Sticky Emotions and Homemaking: 'The Emotional' Mobilities of Lithuanian Queer Migrants

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By drawing on semi-structured interviews with Lithuanian LGBTQ+ individuals who have relocated to various European countries, this study examines the emotional dimensions that influence both migration decisions and homemaking processes. Utilising the theoretical framework of 'sticky emotions' and 'homemaking', the article highlights how queer migrants navigate their old and new social environments and invest them with emotions. The findings indicate that migration motivations are often intertwined with personal, affective and emotional dimensions, rooted in resistance to Lithuania's conservative and heteronormative environment. Additionally, the article underscores the homemaking processes in host countries, where queer migrants encounter diverse queer communities that allow them to express their sexualities more openly. By analysing queer migration narratives, this article contributes to discussions on queer mobility, emphasising the need for detailed ethnographic research on the lived experiences of queer migrants, particularly those from post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: queer migration, Lithuanian LGBTQ+ migrants, migration motivations, sticky emotions, homemaking

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Introduction

Despite the growing number of studies on migration, research on LGBTQ+[1] migration from Eastern Europe to or within Western Europe remains insufficient (Binnie and Klesse 2013; Mole 2018a, 2021; Novitskaya 2021; Stella, Flynn and Gawlewicz 2018). This research gap makes it more difficult to fully understand the lived experiences, challenges and needs of LGBTQ+ individuals who migrate from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe. Many face discrimination and marginalisation in their home countries, yet their migration motivations remain underexplored.

One major shortcoming in existing research is the lack of focus on how emotions influence migration decisions and adaptation processes. Despite the 'affective turn' in social sciences, the specific emotional experiences of queer migrants remain under-researched (di Feliciantonio and Gadelha 2016; Luibhéid 2008). The feelings of alienation, despair, disappointment and longing – particularly in the case of Eastern European queer migrants – require deeper investigation (De Craene 2017). Additionally, the unique forms of discrimination and trauma that LGBTQ+ migrants endure (Alessi, Kahn, Woolner and Horn 2018; Alessi, Kahn, Ast, Cheung, Lee and Kim 2023) and the emotional challenges of integration (Lewis 2018; Mai and King 2009; Mole 2018a, b) demand further attention.

This article addresses these gaps in queer migration research by placing emotions at the core of the analysis. Creatively using Sara Ahmed's concept of 'sticky emotions' (2004, 2010) it analyses how Lithuanian queer migrants explain their motivations for leaving Lithuania and settling down in the host countries. 'Sticky emotions' refer to the way in which emotions can adhere to bodies, objects and social contexts, shaping individuals' behaviours and perceptions. This stickiness means that emotions can be attached to different life decisions and transferred to different social and cultural contexts. The concept is also relevant in understanding how emotions can impact on migration decisions and social adaptation dynamics within different communities. The stickiness of emotions can also affect how individuals relate to their old and new places of residence, creating emotional landscapes that can reinforce or challenge social norms. By recognising this emotional dimension, we can better understand the complexity of migration experiences.

Similarly, the concept of 'homemaking' helps us to analyse how queer migrants create spaces of belonging in their host countries. Thomas Wimark (2021) suggests that queer refugees engage in processes of 'liminal homemaking' by constructing their identities and communities in ways which may diverge from traditional social norms. Homemaking involves a range of personal practices, emotional attachments and social relationships which contribute to the construction of a new home (Boccagni 2022; Brun and Fábos 2015; Pérez Murcia and Boccagni 2022). In the context of protracted displacement, this concept refers to the practices and processes through which individuals create a sense of home despite their uncertain and often precarious circumstances. It can include daily routines, social connections and the reimagining of home through past experiences, present realities and future hopes (Brun and Fábos 2015). The process of homemaking also encompasses the emotional dimension that can illuminate which emotions 'stick' to migrants' experiences in the host countries and how this stickiness persists.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews, this article examines the different emotions that underlie Lithuanian queer individuals' motivations to migrate and their subsequent homemaking processes in the host countries. The most attention is paid to the queer emigrees' emotional motivations to migrate, their sexual socialisation and their adaptation in their host countries, subsumed under the concept of homemaking or the reproduction of home. Two key questions about queer men and women in Lithuania guide this study. Firstly, what primary emotions drive Lithuanian queer individuals to migrate and how

do emotional and sexual factors influence these decisions? Secondly, what emotions are tied to the homemaking processes of Lithuanian queer subjects as they adapt to new queer communities?

