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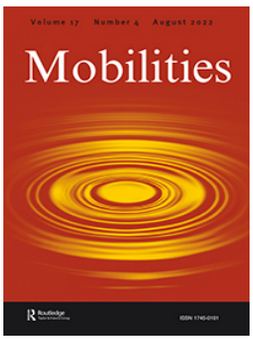

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Going out and making it home: on the roots, routes and homing of young queer men in Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Public imagination and academic scholarship present queer migrants as being uprooted due to their embodiment of non-normative sexual identities. Drawing from ethnographic research with a male sex worker-led organisation (SLO) in Nairobi, including 41 in-depth interviews with members, this paper explores this perceived uprootedness by highlighting Kenyan queer migrants' multi-layered and multi-dimensional social experiences of home. Using the concept of 'homing', the paper explores the men's lifelong efforts to feel at home, and the embeddedness of queer identities in this process. The SLO generates feelings of safety, acceptance and recognition and provides a 'second home' in the city. In the process of creating ties with chosen families in the city, the men still maintain close ties with family back in their villages, while economic opportunities induce back-and-forth mobilities. The men's individual trajectories might fluctuate yet still fit within a more linear route in which they aspire to acquire land and properties in their ancestral homeland. The analysis of queer homing supports a reimagining of queer people's mobilities that stresses their embeddedness in society and illustrates how it relates to the 'queering' of queer in the African context.

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Introduction

I met Yaro when conducting ethnographic fieldwork with a male sex worker-led organisation (SLO) in Nairobi in 2018 and 2019. While we have remained connected since then, our contact was reinforced in July 2021, when Yaro experienced a homophobic attack, had to relocate houses in Nairobi and contacted me for financial support. In December 2021, Yaro called me again, this time from 'home', which, as he explained, was the village where he was born. He had lived in this village until the age of 16, when he left for Nairobi to pursue higher education. He told me how, back then, he imagined Nairobi as 'the place to be', a place of hope, opportunities and prestige. Once in the city, however, a lack of financial support obstructed his access to school, after which he ended up living on the streets, where he did 'any sort of job' to make ends meet, including sex work.

His membership in the SLO provided him with social support and a form of economic security in Nairobi. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, led to widespread unemployment and a scarcity

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of clients and brought considerable financial constraints, making it difficult for him to pay for rent and to buy basic necessities, including food. Yaro decided to leave. When I asked him how it felt to be back home, he said, 'I tell you, I am so excited'. He said he realised he had stayed away for too long, and he now enjoyed being home and taking care of his mother.

Yaro's experience of being excited to be back home and living with his family in the village contrasts with hegemonic notions of Kenyan queer people in general, and sex workers specifically, as being uprooted (e.g. Boyce and Isaacs 2011). Existing research on queer Africans frequently addresses the repressive socio-political climate characterised by criminal laws and homophobia (Mgbako 2016). Researchers often emphasise how queer people's experience limits their access to health and legal services, and how these violent circumstances shape people's sense of self, their friendships and their family dynamics (Okal et al. 2009; van Klinken 2018). In this context, various authors have drawn attention to queer people building a sense of community to find a sense of home away from home (Ferguson 2017; Marnell, Oliveira, and Khan 2021; Woensdregt and Nencel 2022a). Queer migration studies reflect such an understanding of queer subjects' movements as one-directional, away from the home of origin and towards another and more welcoming site to be called home (Fortier 2001).

A growing body of literature recognises that as people grow up and move through their life trajectories, their sense of home may shift in both place and time (Pérez Murcia and Boccagni 2022). These studies turn the experience of home into a matter of '"hom-ing", or a life-long effort to reach the ideal social condition that generates affect, longing and aspiration' (Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020, 597). Using the concept of homing in a novel way, this paper attempts to show how queer male Kenyan sex workers' sense of home is part of a lifelong and cumulative effort to move towards a state, condition and feeling of being at home (see also Boccagni 2022). By exploring the main homes of attachment and belonging over their life trajectories, and the ideal homes or conditions they would like to live in or tend towards, the paper demonstrates that whereas the SLO is part of the young men's journey towards creating a sense of home, it is by no means their final destination. Instead, the men reclaim their marginalised queer identities and make them part of returning home to reimagine their futures. This idea refines the conceptualisation of marginalised groups who migrate because of stigma, discrimination and exclusion in general (and of queer male migrants in particular) as well as challenging hegemonic representations of these groups in academic scholarship.

