

Guesting: rethinking the relationship between hospitality and homemaking within temporary refugee accommodation

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This paper introduces the emic concept of guesting, coined by women living in refugee accommodation to distinguish their form of hospitality from other more hierarchical forms of hosting. Central to guesting is the unspoken rule that once you have played the host, next time you must be the guest. The reciprocal nature of guesting allows for the continual exchange of gifts and support between the women, creating a strong social network, which acts as a foundation to their homemaking practices. Additionally, guesting acts as a key site for collective remembering, creating a context in which the women can connect to pre-migratory aesthetics and sensuous evocations. However, the rules and regulations set out by the state-run refugee accommodation impose limitations on the ways the women in the group are able to use guesting as a homemaking practice. In particular, the guest curfew and the inability to change certain aesthetic features within the rooms remind them of their lack of agency within the accommodation.

Introduction

I was first introduced to the practice of guesting through a group of women I met in a refugee accommodation in eastern Berlin. Unlike dominant forms of hospitality, core to guesting was an unspoken rule that each member of the group would take it in equal turns to invite each other to their rooms. On this occasion, it was Mina's turn. As she led me into the single room she and her family of four shared, she turned with a wry smile, 'welcome to our bedroom, children's room, living room and today, guesting room!'. The room was unrecognizable from when I had been in there previously to do an interview with her. The beds had been stacked on top of each other, the compulsory chairs and table put away and replaced with traditional Afghan *toshaks*¹ and *baleshts*.² In the centre was a large spread of nuts, dried fruit and sweets, all displayed in decorative golden trays, the same selection served at all guesting gatherings. As the other women arrived, they let their head scarves fall and instantly began chatting and joking with each other. When Pashtana arrived, she handed Mina a Tupperware container, who turned to me, saying 'we Afghan ladies never return a Tupperware empty'. The taking and returning of food,

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I would come to realize, was just one of many gifts that were exchanged during these gatherings.

Whilst the vignette above depicts Mina as host, this is only one snapshot of a wider, ongoing structure in which each woman within the group took it in turns to transform their single room into a space of comfort and conviviality for fellow female residents to come together. Drawing on my own participation and research into guesting, as part of a year's fieldwork in a refugee accommodation in Berlin, this paper explores the connection between hospitality and homemaking for female Afghan refugees. While scholars have focused on the asymmetrical power imbalances in which asylum seekers and refugees become embedded in guest/host discourses at the national scale (Babül 2024; Darling 2011; Morris 2010; Rosello 2001; Rozakou 2012), this article contributes to the lesser researched aspects of hospitality that occur between displaced people within the material and social setting of the refugee accommodation (Rottmann & Nimer 2021; Vandevoordt 2017). It is within this setting that I highlight the ways in which a specific form of hospitality, coined by the women as guesting, actively combatted asymmetrical power imbalances by following an unspoken rule that once you have played the host, next time you must be the guest. This stands in contrast to other theories of hospitality which focus on the privileged position obtained by the host through the act of hosting (Chau 2014; Pitt-Rivers 2012 [1977]; Sneath 2019).

As da Col (2019) argues, unlike concepts such as the gift which have been carefully contextualized within different settings, hospitality has not undergone the same level of scrutiny (Parry 1986; Strathern 1988). Whilst terms such as hospitality and hosting have been used haphazardly to describe a range of human gatherings, by using the emic concept of guesting, I hope to shed light on the nuances and specificities that lie within its range and hereby expand our conception of the term as a whole. It is with this in mind that I hope to go beyond the constraints of classical representations of hospitality, instead showing how specific cultural and spatial forms of hospitality create different social relations from the predominantly hierarchal form of hosting explored in most literature (da Col 2019; McNulty 2007).

In the first section, I explore current characterizations of hospitality within literature, showing that sovereignty, hierarchy, and the guest as potential threat are at the heart of much of the literature. I go on to show that this conceptualization has been adopted in migration literature, which focuses on the dynamic between host states and migrants conceived of as guests. I then introduce guesting, which I outline as an alternative form of hospitality centred around reciprocity and care.

In the next sections, I develop on the relationship between hospitality and homemaking by first exploring how guesting helps form networks of solidarity and care. Drawing on Komter (2004), I show how guesting establishes and maintains a sense of community through reciprocal relations. These relationships, I argue, act as important foundations for creating a sense of home against what is often experienced as a precarious and hostile environment both within and outside of the accommodation. I then examine how transforming the material environment during guesting enables the women to return to pre-displacement memories of home through particular sensual objects.

In the final part of the article, I show how the rules and regulations imposed by the state-run accommodation restrict the women from being able to fully connect to the accommodation as home through guesting. I focus on how the lack of autonomy, a sense of ownership, and the inability to fully reflect their identity to the outside world jointly

impacted the women's abilities to engage in guesting in a way that was reminiscent of how each of them practised hospitality in their pre-exile domestic spaces.

