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AFFIRMING THEOLOGIES AND TRANSGENDER REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

by

CATHERINE E. MOORE

Under the Direction of Monique Moultrie, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The resettlement process of refugees and asylum seekers in the United States involves many services to a multitude of marginalized identities. The creation of religious community is commonly foundational for the resiliency of refugees. In terms of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers, this creation proves more difficult but equally as necessary. The two theological frameworks that welcome gender minorities are inclusive theology and affirming theology. This project examines the current practices of resettlement agencies as to the creation of religious community for transgender and non-binary clients and offers a critique to the theological frameworks. Through improving the creation of religious community for transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers, the concept of home can be better supported and strengthened. This will allow for greater chances for resiliency in the resettlement process for such marginalized groups seeking refuge in the United States.

INDEX WORDS: Theology, Transgender, Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Refugee Resettlement

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by

CATHERINE E. MOORE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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2019

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May 2019

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the courageous transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers who live each day in their authentic beauty. With radical love the world can be a better place where violence does not have home and hatred is a fleeting memory.

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Many thanks are due to Dr. Monique Moultrie for her leadership and navigation through this process. Under her guidance, I have learned beyond the limits I expected. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Maura Ryan and Dr. David Bell for serving on my thesis committee and giving unyielding support for this project. The knowledge gained from my committee is invaluable and will be carried throughout my future endeavors.

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Also, thanks are due to all the research participants who must remain anonymous. Without your cooperation and honesty, this project would not exist.

I hope this project pushes the world, even a small amount, towards true progress.

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1 INTRODUCTION

According to ORAM, an international organization dedicated to assisting and researching the most marginalized refugee and asylum seeking groups, seventy-eight nations enforce legal criminalization on sexual and gender minorities. LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus) people in these seventy-eight nations face fines, imprisonment, torture, and even death. This reality leads many to flee their country of origin, leaving family, employment, religion, and community behind for hopes of gaining refugee or asylum status. The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 allows for refugee status for “members of a particular social group” who has a “well-founded fear of being persecuted” due to that membership.¹ It is under this group that sexual and gender minorities claim a persecuted status. The exact number of forcibly displaced sexual and gender minorities is unknown due to lack of documentation and efforts to hide sexual and gender identities out of fear.² Though the known and estimated numbers are very small, efforts must continue to be made to ensure holistic assistance for such a marginalized and threatened group.

This project aims to investigate the experience and realities of gender minorities, namely transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers as it relates to the United States and Canada. The experience of gender minorities is highly unique in comparison of sexual minorities and, most certainly, heterosexual and cisgender³ refugees and asylum seekers. Transgender and non-binary people, in general, face additional social pressure and discriminations based on the politics surrounding the physical body and meaning attached to it. The meaning of body is often

¹ United Nations. "The 1951 Refugee Convention." UNHCR. Accessed March 12, 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>.

² The exact number is unknown due to asylum seekers that do not go through the standard methods, attempts to hide identity for protection, and refusal to divulge personal information.

³ Cisgender denotes a gender identity that corresponds to the sex category given at birth

times created by hegemonic societies and forced upon non-conforming groups and individuals in acts of social violence. Therefore, the experience of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers, with the added social meaning of refugee status, creates a unique reality that is worth exploration.

Scholarship has been produced as to the experience of gender minorities in their respective countries of origin and in post-resettlement locations. This project intends to explore the experience of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers as it relates to the resettlement process, specifically at the intersection of resettlement and religion. Resettlement agencies attempt to meet all possible needs for clients, however, there exist a lack of attention in the conversation around religious community and the rebuilding of the concept of home. Religious identity and communal connection play a vital role in the resettlement process, however, for transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers, the connection proves difficult to navigate. Through discrimination, religious trauma, theological issues, and mental health, the creation of religious connection is challenging.

A religious connection often provides a foundation for community building. Christian and secular efforts are the focus here. Community and community identity lead to stability and the conceptualization of home. How is the concept of home re-created? Home is connected to quality of life and overall stability. The quality of such a conception impacts the quality of life of refugees and asylum seekers. Due to the unique struggles and social connection of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers, the current state of conceptualization seems problematic. It does not take the form of heterosexual or cisgender refugees or asylum seekers. This question around the concept of recreation of home leads this project.

The theologies of religious organizations often play a role in the ability and quality of home creations. The current state of LGBTQ+ welcoming theologies within Christianity function within two popular veins of discourse: inclusive theology and affirming theology. This work's hypothesis is focused around the discourse on the two interconnected Christian theologies and the effectiveness of inclusionary practices. These two theological frameworks create discourse as to the level of acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in terms of biblical interpretation and impact the method of religiously affiliated organizations' outreach. With respect to secular resettlement agencies and organizations, similar philosophical frameworks exist and similarly impact outreach methods. This project uses a critical lens in investigating such impacts, methods, and usefulness in transgender and non-binary refugee and asylum seeker assistance. The crux of this project are questions surrounding the holistic assistance of such refugees and asylum seekers in the interconnection of community, religion, theology, and home.

Resettlement agencies are attempting to answer such challenging questions as secular and religious agencies work together to meet the needs of clients and allocated resources. In respect to religious connection, there is no real success nor consistency in best practices by resettlement agencies. The conflicting practices and lack of attention toward gender minorities lead to potentially damaged, or at best unsuccessful, connection. This can have negative impacts on the resettlement and safety of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers. This project explores the practices, realities, experiences, religious community creation, and results of the current state of resettlement in respect to gender minorities. Analysis and recommendations are produced in hope of clarifying and furthering the conversation on transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers, creating more solidified practice recommendations and assisting in making a home much more than a simple dwelling place.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on the subject of LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers has increased exponentially though the topic, in terms of the academy and intellectual thought, is a relatively new venture. The current state of academic literature on the subject ranges from inquiries into the reasoning, realities, and experiences in the country of origin to the resiliency post-resettlement. To correctly situate the conversation, this project focuses on the intellectual works directly related to LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers, specifically transgender and non-binary, as it relates to the United States and Canada. The works utilized for this project cover topics of the politics of the gendered body, the unique realities and experiences of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers, best care practices, homonationalism, and conceptual creation of home.

2.1 Gendered Body

In *Trans* Lives in the United States*, sociologist Andrew Cutler-Seeber explains the social realities of transgender and gender non-binary people within the context of Western society. The existence and presentation of transgender and non-binary people endure within a structural understanding of visibility by the hegemonic gaze.⁴ This means the socio-political response to transgender and non-binary members of society disrupts inclusionary membership based on the view of the actual body. The physical presentation of the body allows for the hegemonic gaze to dictate the value and placement of the individual as it is perceived to fit within the gender norms and gender binary, creating a politic of body that the transgender and non-binary subjects must

⁴ Cutler-Seeber, Andrew Rene. 2018. *Trans* Lives in the United States : Challenges of Transition and Beyond. Framing 21st Century Social Issues*. New York : Routledge, 2018.

face. In response to existing literature on the concept of social and political formulations of individual capital,⁵ Cutler-Seeber engages on the expansion of social capital to include gender and sexuality. This expansion leans on the theoretical work of intersectionality, the interconnection of social identity categories that impact and define the experience of discrimination of an individual or group.⁶ Members of society who transgress the social normality that distributes social and political capital—not performing the “correct” masculinity or femininity—are refused such “embodied capital.”⁷ With additional limitations to the disbursement and collection of such capital in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity, such identities function as markers of worthiness within the gaze of hegemonic society to refuse or allow for the collection of capital.⁸ This theoretical framework allows for the critical analysis of the socio-political realities of transgender and non-binary people through a body-focused value system in Western society.