The empirical material is drawn from approximately nine months' worth of ethnographic research with a male SLO in Nairobi in 2018–2019, and online follow-up interviews with members in 2021. As part of the ethnographic research, I conducted participant observations to explore the everyday dynamics in the SLO. During this process, I established relationships with its staff, members and fellow sex worker and queer activists. In addition to these observations, my argument for this paper stems from 41 in-depth interviews with members (17 face to face and 24 online), and an analysis of 20 community-led research and action (CLRA) sessions that I attended. A draft of the manuscript was discussed with the interlocutors. This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Using the label 'queer' in this article cannot go without an explanation. In presenting the Kenyan men's narratives, I recognise that global sexual categories such as 'sex worker', 'gay' and 'queer' are contingent, contested and unfinished. I employ the terms my interlocutors used to describe their experiences and expressions of gender and sexuality, including 'gay' and 'queer', which they often used interchangeably. Critical scholars have rightfully emphasised the need to move beyond global discourses and categories including 'queer' (Nyanzi 2014), as they erase differences within and across gender- and sexuality-non-conforming people (Bacchetta, El-Tayeb, and Haritaworn 2015). Scholars have also noted that sexuality is not the main identity marker for African queer people (Ekine 2013; Spronk 2018) and that non-normative desires and gendered subjectivities are marked by multiplicity and intersect with other experiences and identities (Oloruntoba-Oju 2021). In this regard, people simultaneously confirm and defy gendered sexual

scripts, bringing into view the lived paradoxes of the ways in which gender, body and desire intersect (Spronk and Nyeck 2021).

To account for these subjectivities and lived paradoxes, I use the term 'queer' in a theoretical way to indicate a field of non-normative genders, desires and practices where same-sex and cross-sex desires and acts are not mutually exclusive (Spronk and Nyeck 2021). In this way, I hope to further theorise how Kenyan queers 'queer' their social environments in various ways.

Conceptualising African queer homing

Several mobility and migration studies have examined homing, especially in qualitative research on people's physical and imaginative mobilities towards home (e.g. Boccagni 2017, 2022; Castillo 2016; Kim and Smets 2020; O'Connor 2021). Whereas earlier literature tended to conceptualise home primarily as synonymous with material infrastructures, these scholars provide a wider social lens to the meaning of home: they understand it as the outcome of individual or group views, emotions and practices, the assets they rely on, and the external structures of opportunity that enable and constrain their social actions (Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020). This strand of research thus turns the experience of home into a matter of homing and draws attention to people's lifelong efforts to reach the 'ideal' social conditions, as well as the characteristics, accessibility and achievability of such a home (Boccagni 2022). Pérez Murcia and Boccagni (2022) argue that having such a social understanding of home is crucial when analysing the life trajectories of migrants, as doing so can explain people's attachments to certain environments, relationships and communities across different locations and against the background of their broader life experiences.

Queer studies are at the heart of our understanding of how homing resounds in the lived experience of queer individuals and groups (Fortier 2001, 2003; Perez 2021). In these studies, scholars often use homing to address queer migrants' trajectories away from their childhood homes and towards homes with unconditional recognition and free expression of their sexual orientation (Boccagni 2022). In this light, empirical research has demonstrated how queer subjects across the world create and sustain a collective sense of home away from home in physical and social spaces that provide safety, recognition and protection (e.g. Saria 2021; Vider 2022). Fortier (2003, 116) has observed that scholars generally assume that for queer migrants, leaving their childhood home is a kind of 'homecoming', one of leaving an unfamiliar and unwelcoming home to one that is welcoming of gays and lesbians. The author (Fortier 2003, 116) opens up this one-directional approach to queer homing by suggesting that it is an act of mobility, as it can include subjects' reclaiming and reprocessing of histories that might have been uprooted in migration and can be part of returning home to remember the past differently and reimagine the future. More recently, Borges (2018) extended this view on queer homing as multi-directional by illustrating how queer Latinx migrants in Los Angeles maintain close ties with immediate family while simultaneously creating ties with their chosen families; they also take memories from the past to build homes in the present and future.

Until now, few studies have investigated homing in the African context. Homing has been studied among African migrants abroad, for example in China (Adebayo and Omololu 2020; Castillo 2016). Such research has examined migrants' attempts to create a sense of home away from home and efforts in the African diaspora to secure a future, either in the host country or in one's ancestral homeland. Yet, there has been little discussion about homing among migrants within African countries, and still less about queer homing in this regard.

A socio-cultural background to Kenyan queer home imaginaries

In this section, I will explore the socio-cultural background behind hegemonic Kenyan queer home imaginaries, as well as in the broader living and working trajectories within which they are

embedded. Although I met my interlocutors while they were living in Nairobi, most of them were born and bred in other areas of Kenya. Similarly to many other citizens of Nairobi, my interlocutors had engaged in rural-urban migration in search of educational, economic and social opportunities (Nyairo, Onkangi, and Ojwala 2021). Interestingly, despite widespread urbanisation, among Kenyan rural-urban migrants, the rural areas continue to evoke strong notions of home. Jenkins (2012) demonstrated that even people who were born and lived their whole lives in Nairobi imagined their rural and ancestral homelands as 'home'.

The symbolic power of the rural and ancestral homeland in Kenya can be traced back to the colonial imposition of ethnic reserves (Overton 1990). By assigning tribes a 'homeland' (Parsons 2011), the colonial regime determined tribal boundaries and set the scene for an imagined autochthonous or 'native' sense of belonging (Lonsdale 2008). In today's Kenya, national discourses continue to emphasise ethnic identity as inextricably linked to land and place, as a consequence of which people continue to imagine the ancestral homelands as home (Lang and Sakdapolrak 2014). The trope of the rural home is inherently contradictory and contested. Nonetheless, while in urban settings the mixing of ethnic groups is more prominent, in rural areas such mixing is politically opposed and frequently results in violence and conflict between ethnic groups (Hanne and Höglund 2018).