Context and methodology

I first met women from the guesting group (whose names have been anonymized in this article) through volunteering at various programmes which took place within a refugee accommodation, one of three I had been given permission to do research in as part of my PhD in 2023. It quickly became apparent that every woman within the group spoke excellent English and when we were not practising German, we spoke in English. As time passed, I was invited to join their guesting group. At first, I was only ever a guest, until one of the women pointed out that I, too, should host in my nearby flat and I quickly became fully embedded within the group. This was an important point in my domestic-based ethnography; enabling my interlocutors the same possibility to look inside my domestic space helped break down the 'observer/observed' dichotomy, allowing us to compare our styles, aesthetics, and biographies of homemaking (Narayan 1993: 671). However, my role as researcher remained clear throughout and the women would frequently explain things they believed relevant to my research, letting me do recorded conversations which delved more specifically into what guesting meant for them. The women shared the same Persian dialect spoken in Afghanistan which they chose to refer to as simply 'Persian', highlighting hereby their cultural connections to other countries such as Iran, which I therefore will adopt for the purpose of this article. The fact that my Persian was poor meant that when conversations were being held in Persian, I was often unable to follow. If it wasn't for the women's continuous efforts and work to translate and include me in these conversations, my research would have been very limited. I am forever grateful for what must have been an incredibly tiring exercise.

All of the women had refugee protection status under the German state with the same possibility of gaining a settlement permit after five years of residing in Germany. The majority arrived after August 2021 when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan and, as such, compared to other residents in the accommodation, were relative newcomers. Coming from similar middle/upper-class backgrounds in Afghanistan, almost all of the women under 40 had at least a bachelor's degree with professional backgrounds as teachers, artists, IT specialists, doctors, and academics. The accommodation which they shared was managed via a local provider but under the leadership of the government-run LAF (State Office for Refugee Affairs Berlin), which dictates the core rules and regulations of such accommodations. Although it is less temporary than the 'Ankunftszentrum' in which many refugees are initially housed after arriving in Germany, it is not designed for long-term living. For example, families of four (two adults and two children) are often allocated just a single room with shared kitchens and bathrooms. Designed to be an interim space until residents find their own private housing, the accommodation became more permanent for most residents due to the state of the Berlin housing market and the discrimination faced by many refugees within it (Soederberg 2019).

A comparison between hosting and guesting

Hosting

Within literature on hospitality and hosting, one of the key requisites to be considered a host is that one possesses sovereignty over a given space (see da Col 2019; Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000; Shryock 2012; Sneath 2019). Pitt-Rivers (2012 [1977]: 514)

illustrates this idea in his essay on hospitality, arguing 'a host is a host only on the territory over which on a particular occasion he claims authority'. Central to hosting is thus often an underlying idea of ownership and mastery over a space (McNulty 2007; Sneath 2019). In Sneath's (2019) portrayal of everyday hospitality in Mongolia, he highlights how the concept of *ezen* signifies not only the host but also owner or master of the household, who possesses full sovereignty over that space. Similarly, Chau (2014: 496) coins the term 'household sovereignty' to describe the ways in which hosting in China transforms the household courtyard 'into a kingdom with the head of the household as its sovereign', during which the household is placed over and above the other households, conferring on it 'recognition, social prestige, "face" and symbolic capital' through its temporary pre-eminence.

Gender plays an important role here, as it is the male who is predominantly considered the host in the literature. This is connected to the host's requirement to 'offer up or dispose of personal property', something women in patriarchal society often lack (McNulty 2007: 33). As McNulty argues, it is through 'parting with his most treasured possessions' that the master gains the prestige of being host and is able to simultaneously confirm his identity as 'the master himself' (2007: 29). This leaves women in the hospitality literature often vacant and hidden behind the men of the household despite historically having often done the bulk of the domestic work that goes into hosting (Candea & da Col 2012). When women are mentioned in the literature on hospitality, it is often as the victim of free labour or social reprehension, if their domestic work is not deemed good enough by the standards of the master-as-host (Darke & Gurney 2010). Whilst it is important to note how women become victims of a wider patriarchal system, such accounts often neglect women's own accounts and alternative forms of hospitality, which may exist alongside mainstream patriarchal forms (see Allerton 2012 for a good example of this).

Tied to the concept of sovereignty are the ways in which hosting produces and reproduces hierarchical structures. As we saw with Chau (2014), it is precisely through one's ability to control a space and the visitor's position within it that one can assert one's status over and above them. In his work on the role of feasting and food in hospitality, Dietler (2001: 74) argues that hosting can always 'translate into a relationship of social superiority ... unless and until the equivalent is returned'. Much like in the works of the gift, returning hospitality becomes central to understanding the relationship between social power and exchange relationships (Pitt-Rivers 2012 [1977]). In the same way that the unreturnable gift can create a sense of superiority (Yan 2012), when someone out-hosts another, this can be seen as a way of crushing one's rivals and undermining their position in society (Dietler 2001). As such, where one person takes the role of host predominantly or in such a way that one asserts one's status, wealth, or sovereignty, a relationship of hierarchy between the two is established.