In answering these questions, I focus on a variety of 'motivations of individual migrants and the movement of the queer body itself through space' (Gorman-Murray 2007: 111). I begin the article by briefly reviewing the legal and social situation of LGBTQ+ individuals in Lithuania and the recent literature on queer migration, particularly within Central and Eastern Europe. Subsequently, I describe the methodological framework of the study. In the third part, I analyse the semi-structured interviews in an attempt to show how different emotions underlie Lithuanian queer individuals' relocation motivations and adaptation processes.

By employing these theoretical concepts, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on queer migration, emphasising the importance of emotional dimensions. This article ultimately aims to deepen our understanding of the experiences of Lithuanian queer migrants by bringing Eastern European perspectives into conversation with dominant Western models of queer migration. Rather than challenging the notion that Western countries offer comparatively better conditions for queer individuals from Eastern Europe, the article complicates decolonial critiques that frame the West solely as an oppressive force (Kulpa 2011; Mole 2018a).

Queer migration from Central and Eastern Europe: Literature review

Research on queer migration has grown significantly in recent years, yet LGBTQ+ migration from Central and Eastern Europe remains an understudied area (Binnie and Klesse 2013; Mole 2018a). This section provides an overview of the existing literature while identifying key gaps that this study aims to address.

Despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, Lithuania continues to impose significant legal restrictions on LGBTQ+ rights. Although the Law on Equal Treatment prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, education and access to goods and services, legal regulations concerning the recognition of same-sex relationships, gender reassignment, gender identity and the right to privacy remain absent. Efforts to introduce same-sex partnerships and marriage have repeatedly failed, with the Lithuanian Parliament rejecting all proposals (Tereškinas, Kārkliņa and Rodiņa 2022). Additionally, the Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effects of Public Information, introduced in 2010, restricted the freedom of LGBTQ+ expression, preventing the dissemination of positive information about LGBTQ+ individuals under the guise of 'traditional family values' (Tereškinas 2019; Tereškinas *et al.* 2022). However, in December 2024, Lithuania's Constitutional Court ruled that the anti-LGBTQ+ provisions of the law were unconstitutional. It stated that showing 'diverse family models' is not harmful to minors and emphasised the importance of equality and tolerance. After 15 years, the controversial clause banning gay information for children was abolished (ILGA-Europe 2024).

Lithuania also lacks a gender reassignment law, which makes it difficult for transgender individuals to obtain new identity documents, although the national courts began granting legal gender recognition without requiring gender reassignment surgery in 2017 (ILGA-Europe 2018: 17). Furthermore, societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people remain largely hostile, with hate speech and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals still widespread (Lithuanian Gay League 2019). Ultranationalist rhetoric portrays LGBTQ+ individuals as a threat to traditional family structures and national identity, while neoconservative NGOs and Parliament members disseminate radical conspiracy theories, framing

LGBTQ+ activism as an attack on Lithuania's cultural and moral values (Kamarauskaitė 2024; Tereškinas *et al.* 2022).

Despite the precarious legal and social situation for LGBTQ+ individuals in Lithuania, there is a shortage of research on how this impacts on LGBTQ+ emigration from the country. LGBTQ+ individuals are largely absent in the broader migration trends from Lithuania (Brzozowski, Wojno, Ćwiklicki and Chwat 2023; Vaidelytė, Butkevičienė and Vaičiūnienė 2024), although research from other Central and Eastern European countries shows that LGBTQ+ individuals migrate to more 'tolerant' regions due to the continuous stigma and legal discrimination in their home countries (Mole 2021; Stella and Flynn 2019).

Queer migration has been conceptualised as an embodied, situated and relational movement involving a variety of trajectories and complex push factors (Gorman-Murray 2007, 2009). A growing body of literature on the intersection of migration, sexuality and queer studies (Luibhéid and Cantú 2005; Manalansan IV 2006, 2018; Mole 2021) demonstrates how LGBTQ+ individuals challenge traditional understandings of migration, while migration, in turn, influences their sexual and gender experiences (Mole 2021: 2–3). Queer or sexual migration is often characterised as LGBTQ+ people's migration driven by sexual desires and pleasures, the pursuit of romantic relationships, the need to explore new self-definitions of sexual identity, the desire to distance oneself from experiences of discrimination caused by sexual difference or the search for greater sexual equality and rights (Carrillo 2020: 4).