In the context of Nairobi, citizens' unambiguous relationships with their rural homes are easily visible. Income from labour migration contributes to the livelihoods of households in Kenya's rural areas (Meda 2013), and urban residents return home for family emergencies and events such as funerals (Mendola 2012). The rural home imaginary is most visible, however, in people's aspirations for landownership in the rural homeland, to build a house for themselves and their extended families (Elfversson and Höglund 2019). While aspirations for landownership in the ancestral homeland can be linked to a 'native' sense of belonging, landownership is also linked to people's accessibility to land. In Kenya, land ownership is organised by elaborate programmes related to inheritance and the natural reserves described above (Whyte 2005). While economic wealth provides some people opportunities to buy land elsewhere, such inheritance programmes make the ancestral homeland the most straightforward place to own land, especially for those who are less well off. As far as the young queer men's home imaginaries are concerned, they are embedded into national imaginations of the rural as 'home'. What sets these men's imaginations apart, however, is their queer identities.

In Kenya, the criminalisation of queer sexualities and desire in the legal, political and social realm, as well as the framing of homosexuality as non-African, immoral and contrary to Christianity, both suggest an exclusion of queer people from the national home imaginary (van Klinken 2018). The embodiment of non-normative sexual desires, practices and aspirations requires queer people to navigate and carve out alternative spaces in order to feel and be at home. Today, much of what we know about queer people's experiences of home in the Kenyan context originates from important, yet anecdotal, evidence generated as by-products from academic studies, as well as media and popular culture (e.g. Kahiu 2018; Murimi 2020; The NEST Collective 2015). While a few academic studies exist on queer and sex worker communities in Kenya (Ombagi 2019; Restar et al. 2022; Woensdregt and Nencel 2022a), this literature has missed an important aspect in terms of queer mobility and its impact on the meaning of home. Other authors have theorised Kenyan sex workers' migration and relationships with home (White 1990; Meiu 2017) and have shown how these marginalised groups mobilise resources in urban settings to uphold a respectable status at home. But because these later studies primarily centre on heterosexual sex workers, the impact of queer identity on people's relationships with home is not yet fully understood. To fill these gaps, this paper explores the ways in which young queer migrants in Nairobi engage in a lifelong and cumulative effort to attain a feeling of being at home.

Before continuing, it is important to explain that people's opportunities for homing can be enabled and hindered by individual life circumstances, social conditions and crises that are time

and place dependent (Castillo 2016). In the context of this study, and following from the above, this understanding requires an interpretation of the young queer men's homing within a conceptual model that acknowledges that their personal agency is constrained and influenced by a repressive and heteronormative socio-cultural context and a lack of economic opportunities and access to land, among other things. The remaining part of the paper elaborates on the men's homing in the past, present and future. The quotes in this paper have been lightly edited for clarity.

Homing the past: searching for home elsewhere

In discussing the home of the past, the interlocutors often reflected on how their sexual orientation and gender had played a significant role in shaping their sense of home, particularly their relationships with their parents, siblings and other extended family members at home. Growing up in heteronormative social settings, they experienced that most people spoke degradingly and negatively about homosexuality, leaving them feeling lonely and hiding their queer desires from others. Kimani reflected on this childhood experience:

> It wasn't easy. You know, I am Kikuyu and they have those customs where you have to be a man. You have to act like a man and do all the things men do. They wanted to force me into something that I didn't want [because] from childhood I always knew I loved men … [In Kikuyu culture] you're not supposed to do the things women do. You're supposed to sit with your father and maybe have a cup of tea with him. Take your cattle to the river for water. You're not supposed to do such things that are considered to be women's chores. For me it was the opposite. I would cook. I would do everything that ladies do. It was one hell of a time … Like 100 percent, I used to feel like a girl, but you have to act like a man. They expect you to be a man.

As Kimani's words illustrate, the social context of his childhood home assigned pre-defined gendered roles and raised certain expectations in terms of masculinity. To avoid disappointing their families, and to prevent being excluded by them, the interlocutors considered silence about their homosexuality easiest and safest. Some had succeeded in this strategy and still did not discuss their sexuality with their family members. Others experienced family members 'suspecting', 'discovering' or 'finding out' about their lives, and they felt forced (or were actually forced) to come out. Although the family members' reactions differed, the interlocutors generally experienced them as negative. Cashmadam remembered an argument with his father, after which he had to move out:

> The argument was about my sexuality, and he is really religious. It was a surprise to him that his only son could be gay. It was hard for him to understand … [He found out after] he saw a text on my phone and read it. It was from a guy that I had saved, and his contact photo was visible, and he heard several phone calls I was making. He listened to them and jumped to conclusions … I was still living with him and had to move out and start a life on my own … It was tough for me because family was everything I had, and once that tie's been cut, you have no one to talk to …

The interlocutors' forced coming out had profoundly affected their relationships with their childhood homes, and the lack of acceptance obstructed them from sustaining a sense of home there. Indeed, many interlocutors experienced 'disownment' and 'rejection' by family members, who, after finding out about their queerness, had told them to leave and not return home. In most cases, however, these situations did not lead to complete disownment and uprootedness. Contact was generally re-established after a while, often when the men's mothers asked their sons to come back home. Interestingly, their fathers typically remained silent, avoided the topic or refrained from contact altogether. The following quote from Bae provides insight into the dynamics of the family relations the interlocutors experienced.