Although guests are portrayed as disempowered in the host-guest dynamic, they are simultaneously often construed as potential threats; strangers and disruptors to the reigning order (Costa 2017; Harney & Boccagni 2023). Across the literature we are presented with a range of 'dangerous' (Højer 2004), 'parasitic' (da Col 2012) or 'bad guests' (Shryock 2012), always having the potential to 'undo the certainty hosts have over the control of space', subverting the power of the host over the guest (Harney & Boccagni 2023: 321). Turning to Pitt-Rivers (1968) and Derrida & Dufourmantelle (2000), we see how the stranger-guest in particular threatens the social order through being an 'absolute unknown', meaning that they may not recognize and adhere to the

authority of the host, thus overturning existing norms and expectations (Candea & da Col 2012: 6). The guest as permanent stranger is here constructed as somebody who must always be kept at a distance, hospitality acting as the very mechanism through which guest as stranger is imprisoned within their status as outsider.

Within the literature on forced migration, these concepts have been widely adopted, wherein authors consider the ensuing power dynamic when states understand themselves as hosts and refugees as guests (Babül 2024). Many argue that it is through the metaphor of the refugee-as-guest that states place refugees in a perpetual position of disempowerment (Abdelaaty 2021; Babül 2024; Nguyen 2012). As Boccagni and Giudici (2022: 789) claim, it is the very hierarchies inherent in the host-guest relationship that 'may risk reproducing asymmetric dynamics of dependence' in the context of refugee hospitality. Stressing the idea of sovereignty, Nguyen (2012: 71) claims that the host nation maintains a position of power over the person seeking asylum, whereby 'the one who receives, lodges or gives asylum remains the patron, the master of the household, on the condition that he maintains his own authority in his own home, that he looks after himself and sees to and considers all that concerns him'. Linked to this are the racist and nationalist discourses, constructing asylum seekers and refugees as 'strangers parasiting off the host nation' (Gibson 2003: 367). Embedded within these discourses, is the fear of losing control and the 'stranger other' taking over the nation.

Guesting

Although it is important to understand how states assert power through hospitality frameworks, the literature around refugee hospitality risks construing hospitality as a system which only disempowers refugees, without paying significant attention to hospitality between refugees. Whilst we see the host-guest dynamic in operation between the refugee residents and the state, in this section, I present guesting as an alternative hospitality structure practised amongst residents, which acts as a source of comfort and strength. I show how the core values of care and reciprocity at the heart of guesting resist hierarchical structures, creating the foundations for a strong social network.

I was introduced to the emic term guesting during my first recorded conversation with Mina, which took place in English around the topic of hospitality. She explained to me how 'we are always going between homes and guesting'. I assumed that by guesting, she meant 'hosting', a term I was more familiar with in English, asking Mina, 'so by guesting, do you mean hosting guests?'. But Mina was quick to correct me, actively trying to distance her experiences of hospitality from hosting, replying, 'no, both. We are hosting and we are guests ... It's a kind of rule, this guesting, that in our culture, when we go to somebody's home then next they should come to us.' It would be wrong to assume, as I first did, that this is some sort of gap in Mina's vocabulary. Whilst living in Afghanistan, Mina worked as a teacher in English language and literature at a local college. Her English was therefore of a particularly high level and often inventive. When Mina used the term guesting it was unequivocally a deliberate choice to distinguish the practice from that of hosting through the introduction of the new term.

Whilst the term clearly began with Mina, all members of the group would repeatedly define what guesting meant to me, only using it to describe a form of hospitality which was reciprocal and ongoing, in which it was clear to them that whilst they may be the guest on this occasion, this would not be the case the following time when they would

once again be host. Tied to this was the idea that it was disrespectful to host someone on multiple occasions without giving them the opportunity to host you. As Mina said to me in that first conversation, 'if two times we go to them and they don't come to us, then we think, oh why are they not coming. Is there something wrong?'. This notion was repeated in conversations with other women who spoke of the hurt caused when a person did not take up your invitation after you had taken up theirs, with the idea that they were hereby suggesting a superiority over you, that your family and home were not good enough for them. As such, all affirmed the idea that it was an unspoken rule of guesting that the role of host and guest had to be interchanged equally between parties.

Although I asked Mina for a Persian translation, she told me that apart from the term *mehman-nawazi*, meaning literally guest-cherishing, and some loose comparisons to *taarof*, which is a broader term used in Persian to refer to a wide range of polite practices, there was no Persian concept which directly translated (Izadi 2015). The inability to find a translation was something that the other members of the group, also with excellent English, told me was not possible as the English term hosting didn't capture the form of hospitality being practised amongst them. Whilst the anthropological task of translating has received much attention, far less has been written on the concepts people create to overcome their own difficulties of translating specific practices and concepts which may not be included in the researcher's understandings of a concept. The introduction of the emic concept guesting was a way to highlight that the hospitality practice within the group differed from what Mina and the others understood was meant by the concept hosting in English, which they saw as referring to a potentially singular occasion which could be asymmetrical in nature.

Whilst reciprocity has garnered much attention in theories of the gift, where singular gift exchanges are often embedded in an ongoing cycle of reciprocity, less focus has been applied to its specific roles in hospitality (Komter 2004; Mauss 1990 [1923-4]). Guesting highlights how it is not simply the objects themselves which push this system but the very exchange of roles and social identities as host and guest. Through extending the concept of guesting from its usage and embeddedness within the refugee accommodation to the broader sphere of hospitality scholarship, I hope to highlight an important aspect of hospitality grounded within the desire to balance out the powers that come with being host and the importance this has for those who seek long-term relations of exchange and mutual support. In the context of displacement, guesting acts as an important contrast to the often one-sided ideas of state as host and refugee as 'indebted' guest, enabling each party to reciprocate each other's hospitality (Nguyen 2012: 182). It is through the reciprocation of food, drink, resources, and support, I go on to argue, that spaces of care and mutuality are formed within the accommodation between the guesting group.