The research indicates that the primary motivations for LGBTQ+ individuals to leave Lithuania include the desire for safety, acceptance and better living conditions (Klüsener, Stankūnienė, Grigoriev and Jasilionis 2015). Economic factors such as unemployment and low wages also play a significant role in the decision to migrate, as many LGBTQ+ individuals face additional barriers in the job market due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Žukauskienė, Zulumskytė and Ozbinaitė 2022). Some migrate to explore new sexual experiences, either with new partners or in a more accepting cultural environment. Thus, sexuality can significantly shape migration decisions (Binnie and Klesse 2013; Mole 2021; Novitskaya 2021; Stella and Flynn 2019; Stella *et al.* 2018).

Homophobic and transphobic laws, coupled with societal stigma, are major drivers of queer migration (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014; Stella 2015). Western Europe is often seen as a desirable destination due to its more progressive LGBTQ+ rights, legal protections and inclusive communities (Binnie and Klesse 2013). However, some studies on queer migration show that LGBTQ+ migrants in Europe still experience complex discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, race and immigration status. Queer asylum-seekers, in particular, face heightened vulnerability, including homophobic and transphobic violence (Giametta 2017). According to other studies, migration policies, rather than offering protection, often reinforce systemic exclusion and marginalisation (Shakhsari 2014).

Some research explores how queer migrants negotiate their identities and sense of belonging in both their home and host countries. Many experience a sense of displacement, as they are often excluded from both mainstream migrant communities and local LGBTQ+ networks (Stella 2015). Post-socialist transitions have influenced LGBTQ+ rights and societal attitudes, making them a focal point in queer migration research (Mole 2020). Supportive communities and social networks play a crucial role in helping LGBTQ+ migrants to integrate and to emotionally navigate their new environments (Golembe, Leyendecker, Maalej, Gundlach and Busch 2021).

As previously mentioned, queer migrants often face continued engagement with heteronormative nation-states that shape their identities and experiences by marginalising them (Luibhéid 2008). This is the reason why 'queer migration often becomes synonymous with leaving an unsupportive or unsafe

place to disclose their true, already formed queer identity in a more appropriate, inclusive place characterised by a large queer community and less restrictive sexual and cultural norms' (Lewis 2012: 212). LGBTQ+ migrants search for places which they think of as more tolerant and accepting. Seeking to escape discrimination, they move in pursuit of spaces that they imagine will be safer and more liberal, where they can live and express their identities without fear of violence or social ostracism (Adur 2018). This model of migration suggests that queer individuals move from restrictive environments to more open-minded ones. Although some scholars criticise this binary model (Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha 2016), empirical research on Central and Eastern European migrants confirms its continued relevance (Mole 2021; Stella *et al.* 2018). Queer migrants sometimes view their destination countries as utopian places offering a better future and the freedom to express their sexuality.

It is worth noting that, despite legal challenges and hostile societal attitudes, Lithuanian queer citizens enjoy the right to free movement within the European Union. This means that they do not have to face the legal barriers and restrictions that most non-European migrants encounter when they attempt to travel to or settle in the EU. This is a significant advantage for Lithuanian queer citizens who wish to move, work or study in other EU countries, as they can do so without having to navigate complex visa processes or deal with discriminatory immigration policies. Additionally, this right to free movement allows them to fully exercise their rights as EU citizens, including the right to live and work in any member state, as well as access to social benefits and protections (Bryer, Rauleckas, Muraleedharan, Butkevičienė, Vaičiūnienė, Vaidelytė and Miežanskienė 2020; Vaidelytė *et al.* 2024).

While the existing studies address the broader sociopolitical factors behind queer migration, there is limited research on how Eastern European queer migrants emotionally navigate their relocation experiences – firstly how they detach from the negative emotions tied to their home countries and emotionally reconstruct a sense of belonging in their host countries. Lithuanian LGBTQ+ migrants' homemaking experiences, i.e., finding LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces, developing new emotional and sexual self-perceptions and negotiating between old and new emotional attachments to their home and host countries, remain underexplored. This study aims to address these critical research gaps.

Methodology

The research used in this article was part of a broader study on queer migration from and to Lithuania. The aim of the study was to examine the migration motives of emigrating and immigrating queer individuals and to understand how migration is related to the enactment of gender identities, LGBTQ+ communities, culture, politics and religion. Additionally, the study sought to understand how sexuality structures most international migration processes and experiences. Between May and October of 2023, 29 semi-structured interviews were conducted with LGBTQ+ individuals who emigrated to various European countries, LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum in Lithuania and officials from Lithuanian state and municipal institutions involved in migration and social integration policies.