This project leans on the sociological critique by Cutler-Seeber to explore the socio-political and religious realities of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers. Though Cutler-Seeber addresses the experiences of transgender people within the general context of American society, the additional layer of social capital—or lack thereof—brought about through immigration status must be added. The body-based capital that is disallowed because of non-conforming gender expression and identity will only be experienced more harshly when non-conforming citizenship is added to the individual’s sociological makeup. The intertwining of oppressive hegemonic masculinity, being used as a model for acceptances and rejection, and the

⁵ Bourdieu, Pierre, A.H. Halley, Hugh Lauder, Phillip Brown, and Amy Stuart Wells. 1997. “The Forms of Capital.” *Education: Culture, Economy, and Society*. 241-258. Oxford University Press.

⁶Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*. 43: 1241-1299.

⁷ Cutler-Seeber. 2018.

⁸ Ibid.

conceptualization of arbitrary citizenship creates the social reality of the social subject. This lens and critique offers a strong and accurate understanding of the social existence and experience.

2.2 Unique Experience

Understanding the post-resettlement needs and realities of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers requires solid research on the unique experiences of the social group. In direct connection with the theoretical literature, qualitative and quantitative evidence of trauma shows a unique experience for the transgender and non-binary subjects. Specifically, existing literature focuses on the stressors of economic instability, healthcare, and susceptibility to violence.

Economic instability in the country of origin is prevalent in terms of housing, employment discrimination, and labors of desperation. A lack of housing, evidence would claim, is usually initiated by unaccepting family members, parents or guardians throwing the transgender or non-binary family member out of the house.⁹ In respect to transgender or non-binary youth in Mexico, around 70% have claimed to have been thrown out of their home or choosing to run away out of fear for their physical safety.¹⁰ This leads to transgender or non-binary individuals living on the streets with no permanent or safe dwelling and resorting to dangerous methods of attaining resources.¹¹

In addition to forced removal from the home, transgender and non-binary people face labor discrimination in their countries of origin. Regardless of the legal progressiveness and

⁹ Gowin, Mary, E Laurette Taylor, Jamie Dunnington, Ghadah Alshuwaiyer, and Marshall K Cheney. "Needs of a Silent Minority: Mexican Transgender Asylum Seekers." *Health Promotion Practice* 18, no. 3 (May 2017): 332–40.

¹⁰ Cheney, Marshall K., Mary J. Gowin, E. Laurette Taylor, Melissa Frey, Jamie Dunnington, Ghadah Alshuwaiyer, J. Kathleen Huber, Mary Camero Garcia, and Grady C. Wray. 2017. "Living Outside the Gender Box in Mexico: Testimony of Transgender Mexican Asylum Seekers." *American Journal of Public Health* 107 (10): 1646–52.

¹¹ Gowin, 2017.

inclusionary policies in place, transgender and non-binary people face termination or refusal of employment.¹² Reports show that many people leave due to a desire or need to find more inclusive and welcoming employment opportunities, fleeing their country of origin for economic hope.¹³ Out of economic necessity, transgender and non-binary people attempt to hide or disguise their identity for the purpose of maintaining a job, however, many are fired or refused employment once their identity has been discovered.¹⁴ Regardless of an individual's ability or willingness to hide or disguise their authentic identity in their country of origin, transgender and non-binary people constantly live within a reality of economic insecurity when attempting to engage in the legal job market.

It is this economic insecurity that forces many transgender and non-binary people to seek alternative methods of security. Sex work, though particularly dangerous for the individual both physically and legally, is often the method used to maintain livelihood.¹⁵ Forced sex work, whether through threat of physical violence, promises of security, or out of desperation, does not meet the criteria for autonomy and is, therefore, not a product of liberation. Rather, it is an issue of human rights violations. Similarly, many transgender and non-binary people facing such a level of economic insecurity will enter into abusive, unhealthy, and dangerous relationships to maintain some form of security (housing, financial, food, hormone therapy, etc.).¹⁶

In addition to economic insecurity in their country of origin, transgender and non-binary people face insurmountable violence. Studies show that violence (non-sexual and sexual) starts extremely early in the lives of those seen as not adhering to gender norms and the gender binary.

¹² Cheney, 2017.

¹³ Gowin, 2017.

¹⁴ Chaney, 2017.

¹⁵ Gowin, 2017.

¹⁶ Ibid.

As high as 29% of transgender asylum seekers interviewed for a study claim to have experienced their first sexual assault less than or at the age of 6 years old. The statistical breakdown shows that 33%, the highest percentage, claim the first sexual assault happened between the ages of 7 and 10 years old, 24% between 11 and 15 years old, and 11% over the age of 16. Only 2% of interviewees claimed to have never been sexually assaulted.¹⁷ Violence, sexual and non-sexual, are most often committed by close family members, some interviewees claiming additional violence by community members and the police.¹⁸

The police and local legal apparatuses that control and instigate violence against transgender and non-binary people within the respective geographical contexts do not necessarily reflect the national attitudes. National laws that protect LGBTQ+ citizens are often ignored by local governances. For example, in Latin countries, where around 70% of Latin Americans live under some form of marriage equality, transgender and non-binary people (as well as queers in general) face disproportionate amounts of violence and discrimination.¹⁹ Mexican policies have undergone a progressive and anti-discrimination overhaul over the past decades, however, due to the conservatism interweaved with male machismo and cultural religious identity, non-conforming identities (sexual or gender) do not enjoy safety and security.²⁰ This requires the data not to be reliant on the passage and enactment of policy, but instead on data retrieved on transgender and non-binary experience.

As a result of unique experiences, transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers face equally unique post-resettlement challenges. Mental health and community formation are the two most explored topics. Mental health, as a direct consequence of treatment and experience

¹⁷ Cheney, 2017.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Cheney, 2017.

²⁰ Ibid.

in their country of origin and post-resettlement, is of the highest importance by most scholars. In a study that examined the mental health of transgender asylum seekers, 100% were diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 93% experienced depression, and 56% had thoughts of or acted upon thoughts of suicide.²¹ The research builds upon minority stress theory.^{22 23} Though most interviewees claimed to feel safer post-resettlement, many plan their days and social encounters around and in response to their current state of mental health and trauma.²⁴ A thorough and accurate understanding of the mental stresses as a product of this type of experience is not possible due to the fact that many interviewees—representative of the whole population—do not have the emotional ability to discuss the horrors of violence and community rejection.²⁵

Connected to mental health, transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers undergo harsh and devastating bouts with isolationism. Most transgender and non-binary refugees or asylum seekers flee their country of origin due to their gender identity. Family connections are often times severed due to the families' inability to seek refuge with their transgender or non-binary relative or, as in most cases, the family is one of the sources of violence that threatens the life of the transgender or non-binary person.²⁶ In response to loss of trust and out of fear of unknown legal and social codes, many transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers isolate themselves from the community post-resettlement.^{27 28}

²¹ Gowin, 2017.

²² Ibid.

²³ Meyer, I. H. 2003. "Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence." *Psychological Bulletin*. 129, 674-697.

²⁴ Gowin, 2017.

²⁵ Cheney, 2017.

²⁶ Cheney, 2017.