Another distinct element of guesting, in the form I witnessed it, was its restriction to female hosts and guests only, something which stemmed from the women's pre-exile experiences of hospitality as gendered in Afghanistan (Marsden 2023). It was through these female-only spaces that the women felt more freedom to act in particular ways outside of the male gaze. As Rabia said to me; 'when we ladies are together in the home, we are just joking, gossiping, saying whatever we want ... we are feeling more comfortable doing this with just ladies'. Unlike many of the male-centred accounts of hospitality, as a semi-public activity, guesting was hidden within the private domestic sphere, enabling them to carve out female spaces of protection and fun (Skeggs 2011).

This, as I highlight in the following sections, was central for the women to be able to attend to each other's often intimate and private needs which they would not feel comfortable revealing in front of the other women's male family members. This, too, creates a very different context from the broader male-dominated literature in which hosting is often depicted as a way of acting out a status of mastery and power over those who enter the domestic space (McNulty 2007). In contrast, the gendered element of guesting was more focused on creating a space of safety and comfort between both host and guest within a female-only space.

In this section, I have outlined guesting, distinguishing it from typical characterizations of hosting within literature. Whilst narratives centring on male-dominated hosting often focus on hospitality as a form of sovereignty over a space and the guests within it, guesting focuses on different ways in which hosts and guests can relate to each other and their position within hospitality. Unlike common examples of hosting overviewed in the previous section, guesting actively attempts to combat asymmetrical relations through the balancing of roles. It is through focusing on hospitality amongst residents, rather than between residents and the state, that guesting as a distinct hospitality practice comes into view. For those who cannot claim legal ownership over a space, guesting is less focused on sovereignty or ownership and instead on building a community, something developed upon in the following section. Lastly, whilst much literature on hospitality focuses on the travelling stranger, guesting practices were amongst people who lived within the same locale and wished to stay in regular contact with one another, which allows us to focus on hospitality amongst close friends and relatives, a further understudied area. It is with this distinct form of hospitality that I go forward in the article, highlighting how guesting, as a unique practice of hospitality, underpins homemaking for the members of its group.

Guesting as a foundation for internal care

In this section, I show how the guesting practices of the women in this particular group are essential to the creation of a sense of home. I argue it was through guesting that members were able to create networks of internal care, which replaced the everyday support provided by familial networks left behind in Afghanistan. Building on the work of Paju, Näre, and Merikoski (2023: 266) who view 'care and home' as 'intrinsically entangled' and homes as being primarily established through 'acts of care', I show how guesting, with its rotating structure, created both material and emotional spaces where the women could attend to their own and each other's needs. I begin the section by illustrating how the exchange of material goods created and maintained these social networks, supplying the foundation for the emotional and practical support, which are essential to grounding and solidifying a sense of home (Bocagni 2017; Levin 2023).

During an interview with Rabia, she described how upon arriving at the accommodation her family was welcomed by Nasreen, a long-standing member of the guesting group. Handing them a stack of plates, Rabia recalled how Nasreen said 'you are new here, you don't have much money to afford these things. You have to take this, take this as a gift ... So when the guest comes, you have something'. When arriving in Germany with little money and few possessions, these gifts were essential to creating an initial feeling of home, providing the essential practical and aesthetic items found in the group members' homes pre-displacement. However, as Gouldner (1973) highlights, gifts are also central to instigating a new relationship, as gifting opens up a space for gifts

to be returned, initiating long-term reciprocal relations of exchange. Through gifting Rabia the plates, Nasreen was welcoming her family into the group, making a subtle invitation for this kindness to be returned.

Gift-giving in general was one of the key aspects of guesting, with carpets, pressure cookers, and pans for steaming *mantu*³ among the many objects exchanged. Similarly to Bohannan and Bohannan's (1969) study of exchanges between Tiv women, there never appeared to be any exact measuring in the exchange, but rather people gave what they could when they could. On a smaller scale, food was continuously being gifted and returned through the guesting practice. As highlighted in the opening vignette, 'Afghan ladies never return a Tupperware empty'. This was something I found to be true, with guests often arriving with food for the host, and subsequently leaving with food from the host. As Candea and da Col (2012: 2) highlight, although the gift has historically subsumed hospitality, it is often the very rituals and routines of hospitality that are the preconditions for gift exchange to take place. Due to the regularity and reciprocal nature of guesting, members of the group were provided a context in which reciprocal gift exchange could be embedded, grounding the sense of being part of a network (Lewis 2018).

