problems in Toronto, for example racism or?”

Liam: “Ah a bit, yeah. So it wasn’t all about me. It was about other but I heard sometimes about people that they may not like some races and they just, but it wasn’t bad. But I had experience of that.”

Researcher: “Have experienced any shouting on streets or?”

Liam: “No.”

Few mentioned law as being important in preventing racism.

Mason: “Sometimes I feel like that. Then I... Get to this conclusion that it’s only in my head. Or at least that is the way I deal with it. Sometimes, but it’s there. It’s like here in Toronto there are people from 170 nations you basically face racism or comments like that but it’s not allowed in here because ah, law is very straight forward about it in here so...”

Researcher: “Have you experienced shouting or anything like that?”

Mason: “Ah, no not shouting, never. Never shouting.”

Nathan had also seen some racism every now and then, but said (through Interpreter) that:

“Because the law kinda bans racism and stuff. it’s like a matter of fact, less people actually approach that.”

He had also been asked couple of times with sarcasm if he was from the army in Iran but the experience hadn’t bothered him much. He explained it also by his non-Iranian looks:

“Because he doesn’t look a lot like Iranians.”

Researcher: “And you haven’t experienced any homophobia while in Canada?”

Nathan: “Sometimes.”

Only Aiden mentioned having experienced racist and also homophobic shouting.

Aiden: “Racism. You know, there is an interesting thing, that is... I remember two women. I was crossing the street with my friend that they called us bad thing. Okay. And I understood that homophobic people are everywhere. And it depends you know
on culture. And the law if the country is supporting gay people, people have to stop being homophobic. Yeah I had a bad experience but it doesn’t represent all Canadian people to me. But I still feel happy, you know I feel happy.”

Owen emphasized how big and deep-rooted problem racism really is, especially towards people of colour.

Owen: “I have been exposed to racism. Like I have witnessed it myself, maybe like once or twice.”

Researcher: “Have you yourself experienced shouting or?”

Owen: “Well at me, no. Nothing, that was towards me, but towards others. Like I’ve seen racism towards black people. And it’s like really real matter. It’s... I feel like it’s very deep. Something that is so deep in people, you know that is like very pre-judgemental reaction you know. Even though the whole society and... Is very diverse. But still it’s like colour is like...”
4. Home & Belonging

The ideas of home and belonging are complicated for queer subjects in exile, because the whole concept of an original home is often problematic. According to Cant (1997: 1) “Lesbians and gay men differ from other groups of migrants in that there is no homeland that can validate our group identity.” Fortier (2002: 189) continues: “the interesting twist to the narrative of the exile is that queers constitute a different diaspora because the original site of trauma is not the basis of coherence.”

The homeland is often seen and highlighted as restricted, and heterosexual. “Suspended between an "in" and "out" of the closet – between origin and destination, and between private and public space-queer entitlements to home and a nation-state remain doubtful as well” (Eng, 1997: 32). Queer research has often challenged the importance of nation states to queers. “For some, ‘queer diaspora’ rests on claims about the condition of exile and estrangement experienced by queer subjects, which locates them outside of the confines of ‘home’: the heterosexual family, the nation, the homeland” (Fortier, 2002: 188).

The immigrants don’t all share a longing for their native country or home. “Although traumatic displacement is a distinctive feature of diasporic dispersal, reducing diaspora to forced dispersal holds the potential problem of assuming the primacy of an original placement” (Fortier, 2002: 188). Brah (1996: 197) furthermore underlines that “Contrary to general belief, not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return.” Fortier (2002: 188) points out that underlining the homeland can risk “engulfing diasporic populations into culturally unified groupings by virtue of their presumed ‘common origin’ and shared commitment to the homeland.”

The permeability of borders has similarities with the concept of queer – the land as if being naturally “categorically empty”, without human made borders or such. Knopp (2004: 124) explains how underemphasized in his opinion “is the attachment that many queer people—especially gay men—feel to movement itself, and a corresponding ambivalent relationship to both placement and identity.” The migration in itself might evoke feelings of questioning belonging. To paraphrase Eng and Hom (1998:1) “is there always something curiously queer – something curiously divergent, contradictory or anomalous – that arises from the experience of migration” (Fortier, 2003: 128)? Locating and identifying yourself can at least become more complicated.

The interviewees of this thesis associated “home” strongly with “safety”, “freedom”, “peace” and “happiness.” In a telling contrast to their stories from Iran and Turkey and in agreement with their
positive feelings about Canada, the interviewees clearly located their “home” where they currently were.

Mason: “Ah, god, that is such a good question! How do you understand the concept of home ... I think home is where you are happy. Where you feel free, you feel happy, you can be you, and ah... But you got to build it first. So... I don’t think, I don’t necessarily think home is where you are born or you grew up. Cause you are not always gonna stay there or, as you see...”

Liam: “The home, the home is somewhere you feel safe and be happy and have your friends around.”

Nathan: “Philosophic question. Home is where you feel safe, where you can be creative, and where you always have to be happy.”

Owen linked the feeling of (being at) peace to home:

“More like, it’s like, for me it’s like, home is where you lay your head. Like maybe even everyday. Like there are times when I stay at my friends and I feel at home, you know. Peace maybe, home is where peace is like... You are like completely in peace.”