> When I came out to my mom, she was so bitter and angry that I actually left home and went to stay with the guy [I was dating] for a few months. [Afterwards] I came back to my mom, and we spoke about it. She's still uncomfortable because of who I am … [She said] 'I'll try to accept you for who you are, but the only thing is [that] I'd love for you not to show it off around relatives and where we stay, but here you can be who you are'.

As Bae's words illustrate, while his mother tried to tolerate his sexuality, she preferred that others would not know and see it.

At the time of this research, several interlocutors still lived in their familial homes. These men were relatively young (under 25), and all were born in Nairobi. Out of fear of the above-described repercussions, none of them had come out to their families, and many did not intend to do so. While this silence to some extent provided them with a sense of familiarity and security, a research diary of one of the community researchers I worked with[1] illustrates the complexities these interlocutors needed to navigate in the context of the familial home.

> My family, the people I stay close with, they don't know that I'm an MSM[2]. Those are my father, two sisters and two cousins, I'm trying my best to keep it that way because from the way I know them, if they come to realise that I'm MSM, they might reject me. But then, on the other hand, my stress and depression will increase. Living with a secret that I don't want to be revealed has been like hell to me. My family generally doesn't like gay men. They talk about them negatively, and they are against them. So, that's given me a headache and sleep problems because I'm stressed out: What if they find out I'm a gay?

In the interviews, the men expressed attachment and belonging to their childhood homes, yet they also recognised the tensions that had arisen in their attempts to create a sense of home there. Such tensions often resulted in a decreased sense of acceptance and safety, which, alongside their limited economic opportunities, had fuelled their desire to leave their family homes behind and move to the city.

Homing the present: a place to call home in the city

The men in this research often initially imagined the city as 'the place to be', a place that would bring them improved economic and social opportunities. Generally, however, these expectations quickly turned into disappointment. In reflecting on those days, the interlocutors primarily referred to themselves as struggling and surviving. Once they were far away from their childhood homes, their initial experiences in the city were marked by negative feelings including (but not limited to) those of loneliness, confusion, self-blame, stress and depression. Many lived on the streets and were homeless for a while, 'hustled'[3] to make ends meet and were getting by on sex work. Their experiences of urban struggle and survival changed, to some extent, after becoming part of the male SLO discussed in the introduction. Indeed, the interlocutors often conceptualised the moment of being introduced to the SLO as a turning point in their city lives. As Adin explained:

> I realised I was gay when I was 14. I was expelled from school because of looking girlish and being abnormal. I dropped out of school, and my family went against me. I was kicked out of the house at the age of 16. I didn't have any skills, and I started to do sex work. I tested positive [for HIV]. I felt a lot of pain, I blamed myself and was very suicidal. [My depression] affected me so much that I could no longer do sex work freely. I lost a lot of clients and was sinking into stress and depression, and I couldn't afford my rent anymore. I found myself on the streets, and I started taking drugs, sniffing glue and petrol. Then one day my friends convinced me to go to this gay-friendly place, where they made sure I got back onto my feet. They took care of me, told me that there's still hope, and they rented me a house, and that's how I settled down and found myself working for [the SLO].

Adin's story was common to many of the men I spoke to. The significance that the organisation had in its members' lives went beyond the provision of a physical safe space and resources

to alleviate the most basic needs. Instead, the SLO can be understood as a place that fulfilled the young men's needs and desires to have a place to call home in the city.

The SLO: a special place to call home

Some contextual information is necessary to understand the men's attachment to the SLO. The organisation reaches more than 5,000 men annually, providing them with health and legal services and medications. Its membership consists mostly of young, lower-educated and low-skilled men, who identify as queer and who perceive themselves as lower class, especially when compared to the members of other queer collectives in the city. In an attempt to make ends meet, most of them engage in sex work, sometimes alongside other activities.

When discussing the meaning the SLO had in the lives of its members, they consistently referred to the SLO as 'home' or 'second home' and to the staff members as a 'second family'. In interviews, members often reflected on what had contributed to this sense of home. Particularly notable was their experiences of a sense of safety, acceptance and recognition.