²⁷ Gowin, 2017.

²⁸ Alessi, Edward J. 2016. "Resilience in Sexual and Gender Minority Forced Migrants: A Qualitative Exploration." *Traumatology* 22 (3): 203–13.

Unlike cisgender, heterosexual refugees and asylum seekers who rely on a refugee community of similar ethnic and cultural background, transgender and non-binary refugees face hatred and discrimination from their respective refugee communities.²⁹ Isolationism, though a safety mechanism, is in direct contradiction to the current research of best care practices.

2.3 Best Care Practices and Resiliency

Literature reviews and studies have been produced and circulated exploring the current state of resettlement, outreach care, and resiliency for transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers. Resiliency is understood as the “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity.”³⁰ Popular LGBTQ+ manuals and reports such as Rainbow Response, Rainbow Bridges, Rainbow Welcome Initiative Assessment Report, and Opening Doors are popular among secular and religious resettlement agencies and outreach organizations. Such manuals often rely heavily on the experience of sexual minorities and remain lacking in the experience and care of gender minorities.

Researchers have created areas of focus to assist and maintain resiliency of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers. For the purpose of this project, the areas of community, service, and religious and spiritual maintenance are highly important for understanding the impact and possibility for resiliency. The first area is the formation of community. In direct linkage to the problem of isolationism, research show that an active and supportive community around the transgender or non-binary subject promotes a healthier social transition and relieves mental anguish.³¹ Simply being a member of a community is not believed to be enough. Service-based involvement—working to help one’s community—gives rise to a sense of belonging and

²⁹ Alessi, 2016.

³⁰ Luthar, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, 71, 543–562

³¹ Alessi, 2016.

membership. Active community membership increases the solidity of identity and community ties. In terms of social community or services that assist in the cultivation of mental and social function, it is vital that the organizations not merely be inclusive in nature and policy, but affirming.^{32 33} Through community formation, many transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers are given the opportunity to engage in the betterment of the community or assist in a communal mentoring. This is believed to increase resiliency because it give purpose to life while interweaving it with community.³⁴

In connection with community formation, research shows that spiritual health is directly connected to the resiliency of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers. Having religious and spiritual space available for the individual to reconnect with the religious tradition from their country of origin often times creates stability.³⁵ However, in many cases religion is a root of violence and trauma. This may lead an individual to renounce their past religious identity and search for a spiritual or religious identity not connected to trauma. In this case, scholarship shows that having a religiously fluid and welcoming space and community allows for the individual to grow in comfort, increasing resiliency.³⁶ Regardless of the religious identity or path of the individual, research also shows that inclusive-based religious organizations often times re-traumatize transgender and non-binary refugees. Affirming religious organizations are believed to be the safest spaces for the individual, allowing for the most opportunity for resiliency.³⁷ Due to research questioning the ability of inclusive organizations, in contrast to affirming

³² Ibid

³³ Alessi, Edward J., and Sarilee Kahn. 2017. "A Framework for Clinical Practice with Sexual and Gender Minority Asylum Seekers." *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, Clinical Practice With LGBTQ Patients*, 4 (4): 383–91.

³⁴ Alessi, 2016.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Alessi, 2017.

³⁷ Ibid.

organizations, this project focuses on agencies and organizations that function within an inclusive or affirming theology or philosophy. Inclusive and affirming organizations—as opposed to non-inclusive or outright anti-LGBTQ+ organizations—attempt to recognize and welcoming non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities. This project aims at examining the function and ability of such organizations.

2.4 Homonationalism

Jasbir K. Puar—professor of Women and Gender Studies at Rutgers University—coined the term “homonationalism” in 2007, a term that situates the experiences and identity of LGBT folks in modern America.³⁸ The term also proves useful in situating the discussion and analysis of this project. Homonationalism is the creation and practice of nationalistic identities that associate and shape around the sexual identities of sexual minorities. Puar explains, “at work in this dynamic is a form of sexual exceptionalism—the emergence of a national homosexuality, what I term ‘homonationalism’—that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire.”³⁹ This concept gives explanation to how Western—specifically American—LGBTQ+ identities are created within an American exceptionalism praxis. The homonational American gay or lesbian interweaves the nationalistic identity to create a separated and value-based understanding of the global LGBTQ+ community with higher value added to the intersection of sexual and national identity markers.

Homonationalism also assists in framing and understanding the international experience of LGBTQ+ people and the relation that that experience has with American exceptionalism. The way in which value statements and global perspectives are created in respect to foreign states and

³⁸ Puar, Jasbir. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.

³⁹ Puar, 2007.

state sovereignty is predicated on the treatment of “acceptance and tolerance” for gay and lesbian members of society.⁴⁰ This means the way in which conversations frame ideas of good versus bad nations of the world are created based on a nationalistic exceptionalism as to the treatment of American gays and lesbians, using that as the measuring tool for other countries. This fuels neoliberal capitalist interest and shapes, problematically so, the civil religious discourse around freedom, liberation, and rights.⁴¹ This has been seen insofar as gays and lesbians supporting particular religiously backed immigration bans, while supporting acceptance for Christian immigrants.⁴² This is particularly interesting as it exposes conflict within the LGBTQ+ community on the subject of refugees and asylum seekers. These constructions of acceptable bodies, sexualities, nationalities, religions, and genders are at a point of discord in the discourse around acceptance and value.⁴³ Transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers are placed as negative subjects of discourse due to the lack of assimilation and alignment to nationalistic sexual and gender identities. This causes extra caution to be taken in this project as to not fall into logical claims bred out of or give fuel to destructive and divisive nationalistic sentiments.

The perpetuation of such destructive thought is being discussed throughout the academy. One specific and relevant discussion surrounds document production. In respect to the functionality of research for field usage and the framing of scholarship, it is important to recognize the work of David A. B. Murray, work that leans on Puar’s terminology. Murray raises concern as to how research is being used and presented in respect to homonationalism.⁴⁴ Work

⁴⁰ Puar, Jasbir. 2013. “Rethinking Homonationalism.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 45 (2): 336–39.

⁴¹ Puar, 2013.

⁴² Schulman, Sarah. *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*. Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 2012.

⁴³ Puar, 2007.

⁴⁴ Murray, David A. B. 2017. “The Homonational Archive: Sexual Orientation and Gendered

on sexual and gender minorities is being interpreted and used for the purpose of creating a specific narrative rooted in Western exceptionalism. Though Murray focuses on the legal documentation and academic reports being used in immigration court cases, the overarching argument is applicable to this project insofar as the creation of an idealistic Western safe haven and citizenry of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers. This is in direct relation to the promotion of negative narratives of countries of origin.

...I argue that the bureaucratic regime of refugee care and its archives of sexuality contributes to the production of homonationalism (Puar 2007), a privileged discourse containing a highly delimited—neo-liberal, classed and raced—definition of sexual orientation and gendered identity that is being folded into the nation state’s discourses of the good immigrant and proper citizen, and simultaneously creating its opposite, the bad immigrant and deviant citizen.⁴⁵

This conceptualization and intellectual warning serves as a point of reference when applying research and the creation of narrative arguments. It is not the purpose of this project to perpetuate such ideals, rather to offer a productive critique.

2.5 Conceptualization of home

Using the aforementioned literature and theoretical frameworks, the purpose of this project to interrogate the conceptualization and creation of “home” as it relates to transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers.⁴⁶ In doing so, it is not the purpose of this project to

Identity Refugee Documentation in Canada and the USA.” *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 82 (3): 520–44
⁴⁵ Murray, 2017.