The sense of community created through guesting was fundamental for building a strong support network. When I asked Rabia why they do guesting, she said, 'I think [greeting] refers to that idea of living together in a society. I think that maybe that's why, and to connect to people for our needs, to get help, but also to give help. I think that is why we do so much greeting'. Whilst research into refugee support structures often emphasizes the role of the government, NGOs, and external citizens, what became clear whilst spending time with this group of women was the crucial role that internal care played between residents within similar situations (Darling 2022). This is an element of hospitality which is often absent in the literature around hosting, but is essential for people to feel part of a community and ground a sense of home (Taylor & Lefebvre 2022). As Yassine, Al-Harithy, and Boano (2021: 2873) argue, care forms 'life sustaining webs', where actors utilize 'a repertoire of practices, tactics and mutual support to sustain a terrain of relations and resist marginalization'. Central to this approach is the importance of not seeing the refugee 'merely as the recipient of care' but as active agents in creating care networks to 'mitigate marginalization and precariousness of their dwellings' and urban environment (Yassine *et al.* 2021: 2872). Through greeting, residents could turn to each other for help without having to rely solely upon charitable or governmental systems of support.

Greeting, and importantly the guest networks which it produces, often acted as an important replacement to the everyday support received from close family members in Afghanistan. Many authors have shed light on the centrality of extended family for Afghan citizens and diaspora where families are often perceived as networks of trust, solidarity, and reciprocity (Abbasi-Shavazi, Sadeghi, Mahmoudian & Jamshidiha 2012). Fischer (2017) highlights the importance of kinship networks for Afghan migrants living in Germany and the United Kingdom, arguing that participants chose locations based on where they already had a family member as a central way to access support in an initially unfamiliar environment. However, for most of the women in the greeting group, they were the first in their extended families to arrive in Germany. Siblings, uncles, aunts, and parents were often dotted across different continents or remained in Afghanistan. Asking Mina about it, she said: 'we are here, we are alone, we don't have close relatives like brothers, sisters, aunts – we don't have here so now we have to make

our own network here'. As such, arriving in Berlin, many echoed Mina's sentiment of feeling completely alone in a country they had never been to before.

The support took the form not only of practical exchange but also emotional care (Boudou 2021). Mina, who had also been a teacher in Kabul recounted to me how her daughter's teacher had shouted at her one morning when she had dropped her off. With no German, Mina had not known what it was about:

She behaved very badly to me and I can't tell you how much it affected me. When I came back, I just knocked on all the doors. Yeah, some of the women, they brought *bolani*⁴ and other Afghan foods and I was feeling a little better. This is also why guesting is so important for us. Everything is new, we don't know anything and people can be very bad here.

Mina was not the only person to experience abuse outside of the accommodation. Similar stories of discriminatory and hostile encounters with doctors, teachers, bus drivers, and random people on the streets were shared by other women in the group. Having a group of other women to share these experiences did not detract from the distress and suffering it caused, but it provided an important emotional comfort to come back to, to feel less alone, and to receive support from after such events took place. Recognizing the injustice of these occurrences together, and the self-worth of the individual who has been unjustly shamed or chastised, was an incredibly important element of their time spent together through guesting.

In this section, I have shown how, through the structures of guesting, the accommodation became a 'location of caring', where the women's emotional and practical needs could be addressed regularly (Paju *et al.* 2023: 274). Having been separated from most, if not all, of their family through displacement, the women were able to recreate a strong network based on mutual care and social solidarity. As many authors argue, this sense of community and belonging is essential to creating and maintaining a sense of home (Hage 2010; Mendez & Deeb-Sossa 2020; Richardson 2019). Central to the guesting network was the exchanging of gifts, which initiated new members into the group and assured their sense of continued community. The exchanging of gifts and food provided the ground for deeper emotional support which helped the women navigate the challenges of moving into a new environment, enabling them to better connect to this environment and create a sense of home (Werner, Altman & Oxley 1985). In the next section, I explore how guesting further grounded their homemaking practices through connecting to pre-displacement sensual and aesthetic memories of home.

Guesting and collective memories of home

Whilst the last section addressed how guesting was viewed and practised by the group as a vital social structure, rooting a sense of home within the accommodation, another key part of guesting was the ways in which it transported the women to pre-displacement environments. In this section I show how, through the collective consumption of key guesting substances, such as tea, bread, and nuts, as well as the transformation of rooms to reflect their respective guest rooms from the past, guesting became a key way in which women were repeatedly transported to memories of hospitality and past domestic spaces. I explore how these sensuous materials triggered embodied memories of homes left behind, enabling the women to recall and reinsert these familiar experiences more permanently into their everyday lives in the accommodation, helping them to feel more at home within the space (Dudley 2011; Tolia-Kelly 2004).

One of the key ways in which the women created a sense of home in their rooms was through the transformation of the domestic space to resemble that of their homes pre-displacement. During guesting, residents often moved aside objects prescribed by the accommodation and replaced them with traditional Afghan objects such as carpets, *toshaks*, and *baleshts*. On one occasion whilst visiting Anahita's room with Mina and Nasreen, we noticed that the *toshaks* and *baleshts* had been replaced. Both Mina and Nasreen pushed down on the material. 'Ah, it is good', Mina said, 'it is the Afghan *toshak*'. 'What other *toshaks* are there?', I asked. 'They also have *toshak* in Iran', she told me, 'but it is softer, yeah'. Nasreen nodded, 'it is just like mine at home', she smiled, referring to the house she and her family left behind in Afghanistan. As Dudley (2011: 748) argues, fundamental to feeling at home is that things 'feel familiar, in material and sensory terms'. For many of the residents, the objects used in guesting held particularly strong associations with home through their material and sensory familiarity. The women's ability to distinguish between Iranian and Afghan *toshaks* and the comfort of the familiarity of the Afghan style gave them underlines the importance of materiality for homemaking.