The sense of safety the members experienced in the SLO can be considered the outcome of its embeddedness in a socio-political setting in which queer people in the city are criminalised and marginalised. In public spaces, the men experienced the constant threat of homophobic stigmas and other forms of violence, and they continuously felt the need to engage in strategies to hide their queerness from neighbours and other people in social settings (see also Woensdregt and Nencel 2022b). In this context, the men experienced the SLO as a 'safe space' and as vital in buffering structural societal factors that fuel queer-negative stigma and discrimination (see also Hassan et al. 2018). Indeed, within the SLO, their presence needed no justification – they did not need to hide or explain themselves – which added to their sense of safety. In meeting men with similar experiences, needs and desires at the SLO, its members gained a new sense of acceptance and recognition that was generally absent in their childhood homes. Flava explained how this social experience had fostered feelings of home:

> When I joined [the SLO], that was the first step in my life to [start] accepting myself. Before then I was in denial – I used to think I was the only one who was feeling this way, so after getting to [the SLO] and seeing everyone happy, calling themselves names, hearing that, and there were even men putting on makeup and stuff … you feel like you're just at home.

Inside the SLO, members felt free to express themselves, to embody 'the fun of being gay' (as one person expressed it) and to transgress cultural gender norms related to Kenyan masculinity. Such transgression and was reflected in members wearing clothing traditionally considered feminine, putting on jewellery and makeup, and 'cat walking'[4], dancing, and engaging in activities related to beauty and wellness. As such, the SLO gave them possibilities to increasingly embrace their non-normative sexualities as part of their self-identity. The sense of safety and recognition also provided the members relief. Raised in an Islamic social environment, Chiki explained how he felt continuously judged for his sexuality in his family home. He explained how this judgement strongly contrasted with his experiences in the SLO:

> I've met other people [here] like me who were open, who were out there, which gave me that zeal to be like them … So I was just like, 'I have to be myself, whatever it costs me, I have to do it' … Going out to gay clubs, sharing a lot with your own kind, listening to other people's stories – you sharing your own stories, them having your back, being there for you as friends. That's part of what makes it fun. And there are some things that I can't discuss with my relatives, like about men. So being with my own kind makes me feel alive … Let me give you an example. Sometimes I'll be walking with my friend, and then they're like, 'You know what, you do have an amazing catwalk', and I'm like, 'I don't feel like I'm cat walking'. I don't even notice it; this is who I am.

The above illustrates how the members created a sense of home in the SLO by spending significant amounts of time with their 'own kind' and developing meaningful relationships with

each other in a queer-friendly space. Interestingly, by saying that he discussed with his fellow members topics he could not discuss with his relatives, in this quote Chiki hints at his continued and simultaneous embeddedness in his childhood home.

The participant observations I conducted provide further insights into how the men socially 'homed' the SLO's space. For members, the SLO was a central element in everyday life, as many of them visited it multiple times a week. In the SLO, they simply hung out with each other, sat together in the lounge area, cracking jokes or watching social media together, or going out for walks in the neighbourhood together and having lunch at nearby restaurants. They shared cleaning duties and responsibilities for welcoming guests, but they also participated in meetings, events and other activities. Members who were employed as peer educators or outreach workers[5] in the SLO's HIV programmes often came in to fulfil their tasks. The members also engaged in group activities, such as support groups and the weekly ritual of 'Beauty Fridays', where members dress up by using clothes and makeup to prepare for going out on the weekend. Members recognised this all as contributing to their sense of home.

The community members' shared sense of precarity also triggered them to collectively create financial stability and security. They were expected to financially support each other and contribute to each other's festive events such as birthday celebrations and weddings, but also hospital bills and funerals for themselves and family members. The more senior and better off community members financially supported the younger queer sex workers in daily living expenses, for example by contributing to costs for rent and food. Members also regularly collected money and food and distributed it to their fellow community members who were going through difficult times. Taken together, the above suggests that the members' attachment to the SLO as a second home was cultivated by and across community members, and that qualities people often associate with home are the fruit of their own sustained relational work (Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020).

Making it home: going here and there

I previously introduced the idea that the interlocutors perceived being part of a second queer home in the city as not being mutually exclusive from maintaining a sense of home with family members and other people related to their home of origin. Indeed, while the interviewees commonly perceived the SLO as 'their place' and its people as 'their community', many had not rejected their familial homes, but rather embraced them as part of their homing process. To illustrate this scenario, when I asked them who they would turn to for support in case of financial need, many referred to family members, particularly their mothers and siblings. During the Christmas holidays, many interlocutors went home to 'the village' to visit family and spend a longer time with them. During the year, they often visited the village several additional times, the frequency depending on the distance from Nairobi and their financial means. In the meantime, they remained in contact via phone and WhatsApp. Sometimes parents, siblings and other extended family members visited my interlocutors in Nairobi, often staying with them in case of a hospital visit in the city or for other needs. I also heard of family members joining an interlocutor at the SLO, although such stories were unusual.

In addition to the physical visits, the men sent remittances home, and their economic abilities paid for shopping and hospital bills, school fees for siblings and other family members, and contributed to burial costs. The men were generally happy to take up this provider role and perceived it as a means to reaffirm their position in the family, to regain respectability as a son, brother and man within their communities. Idi reflected on his experience in this regard:

> I was stigmatised for four months; then they realised I was helping them. When I was doing sex work, I could give them money for them to go shopping and settle bills. Even now my grandmother is around, and I buy her medication … It's okay for me. I was very happy that at the end of the day, when they asked for money, I could still provide it.