Owen also said that home signified a sanctuary to him:

“It’s like a sanctuary from the worlds outside for me, this place, like... It’s like the moment I walk in I am so relaxed.”

The often-mentioned safety and happiness were seen as important for self-expression, making it possible for you to be creative and yourself.

Aiden: “Where you feel free. Where you feel happy. I can’t say... Where you feel that you are yourself. You can express yourself. It’s gonna be your home.”

From Mason’s and Aiden’s answers it can be understood that “home” is associated with oneself:

“You can express yourself. It’s gonna be your home”...”Where you feel free, you feel happy, you can be you”...”But you got to build it first.”

Therefore the idea of “home” and the idea of personal happiness are intertwined – a home is a home when lived by a happy person and what makes person happy is the home that allows him/her to be happy. Home constitutes the boundaries for safety and peace (“the sanctuary”), which enables self-expression and happiness. And as Mason underlined, home is not necessarily located in one’s hometown or in your native country as long as the qualifications are met.

All of the interviewees considered Canada, instead of Iran, as their home now. Aiden and Liam highlighted how happy they felt in Canada. For Aiden the happiness and freedom of home covered the whole nation of Canada.

Aiden: “I said, wherever you know, you feel happy. And Canada is my home now. Actually, a lot of people ask me do you feel happy, I say yeah, I am a Canadian now and I feel happy. I like Canada more than Iran.”
The feeling of happiness could carry Liam over the economic hardships of living in Toronto and he highlighted feeling more at home there than he did in Iran.

Liam: “Yeah I, recently think about Canada that is my home. So I’m supposed to stay the rest of my life, for now, so I mean ... So but Canada is my home. Cause I, as I told you, I feel safe here, it’s happy, it’s kinda hard to live in Toronto but ah, it’s about expenses. But yeah, I feel home here more than in Iran, yeah.”

Owen also mentioned feeling immediately at home in Canada. However, the way he put it, Canada was not so much a home waiting to be found as a place that made it possible for him to set up the home that he was carrying with him:

“Oh definitely Canada is my home now. And I don’t think Iran, Iran hasn’t been my home for so many years, now. So... Again for me like, Canada has been home for me since the day I landed here. And it’s going to be as long as I’m here.”

Nathan seemed similarly to carry his home with him, although from his words it is possible to read that he had not felt it as easy to build home in Canada, as it had been for Owen. Mason underlined that saying Iran, as his home is indication to his background:

“Canada is definitely home. Ah, I call Iran home as figure of speech, it come naturally and I believe it’s, I’m not saying that I hated it, no, I definitely... IT’s a love-hate relationship. It’s really hard to explain. But if the political situation changes I definitely go back to visit (laugh). But Canada is home. Because I’m, it’s where they support me, I get loan. They support me every possible way, emotionally, financially ... Yes there are steps (loans) that I’m gonna have to pay back but they are not gonna hang you for that. So, and yeah... Definitely Canada is my home. Yeah.”

Mason underlined that the saying of Iran, as his home is more similar to indication to his background, empty of any significance it should have. Canadian society had instead supported Mason in “every possible way,” like a dwelling that should provide shelter.

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Many of the interviewees highlighted how difficult their time spent in Turkey had been. So I had to ask if they had felt at home in Turkey. Most of the interviewees had had tough time in Turkey, either for the frustration or for the outright hostility they had faced. Also living somewhere just temporarily, waiting to go somewhere else, can also explain the common answer of not feeling at home in Turkey.
Liam: “Not actually, cause I all the time just wait for leaving Turkey. Like to leave to go to my final destination.”

Mason: “Not at all. Unfortunately. I was beaten off for, ah, along with my friends. On the streets, we were named, called, shout at and ah... Again I think we were living in a religious city. But ah... That doesn’t explain, what, what went on. In that, so...”

Mason had already told that he didn’t want to go outside, when staying in Kayseri and how frustrating therefore the waiting in Turkey had been for him. “Tolerant or liberal local environment can make the home feel a safer place, whereas bigoted, homophobic neighbourhoods are obviously more confining” (Munt, 1995; Valentine, 1995a; Elwood, 2000 in Valentine, 2002: 154).

Aiden immediately denied feeling at home in Turkey. He also gave reasons that could have helped him to get that feeling – knowing the language, liking the country – but apparently they weren’t enough.

Aiden: “No. No. Even though I know Turkish, ah, I learnt, I had to learn. Ah, I liked Turkey, but no.”

Owen was something of a case apart compared to the other interviewees, because he had been living abroad, in Dubai and Malaysia, in the past. This had prepared him to be able to find his nook also in temporary circumstances and by himself. He was the only one of the interviewees who had eventually felt at home in Turkey.

Researcher: “Did you feel at home while in Turkey or Dubai or in Malaysia?”

Owen: “That’s so many... I did feel at home in Turkey, maybe not the first couple of months because I had no connections to the culture due to the language barrier. Same thing with Dubai, it took me like, a little longer to just adapt and feel at home. Because I was always missing Iran, when I was really young. And then in Malaysia I felt at home. I think I did, or maybe I learnt to feel at home in Malaysia. Because it was actually the first time like in my entire life that I’ve been completely away from all the family members [...] And I would like to add that I didn’t really integrate into the Malaysian society due to the like really short time I was there.”