As well as the material surroundings feeling familiar, the women also connected to a sense of home through familiar tastes and smells from Afghanistan. I observed this one particularly icy day when Afsaneh made tea for the group, using saffron recently brought across from Afghanistan by a relative. Afsaneh breathed in the steam rising off the fluorescent yellow tea and exhaled, sighing 'Ahh Kabul', her smile widening. There was a murmur as the other women echoed 'Kabul', taking their first sips of the tea as the delicate aroma of the saffron infused the space between us. I noticed how even those who weren't from Kabul seemed so caught up in this moment that they too repeated the name of the capital. After months of complaining about how the saffron bought in Germany just wasn't the same, the joy of finally having saffron from Afghanistan spread across the room. Sitting tightly in between the other women, I wondered what was going through their minds. As if reading my mind, Fatima, who was sat to my left, whispered to me; 'right now I feel like I am in Kabul, sitting in my home and it is something special'. Tea is a particularly fundamental part of guesting and central to the sensorial production of sociality between the women during their visits. As Allerton (2012: 50) highlights, particular substances are used to transform a setting and bring a shared world of 'liveliness' and 'heightened sociality' into being through sensory experience (see also Chau 2008). Not only did people enjoy the performance of drinking together, but the taste, smell, and steam that rose off the tea and infused the room contributed to creating a shared space of togetherness and home (Christou 2023).

For many of the residents, the objects used in guesting held particularly strong associations with home through their material and sensory familiarity. In her research on the British-Asian home, Tolia-Kelly (2004: 314) highlights how it is through these encounters with particular materials that migrant memories 'stimulated through scents, sounds and textures' are re-experienced and re-memorized not just at the individual, but also communal, level as they 'activate common connections to pre-migratory landscapes and environments'. As Pashtana said to me one evening over a shared meal,

When we are getting together, we are feeling like we are in our homes, it just reminds us of our memories of life before because yeah, because we are eating the same, we are doing the same, we are drinking the same, yeah, we are feeling. It is a feeling which is the same. Sometimes, we are also speaking about Afghanistan, about our memories. We go back to our memories here.

Objects play an important role in a community's 'rememories' as they have the ability to absorb individual memories but importantly also allow people to connect and combine each other's memories within them, becoming what Tolia-Kelly (2004: 314) calls the 'precipitates' of shared narratives of memories and belonging, binding migrant groups together in the diaspora. By placing familiar objects in the environment, the group was able to collectively connect to memories of Afghanistan, which, whilst distinct, also drew them together.

This section has shown how the materials of hospitality between the women created a strong collective notion of home. Feelings of home within the accommodation seemed to arise precisely when the women came together and felt a sense of connection through the materials of guesting, which they so strongly associated with their separate lives pre-displacement. As many authors in migration studies have highlighted, home for migrants rarely takes 'place through the heroic act of an individual (the migrant), but through the forming of communities that create multiple identifications through collective acts of remembering' (Ahmed 1999: 329). Through the prescribed etiquettes, rituals, and sensual experiences embedded within guesting and hospitality more generally, it becomes a key facilitator for creating a space in which such collective acts of home and community building could take place (Allerton 2012; Candea & da Col 2012). Whilst the 'stagecraft' put into guesting was often temporary, everything being packed away again afterwards, its regularity through guesting meant it became strongly embedded within the four walls of each other's rooms (Shryock 2012: 23). In the next section, I explore how the women's narratives and practices of guesting are simultaneously challenged by the LAF, which acted as a kind of meta-host, stopping the women from feeling full sovereignty over their domestic spaces and the guesting practices which took place within them.

Material and structural limitations to guesting within the refugee accommodation

In the previous sections, I outlined how guesting is a key practice contributing to the ability to feel at home within the accommodation; both through the establishment of a social network which incorporates care and support, as well as creating a sensual environment in which residents can draw on embodied memories of a pre-displacement past. However, it is also important to consider the limitations imposed by not having full sovereignty over the space when guesting within the state-run accommodation. In this section, I explore how not having full ownership over the space affects the residents' abilities to practise guesting in a way that resonates with how they had previously done so in their domestic spaces in Afghanistan. I examine the role that the LAF plays as a kind of meta-host over the women's guesting practices, determining the ways in which the residents may create a hospitable space for both themselves and their guests.

On one of the first spring days, Padida led me to her family's new room where a pair of slippers was already waiting for me. As I entered, the smell of chlorine and bleach stung the back of my throat. A sponge floated in a tub of soapy water in the centre of the room which Padida had been using to clean the walls. 'Dirty', Padida said with a sigh of resignation. 'I have been cleaning from 6am', she told me, tying together the strands of loose hair that had come undone from the scrubbing and washing. 'But look', she pointed to the various stains and a rip across the side of the wall which revealed the chipboard underneath. 'Not nice, not nice, this is making me unhappy', she said before

adding, 'I cannot have guest here'. There was a pause as we both looked around the room allocated to Padida, her husband, and two children.