In the case of families living in rural areas, the interlocutors described additional expectations in terms of them being urban and being perceived as wealthier and more economically stable, although the men themselves frequently contested this assumption.

While the interlocutors aspired to live in the city, one concern they frequently expressed was having insufficient income to sustain themselves there. This concern came up, for example, in discussions about the increased numbers of sex workers in the city, and hence the reduced numbers of clients per person, as well as insufficient compensation for the peer education work they did for the SLO. In order to sustain themselves and while searching for improved economic opportunities elsewhere, the men were constantly anticipating and preparing. They regularly changed gear, focus and location, such as by starting side businesses, doing seasonal sex work in coastal cities or temporarily going somewhere else in Kenya or abroad. This constant state of anticipation arguably contributed to their need to create a sense of home distributed across different sites.

The interlocutors' narratives also demonstrated the relationship between economic crisis and homing. In their accounts of mobility related to the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, they reported that many community members (including themselves) went back home to the villages. As Spice said:

> When COVID hit, I went back. This was last June, and I stayed [there] from June to January and then came back … During COVID, I almost turned into a farmer. I'd saved and brought some things home like a cow and chicken and got into farming … I was doing fine, but this wasn't what I wanted to do … it's just the circumstances forcing me to do it.

Spice's words illustrate how his home in times of crisis gave him a sense of economic security and a place where he could home himself, given the material, relational and emotional affordances available, albeit temporarily.

The above has highlighted how social ties to one's home of origin and village more generally, as well as economic opportunities and times of crisis, induce migrants' mobilities back and forth. As the next section demonstrates, while the men's individual trajectories might have fluctuated within this context, they ultimately fit within a more linear route in which almost all of them aspired to acquire land and property in their ancestral homelands.

Homing the future

In discussions on the men's ideal future home, thoughts on age and ageing were central. While some interlocutors intrinsically preferred living in the city, the men more generally felt they lacked long-term viability there because of the above-described urban economic insecurities. Because most largely depended on doing sex work, their shared belief that ageing and becoming less sexually attractive would obstruct them from selling sex beyond the age of 35 tended to reinforce these concerns. To gain some social and financial security in the future, the interlocutors desired land ownership and to build their own houses. Yaro's narrative illustrates why the interlocutors primarily imagined such land ownership and security as occurring outside the city:

> Home is always home, and Nairobi life is always stressful. And you see, most of us don't have a place to call home [in Nairobi]. We have rental places. So, what happens when you're old and you don't have a place of your own? We don't have enough money to get a mortgage or house, or even money to buy land and build a home. Most of us would love to live in the city, we love that glamour in the city, even though opportunities are scarce. City life is more preferable for us. We want that life … [but] the tragedy is that if you can't make it, you go back to the village. I don't think it's a choice many of us will make because many of us will prefer to be in the city.

His words demonstrate that while the interlocutors' ideal homes might have been in the city, without having the financial means to live there, the rural home gave them opportunities for land ownership that were hard to find in the city. In this sense, their return to the rural homeland was thus also a pragmatic choice, and the outcome of a lack of opportunities.

In thinking about their future homes, by default, the men expected that leaving the city would require them to engage in renewed relational work with their extended family members and to re-negotiate their queer identity. In this regard, Calvin expected to assimilate into the existing social scripts for heterosexual family life, to get married and have children:

> That's the situation. Sometimes I get confused. I get stressed. I get depressed by thinking about that situation because here in Kenya, you have to marry to continue the generations, and my mom keeps asking. She knows I'm gay, but she keeps asking, 'When will you have a child?'

As Calvin's words illustrate, the interviewees experienced their familial expectations in terms of heterosexual marriage and fatherhood as being high. In this regard, Dani's family members frequently asked him questions about marriage and tried to convince him to change his mind and to become heterosexual again. He explained how he imagined himself navigating such requests in the future:

> I might become bisexual, as I have to marry a woman. In the future I was thinking I'll find a woman who'll know who I am and accept me for who I am. Some say it's good to marry a lesbian and have kids with her because she'll understand you, and she can have her female friends and I can have my male friends.

Dani's reflection illustrates how the men intended to build spaces of belonging in their homes of the future despite family structures and other oppressive systems that tend to affect sexual minorities in Kenya. In terms of how to navigate oppressive structures, the data suggests that the interlocutors learned from each other while living and spending time together in Nairobi. The strategy Dani proposed, getting married and having children with a lesbian woman, is a strategy that is more commonly employed in the Nairobian queer community. Because the outside world perceives this type of relationship as a heterosexual relationship, it gives both partners a cover-up that will allow them to meet societal expectations while simultaneously engaging in queer relationships.