Owen also underlined the importance of being able to speak the language in the new country.

Researcher: “Do you think language is important in feeling at home, that you understand the language in the country.”

Owen: “Oh yeah definitely, definitely. Because when you can communicate, you can move on with your life. But as long as you can communicate and you hold everything in, like I think the problem due to the language barrier, not necessary is the disability to communicate, but the fact that people can’t express themselves and it kinda like, creates depression and isolation, you know. Yeah it definitely is important; it’s like the main factor, the language and the culture.”

Thinking of some space as one’s home, feeling attachment to it, make it also easier to figure out the world. Massey (1994: 172) emphasize, “for the new complexities of the geography of social
relations to fear and anxiety, both personal identity and ‘a place called home’ have had to be conceptualized in a particular way – as singular and bounded.” I argue that this feeling of belonging and attachment to a place is important. Underlining the sense of belonging perhaps sometimes simplifies the world and the place in question but it can be useful in getting knowledge. The ties felt to the one’s surrounding reflect the alienation or attachment felt and consequently also the society and one’s history there.

The estrangement felt can reshuffle one’s feelings of belonging to a place. Hooks (1990: 148) writes, “At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations.” Thus, alienation, estrangement and the difficulties along the way can also give one new perspectives to home-place.

To ‘feel at home’ has similarities to being in nature, certain nonchalance, for you shouldn’t be too conscious or concerned of your behaviour. “Who’s he when he’s at home? is the hardest question to answer, and the least interesting, because when he’s at home, he doesn’t need to be anybody” (Joseph, 2010: 17). Joseph (2010: 17) further underlines that it’s “when he’s not at home that his identity matters.” When one feels ‘at home’ somewhere one feels safe and relaxed, so thus this does not necessarily mean one’s apartment or dwelling, or wider concept such as homeland, for everybody might not be able to be himself or herself there but instead, strives to find for such safe space and place.

My last set of questions tried to map the interviewees’ connections to the Iranian community of Toronto. Liam and Mason weren’t active in the community, while Nathan intended to become more active. Owen stated that he wasn’t that interested in Iranian networking, although he was participating in a project by an NGO connecting the Iranian and the LGBT communities. He saw his work there more as a separate task.

Owen: “I’m not actively involved in the community but I’m more like, I’m producing the message for them. Like I’m doing the art part of the project, so.”

Aiden was the only one explicitly active within the community.

Aiden: “Yeah a lot, a lot, yeah. Because [of] parties and [I] go to workshops, I have Persian friends.”

Community-wise, LGBTQ diaspora might quite often differ from others immigrant communities. “Whereas other refugee groups stick together, LGBT individuals sometimes isolate themselves with distrust and paranoia, according to Ariel Shidlo, a psychologist specializing in LGBT refugee mental health” (Strochlic, 2014). Strochlic (2014) further underlines, and again cites Shidlo: with “Iranians in particular, he says, there is “a lot with strong internalized homophobia and a lot of other
psychological issues that create barriers from reaching out and really accessing the community resources.” Most interviewees hadn’t been in Canada for that long and were focused on getting their lives on track, integrating and therefore, also hadn’t had that much time to be involved.

“Diaspora” might also not be the right word to describe the feelings felt by all of the Iranian LGBTQ people, for the term is also heavily linked to identifying yourself with the Iranian community and having a bond with the native country. Indeed, relations with the homeland are, for many social theorists, crucial in ascertaining diasporas and diasporic subjects” (Conner, 1986; Safran, 1991; Tölölyan, 1996; Cohen, 1997 in Fortier, 2002: 188). Most of the interviewees of this thesis said that they had not been involved or in much interaction with the Iranian community.

The “queer diaspora” view on former home is, all in all, quite different from its non-queer equivalent. “If conventional diasporic discourse is marked by this backward glance, this “overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for ‘times past,’” a queer diaspora mobilizes questions of the past, memory, and nostalgia for radically different purposes” (Gopinath, 2005: 4). Gopinath (2005: 4) underlines that rather “than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history, what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and theviolences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles.”

Hostile environment can make you question your belonging to a place, when you are being or you feel alienated. Also, the national imaginaries of belonging mentioned by Chávez (2013: 10), often exclude both migrants and queers as citizens. Fortier (2002: 194) underlines that “queering diaspora challenges naturalist assumptions about the heterosexist foundations of both the nation and ideas of ‘home’, which is not to say that queer is a refusal of home and ideas of family that are often associated with it.” However, she emphasizes that “Closer scrutiny into multiple evocations of home/land within narratives of queer diasporas would offer a more complex, and less uniform view of ideas of home and nation.”

When asked about the Torontonian Iranian attitudes towards the LGBT people, three of the interviewees didn’t see much difference between the Canadian community and Iranians back in

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9 “Once used to describe exiled and forced dispersal of Jews or Armenians, ‘diaspora’ is now widely used to describe transnational networks of immigrants, refugees, guest-workers and so on” (Fortier, 2002: 184). “Central to its definition are ‘push factors’, that is, forced migration or displacement” (Clifford, 1994; Gilroy, 1994: 207 in Fortier, 2002: 184).
Iran. Owen told that it’s not easy for him to answer, because he hadn’t been in Iran for so long, but told that the Persians in Canada, though not “yet” accepting, were curious in a child-like, intruding manner. Mason and Aiden thought better of their compatriots. Mason said that his only close contact to straight Iranians was a couple from his neighbourhood

—“We are very good friends, live very close by ourselves. And ah they have no problem whatsoever with gays”—

But he believed the community was also generally more accepting, though he did have stories of homophobia regarding

“Persians, and also non-Persians.”