For this article, 9 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ emigrants were analysed. These interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 48 minutes, with an average length of 1 hour. The interviews were conducted either remotely via Zoom or in person. The interview guidelines consisted of 6 question blocks covering sociodemographic data, sexual identity, emigration motives, adaptation and integration into a new country, the relation between sexual and religious identities and possibilities of return. After transcribing the digital audiotapes of the interviews *verbatim*, the researchers reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and summarised the key points for each interview. The interviews were

then coded – i.e., they were assigned relevant codes such as emotions, sexuality, migration decisions and adaptation to a host country.

Simple random sampling (Staller 2021) was used to select queer migrants. The sample consisted of 9 participants, including 7 men and 2 women. These individuals, aged between 29 and 43, resided in different European countries, including the UK, Sweden, Denmark and France. All informants identified as gay, lesbian and queer (some defined the latter identification as a cultural and, sometimes, as a subcultural category). All of them had a university education.

The theoretical saturation principle was applied to determine the appropriate sample size. This principle suggests that the researcher should continue collecting data until no new information is generated from the interviews (O'Reilly and Parker 2013). Despite the small research sample, the richness of the narrative data, thematic consistency and recurrence of shared experiences among participants support the adequacy of the sample. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that a more extensive and diverse sample, including non-binary, bisexual and transgender individuals, would enhance the study's generalisability. Future research could expand on this by incorporating a broader range of sexual identities.

The researchers addressed the ethical concerns of the research by ensuring the confidentiality and safety of the interviewees. Confidentiality commitment was explained during the informed consent process, which was conducted with each informant before they participated in the study. The study's objectives, methods and potential risks and benefits of participation were explained in this process. It was made clear that participation was voluntary and that the informant could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. During the interviews, researchers took particular care to ensure the anonymity of our informants. They did not use their real names in any part of the study and avoided asking any specific questions that could potentially identify them. They also ensured that all data collected during the interviews were securely stored and kept confidential. To further protect the privacy and confidentiality of the informants, their names were changed in the article.

The article employs theory-guided qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2023) to examine the research participants' migration experiences and emotional attachments. Dominant themes were identified in the interview transcripts and the views of the interviewees concerning their emotional experiences in migrating and adapting to new countries were analysed in relation to the concepts of 'sticky emotions' and 'homemaking'. This methodology enabled me to understand migrants' desires, affects and emotions related to their mobilities.

While the study provides valuable insights into the sexual, emotional and affective dimensions of queer migration, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations, including the sample size, geographical scope and lack of a longitudinal approach. The study primarily focuses on gay and lesbian individuals, with limited representation of bisexual, transgender and non-binary perspectives. It did not analyse intra-regional migrations within Central and Eastern Europe. A longitudinal approach focusing on the impact of emotions across different life stages would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of queer migration and its emotional complexities.

Findings: Migrating subjects, migrant subjectivities

In this part, I examine how different emotions affect queer migration, focusing on both the research participants' decision to leave and their sexual resocialisation and adaptation in new countries and queer communities that I call 'homemaking' or the reproduction of home. By analysing Lithuanian queer individuals' experiences through the perspective of sticky emotions and homemaking, I answer the

following questions: What emotions motivate Lithuanian queer individuals to leave their home country and not return? What emotional experiences continue to influence their homemaking process or sexual socialisation and adaptation to host countries?

As mentioned before, all the informants identified as gay or lesbian and queer. One female informant avoided classifying herself, although she had been in a long-term relationship with a woman. Another female informant fluctuated between the definitions of bisexual and lesbian but finally chose the latter because of her romantic involvement with another woman. The distinction between gay and queer was often explained as a distinction between the sexual and political/subcultural identifications: 'Of course, I identify with the gay community. Considering the subculture, I am queer. I will also identify myself politically as queer since I have a quite progressive leftist mindset' (Dominykas, London).

Sticky emotions and motives in queer migration

The decision to leave Lithuania and the refusal to return are deeply intertwined with emotions that 'stick' to Lithuanian migrants' experiences. Ahmed's (2004) concept of 'sticky emotions', which describes how emotions accumulate around certain bodies and spaces, helps us to understand these migration motivations. Emotions do not simply reside in individuals but circulate between bodies and social spaces, attaching to specific subjects and reinforcing their affective experiences of belonging or exclusion. In this way, Lithuania, for many research participants, was not just a homeland but also a place associated with such negative emotions as fear, discomfort and shame.

For some, the desire to leave was articulated in terms of academic or professional aspirations. Some informants left the country, after completing high school, to study abroad, while others departed at just 17 years old. They explained their decision as a desire to 'study and live in a country which is relatively acceptable to them and has good universities' (Dominykas, London). One informant also left after high school. He studied and worked in several countries in Western Europe and, at the time of the interview, was a doctoral student in London. He argued that the primary motivation to leave Lithuania was his studies or, in more general terms, career possibilities (Tomas, London).