The above scenario illustrates how interlocutors who were often so explicitly queer within the SLO intended to meet societal expectations regarding masculinity once they were back home. This finding corresponds with the work of Hendriks (2021), who explains that many explicitly LGBT-identified African subjects profoundly desire to be normal, and that rather than being seen as deviant, pathological or transgressive, they long for an ordinary life that is liveable. To reach such a liveable life, the interlocutors in the present study generally intended to strategically navigate their queerness and, as one said, to live a 'discreet [queer] life'. In this regard, similarly to Dani, those interlocutors who intended to engage in a heterosexual marriage simultaneously expected to continue to date and have sexual relationships with men outside their marital relationship. This finding is similar to ethnographic work that has illustrated the co-existence of same-sex sexual desires and relationships alongside heterosexual marriage in other African contexts as well (e.g. Gaudio 2009).

From the above discussion, we may conclude that the young queer men refrained from unnecessarily romanticising their future homes in the village. Instead, in an attempt to live relatively normal lives and to create a sense of home again 'at home', they approached the future home rather pragmatically. Some interlocutors, however, could not imagine themselves marrying a woman at all. Others had such tense relationships with their families that returning to their childhood home was not an option. They anticipated acquiring land and property elsewhere, for example in the hinterlands of Nairobi. Some had thought of alternative ways to create homes for themselves and other community members in the city. As Edwin explained:

> I've always had a desire to have a home for the elderly, because older male sex workers don't have children. The older we get, [the more] people see us as burdens because we don't contribute at all … Because people don't accept us, we alienate ourselves from society. Like when we go home, we're asked questions: 'When will you come home with a wife?' and things like that. So, you get scared and just run away. By running away, you run out of money, so you don't even send it; if [your family members] have issues, you don't send money; eventually they don't see any value in you … Your value is through the fruits [you bring]. You know the tree by its fruits … Now I have a big dream for the organisation … I'm hoping to start something for the elderly [sex workers] … [Those] who aren't able to pay can stay there, then people who are able to pay can sustain them.

Edwin considered the notion of providing and taking care of each other as being at the heart of the meaning of home in African culture. Because he was no longer part of such a home structure elsewhere, he thought of alternative ways to generate this structure. Adin similarly lacked embeddedness in traditional family structures at this point in his life and, together with other men, lived in what he referred to as a 'house'. As he explained:

> [The house] came with COVID. Hot spots[6] were closed, and sex workers were not left with any option … And that idea of staying together, it used to be there with our people, but [the idea of staying together] wasn't as embraced … But with COVID it brought people together because other options were closed and we couldn't do anything else to survive. Most people disappeared and we were divided. Only those people who came together and were strong enough are still moving … We're here for each other. In this world, you find that most of us are on our own. We don't have mentors to lead us. We depend on each other.

The houses Adin described illustrate how queer men who experience limited opportunities to go back 'home' instead produced alternative homes in the city, in which they found a new sense of intimacy and belonging. Adin imagined such houses in the future as well.

Across the different imaginations and aspirations for future homes, the interlocutors expected the SLO to continue to be a critical part of their future lives. Despite being away from the organisation physically, they expected a continued relational engagement through which the significance of the SLO would remain in their lives. For the few interlocutors who already lived with a wife and children in Nairobi, as well as those who by now had migrated to other places in Kenya or abroad, this co-existence of multiple homes had already manifested. For others, they expected this co-existence to happen in the future. As Liam said, 'Even if I get the chance to leave [for Europe], I'll never leave [the SLO]', suggesting that the meaning of home for him would not necessarily be tied to one location, nor a recollection of the past, but rather would encompass multiple homes and be constantly in the making.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyse and theorise the meanings of home among young queer migrants in Kenya. Drawing on ethnographic research with an SLO, as well as in-depth interviews with its members, the paper has shown that young queer migrants in Nairobi experience home as a lifelong and cumulative effort to reach the 'ideal' social conditions of being at home. This social rather than material approach to home has resulted in an experience of 'hom-ing' that is distributed across time and different locations.

By presenting the home-ing experiences of Kenyan queer migrants, I have shown how the men experienced their homes of the past, attempted to create a sense of home in the present, and discussed their aspirations for future homes. The men whose trajectories I have described in this paper were always in search of economic opportunities in Nairobi, in other parts of Kenya and in some cases even abroad. The resulting mobilities led to multiple senses of home that from their perspective could co-exist in both space and time. The paper has demonstrated that the men built these homes and places of belonging across different locations, despite oppressive circumstances that marginalised and excluded them and their communities.

In terms of homing in the past, heteronormativity and rigid binary categories of gender and sexuality often induce migration towards the city. Once in the city, the SLO provides queer migrants with a special place to call home, characterised by feelings of safety, acceptance and recognition. In the context of the SLO, the men's shared stories of being queer and being sex workers created the possibility to break away from constantly being constructed as outsiders, which in turn created the potential to feel and act differently.