Aiden, who had been the most active in the Iranian community, thought almost unconditionally, that Iranians in Canada were more accepting. However, even his answer begun by referring to the Canadian laws that forced people to behave. He also strongly underlined the effect and importance of unprejudiced information. In fact, according to his representation of the Iranian community it seems to be already on the next level of understanding and acceptance, so there seems to be an underlying idea of progress.

Aiden: “First of all they have to be [more accepting]. But I think so, yeah. They are better than Iranian people who are living in Iran. Because. They have information, as I said, a lot of people don’t know about the LGBT’s in Iran. But here, they understand, they know more. Because they have kid, who are attending schools. They are gonna talk to their family. Or they see gay people. They are attending, you know, gay pride. They come to enjoy. But at the same time, they, you know they are gonna get the information’s. So yeah, they are better than Iranian people who are living in Iran.”

Compared to the participation in the Iranian community in general, the interviewees seemed more eager to participate in the Iranian LGBT community in Toronto.

Owen: “Yes I am [active], I’m trying to be, I’m, I’ve been involved with one [NGO] and I’m really trying to.”

Researcher: “In NGO?” “Yeah, and not that one, another one, which is called Shelter Care. So yeah I actually have participated in the workshops and....”

Nathan had also tried to be active in the NGOs and praised their work.

Nathan (through interpreter): “There are a few and some of them are really good and like actively processing and for him as much as he finds the time, he tries to participate, even if it’s just one event or something.”

Mason: “There are few [NGOs of Iranian LGBTQ –people]. One of them is IRQR and one is Shelter Care... and I believe there is a third one. I’m not sure. But ah, hmm I’m not involved. As I said I try to attend their like public gathering sometime. So there is but I am not involved.”
Another interviewee mentioned that they have a small Iranian LGBT community in town.

Aiden: “Yeah, we have a small community. As I said, I’m involved. Yeah, workshops and... I try to work with organisations, if I can, if I’m you know useful for them. I try to help them.”

He had also been participating in an NGO’s work in his former transit country, Turkey, where he had spent a week helping Iranian LGBTQ –refugees around the country.

Aiden: “I went to Turkey once. To you know, I was working as, as a volunteer, in an organisation and they asked me to go to Turkey, to have interviews with, gay people, with LGBT people and I went there, yeah. As much as I can.”
5. Multiple Identities

Identity is often complex term to which space and place and social relations have strong defining role. “Identities are inscribed through experiences culturally constructed in social relations” (Brah, 1996: 123). Valentine (2002: 146) underlines, “space is understood to play an active role in the constitution and reproduction social identities and, vice versa, social identities, meanings and relations are recognised as producing material and symbolic or metaphorical spaces.”

Social identity defines itself often with the ostensible binary identity. Binary identities definitional differences are however often based on thin ice. Queer is used to alleviate this constantly reminded contrast, for example in gender or sexual identity. Clare (2015: xxvii) mentions how “Today I live in the world as a man, even while my internal sense of gender is as a genderqueer, neither man nor woman”, while “At the same time, I have no desire to abandon or disown my long history as a girl, a tomboy, a dyke, a woman, a butch.” The complex, historical process of giving different shades of meanings, nuances for example to LGBT categories, is why queer, the “categorically empty” interests many. Gorman-Murray & McKinnon (2015: 759) for example underline that at its core, “queer theory rejects sexual and gender binaries in favor of fluidity and complexity, finding sexual identity and its role in space not as fixed and constituted but iterative and mutable.”

When researching multiple identities, it is important to be conscious of the specific experience each person has gone through, and queer is used to alleviate the burden on the identity. Luibhéid (2008: 170) underlines, “rather than inscribe migrants from extraordinarily diverse backgrounds within a developmental narrative of LGBTQ identities, many scholars instead deploy the term queer to acknowledge that all identity categories are burdened by legacies that must be interrogated, do not map neatly across time and space, and become transformed through circulation within specific, unequally situated local, regional, national, and transnational circuits.”

One can identify with several (other) social identities. According to Brah (1996: 123), “Identities are marked by the multiplicity of subject positions that that constitute the subject” and therefore “identity is neither fixed nor singular; rather it is a constantly changing relational multiplicity.” “Each of us performs a repertoire of identities that are constantly shifting, and that we negotiate and re-negotiate according to the circumstances” (Joseph, 2010: 14) Place and society, the circumstances just mentioned, have obvious importance to which you relate. Patton & Sánchez-Eppler (2000: 4) emphasize: “identity is not merely a succession of strategic moves but a highly mobile cluster of claims to self that appear and transmogrify in and of place.”
Rules and expectations govern our behaviour. “Although the inner workings of the social network depends somewhat on amount of personal contact, the essential things is that its members share norms” (Joseph, 2010: 14). Moreover, the nation for example is ‘imaginative community’ which is bind together by the shared belief in the membership in the community. I find my interviewees feelings towards Iranian community and Iran to reflect that they don’t share the norms in their native country and therefore feel not being accepted as part of the community.