⁴⁶ It is necessary to state that the conceptualization of home within the context and reality of queer existence is highly complex. Within queer theory the complexity and language around home is contested and debatable. The purpose of this project is not to add to the definition of home. Rather, in general understanding, the term “home” is used within the context of immigration, refugee, and asylum seeker experience. It is clearly that more work needs to be done around the conceptualization of queer home within immigrations and refugees sub-context.

perpetuate Euro-centric, Westernized concepts of “home.” Rather, following Nael Bhanji’s critical analysis on the state of transgender scholarship and interrogating current practices by resettlement and outreach organizations, this project wants to explore how the concept is being created, maintained, and practices currently in place.⁴⁷ Bhanji investigates and questions the concepts of home as it relates to transgender people in respect to physical dwelling, the body, the social, the political, etc.,. Bhanji’s work pulls into conversation how home is made, thought of, rebuilt, maintained, and experienced.⁴⁸

This project intended on furthering this conversation on a people in physical, bodily, communal, spiritual, and experiential diaspora. Bhanji’s work offers a critical analysis of theoretical conceptions and understandings as to how transgender migrants create home, how home is created for them, and the problematic and imperialistic undertones of existing theory. The damaging Westernized understandings that are laid on top the transgender and non-binary resettlement experience adds to the misconceptions and lack of holistic assistance. This project leans on Bhanji’s criticism when investigating and analyzing the current state of best practices of resettlement agencies.

⁴⁷ Bhanji, Nael. 2012. “Trans/scriptions: Homing Desire, (Trans)sexual Citizenship and Racialized Bodies.” *Transgender Migrations: The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition*. Routledge.

⁴⁸ Bhanji, 2012.

3 METHODOLOGY

This research aims to interrogate the experiences of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers during and in the aftermath of resettlement. Specifically, the focal point is the experience in respect to religious and secular resettlement agencies and outreach organizations. Due to the unique experiences of transgender and non-binary people, both in personal identity and external social reality, this project does not engage in interrogating the overarching—and somewhat dismissive and privileged—LGBTQ+ experience. Rather, in respect to that unique experience, the focus of the interviews and data collection are centered on transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers. By interviewing select employees of religious and secular agencies and outreach organizations that follow specific theological or philosophical frameworks, this project explores resiliency and the concept creation of home.

In order to fully engage in this research, particular terminology must be defined as to the usefulness to this project. The terminology can be understood to fit 3 categories: 1) gender, 2) legal status, and 3) theological. The first section—gender—requires attention to the terms transgender and non-binary. Both terms are commonly used within the problematic gender binary system. Whether in terms of sexual expression or gender expression, the scale model remains problematic in respect to the reality of experience and enforces limitations to the reality of individuals' placement within gender. A more accurate model of gender expression can be imagined as an ever rotating sphere on an ever changing axis wherein the individual is capable and free to move to any location on the sphere at any time without limit. Unfortunately, the understanding of gender by the dominant society has yet to understand and accept such a fluidity of gender. Therefore, though problematic in the theoretical understanding of gender expression, the two terms will be forced into definitions based somewhat off the simplistic binary scale.

Transgender refers to gender identifications that differ from the identification forced upon the individual at birth. This project will recognize the expression of transgender identity regardless of medical, external, internal, or lack of any transitional processes. Though most transgender and non-binary clients that are discussed in this project or supporting literature have, in some way, undergone a transitional process (surgical, hormone therapy, wardrobe choice, make-up choice, etc.). The identity of transgender or non-binary does not necessarily hinge on the external expression. By not recognizing the personal and internal identity in the absence of external performativity would only add to existing discrimination, marginalization, and transphobia. This project will not, intentionally, added to the damaging and problematic understandings in existences. Therefore, the term transgender will not be limited to those engaging in an externally visible transition process.

Though non-binary is often considered under the umbrella term of transgender, it is vital to understand the term as significant and separate for this research. Not all gender-based asylum petitions exist within the limited definition of transgender. Some subjects for this research present a bodily expression of gender that does not fit within the hegemonic understanding of binary gender. Though some subjects claim transgender identities while not presenting within the binary, some do not claim transgender identity while still presenting outside the binary formation. The personal identities within and outside of transgender identity experience similar realities due to the fact their very existence challenges gender norms of the dominant society. Transgender and non-binary, though seemingly similar and often time functioning within similar social scripts and realities, must be respectively defined for this project.

The community this project is focused on engulfs another layer of identity: immigration status as refugee or asylum seekers. Asylum seekers have fled their country of origin to a country

they seek protection by and then apply for refuge. The accepted definition of refugee, used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is an individual that flees their country out of a “well-founded” fear of persecution, war, and/or violence. Race, religion, nationality, political affiliation, and “membership to a particular social group” are recognized reasons for refugee application.⁴⁹ Transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers, in the vast majority of cases, seek refugee status by way of social group membership. The social group they belong to is the reason for violence and persecution.

It is also important to note that, as the intention of this project is to explore and criticize the current concept creation of home, the term “host country” will be rejected and replaced with the terms “resettlement country,” “new home country,” or “new home.” The contextual meaning behind the term “host” implies impermanence and limited welcome. If the conversation on refugee and asylum seeker resettlement is to be moved forward, the basic linguistic aggressions and implications must be challenged. The country that is accepting and resettling the refugees and asylum seekers in question is not hosting. Rather, they are welcoming the person(s) for a permanent stay and to create a home.

In respect to theological definitions, inclusive and affirming are often and mistakenly used as interchangeable by practitioners and non-academics. This project is focused on the Christian-based theological claims and organizations. The difference between the two terms is vital to understand due to the fact that much of this research hinges on that difference. In terms of LGBTQ+ membership to religious-based organizations, the inclusive approach allows for partial social space for LGBTQ+ people, but allows for systemic and existing socio-religious discrimination to thrive.⁵⁰ Inclusive-based religious organizations and institutions allow for the

⁴⁹ <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>

⁵⁰ Lightsey, Pamela R. 2015. *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology*. Pickwick Publications. 2015.

inherent dignity of the LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, but does not require acceptance of the full identity of the person. Often times, inclusive organizations operate under the theological statement of “hate the sin, love the sinner.”⁵¹ This allows for the space to be used for LGBTQ+ people, but the full acceptance (e.g. positions of leadership, same-sex marriages, name affirming ceremonies, queer hermeneutics) are not made part of theologically inclusive organizations.

Affirming theological stances do not merely allow for limited and conditional space for LGBTQ+ people. Rather, affirming theologies operate and are formulated through queer accepting hermeneutics. This allows for the creation of religious space, faculties, and roles that can be used for non-cisgender and non-heterosexual membership. By affirming, this means these identities are fully accepted, holistically allowed, and welcomed.

For this project, five employees of agencies that work to resettle and meet the needs of refugees and asylum seekers were interviewed. The professional titles of interviewees varied, however, each interviewee was screened to have field experience and high levels of knowledge on issues, processes, and institutional function of refugee resettlement and social assimilation. The names of the interviewees and the respective agencies remain anonymous in hopes of removing any pressure or fear and allowing for the most authentic and honest responses.