The sense of home the SLO provided to the young men is linked to the work of many scholars who have connected kinship and community in the context of queer people (e.g. Ferguson 2017; Weston 1997.). Similarly, the sense of home provided by the SLO represents a larger global movement that has historically addressed homelessness and other challenges young queer people face (e.g. Vider 2022). But previous studies often assume such queer homes-away-from-home to be queer migrants' place of 'homecoming'. This paper has shown that the queer men in this study perceived the SLO as one among multiple homes, alongside which they continued to maintain social ties with family and other social networks related to their home of origin. More strikingly, their aspirations for future homes illustrate that while the men oscillated between homes, they ultimately imagined possibilities for homing in the ancestral homeland, and particularly 'the village'.

Fortier (2003) notes that migration can offer queer people distance that might generate the possibility of reassessing and reconciling with their childhood homes, and that after initial distancing, they can consider the possibility of return. In the context of this paper, the young men's embeddedness in the SLO arguably facilitated the process of returning. The men helped each other to reimagine home as ultimately being in the village, and they shared tactics and strategies to negotiate kinship values and responsibilities, in order to maintain a sense of freedom and continued connection with queer communities and their second home in the city. This coexistence of space, time and social relations in the men's understandings of home suggests that processes of queer homing might be never-ending for migrants who embody marginalised genders and sexualities in Kenya. This scenario complements previous research conducted among Latinx migrants in the American context (Borges 2018).

This paper makes several contributions to the literature on queer homing and complements the mobilities literature with discourses on home and homing in the African context. While some authors have focused on the homing of African migrants in China (Adebayo and Omololu 2020; Castillo 2016), the scholarship on homing is currently dominated by the experiences of migrant and diaspora communities outside of Africa. And while most of the literature on homing focuses on migration in transnational contexts, this paper instead turns to internal migration in one specific African country.

Theoretically, this paper supports the previously established notion that social relationships are important in the process of homing and might enable or constrain people's attempts to feel and be at home (Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020). Yet the findings presented here provide additional understandings of the social relationships that are important in the homing process of African queer migrants, which include meaningful relationships with queer communities and family members alike. In this regard, the paper also responds to established notions of Kenya's national home imaginary, from which queer people are generally excluded. The men's aspirations for future homes in their ancestral homelands correspond with those of Kenyan citizens more generally (Elfversson and Höglund 2019), as well as with the findings of other studies that have been at least partly been conducted on the continent (Adebayo and Omololu 2020; Njwambe, Cocks, and Vetter 2019). Their notion of the village as ultimate home tells us something about their personal and political navigation in an oppressive system for queer people, and their expected possibilities to ultimately be able to create a sense of home again at home.

The paper has offered glimpses into how queer groups and communities attempt to reconcile their queer identities with existing home imaginaries by stretching and adjusting dominant moral codes in ways that are meaningful to them. Other scholars have demonstrated that such

stretches and adjustments enable queer people to live relatively normal lives in oppressive contexts (e.g. Oudenhuijsen 2021). For now, it is unclear how the anticipated deviance from dominant moral codes will provide the men whom I have described in this paper with the opportunities to live a liveable life, nor how the men's ideas and behaviours in relation to living in queer-alongside-heterosexual marriages will be reworked. But by navigating normative gendered behavioural codes to negotiate their future homes, the men and their aspirations reflect the pioneering ability of African queerness (Spronk and Nyeck 2021). This pioneering ability will open up opportunities for transformation and contribute to the 'queering' of what it means to be queer in Kenya.

One limitation of this study is that its analysis is mainly based on outcomes of in-depth interviews. While my long-term and ethnographical research with my interlocutors enabled emotional depth, which is generally considered a requirement for research on homing (Boccagni 2022), due to primary reliance on interview data, my study has mostly enabled an analysis of people's articulated views, emotions, memories and aspirations of home. I have not included observations of the tactics the men used to 'home themselves' outside the SLO or the emotions that are part of attempting to create a home in a place that does not always feel like one.

The interview data also reflects experiences and expectations of home in a particular point of time, and discussing aspirations for future homes years from now might produce a completely different imaginary of home. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study offers preliminary insights into homing among young queer male migrants in Kenya. In terms of future research, what is now needed is ethnographic research involving migrants who temporarily or indefinitely move 'back home' in order to understand how these men readapt to this life environment over time as a way to create space for themselves in order to feel at home.

Notes

1. Keeping a research diary was part of the community researchers' work in the community-led research and action (CLRA) project. Being involved as an academic researcher in this research project gave me access to these diaries.
2. Men who have sex with men (MSM) is an epidemiological abbreviation that is circulated within the sex worker–led organisation (SLO) I conducted my research with and in the official development aid system more generally; queer sex workers use the term to refer to themselves.
3. See Thieme, Ference, and Van Stapele (2021) for more insight into Nairobi's hustling economy.
4. Walking like a catwalk model
5. Both peer educators and outreach workers were members of the SLO and were employed in HIV prevention programs. Peer educators were tasked with inviting new members to the SLO, providing health education, and linking them to HIV prevention and care services. Outreach workers trained peer educators and provided them with ongoing support and mentorship.
6. Hot spots are locations including bars, clubs and hotels from where sex workers recruit clients.

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