Yet beneath these reasons lies a more profound emotional unease tied to the perception of Lithuania as 'small and claustrophobic'. Dominykas, for instance, described his decision to study in London as a pragmatic choice but, later, acknowledged that his queer identity became an essential factor in his decision not to return: 'One of the reasons was definitely related to my identity – as a queer person. I think that eventually, I came to understand that I never wanted to return to Lithuania, probably... It just feels too small, unsafe and too conservative on almost all issues. I don't feel respected there' (Dominykas, London). Another informant presented a similar argument: 'Leaving has significantly contributed to my understanding of my identity. I didn't initially consider it as a factor in my decision to leave but I now see my sexuality as one of the key elements influencing whether I return to Lithuania or not. It's more important to me now than when I left' (Tomas, London). The emotional weight of feeling unsafe and unrecognised as a queer person made informants feel uncomfortable and always out of place.

Other informants, like Aušra, explicitly associated their migration with the promise of emotional comfort elsewhere. Aušra left at the age of 17 and travelled extensively, residing in cities such as New York, Milan, Tokyo, London, Barcelona and Paris before eventually making Copenhagen her permanent home. She enjoyed 'the size and human scale of Copenhagen, as well as the fact that many things [were] adapted to people...' In her words, 'All social guarantees for people [were] more developed and this [was] felt in the general atmosphere of the city'. In Copenhagen, she found an atmosphere where the legal and social acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals allowed her to experience what she called 'inner

comfort': 'Without a doubt, the opportunity to live in a country where same-sex marriage is recognised was very appealing. There, it's simply not even a question anymore – people don't dwell on it or overthink it... And that truly brings a great deal of inner comfort!' The absence of this comfort in Lithuania was not simply an individual feeling but a collective affective environment, where institutions, families and everyday encounters reinforced her sense of 'not belonging'. The repetition of exclusionary gestures – legal exclusions, emotional violence and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric – made this informant feel 'out of place'. Her pronouncement echoes Ahmed's notion (2004) of how specific spaces and places compel some individuals to move away from them.

Rytis' story demonstrates how migration itself becomes an affective project, a way of disentangling oneself from challenging emotional environments. He described his decision to move to Paris as 'the bravest step of [his] life', driven by a need to escape a 'gloomy emotional state' caused by his inability 'to realise [himself] as a homosexual man'. This inability led to what he referred to as 'frequent fluctuations in [his] mood', revealing how queer existence in Lithuania was often marked by emotional unease, precarity and exhaustion. In contrast, emigration to France offered him the possibility of 'inner freedom' – an affective transformation – that allowed him to reimagine himself in a place where queer individuals were treated without hostility.

Even those who left for career-related reasons, such as Vytautas (Brussels), acknowledged that emotional factors were interwoven with their migration decisions:

> After finishing my political science studies, I looked to Belgium. Probably, the most job opportunities are here... Of course, the competition was also high but I really aimed to gain professional experience. Naturally, if you look deeper, it's clear that it was vital for me to feel free, for example, in terms of sexual identity – not to have to be afraid and hide. So that was also a factor.

He emphasised that, beyond job opportunities in Belgium, expressing his sexuality freely was crucial. The fear of having to hide and of constantly being in a closet was too heavy an emotional burden in Lithuania.

Another informant mentioned the limited LGBTQ+ community in Vilnius, Lithuania's capital. Even Grindr (a gay dating app) had few gay or queer men to connect with, which was a significant difference from London: 'This weekend in London, I'm going to two raves that are exclusively queer. There are hundreds of similar events there... I invite my friends to go but they say they will go to another gay rave'. He also pointed to the LGBTQ+ Lithuanians' unwillingness to be open and participate in their community: 'Many people are not out or they are out but they completely do not want to be part of the LGBT community. To me, this also seems like internalised homophobia. They say, "Oh, my sexual orientation is not my identity. It is just with whom I sleep"' (Dominykas, London). Dominykas' story demonstrates that emotional geographies of queer migration are also shaped by the absence of a sustainable queer community and broader possibilities of sexual intimacy. This informant highlighted how Lithuania's queer scene felt suffocatingly small and the lack of visibility of queer people strengthened his feeling of isolation. The lack of emotional and social networks in Lithuania made queer life not only lonely but also precarious. Similarly, negative public discourse, particularly anti-LGBTQ+ speech, acted as an affective barrier to staying in Lithuania. Rytis (Paris) spoke of how simply reading the comments under articles about LGBTQ+ issues in Lithuanian made him feel depressed:

> [Negative] comments and the strictly negative attitudes towards LGBT individuals affect me very negatively because they drag me back to my past and to how I felt 13 years ago. Although the situation

has relatively improved in Lithuania, it is still impossible to get married... It is also impossible to walk down the street holding hands. Of course, you can risk doing it but it is a considerable risk.