The nation states as well as borders are fuelled by ‘the other,’ which is often portrayed as a threat. Identity and home are often fused together but the diversity is inherent globally, whether the states try to regulate it or not. Binnie (2004: 29) underlines how the “fixity of identity and primary loyalty to the nation-state – which lies at the heart of nationalism, can be threatened by sexual dissidence.”

In certain spaces, places, people might have to hide one side of themselves be it sexuality, religion or ethnic background. My interviewees hadn’t themselves experienced major social problems or alienation in Canada, albeit some witnessed racism or homophobia and experienced for example language barrier in the beginning. The new environment and possible social problems can make you feel alienated and in some cases, this could lead to self-seclusion or being excluded by the others. Be it for racism, prejudice, homophobia or cultural discrimination.

The criminalization has made homosexuality a taboo in Iran and as a consequence people have to hide their sexuality from others. “When queer identity is criminalized in one’s homeland, this part of one’s identity is a secret from the rest of society” (Freedman 2007: Jafari, 2014: 32). This has consequences obviously for the queer subjects themselves but also for the society around them. This is why people often don’t know that sexual minorities exist or don’t know much about them, because there is no objective public discussion about it. Many interviewees also mentioned the lack of knowledge about LGBTQ. Forced secrecy can also explain strong prejudice against LGBTQ people, towards the unknown other. Homosexuality being illegalized allows normative condemnation and homophobic attacks.

At the same time, in Iran the limited democracy in addition to homophobia, which has been elevated into laws, leaves lesbians or homosexuals with few or none chances to exert influence or demand their rights. When your sexual identity is being denied with capital punishment, many have

10 “Soon after, Anderson (1991, first published in 1983) proposed a new understanding of the ‘nation’ as an ‘imaginative community’, whose members, like that of the interpretative community, will never all meet one another let alone have the sort of regular intercourse that creates a ‘network’” (Joseph, 2010: 14). “What binds them together is the shared belief in the membership in the community” (Joseph, 2010: 14).
left. Therefore, where Iranian LGBT communities, diaspora exist, they have also NGOs driving their cause. In Toronto there are for example IRQO (Iranian Queer Organization) and IRQR (Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees).

Belonging to a minority can be asset in multicultural country such as Canada. Multiple marginal identities can be resource and purposefully “draw upon to serve different needs and purposes” as Yip & Khalid (2010: 88) highlight in the case of “El-Farouk, a Canadian gay human rights lawyer, activist and aspiring politician,” who “noted that during the last local elections for which he ran, he managed to employ his Muslim and gay identities strategically to widen his support base.” El-Farouk was able to harness the support of the LGBTQ community as well as a vast majority of the Muslim community, including the Canadian Islamic Council by foregrounding different identities to different audiences and without denying the others (Yip & Khalid, 2010: 88).

El-Farouk’s case shows that it is possible to change the usual confrontation of Islam and LGBTQ – movement. Confrontation is not a solution to clashes of identities. Furthermore, this can be used in legitimizing warfare in the Middle East, when the real objectives might be murkier. According to Haritaworn et al. (2014: 98) “the binary opposition of the backward homophobic Muslim/civilized queer has been deployed repeatedly during the ‘war on terror’ is the widely publicized case of the hanging of two young men, Ayaz Marhouni and Mahmood Asgari, in Iran.” Haritaworn further speculated that it is not clear whether these two really were gay, to which speculation I won’t go into. In any case, it is difficult to get objective information from Iran, as well as spotting adversarial propaganda rhetoric.

Cant (1997: 14) speaks in his book of ‘Invented Identities?’ of complex set of loyalties many LGBT feels, of “belonging to more than one community and how this “sense of complex loyalties is a common theme among peoples who are part of diasporas.” Identities are often presented in the media as if in constant contrast with each other. As if you owe allegiance to one more than the other. Move away can make you rethink yourself and your place. “When a practitioner of “homosexual acts,” or a body that carries any of many queering marks moves between officially designated spaces – nation, region, metropole, neighbourhood or even culture, gender, religion, disease – intricate realignments of identity, politics, and desire take place” (Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000: 3).

The national identity, locating yourself and the other citizens inside national borders, uses also the other outside these borders in defining. “These processes of spatial selfhood have been amplified though dualist models of ‘self’ and ‘other’ which support and are reinforced by a series of territorial imaginaries of inside and outside” (Crang & Thrift, 2000: 9). Crang & Thrift (2000: 9-10) further
highlight, “We might typify these imaginaries as geographical fantasies, sustaining ideas of a territory of self-identity set against radical and exoticised alterity.”

One interviewee pointed out quite similarly that he wouldn’t want to identify according to citizenship.

Researcher: “How would you mainly identify yourself today, as Iranian or Canadian or Iranian Canadian, queer, LGBT, other or just combination of many things?”

Owen: “Ah, the thing is I mainly try not to self-identify with labels. So like in documents I am Iranian and I am Canadian, but I wouldn’t self-identify as Canadian, I would never say like I am Canadian, you know. And if I had to choose one of these options I would choose queer, only from the list, that I actually self-identify as.”