In Afghanistan, I was a doctor, but only in the mornings, then I come home, prepare the house, make it nice, buy things, friends, family come to my home. Yeah, in Afghanistan every family has lots of guests every day. We are very happy when we have guests, it is so, really important for us. But you see, it is difficult here.

Hamington (2010: 26) describes hospitality as 'a dynamic act of identity formation,' as we both display our identity through the construction of the space, as well as perform our identity as host. However, as Warren (2010: 427) argues, opening our private spaces to others is an act of vulnerability, exposing ourselves to the possibility of both pride and shame, as 'private spaces can reflect ... the identities and truths of selves, and their connectedness to or isolation from others'. For the women in the guesting group, whilst there was much to take pride in through guesting, an element of shame was often present due to their material surroundings. Although many of the women created inventive strategies to try and mask aspects of shame, such as creating curtains to cover untidy spaces, there were certain features of their material surroundings that they were unable to change and which they saw as reflecting badly upon themselves.

Whilst Padida literally bleached the room in an attempt to remove signs of past occupants and make it feel more like her own, she was still confronted with aspects that she couldn't remove or change (Pink 2004: 53). Many of the walls in the accommodation needed replastering and repainting at the very least, but residents did not have the power to make such changes. This had a large impact on the ways in which people felt that the space was truly their own and could open it up to the other. As Hage (1997: 101) argues, central to homemaking is feeling like a 'wilful subject', meaning that one has the ability to act as one wishes within a space, including by changing that space. This is something echoed by other authors, who have pointed out how feeling autonomy and ownership over a space is central to creating a sense of home (Ratnam 2018; Richardson 2019). However, as Padida and many of the other women attempted to create special spaces which they felt happy to open up to their guests, they were constantly reminded of their own lack in ownership and autonomy over the accommodation as their home.

Another central impediment to homemaking was the guest curfew, which was present in all LA refugee accommodations I visited, determining when guests could come and go. When I asked Nasreen about whether the accommodation felt like home, this was the first thing she mentioned: 'no, because here we cannot have guests stay the night. We are not comfortable with this situation. But this is how it is'. Zainab, another woman from the guesting group, explained the reasoning as follows, 'in our culture, you cannot tell the guest what time. We cannot say, "okay, it's time up, you should leave". This is not respectful to the guest. The guest, they have to be able to come and stay here whenever they want. This is our culture'. As Boccagni (2022: 146) outlines, homemaking isn't just about the ability to adapt a dwelling to 'one's needs, interests or tastes', but also the freedom to 'continue cultural and biographical activities' central to one's understandings and experiences of past homes. Many of the women highlighted how distressing they found the guest curfew and the way it came into conflict with guesting as they had previously practised it. As Nasreen highlights, the lack of sovereignty to practise guesting as they would have in Afghanistan detracted from their ability to feel at home within the accommodation.

Zainab brought up the fact that she and many of the other women had complained about the guest rules: 'we went to our social worker and to the management in the *Heim* [accommodation] and they told us it is not possible because it is not in our hands. It is the LAF. When we heard LAF, we knew this is not changeable, we won't be able to change that.' The LAF was only ever spoken of in its three-letter acronym by both residents and staff. When I asked residents if they knew who ran the LAF, nobody could answer, and yet it was so omnipresent in people's lives in the accommodation. It was as such a kind of hidden power, always lurking behind the scenes but never fully reachable. Many referred to a detailed document by the LAF, which they had to sign when they moved into the accommodation, stating the accommodation rules and conditions (known as *Hausordnung* in German). If those rules, sometimes as minor as removing the mattress from a bed frame and leaving it on the floor, were broken, the letter stated that they could be removed. This threat of removal was incredibly powerful as refugee residents often immediately equated it with deportation (Peutz 2006). As Drotbohm and Hasselberg (2018) highlight, migrant policies often draw on the anxiety around breaking rules and risking deportation that refugees have when they arrive in a new place. Whether intentional or not, it is precisely through documents such as the *Hausordnung*, and the threats they contain, that power imbalances between the LAF and residents are deepened. Through their power to decide how residents may stay within the accommodation, the LAF acts as a kind of meta-host within guesting and beyond it.

Although in the previous sections I have shown how the women have been able to create affirming hospitality practices, we can see that these happen within the limitations set out by the LAF. This is not a direct attack on the LAF; after all these accommodations were never meant to be anything but temporary. However, within the current context of Berlin, where there are few other realistic housing options for many refugees, these spaces do become more permanent and residents must seek ways to lead as normal a life as possible within them (Soederberg 2019). These limitations raise an important question as to the realizability of guesting, and therefore homemaking, within the refugee accommodation. The lack of full sovereignty over the space means the women are unable to practise guesting as they otherwise would, which impacts their ability to feel fully at home within the space.