It is necessary to pause and acknowledge the lack of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers interviewed for this project. The intention during data collection was to interview transgender and non-binary clients of resettlement organizations, to gain firsthand knowledge of experience. However, in order to successfully protect those whom have experience immeasurable violence and marginalization, a particular level of trust and engagement within the community would be necessary. That level of trust, during the time of this project, was not

⁵¹ Cheng, Patrick S. 2011. *Radical Love : An Introduction to Queer Theology*. New York, New York : Seabury Books, 2011

achievable. In an attempt to fill this void of data, this project leans on the work of other scholars that have produced knowledge built on that firsthand experience. Though the data collection comes from reliable interviewees who have assisted directly with transgender and non-binary clients, it is necessary to acknowledge that future work most certainly will be required to fully understand the experience of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers.

The interview questions can be categorized through three sections.⁵² The first section of questions inquires to the theological or philosophical framework of the respective agencies. Theology and philosophy was intentionally mentioned as separate but related concepts of belief systems due to the fact that both religious and secular agencies were included in the interview selection. Theology sparks relatable language to religious-based institutions, while philosophy is a useful term when examining a secular agency or institution. The interviewees were asked to describe and explain the overarching theological or philosophical framework that drives the institutions' understanding and interactions with LGBTQ+ clients. The terminology used in this questioning centers on the differences between inclusive and affirming theologies and philosophies. The response to this line of questioning allowed for the data to be collected as to the placement of inclusion and active presences of LGBTQ+ people in the worldview and praxis of the institution.

The second category of questions relates to active attempts to assist LGBTQ+ clients. The questions were deliberately separated by sexual identity and gender identity. Separate questions were asked in relation to the institutions' support for gay, lesbian, and bisexual refugees and asylum seekers and transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers. The purpose of this separation of questions within the same vein of questioning was to force the

⁵² Refer to Appendix I

interviewees to examine the respective institutions' methods, knowledge, and ability of assistance within the very different realities and experiences of clients. Specifically, the interviewees were asked about the agencies interaction with marginalized clients. For example, questions probed at the unique needs for LGB clients versus those of transgender and non-binary clients. Rather than allowing for the conversation to conflate gender identities and sexual identities together, this separation allowed for the collection of data on the two unique experiences.

It is also in this vein of questioning that the concept and critique of “home” is useful.⁵³ The data collected from the second section of questions reveals not only the current attitudes toward transgender and non-binary refugees in respect to the resettlement agencies, but also the current state of practice of resettling this uniquely marginalized group. This is not to mean negative or transphobic attitudes. Instead, it shows the lack of nuance paid to the transgender and non-binary experience and reality and the barriers to reach needs holistically. Evaluating the data here through the work of Bhanji on the creation of home through Western ideology and understanding⁵⁴ will assist in clarifying the lacking areas and producing potential remedies.

The third category relates to the in-house or community connection with religious services and religious organizations. The interviewees were asked to describe, assuming such connections or services existed, the process of connecting transgender and non-binary clients to religious organizations. This line of questioning specifically inquired about the spirituality of the clients. Much like the communal connection through religious organizations, the interviewees were asked about spirituality and trauma as both separate but connected concepts of experiences. The connection of the two concepts is vital as the project looks to bridge the conversations

⁵³ Bhanji, 2012.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

around trauma inflicted in countries of origin,⁵⁵ often backed with religiosity, and the attempts to decrease re-traumatizing during and after resettlement. Resettlement practices, connection with community, and trauma all intertwine within the experience of holistic assistance of transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers.

⁵⁵ Gowin, 2017.

4 ANALYSIS

The five agencies interviewed consist of religiously affiliated and secular foundations. Every interviewee was asked to explain the overarching theological or philosophical foundation for including LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers in their respective organizations. The terminology used by some of the interviewees reflected that of affirming theology in respect to LGBTQ+ people, including LGBTQ+ people without any reservations or limitations. LGBTQ+ clients are to be included as they identify without any attempts to change or denounce non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identity markers. Some interviewees used language that reflected inclusive theologies, allowing space for LGBTQ+ people but with limited access to salvation and doctrinal acceptance. The secular answers were by and large in harmony, speaking of an all engulfing understanding of humanity. This philosophical understanding of humanity carries with it an effort to reach all suffering people for the betterment of the world for current and future generations. The concept of God or the answer of a theologically defined “calling” was absent from the description given by the secular interviewees, rather answering a universal need for human compassion and understanding.

4.1 Separation of Belief and Policy

Several of the interviewed agencies are religiously affiliated with some form of Christian denomination.⁵⁶ The theological beliefs around LGBTQ+ people were not unanimous across the agencies. Some religiously affiliated agencies did not hold the theological and doctrinal belief as the foundation of policy making and outreach practice.⁵⁷ In these cases, the resettlement agencies accepted funding from particular churches and denominations but created inclusive or affirming

⁵⁶ The denominations will not be identified for the purpose of maintaining anonymity.

⁵⁷ Two of the interviewed agencies operate under denominations that do not fully accept the theological dignity of LGBTQ+ people. No agency or organization that outright rejects LGBTQ+ identity with extreme prejudice was interviewed.

policies regardless of doctrinal support or opposition. One interviewee claimed that efforts are made to make sure “everyone has a seat at the table” and such efforts come from being “faith informed in how we care for people” but “all our services are secular in nature.” This interviewee draws a clear distinction between “faith informed” efforts while not having a “theology as an organization.” This speaks to the separation of theological and doctrinal structures and the humanitarian outreach efforts. The justification for this separation between doctrine and outreach policy comes from the understanding that the respective church and denomination charges the agency with assisting refugees and asylum seekers in all ways possible. This blanket charge is practiced with the understanding of religious funding and secular policy.

However, such separation is not the case for all religiously affiliated agencies. In a few cases, the agency’s religious ties impact and dictate most, if not all, aspects of outreach and methodology. In these instances, the methods used to assist, employment requirements, and additional limitations to clients are arranged and implemented to remain in line with existing theological and doctrinal beliefs of the larger church or denomination. This lack of separation between belief and practice requires LGBTQ+ clients to be assisted in different and potentially negative methods. Even in terms of language used by such organizations is impacted. An interviewee from an organization that does not separate the two concepts states, “A need across the board is to use inclusive⁵⁸ pronouns. That is something our organization hasn’t even been educated on, and I don’t know how well received or adapted it would be.” Efforts are being made by this organization—or rather by select employees—to change this policy and used more

⁵⁸ The interviewee is not speaking about affirming or inclusive theology here. Rather, the interviewee is merely referencing progressive language practices that include pronouns for non-binary the he/she standard.

progressive and inclusive education practices and policies. In relation to a specific transgender client, the same interviewee stated that the client was “treated with respect for their *choices*” but employees experienced difficulty in communication and assisting the client due to lack of correct language. It is worth noting that the lack of separation is not widely practiced among religiously affiliated agencies, but is worth examination for this project.