In the end, people identify with various identities with each interacting in the background.

Mason: “Queer. LGBT. But you know, nationality, I, no, I would say Canadian Iranian (laugh), Iranian Canadian... Both so I was born there, I grew up there, so of course I am Iranian. I speak the language. But ah... I am a citizen of Canada too so. And queer and LGBT... So I guess a combination of many things (laugh).”

Nathan thought the same:

“He would go with the combination of many things.”

Liam as well, although he preferred to sidestep the labels and just be human:

“Ah, it’s actually the combination of many things. The first of all I, I identify myself as a human, and second gonna be LGBT, like, so I have Iranian background but I live in Canada so, Canadian Iranian and LGBT.”

Aiden underlined the difficulty in preferring one to the others:

“I’m all of that. I’m Iranian, I can’t say, that I am not Iranian. I’m Iranian. I’m a Canadian and LGBT. I’m not Muslim. I’m a queer. Yeah. A lot of things together... How can I prefer, a lot of things.”

Researcher: “Yeah it’s tough.”

Aiden: “Yeah but I’m Iranian Canadian LGBT. I’m Iranian Canadian gay, queer... Yeah.”

The label “Iranian,” although it was stated first, comes across as something inescapable for the interviewee, who however, decides to stick with it and even pronounce it before all the rest.

The globalized world with migrations forming emigrant populations around the world and Internet enabling synchronous contact, make evident the multilevel character of identity possible. Fortier (2002: 185) sums up: “diaspora now signifies a site where ‘new geographies of identity’ (Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996) are negotiated across multiple terrains of belonging, producing what Avtar Brah (1996: 2009) calls a ‘diaspora space’, located between ‘the global’ and ‘the local.’”
LGBTQ people are often quite aware of our identity being plural. Knopp (2004: 129) underlines how unique the queer experience of place and movement is: “Queers are actively engaged in processes of personal reinvention that intrinsically entail examinations of ourselves and our surroundings” and “We are keenly aware of the hybrid nature of our existences, and of the highly contingent nature of both our power and the constraints on it.” Therefore we have ambivalent relationships to both, place and identity, and that also explains our affection for the feeling of ‘placelessness’ and movement (Knopp, 2004: 129).
6. Conclusions

The Iranian LGBTQ refugees present how stark the difference is between living in a conservative theological country and in an openly multicultural liberal country for LGBTQ people. They also show what difficulties and uncertainties people are ready to face when their sexual identity is forbidden in their home country. Leaving home and family, and possibly losing both, is something not everybody is ready to experience. It takes and shows tremendous strength. It also shows how important part of a person sexual identity is.

For the interviewees of this thesis “home,” as a ‘site of impossible return, the site of impossible memories,’ did not seem to be so much linked to the childhood home as to the experience and fear of the authorities and public homophobia in Iran. Most interviewees didn’t experience traumatic cut of bonds to their families and were still in contact with their families, though perhaps not with all of the members and maybe not right after coming out. However, this could have made their stay in the transit country (Turkey) supposedly slightly less stressful. The decision to leave the former homeland feels to be more about the contradiction between private life and public life in Iran, than the contradiction [being in a closet] in the centre of one’s private life.

The situation Iranian queer refugees are facing is more complicated than the one faced by their heterosexual fellow-refugees. The support network is often missing – as Owen mentioned, there is no way back. The time in the transit country (Turkey) is often almost two years. Since the support they get from the transit country is very limited or none, the contacts and support from family and friends become crucial for the refugees. Furthermore, most of the interviewees talked about alternative networks in Turkey – friends they had made apparently among other LGBTQ –people, either Iranian or Turkish, and even a relationship.

All thought that they had no freedom whatsoever in Iran, no laws to protect them, only against them. This is in huge contrast to Canada also explains why they didn’t feel free in Iran. In Turkey the bureaucracy was felt to be against the interviewees. This is maybe because the traditions and religion are similarly present in Turkey even though the freedom should be there for the Turkish law in principle shouldn’t be against them. The existing freedoms, however are also in Turkey, as Aiden highlighted: “We got help because the freedom that I have here. The Turkey is part of that. I know if the government is not gonna help you then the UNHCR are. So, maybe the law helped us. I don’t know, I think so. What do you think?” Aiden was also brave enough to complain to police even though the life there was experienced as repressive, and it was worth it. In Canada Mason, Nathan and Aiden also underlined the law as preventing racism and homophobia in the society.
law guarantees them freedom, specifically the freedom to be themselves. The happiness that the often-mentioned freedom grants is connected to the society taking care and is not restricting but protecting them – as home is and should. The experiences of possibilities, of “freedom” are directly linked to the formal and symbolic rules of the society.

Canada was clearly a land of freedom and hope, for all were immensely positive of their time in the country. Being both queer and a migrant, you may find yourself being excluded twice. Owen for example pointed out that Canada, being a multicultural society makes it easier to integrate. There seems to be a clear timeline. Iran was a place of static fear and external torment. The extreme interpretation of religion with extreme punishments clearly effects to the feeling of belonging to a country. As Aiden highlighted, the lack of safety in such environment reflects to the impossibility of thinking your native country as your home. Not only are you persecuted, but also your sexual identity is forbidden, and you are marked as unacceptable citizen. Turkey was an ordeal, for it was for the most of them a time of frustration and uncertainty, endured to reach the final destination. The external torment was lesser but the stress of uncertain future was heavy. Finally they reached Canada, that for all of them were from landing the first day a hopeful place, where the hope of freedom and many possibilities came true.