Conclusion

The literature on hospitality has predominantly followed Derrida by viewing hospitality as enacting a particular power dynamic, where guests are invited to 'please feel at home, act as if you were at home, but, remember, that is not true, this is not your home but mine, and you are expected to respect my property' (Derrida & Caputo 1997: 111). Central to this argument is the paradoxical duality of hospitality, between the moral necessity of fully opening up one's doors to the guest, whilst simultaneously retaining full sovereignty over that space and the guest's position within it (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 2000). This is certainly true when focusing only on the power dynamics at the macro level between refugees and nation states. Acting at a governmental level, the LAF holds a position of power which restricts the actions of the residents in the accommodation. If we were to focus only on this level, we would have to characterize hospitality as an impediment to homemaking. However, by focusing on hospitality between residents in the form of guesting, this article has also highlighted how

hospitality can be an important force for care work, solidarity, and material comfort, all vital to homemaking.

Following da Col (2019), this paper has highlighted the need to complicate and broaden our understandings of hospitality and the functions it plays in different social, spatial, and cultural contexts. Whilst many accounts of hospitality detail relationships based around power differentials, instigating or reinforcing hierarchical relationships, gisting is a form of hospitality that actively seeks to combat power imbalances through the reciprocation of roles, gifts, and care. As Pitt-Rivers (2012 [1977]) argues, it is not possible to have equality within a single occurrence of hosting and being hosted as there is always an imbalance in the power dynamic. Instead, he argues that 'reciprocity implies an alternation of roles, not an identity of roles' (2012 [1977]: 509). Every instance of gisting anticipates the succeeding role reversal between host and guest; it is this which forms a key foundation on which relationships of mutuality and commensality evolve. This becomes even more crucial for groups such as newly arrived refugees who often find themselves in situations of precarity and with less certainty over what their futures will hold.

The sense of solidarity created through gisting was also essential for homemaking. As authors have highlighted, home for many people is feeling themselves embedded within a wider social network (Mendez & Deeb-Sossa 2020; Wiles 2008). By creating this community, gisting is a key practice by which the women feel attached to their social and material environment and thus a sense of home (Ahmed 1999; Boccagni 2017; Levin 2023). Hospitality, in the form of gisting, also creates a context in which the women can return to a pre-migration sense of home through familiar objects. These objects link to individual memories of home through a sensory familiarity, as well as a collective identity as Afghan women. The transformation of the rooms was one way in which the women could appropriate the space, making it feel like their own (Marcoux 2001). However, food, drink, and conversation were also essential stimuli for returning to a pre-migration landscape (Tolia-Kelly 2004). Tapping into their past homes was not just a form of remembering, but for many women an essential way to reinsert their sense of place in the present. More broadly, this paper highlights the importance of hospitality for homemaking by showing how gisting acts as a context for the performance of identity and a site of remembrance.

Whilst I have focused on a female-only form of hospitality, something which is considerably absent in literature, I am also cautious not to fall into the same trap as Levinas (1991: 150) who attempts to outline an essential feminine hospitality based on ideas of 'gentleness', 'radiancy', and the woman's body as 'interiority of the home'. Such reductions morph women into a kind of mythical and sacrificial vessel of hospitality, hiding the actual performances and perspectives of women as hosts and guests (McNulty 2007). In contrast, this article shows how women's roles within gisting were not purely acts of selflessness, but also self-interested. Core to the structure of gisting was that one would both give as well as receive something from it, and each woman spoke of the many personal advantages gisting had on their lives both in Afghanistan and especially now in Germany. It is through such female-focused depictions of hospitality that we can begin to see more complex and diverse images of women as hosts and guests take shape. Hopefully this article will inspire more research into the role of women in, and the potential value they gain through, hospitality, rather than just construing them as exploited for their labour.

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NOTES

¹ Type of floor mattress.

² Type of pillow commonly combined with the *toshak*.

³ A kind of filled dumpling.

⁴ A kind of filled and fried flatbread.

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Le concept de *greeting*: repenser la relation entre hospitalité et création d'un « chez-soi » dans l'hébergement temporaire des personnes réfugiées

Résumé

L'article présente le concept émique de *greeting*, créé par des femmes réfugiées hébergées en foyer pour distinguer leur forme d'hospitalité d'autres formes plus hiérarchiques d'hébergement. Le cœur de ce concept est la règle tacite selon laquelle, quand on a joué une fois le rôle de l'hôtesse, il faut endosser celui de l'invitée la fois suivante. La réciprocité du *greeting* autorise l'échange continu de dons et de soutien entre les femmes, établissant ainsi un solide réseau social qui constitue le socle de leurs pratiques de *homemaking* (création d'un « chez-soi »). En outre, le *greeting* offre un espace essentiel pour la remémoration collective, un contexte dans lequel les femmes peuvent se reconnecter à leur esthétique et à leurs souvenirs sensoriels d'avant la migration. Néanmoins, les règles et règlements imposés par les structures d'accueil des réfugiés gérées par l'État limitent les manières dont les femmes du groupe peuvent recourir au *greeting* en tant que pratique de création d'un « chez-soi ». Le couvre-feu pour les invitées et l'incapacité de modifier certains éléments esthétiques des locaux, en particulier, leur rappellent qu'elles n'ont que peu d'agencéité au sein de l'hébergement.

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