Both religiously affiliated and secular agencies explained the respective agencies’ understanding of inclusive or affirming theology or philosophy. The results were divided. The secular agencies used language when describing the philosophy that mirrors that of affirming theology. “We do not have any metrics in which we use to decide who we help,” claimed one secular interviewee, “our sole metric is that someone has come to the U.S or come to our office [...] to overcome their experience of war or conflict.” This language relies on a full acceptance of a client’s identity. The religiously affiliated agencies that implemented funding and practice separation from the respective churches and denominations, with two exceptions, also reflected more affirming theological qualities. Referring back to a previous interview quote, one interviewee stated that affirming theology was “making sure everyone has a seat at the table” and “there is no judgment for anyone who comes” to the “table.” This was in respect to all minorities, including sexual and gender minorities. However, inclusive theology is used to explain services in some religiously affiliated agencies. An interviewee explained that the goal was not to offer services to “only the majority, but to all.” However, the praxis and methods of this agency are LGBTQ+ limited. Therefore, the sentiment is “all” but the praxis is exclusive. It is necessary to draw distinction between offering services to all through an inclusive theology, and offering an affirming environment. In this case, though the agency is attempting to offer services to all in need, the theological understanding follows the inclusive, rather than affirming,

vein of understanding. Agencies that do not practices such separation and are mandated to produce and follow policies in line with theological and doctrinal beliefs operate under an inclusive theology, including LGBTQ+ clients but not fully accepting their identities. In this case, organizations accept the client's expression with theological limitations. As stated by one interviewee, "most people in my office would see [sexuality and non-conforming gender expression] as a choice or preference and not who [LGBTQ clients] are." The interviewee, making clear this was not their own belief but merely reflecting the organization's broader belief, stated that many of the employees do not "have the obligation to honor who [LGBTQ clients] are." The concept of choice reflects the inclusive-based theology, hinging on the theological cliché of "hate the sin, love the sinner." The foundational theological and philosophical understanding of inclusive or affirming practices impacts additional functions of resettlement agencies.

4.2 Hiring Practices

One such function is hiring practices. Affirming secular and religiously affiliated agencies engage in hiring practices that reflect the demographic of clientele when and if possible. This means that the affirming agencies directly stated that hiring transgender and non-binary employees—both refugees and non-refugees—would assist in bettering the existing methods of assistance. By including those who live in the margins of society—in this case gender minorities—the agencies would be better equipped to meet the needs of gender minorities. Many of the agencies already have transgender and non-binary employees working with the refugee and asylum seeking community. Some of the employees, in all except agencies refusing to employ sexually and gender non-conforming people in general, have been resettled with refugee status through the very agencies they are now employed.

However, the select agencies that are religiously affiliated and do not practiced a separation from their respective churches or denominations are required to enforce hiring practices that reflect the doctrinal limitations. For example, one agency maintains an inclusive policy—with specific implications that will be discussed later in this paper—toward LGBTQ+ clients, however, maintains a discriminatory employment policy that refuses employment to non-heterosexual and non-cisgender applicants. When discussing areas where there is a lack of inclusion, an interviewee stated that “[the organization] does not allow anyone on staff that isn’t straight. They don’t allow any form of leadership or employment.” This interviewee expressed discontentment with this policy, remarking on how the hiring practice does not meet the intention and overall humanitarian goal of the organization. “I have talked to the director many times and he will say ‘we will treat everyone equally and we love everyone the same’ until they [read LGBTQ people] apply. Then the line is drawn there.” This policy is upheld due to religious affiliation of the agency.

The theological and philosophical commitments clearly influence the hiring practices of the agency. The demographic makeup of employees for resettlement agencies directly impact the experience of clients and effectiveness of the agency. This means that having a staff that is diverse (racially, ethnically, sexually, gender identity, etc.,) not only creates an environment that is more welcoming and comfortable to a massively diverse clientele, but also ensures specific tools and methods gained from similar experience. This is not to imply that hiring practices should be based solely on membership to specific marginalized groups, however, the refusal and direct rejection of hiring gender (and other) minorities due to doctrinal conditions removes hope and possibility for holistic assistance. The staff must, to the best of ability, reflect the clientele.

The absence of minority and marginalized employees and the lack of affirming beliefs opens the client to subpar care, potential isolation, and re-trauma.⁵⁹

4.3 Employee Education

The second function of resettlement agencies that is impacted by the theological and philosophical commitment is employee education. Literature is circulated throughout resettlement agencies and outreach organizations for the purpose of educating on “best practices” to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ clients.⁶⁰ However, education practices to maintain sexual and gender competency of employees were criticized heavily by the vast majority of interviewees. “Anytime we have a training session [...] they break down the term LGBTQ and then spend the rest of the time lumping it all together,” stated a secular interviewee. A religiously affiliated interviewee spoke about the need for further education at the basic levels, stating, “a colleague from a partner agency [...] said something that was a little bit phobic and blatantly untrue about what it is to be gay. Basically, he made it sound like being gay was contagious.” In this context, the agencies were working together to house LGBTQ+ clients. Given the overall lack of education in some cases about the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, the main concern from the interviewees focused on the uneven attention paid to sexual identities versus gender identities. Each interviewee spoke about education efforts attempting to be encompassing of all members of the LGBTQ+ community, domestic and global, however, beyond basic definition and breakdown of the acronym, sexual identities (gay, lesbian, and bisexual specifically) were the only focus. Gender identities remained undiscussed or, at minimum, briefly referred to. Internal and external

⁵⁹ Alessi, 2016, 2017.

⁶⁰ Portman, Scott, and Daniel Weyl. 2013. “LGBT Refugee Resettlement in the US: Emerging Best Practices.” *Forced Migration Review* 1 (42): 44.

education programs are conducted with reasonable regularity. Such lacking educational material is shared by all the resettlement agencies interviewed and is widely circulated.

Though the information is shared and made accessible by all resettlement agencies, the lack of attention paid to the transgender and non-binary experience is devastating to the ability of the agencies to best assist transgender and non-binary clients. Though sexual identity requires special attention, the lack of attention and education on gender identities creates a false educational inclusion. The conflation of all members of the LGBTQ+ acronym into a common and share experience—seemingly focusing on sexuality—not only serves as a factually incorrect model, but also perpetuates dangerous simplicities and encourages false ideas of knowledge. This can—and arguably does—create an environment of assistance and outreach that fails to meet the actual needs of the clientele.

It is also necessary to contemplate the creation of sexual and gender identities within the context of employee education. The terminology that is used to understand and discuss sexual and gender identities and experiences is predicated on a Western and colonial creation.⁶¹ Resettlement agencies, both secular and religiously affiliated, assist a global clientele. This clientele, specifically the sexual and gender minorities, may not function within the same Westernized understanding of identity. Therefore, employee education, though lacking as is, may be lacking in cultural competency in respect to global understandings of sexuality and gender expression. Though the current understanding is useful in navigating the Western culture that clients will be assimilating to, it is not necessarily the best practice when attempting to understand and communicate to clients who operate within a different framework of sexuality

⁶¹ Puar, 2007, 2013.

and gender. Employee education practices directly affects the methods of active assistance of resettlement agency.

4.4 In-House Signage

The education available to resettlement agencies and employees impacts the method and ability of outreach to transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers. Agencies actively attempt to create a welcoming environment and safe space for sexual and gender minorities. The most common method used is creation and visibility of LGBTQ+ supportive posters. Such posters are visible on the walls of the agencies. Several interviewees mentioned the importance of the posters, one interviewee stating “I had an extra one made for my office.” The most useful and popular of such posters include the words “you are safe here” written in multiple languages upon a rainbow background. The languages used are those commonly spoken by clients. The rainbow background connects the message to the widely popularized LGBTQ+ pride flag. The idea behind this poster is to ensure clients who are sexual and gender minorities that the resettlement agency is a safe space to divulge sexual and gender identities. Many clients who may identify within the LGBTQ+ identities have fled their home countries out of fear of violence due to the rejection of such identities. Scholarship shows that this may lead the client to attempt to hide sexual and gender identities from the agency.^{62 63} A secular interviewee claimed that clients attempt to hide their religious, sexual, and/or gender identities out of fear. This fear comes from trauma experienced in their country of origin and fear that the identity will spark additional violence during the resettlement process, even by case workers and other employees. Outside the Westernized understanding of sexuality and gender, this approach may not be as effective as

⁶² Edward Ou Jin Lee, and Shari Brotman. 2013. “SPEAK OUT! Structural Intersectionality and Anti-Oppressive Practice with LGBTQ Refugees in Canada.” *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue Canadienne de Service Social* 30 (2): 157.