Many of the interviewees are still striving to reach their aims but they were nonetheless underlining how grateful they were for the help they immediately received from first day of landing to Canada and of all that the freedom has made possible. Aiden and Nathan also mentioned that in Canada they must be happy and free: “I’m a civilized person, so, and because I came here to be free. And I knew that I have to make my life, you know so,” ”it’s possible to settle down in a year or two easily, but because he wasn’t in a happy place mentally when he arrived it took him longer than that.”

Thus both seem to emphasize and have an idea of what life and home should be “Home is where you feel safe, where you can be creative, and where you always have to be happy” and that their lives are in Canada and if they haven’t settled down well enough, it’s feels being their fault for the freedom and possibilities they have in Canada.

Home is also something, which society makes possible as well as protects and secures. Owen’s answer of home [his apartment] signifying “a sanctuary [from the worlds outside]” crystallizes the images that the interviewees had of home: safety, peace, [a place where you] can be you, [a place where you] can express yourself. Home, a dwelling and the wider concept of home are intertwined exactly because of this: society making it possible for you to have home and to feel at home. There is something that guarantees safety, maintains peace and lets you be and embrace yourself. A society that enables and protects freedom is something associated with the word of freedom.
Consequently, all interviewees of this thesis basically repeated the word freedom in context with the words ‘home’ and ‘Canada.’ Thus, the freedom of home is possible because the society generates it also in the wider scale.

Home is actually also quite close to the one who perceives it: you. For example, from the answers of both Aiden and Mason, it can be read that ‘home’ is associated with oneself: “You can express yourself. It’s gonna be your home,” “Where one feels free, you feel happy, you can be you. But you got to build it first.” The idea of home and the idea of happiness being intertwined – a home is a home when lived by a free and happy “Home is where you... always have to be happy” oneself and what constitutes such is a home allowing one to be free and happy. Home constituting the borders of safety and peace [the sanctuary], it allows happiness and self-expression. Thus the borders of one’s former home might crack down, be blurred or even expand, when one feels to be able to be oneself somewhere else. Outside, the other and the binary view that define the place and home can have therefore shattered, when the threat to one exist especially inside the ‘homeland.’ Mason for example underlined that home is not necessarily located in one’s hometown or native country. It can be such as long as it fills the listed qualifications: “Canada is my home because...I can express myself here. Canada is my home because...everyone is accepting me.” Home is also something that can be paralleled to personality – it travels with you and waits and becomes such when the environment is favourable.

One interesting matter of the Canada section is also how little the interviewees spoke of their homosexuality and ‘gay life’ in Canada in the end. Owen, who identified as queer for example: I am not very conscious about that [the sexual freedom] to be honest. Like, it’s so free that it’s not really in my control. So...” All clearly identified as being either gay or queer, something that the emigration didn’t change. However, it could be that when one have to hide one’s sexuality and fear, it also can become quite dominating identity, while on the other hand when one can fulfil oneself and live without fear, it might become identity among the rest. Or it can be the first identity mainly identified with, as Owen chose queer, but it was the only thing listed that he felt he could identify with: “I mainly try not to self-identify with labels.” Thus, unlike many of the sources cited in this thesis, which equate and also kind of simplify the emigration as equalling to coming-out-of-closet, the finding of home in Canada made it also possible for them to live balanced lives without unlawful sexuality defining their life, as it did in Iran.

Of course the emigration to such society as Canada makes it possible to come-out-of-closet and live openly but more importantly, makes the well-balanced life, without denying oneself and one’s sexuality, possible. Makes it possible to embrace oneself, allows one to have a personality. Four out
of five of the interviewees chose combination of many things, which together with Owen identifying as [the only potential from the list] queer, categorically empty, underlines the “allowing you a personality” quite well. However, even though interviewees didn’t highlight their sexuality (as being the dominating identity) in Canada, they clearly chose activity in the LGBTQ community before the Iranian community in Toronto (were more active or eager to participate in) and seemed to identify as LGBTQ person before nationality.

For Iranian LGBTQs, especially in the case of my interviewees, I argue that little by little, you are faced with the decision that the only possible future is abroad. As a consequence of lack of freedom, safety and fundamentally for the lack of human rights, LGBTQ –people are not only forced to go into exile but also to revaluate their identity and home. The fear and hate ruptures one’s trust. I believe this also reflects on the LGBTQ Iranians willingness to be in touch with the rest of Iranian community, diaspora abroad. As Owen for example mentioned, he came to Iran for a visit several times but concluded that there is no place for him. The importance of feeling at home somewhere is vital for your wellbeing in a long run. Home, dwelling can be a sanctuary but the norms and laws can extend there as well and also one can’t isolate oneself to his or hers apartment and be free and happy. Life becomes restricted and oppressive if you have to be too conscious and controlled of your behaviour or of showing your feelings towards someone and of what consequences this could have. All in all, feeling at home in one’s domicile makes life more balanced for queer people by letting one to be proud and embrace oneself and to be hopeful and optimistic of the future.
7. Bibliography:

- Gorman-Murray, Andrew. 2007. Rethinking queer migration through the body. Social & Cultural Geography, 8:1, 105-121.