As some informants pointed out, it is unfortunate that homophobia and anti-gay speech were still prevalent in Lithuania, which fell behind many European countries in terms of legal protections for LGBTQ+ people. Same-sex couples are not provided with legal partnership or marriage and negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals remain high (Tereškinas *et al.* 2022). While some believed that progress toward greater equality for the LGBTQ+ community was inevitable, others felt that waiting for such change was a waste of time and chose to leave their home country (or not to return) due to their sexuality. However, for many, the possibility of return was tied to an unattainable future rather than a realistic prospect. Rytis, having relinquished his Lithuanian citizenship in favour of French nationality, described his return as imaginable only in 'a hundred years', when radical changes might have occurred:

Well, I don't plan to move back to Lithuania. If I were planning to, there would need to be a law allowing same-sex marriage. There would also need to be a law passed for dual citizenship. Having adopted French nationality, I lost my Lithuanian citizenship because I was forced to do so and had no other option... If I wanted to return to Lithuania, it would require radical changes, which realistically are impossible... Maybe I could return to such a Lithuania as it might be in 100 years... (Rytis, Paris).

His and other informants' words reflect how their decision not to return to Lithuania depends both on legal and social changes and an affective environment hospitable to LGBTQ+ individuals.

Some informants, like Saulė, made migration decisions based on the well-being of their families. Raising a child in Lithuania as a same-sex couple meant constant stress and uneasiness. Saulė described the growing discomfort in school, where children and parents were confused and angered by the idea of a child having two mothers:

One of the reasons was homophobia and the fact that the child was growing up. I think it was becoming more complicated in school as time went on. We didn't hide much in primary school, as it was the same building – kindergarten and primary school. Everyone knew us there... The kids were a bit confused. I mean, how does this child have two mums? I don't understand, they would say. On the other hand, the parents were very distant and somewhat angry.

The emotional labour of constantly explaining and defending her family's legitimacy became untenable, leading her to emigrate to Sweden, where same-sex families were accepted.

Some informants decided to leave their home country due to romantic relationships. For example, 39-year-old Linas emigrated to Sweden because he found a romantic partner there. He compared living in Sweden to residing in Lithuania, stating that one needed to have solid nerves or create a social circle to live a good life in Lithuania. In Sweden, life was much more straightforward, as one could have a routine, mundane and domestic life. He felt happy and content living in a society where being an LGBTQ+ individual was normalised.

Queer people often associate mobility, relocation and travel with their coming-out processes (Binnie 2004; Carrillo 2020). This association can be transformed into an essential part of their life stories and self-narratives. Migration and movement can provide opportunities for queer individuals to explore their sexuality and gender identity safely, without being constrained by their previous social environment. Moreover, queer individuals hope that moving to their destination countries will offer

them a sense of belonging and community and will allow them to form new sexual, romantic and social relationships.

The research participants' stories and narratives often centred around the impact of movement and migration on their identity, relationships and experiences. This is particularly evident in the case of Rytis, who came out to his family while he was in Paris. Coming out was a continuous process for him and, like others, it progressed further when he immigrated to Paris. However, this process was accompanied by satisfaction and emotional stability: 'I have a certain inner freedom, the right to say what I think and how I think. Simply, inner freedom gives a lot and I think it is the most important!'

As the participants' stories show, migration is not just a movement across geographical borders but is also a way of shedding sticky negative emotions such as fear, shame and discomfort and finding a place of residence with less negativity and social friction. In Dominykas' opinion, in Lithuania you constantly experience 'a feeling that no one understands you because you can't tell anything to anyone. Thinking that you will never be normal and won't have those normal things that everyone has. And now I think, thank God, I don't have all those normal things because I really don't want them'. His words reflect resistance to the normality and normativity of negative emotions that Lithuania imposes on queer lives, reinforcing the idea that migration helps LGBTQ+ individuals to escape the emotional burdens that 'stick' to their bodies.

Finally, the stories of Lithuanian queer migrants illustrate how emotions affect not only the decision to leave but also the refusal to return. In leaving Lithuania, the informants attempted to escape the stickiness of negative emotions that made their lives difficult and burdensome. Their new homes offered them different affective possibilities, where queer lives were not sites of social struggle but of emotional fulfilment.