⁶³ Alessi, 2016, 2017.

intended. Though the rainbow flag has gained traction throughout the world as a symbol for sexual and gender minorities, particular identity formation may not be created within the Westernized perspective. This would imply that gender education must be challenged to engulf non-Westernized conceptualizations and formations in order to fully and holistically gain the attention and trust of such clients.

4.5 Housing

In the vein of holistic assistance of transgender and non-binary clients is the effort to gain and maintain safe housing. The main focus of all interviewees was the issue of housing. The physical safety of the client is the agencies' highest concern, and rightfully so. Concerns exist around the safety of the client. This is not unique to transgender and non-binary clients, however, the unique experience of transgender and non-binary existence does require significant attention paid to housing issues. In terms of living situations, transgender and non-binary clients face potential danger on several fronts. When possible, resettlement agencies attempt to house clients with roommates of similar cultural background or within an area populated with people of shared culture. This is not the case, most of the time, for gender non-conforming clients. Often times, cases of transgender and non-binary clients involve violence due to cultural and religious beliefs held by the threatening parties. It does not serve the clients best to house them in a cultural situation existing in transphobia. This presents a housing issues for the client. However, due to the weakness in some educational efforts, remedying these issues prove quite difficult.

The question of how to best house such a small and unknown group must be adequately answered in order for holistic assistance. There have been cases where employees of the agencies have housed transgender and non-binary clients in their own homes. This is done out of necessity. The question agencies are faced with, though perhaps insensitive and blunt, is where

does an agency put such a person, a person that seemingly fits nowhere in current American society nor their culture of origin? A common thread of concern throughout all the interviews was the issue around safe housing. Specifically, concerns include transphobic violence in the neighborhood, violence inflicted by a transphobic roommate, and environments that have negative impacts on the mental health of the transgender or non-binary client. Employees express difficulty finding homes for transgender and non-binary clients that fit the cultural and safety needs. Such clients do not fit well within groups reflecting the culture of their country of origin, nor do they fit well within established Western LGBTQ+ communities. Though, potentially, alternative and nonconforming factions of the LGBTQ+ American community would be a social location for easier assimilation and acceptance. However, such social groups can be difficult to penetrate. But what does remain clear from this research is the importance of community. A home is not merely a dwelling place, a place of physical safety. Rather it is a place of safety, belonging, membership, and ownership.

4.6 Religious Community

This leads to the third category of questioning on religious connections. At this point, the data collected from the interviews shows a disconnect between scholarship and praxis. Literature points to the need of additional assistance and efforts in community creation to reduce isolationism, dangerous behavior, and potentially destructive coping.⁶⁴ One such method of community creation is through religious organizations, be that houses of worship in respective faiths, non-institutionalized religious followings, or spiritual alternative groups. Being connected to religious or spiritual groups increases the chances of maintaining resiliency of LGBTQ+

⁶⁴ Alessi, 2016, 2017.

refugees and asylum seekers.⁶⁵ Again, access to such communities is a unique struggle for transgender and non-binary clients due to the politics around the body. Religious or spiritual community connection gives both communal identity that leads to concepts of belonging and membership. Additionally, such connection gives the opportunity to engage with the community through service work. Service work gives a sense of ownership to the new community. This is vital to maintaining resiliency.⁶⁶ The data collected through the interviews exposes a lack of attention paid to this point of the resettlement process. Though the agencies attempt to meet the needs of clients via housing and community, the additional needs of religious and spiritual community are not fully met.

In response to interview questions regarding community connection with religious groups, agencies expressed two main methods of attempting to meet the religious and spiritual needs of clients. The most common method is to recommend religious organizations upon request, but not to take direct engagement. This method, as stated during many interviews, is used for two reasons. The first is to not appear to favor one faith or denomination over others. Fear around breaking the separation of religious funding and secular policy or fear of appearing religious in general drives many agencies to take a hands-off approach or minimal approach with building religious community. Though this is understandable, it does not align with the needs as presented in existing literature. The second method used by some agencies is to implement policies that dictate or try to forcefully promote the church or denomination affiliated with the resettlement agency. In such cases, case workers or advocates are instructed to attempt to connect the client with a specific church regardless of the client's religious history or commitments.

⁶⁵ Aslessi, 2016.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Both methods offer problematic results to transgender and non-binary clients. The former approach, though seeming to be the safest approach, does allow for potential isolationism and damaging religious connection. Damaging religious connection refers to the re-traumatizing of refugees by new religious organizations, specifically towards refugees who have experience religious-based trauma in the past.⁶⁷ Recommendations upon request does not take an active stance in the creation of community. (It should be understood that the argument for this project is not to force clients into religious or spiritual communities; instead to take a more active approach in offering recommendations to better assist.) Refugees and asylum seekers enter into a society they are not familiar with, with very little knowledge of the religious landscape of the new community. Many transgender and non-binary clients believe it is physically safer to remain isolated, fearing attack if they venture into the surrounding community. Isolation leads to depression, potential alcoholism, substance abuse, and suicide.⁶⁸ Suicide and depression are disproportionately high in transgender and non-binary culture. With the additional layer of refugee status, isolationism, or trauma/re-trauma inflicted by non-welcoming or negative impacting inclusive religious groups only increase the risk of these results.⁶⁹ ⁷⁰ Though this approach seems the best practice, it still leaves transgender and non-binary clients in a state social liminality that can prove to be devastating to their resiliency and even livelihood.

The latter method takes a more direct action in a destructive path. Most, if not all, transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers undergo some form of religious

⁶⁷Religious organizations, regardless of intention, have the ability to re-traumatize refugees and asylum seekers through inclusive theology, testimony, misguided or misinformed services or expectations. Religious trauma can be relived or inflicted on transgender and non-binary clients as the organizations understand and respond to the multilayered identity and experience of the clients.

⁶⁸ Alessi, 2016.

⁶⁹ Luthar, 2000.

⁷⁰ Alessi, 2017.

trauma.⁷¹ Though religious community is vital to the resiliency of clients,⁷² this type of method reduces the religious choice and autonomy of the already religiously traumatized client. It should be made clear that such policies do not require clients to attend any connected church or organization. Rather, the policies state that the employees should make attempts to connect clients with approved religious organizations and churches. Nonetheless, the policies attempt to push a specific form of religion upon clients. The agencies that upheld and utilize this type of method operate within an inclusive theology, desiring to have LGBTQ+ members but with limitations to the acceptance of their sexual and gender identities. Of course, such theology can traumatize or re-traumatize clients who attend, but the policy to push such religious communities can increase the trauma felt by the clients. It potentially will decrease the self-worth of the client, increase the desire for isolationism, and further separate the client from affirming and healthy community connection.