7.1. Internet sources:

The 519 <http://www.the519.org/about>.


– Omidvar, Ratna. 22.06.2015. Global Diversity Exchange (GDX). A Citizen’s Tool for Refugee Resettlement: Canada’s Refugee Sponsorship Program
Queer Muslim project <http://queermuslimproject.tumblr.com>.


7.2. Interviewees

- Nathan: age 37 when interviewed on 4th of April 2016, hometown in Iran Kermanshah, Tehran
- Liam: age 28 when interviewed on 5th of April 2016, hometown in Iran Shiraz
- Mason: age 30 when interviewed on 6th of April 2016, hometown in Iran Bandar Abbas, Shiraz
- Aiden: age 29 when interviewed on 6th of April 2016, hometown in Iran Tehran
- Owen: age 24 when interviewed on 7th April 2016, hometown in Iran Tehran
7.3. Interview paper

31 March 2016

INTRODUCTION

I am a student in Human Geography from the University of Eastern Finland who is conducting research for my Master’s thesis on Iranian Queer Refugees: Hopes and Fears of Home. This research entails conducting face-to-face interviews in Toronto, Canada, in April 2016. Participation in this research is voluntary and I am seeking verbal informed consent from each respondent before commencing an interview. All collected interview materials will be used only for research purposes and will be handled strictly confidentially to ensure complete anonymity. No information will be revealed to outside individuals, institutions or organisations. If you have any questions about the privacy of your answers or anything else connected to this research, please do not hesitate to ask.

Moreover, my research project and student status can be confirmed by my academic advisor and programme co-ordinator in Finland, Dr. Paul Fryer (paul.fryer@uef.fi, tel: +358 50 372 8521, www.uef.fi/bordercrossings)

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions.

Mr. Antti Saastamoinen
Master’s degree student
University of Eastern Finland
BASIC INFORMATION

1. Age:
2. Gender identity:
3. Sexual identity:
4. Native language (mother tongue):
5. Religious belief:
6. Education (highest achieved):
7. Social background (please selection ONE):
   working class - lower middle-class - upper middle-class - upper class
8. Current marital status (please selection ONE):
   single - living with someone - registered partnership - married - divorced
   a. If divorced, were you in a traditional marriage before arriving in Canada: Y / N
9. Years lived in Canada:

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

10. What was your occupation in Iran when you left?
11. In Iran, where did you live? (e.g. countryside/village, provincial city or capital?)
12. Tell me a bit about your family, e.g. is it big? traditional? were you close?
   a. Are you still in contact with your family today?
13. When did you first start to acknowledge your own sexuality?
14. Did you tell your family or friends about your sexuality? if so, when? How?
15. In your opinion, how does the average Iranian view LGBT people?

IRAN

16. How do you perceive the LGBT human rights situation in Iran at the moment?
17. When you were living in Iran, how frightened were you being caught/exposed by
   the authorities?
18. Did you personally experience persecution by the authorities?
19. Would you consider moving back to Iran if the political situation changed?
20. What specific events contributed to your decision to leave Iran?
21. Was your sexual identity the main factor in your decision to leave Iran?

EMIGRATION PROCESS

22. Describe how you left Iran?
23. In which country did you apply for asylum? Did you transit through any other
   countries before applying for asylum?
24. Is the asylum process different for LGBT applicants than for other asylum
   applicants?
25. Do you think that it is more difficult for LGBT asylum seekers? If so, how?
26. How long time did the asylum process take for you?
27. How would you describe this process? e.g. simple, bureaucratic?
28. Did you get help from any non-governmental organisations while applying for asylum?
29. Did you receive help (e.g. financial, advice, accommodation) from any transit country while applying for asylum?
30. Did you apply to emigrate specifically to Canada? Why do you think you were approved?

CANADA

31. Describe your journey to Canada? What was your official reception from the Canadian authorities? How did they help?
32. At first, how did you adapt to your new surroundings? What did you find difficult in Canada?
33. Did you know anybody in Toronto when you arrived?
34. In your opinion, how difficult is it to integrate into Canadian society?
35. What is your current occupation? How did you get started in this?
36. Do you feel that you can express your sexual identity freely in Canada?
37. What do you know about the LGBT community in Toronto?
38. How do you experience (use, participate in) the LGBT community in Toronto?
39. Have you made friends since you arrived in Toronto? If so, where did you meet them?
40. Have you experienced any social problems in Toronto, e.g. racism?
41. Are you active in the Iranian community of Toronto?
42. Is this community more accepting of sexual minorities?
43. Is there an Iranian LGBT community in Toronto? If so, are you involved?

HOME

44. How do you understand the concept of home?
45. Can you describe your home?
46. Do you still think of Iran as your home or is Canada your home? Explain?
47. In your opinion, is it possible to be both LGBT and Muslim? Explain?
48. Have your religious views changed since you moved to Canada? How?

خیلی ممنون