Queer homemaking and sticky emotions in migrant adaptation

All informants described their new homes as more inclusive, diverse and safer compared to Lithuania. For instance Dominykas, from London, noted: '…in my neighbourhood, white people are a minority. I always feel safe everywhere and I can dress as I want. Even the city [of London] is incredibly queer! I really liked these things and decided to stay'. Similarly Aušra, from Copenhagen, mentioned that she always noticed multi-racial and diverse same-sex couples everywhere in the city, from the street to art museums. In her view, this attested to the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals and other aspects of social diversity in her new country. These observations highlight how the process of 'homemaking' – creating a sense of belonging in a new environment – is intertwined with the acceptance and recognition of queer identities. As Wimark (2021) argues in writing about queer refugees, queer homemaking is a continuous negotiation, an attempt to find spaces where they can feel safe and express their identities more freely.

The narratives of Lithuanian queer migrants reveal distinct patterns of homemaking or the reproduction of home related to sexual socialisation and adaptation. First, in their new countries, these individuals encountered a trend towards more fluid sexual and gender identities, which allowed them to experiment with different forms of appearance, self-presentation and intimacy. For example, Dominykas (London) reflected on how his new location helped him to queer his sexual and gender identity:

Of course, I have become much more gay and queer. I'm not afraid to experiment with my appearance and express myself how I want. I enjoy attending parties where everyone is gay because I can dress how

I like and express myself freely, such as painting my nails and wearing makeup. Looking back, I've definitely undergone a significant transformation…

This transformation can be understood as part of the homemaking process that enables queer migrants to actively create spaces and identities that feel authentic and liberating. It could be argued that the relocation process was 'also about testing, exploring and experimenting with alternative ways of being, in contexts that [were] unencumbered by the expectations of tight-knit family, kinship or community relationships' (Knopp 2004: 123).

For many informants, the ability to freely experiment with sexual intimacies was a critical part of their homemaking process. The participants suggested that they felt 'out of place' in Lithuania and that moving to a different country made them feel more at ease with the environment. Sexual experimentation and the exploration of same-sex intimacies became not only incentives but also an outcome of queer migration. Rytis, from Paris, highlighted the importance of sexual freedom in his new country: 'First of all, in France, you can freely talk about sex. Well, I can't imagine such an attitude in Lithuania… Yes, in France, you can freely talk about sex, especially with the person you are in a relationship with… I could say that, for the French, sex is an essential part of life'. Rytis' words indicate how discomfort and self-censorship have been attached to Lithuania, shaping his past experiences. Migration did not automatically erase these affective attachments but Paris offered an opportunity to detach from these negative emotions. Similarly, other participants emphasised the personal reinvention that allowed them to perform their sexual identities openly and to experience a sense of comfort and joy in their host countries: 'I feel like I wear more queer-related clothing now and I can dress more queer depending on my mood. If you accepted me like this – both queer and a migrant – then I won't hide those parts of myself… I can be who I am' (Saulė, Uppsala).

The presence of diverse LGBTQ+ spaces in their new countries played a crucial role in the homemaking process for Lithuanian queer migrants. Dominykas described the vibrant queer scene in London:

In London, there is a specific environment not only based on laws but also on a sense of community, which is very radical and queer. For example, there is even something called Corporate Pride, which is essentially quite dull, and all the punks go there. Then, a week later, there is Trans Pride and, after another week, there is Black Pride – but these delve into other issues. There are also various raves, communities, gay rugby teams, lesbian football teams, nightclubs, bars… So, there are really many places and opportunities to gather.

These varied communities and spaces aided the Lithuanian queer migrants in their homemaking process by creating new emotional ties and affiliations. In leaving behind their home countries, the informants created the opportunity to explore new horizons and experience new things. The desire to experiment with their sexual identities, practices and ways of being queer often led the participants to search for communities where they could feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. Such communities provided a safe space for them to be their 'true' selves and to engage in activities often disapproved of and condemned in Lithuania. Relocating represented a moment of transition, a time of change and an opportunity to embrace new experiences and challenges.

Despite finding new homes in their host countries, some informants still felt a sense of transnational belonging, living between Lithuania and their new country. Linas, from Malmö, expressed this tension: 'But Lithuania is also my home… I'm just torn between two homes. Both Sweden and Lithuania are my

homes'. Similarly Aušra, from Copenhagen, argued that 'It often feels like there are two homes. There are also some projects in Lithuania. So, you travel to Lithuania, complete the project there and then return here. The border is not so daunting because the flight only takes an hour'. These accounts illustrate how queer migrants navigate and accommodate dual attachments while maintaining flexible and pragmatic relationships with both their home and host countries. Their experiences reflect a dynamic form of homemaking that integrates mobility, belonging and continuity across national boundaries.