4.7 Recreation of “Home”

In addition to the religious, psychological, and social concerns in resiliency, the understanding of home should be investigated. The conceptualization of home must be more than a physical dwelling with the promise of physical security. It must be more than a place, it must be a community, a connection, a place of personal and communal birth and growth. The practices and methods that exist currently are meeting human necessities for all refugees and asylum seekers, but not the needs of humanity for so many. More often than not, LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers arrive alone, having been rejected by their family and communities of origin.⁷³ Transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers do not have to ability—in most

⁷¹ Gowin, 2017.

⁷² Alessi, 2016.

⁷³ Cheney, 2017.

cases—to hide the identity. The reality of who they are in society exist in terms of the body. The current practices and methods by agencies are not enough to ensure, or at least promote, the resiliency of this gender minority group. The conceptualization of home must be at the center of efforts, at the foundational level of client resiliency. Though the practices that are employed currently do not require total review or change, new practices need to be assessed and implemented if the goal of holistic assistance and resiliency is to exist.

5 CONCLUSION

Through the labors of this project, the current state of refugee resettlement in respect to transgender and non-binary clients has been interrogated and results in several recommendations to more holistically assist clients in the creation of home. The intention of these recommendations is to add to the good work being done by agencies, offer corrective points, and bring strength to lacking areas. It is not the intention of these recommendations to unnecessarily criticize. The recommendations range from decolonizing education, improving documentation practices, strengthening relationship with affirming organizations, and the integration of religious and spiritual community into the resettlement process. Some recommendations can be implemented easily while others require long term and institutional challenges.

5.1 Decolonization of Education

The first recommendation is the decolonization of education. The employee education practices that exist currently are the product of colonization, solely Western conceptualizations of sexuality and gender. Though it is necessary and important to include Westernized concepts due to the fact that resettlement occurs in the Western social context, it is equally as important to engage education and outreach within the construction of the origin society. This means that constructions of sexuality and gender must be understood both within the current state and the state in which clients were socialized. For example, many Native American communities use the term two-spirit, Samoan culture uses fa'afafine, hijra is used in Indian communities, the Oaxaca culture in Southern Mexico uses muze, and in parts of the Arabic Peninsula the term khanith is used to identify a gender non-conforming person. The education must fight against the Westernized conceptualization, include the very group intended to assist, include sexual and gender minority and refugee perspectives in the creation of educational material. This will

improve the ability for useful and more holistic communication of needs and assistance between client and employee.

Additionally, the focusing on sexual identity and lack of attention to gender identity is the product of the Western socio-political praxis of sexual and gender inclusion. Whether in terms of Gay Liberation or public policy, sexual identities, specifically those that are assimilated into hegemonic society with more ease, are favored. This leaves gender minorities not only marginalized by mainstream society, but also marginalized within the LGBTQ+ community as well. Transgender and non-binary exist within multiple layers of marginalization. Employee educational efforts that reflect this unsavory state of society perpetuate the ideals behind it. By not giving necessary attention to gender minorities' experiences perpetuates the marginalization and affirms the lack of empathy toward them. When assisting transgender and non-binary refugees, the agencies are faced with even more layers of marginalization. It would behoove the agencies to engage in educational programming that would function to challenge the existing state.

5.2 Documentation

The next recommendation requires institutional and legal challenges that certainly will require time and effort. The documentation that is provided to resettlement agencies from government agencies is not clear as to the specific classification. "Particular social group" is the standard reason giving for many accepted refugee statuses including sexual and gender minorities. Additional information is only attainable through conversation or assumption. Though the reason behind this is reasonable, the intention to not "out" the client in case of danger, the lack of information causes issues around being able to offer better care. Though this project does not offer a strong solution to this problem, it is evident that the issue requires further investigation. The question arises as to how documentation and demographical information can

be better formulated in order to assist additionally marginalized clients. It is most evident that this issue must be approached with the utmost caution.

5.3 Religious Community in Resettlement

The last recommendation is the active building of relationships with affirming religious and spiritual organizations and the integration of religious and spiritual needs directly into the services offered. Though it is clear that most interviewed agencies take some form of relationship building with religious groups or institutions, the recommendation is to actively seek out affirming theological organizations. It is also necessary to reduce or reject inclusive-based organizations. Literature and scholarship makes it evident that inclusive organizations create space that is susceptible to re-traumatizing transgender and non-binary clients due to the lack of full acceptance and indirect negative perspectives of gender minority expression. Directly building professional connection with affirming groups, not inclusive, reduces the chances of client referral leading to the re-trauma.

In terms of referral, the recommendation of integration of religious and spiritual connection into services offered requires explanations. In contrast to some religiously affiliated resettlement agencies that actively attempt to direct clients to preapproved churches and denominations that are connected to the agency or agencies that take a hands off approach, this recommendation claims that resettlement agencies should focus attention on offering religious and spiritual navigation. Navigation requires the religious and spiritual needs of the client, as understood by the client, to be placed in priority and the agency's religious affiliation to be of no concern. Navigation requires an active approach by the agencies while being led by the client. Due to the fact that religious and spiritual well-being directly impacts the chances of resiliency in transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers, the resettlement process must focus on

the creation of such well-being and community if the success and holistic well-being of the clients are to be the end goal.

The recommendations offer additional methods and conversation starters to include the transgender and non-binary experience in creating a stronger concept of home. This project grappled with the conceptualization of home, the misinformation and misjudgment of home, and the praxis of its creation. Religious community, that supports religious resiliency, functions as a building block for the creation and understanding of home. This allows for socio-religious assimilation and strengthening of community and personal well-being, as advised by scholarship. Through the information created, the critique of current practices, and the recommendations for future work, home for transgender and non-binary refugees and asylum seekers can be approached through the intersection of resettlement and religious connection in hope of assisting in the development of stable, resilient, and truly joyous homes.

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APPENDIX I

Question List for Outreach Organization

- 1) Describe what the term Inclusive or Affirming Theology means to you and to the outreach organization.
- 2) If this is a secular organization, what is the overarching philosophy of inclusion that helps form the purpose and action of this organization?
- 3) How does this organization address the needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual refugees/asylum seekers?
- 4) What, if any, unique needs are you faced with when handling LGB cases? This is in terms of resources, spirituality, trauma, etc.
- 5) In respect to transgender/queer/non-binary) clients, do you see an especially unique need or experience?
- 6) Do you now or have in the past worked with trans/queer/non-binary clients? If not, why?
- 7) Do you have protocols or special means (education/training/resources/etc.) when faced with a trans/queer/non-binary client?
- 8) What religious services or resources are offered to trans/queer/non-binary clients?
- 9) Are there any lacking areas of inclusion that the organization has or is currently working to remedy?

Question List for Outreach Clients

1. How do you identify yourself in terms of sexuality and gender?
2. If you are comfortable, can you tell me how and if your gender was a reason you needed to flee your home country?
3. How has your gender identity been received by resettlement agencies and outreach organizations?
4. Outside the resettlement agency and outreach organization, have you experienced discrimination based on your gender identity? If yes, how so?
5. As a trans/queer/non-binary person coming into the US as a refugee/asylum seeker, did you have any special needs? If yes, what were the needs?
6. Were you able to find assistance with such needs through the resettlement agency or outreach organization? If so, how did the organizations help out?
7. What does the term “home” mean to you?
8. How has the outreach organization changed how you think of home?
9. Do you feel safe and included in the outreach organization? Why?
10. As a trans/queer/non-binary person, what needs or issues are you still facing now that you have resettled or are resettling into Atlanta?