As my data demonstrate, the process of homemaking entails certain emotional complexities. The concept of sticky emotions, which attach themselves to specific bodies, objects and spaces, helps to explain these complexities. While Dominykas and Aušra found comfort and safety in the queer-friendly spaces of London and Copenhagen, they also carried with them the residue of their emotional experiences in Lithuania. The emotions of fear and shame still stick to their current lives and persist in new, more accepting environments. Sometimes, it was difficult to articulate whether the newly found sense of safety and comfort was due to leaving Lithuania or simply to becoming a more mature person: 'Over the years, I've felt increasingly safe with myself and more courageous. It's difficult to say whether this is solely because I left Lithuania or if it's simply a result of my maturing' (Tomas, London). In the words of another informant, he became more open after ceasing to experience the oppressive Lithuanian environment filled with gossip and negativity: 'Well, you just become braver... I think I've become more open. Perhaps I just pay less attention to people and their opinions...' (Linas, Malmö). This ambivalence reflects the complex interplay between the sticky negative emotions experienced in Lithuania and new possibilities of belonging and comfort.

The Lithuanian queer migrants' narratives show that homemaking is an affective process shaped by opportunities provided by host countries and sticky negative emotions carried from Lithuania. Therefore, homemaking requires active emotional unlearning and relearning that allows queer individuals to embrace, embody and perform their identities without fear of discrimination and stigmatisation.

Conclusion

This article has examined the migration experiences of Lithuanian queer individuals through the perspectives of 'sticky emotions' (Ahmed 2004) and 'homemaking' (Brun and Fábos 2015; Wimark 2021). By foregrounding emotions in migration studies, it has demonstrated that migration is not only a reaction to structural inequalities but also an emotional response to the persistent feelings of discomfort, fear and shame that 'stick' to their experiences in Lithuania. Most interviewees perceived their childhood home as unfriendly towards LGBTQ+ individuals, perpetuating a heteronormative culture. By leaving their home country, queer migrants sought not only legal and social recognition but also an emotional transformation enabled by their detachment from an oppressive emotional atmosphere. In this sense, their relocation marked a distinct transition between the initial feeling of estrangement – home as not home – and the emergence of a new site of possibility (Fortier 2003). The informants emphasised the sense of acceptance which they felt within diverse queer communities in their chosen home countries – communities which enabled them to express their 'genuine' sexual and emotional selves.

The emotional burdens of shame, invisibility and exclusion have been gradually reshaped through the informants' exposure to their host countries, which offered acceptance, diverse queer communities and expanded possibilities of self-remaking. The research participants' stories demonstrate that negative emotions do not simply disappear upon migration; instead, they are reconfigured through interactions with

new queer communities and spaces that provide emotional comfort and the freedom to explore new ways of being. The host countries, with their more progressive LGBTQ+ rights and inclusive communities, offered Lithuanian queer migrants many opportunities for emotional and sexual resocialisation.

The concept of 'homemaking' reveals how queer migrants construct a sense of belonging in their host countries, often through participation in LGBTQ+ communities, sexual socialisation and personal reinvention. For many, the new homes become spaces in which they can engage in new forms of sexual and social intimacy and build meaningful connections. The presence of diverse LGBTQ+ spaces, such as queer clubs, pride events and supportive social networks, plays an essential role in this homemaking process. However, this process is complex: some migrants experience a sense of transnational belonging, torn between their old and their new homes. This liminal state reflects the ongoing negotiation of belonging that characterises queer migration.

By employing the concepts of 'sticky emotions' and 'homemaking', this article highlights how migration can be conceived of as a process of emotional disentanglement from the home country and emotional attachment to host countries. It expands the scope of queer migration studies by integrating queer experiences from post-socialist Eastern Europe with Western queer migration models, while also complicating decolonial critiques that uniformly depict the West as an oppressive space for non-Western queer migrants. Future research should further explore how the affective dimensions of migration influence LGBTQ+ migrants' adaptation and sexual socialisation processes, particularly within Central and Eastern European contexts. Addressing the emotional dimensions is crucial in developing more nuanced perspectives on queer migration and the lived experiences of those who navigate multiple social and affective challenges in search of a new home.

Note

1. When referring to LGBTQ+ individuals in the article, 'queer' – as an inclusive umbrella term for those whose gender identity and sexual behaviour do not conform to societal norms – is the most often used.

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