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Article

# Homonegative Labyrinth of Representational Distortions: Planning Im/Possibilities for Higher Education LGBTQ+ Students in Mumbai

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## Abstract

This article accentuates higher education LGBTQ+ (HE-LGBTQ+) students' lived experiences of off-campus housing in the Deonar Campus District of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India. It is observed that key urban stakeholders such as brokers, landowners, neighborhood resident families, and hostel wardens informed by cis-heteronormative moralities work in tandem in shaping the student housing market. The article argues, first, that these powerful urban stakeholders collectively contribute to two mutually feeding phenomena—"studentphobia" and "cis-heteronormative familification"—which in turn effectuate a homonegative labyrinth of representational distortions of the HE-LGBTQ+ student-image. Secondly, when compounded with an increasingly unaffordable urban housing market in the finance capital of India, it results in relatively acute experiences of "spatial dysphoria" for HE-LGBTQ+ students that cannot be comprehended within the neat binary of socio-spatial un/belonging. Methodologically, this article takes a trans-disciplinary approach to analyze the spatial stories of disbelonging of 13 HE-LGBTQ+ students that follow three stages: (a) securing a home, (b) making a home, and (c) leaving home. The article concludes that what is needed to enable a sense of belonging for HE-LGBTQ+ students in India is not necessarily "LGBTQ+ inclusive" or, for that matter, "exclusively LGBTQ+" housing; rather, it is for planning practices to take on queer and trans approaches that undo cis-heteronormativity in urban housing and homes.

## Keywords

cis-heteronormative familification; homonegativity; India; LGBTQ+; spatial dysphoria; student housing; studentphobia

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

This article engages with two key questions posed within cultural geography: "what representations do" as "activities that enable, sustain, interrupt, consolidate or otherwise (re)make forms or ways of life" (Anderson, 2019, p. 1120), and "who speaks" as posed by "feminist, postcolonial and anti-racist movements" (Anderson, 2019, pp. 1121, 1125). The question of representation has arguably been central to advocacy in inclusive and participatory planning initiatives invested in working towards socio-spatial justice. Critical questions have been raised in the last two decades by urban scholars around representation, including, the question of underrepresentation of women (Listerborn, 2007), attempts to move away from token representations towards true

partnerships with adolescents (Rhodes & Kovach, 2002), and cultural misrepresentation of participatory engagement of marginalized groups (Kamols et al., 2021) as well as of the aboriginal land itself (Natcher, 2001). Transformative planning processes are, however, yet to take queer and trans/non-binary approaches necessary to engage with, what this article recognizes as, distorted representations and its implications for socio-spatial sense of distorted belonging—spatial dysphoria—in particular, for higher education LGBTQ+ (HE-LGBTQ+) students in Mumbai, one of the most expensive cities to live in India.

In extension to gender dysphoria, this article offers the concept of "spatial dysphoria" experienced when queer ways of living are forced to fi(gh)t cis-heteronormatively informed domestic configurations

and administrations. In attending to HE-LGBTQ+ students' housing experiences of confronting the social stigma against queer ways of living in the postcolonial context of India, this article primarily draws on distortion as a theoretical concept from the social justice framework of liberation psychology. Moving away from the traditional cognitive psychological models that place the onus of minority distress on the individual going through it, the social justice framework of psychology critically reorients us to hold the nation and the society accountable for its systemic patterns of "distorted thoughts and beliefs that may lead to unfair behaviors as stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination" (David & Derthick, 2018, p. 3). More specifically in the context of a homonegative society, scholars have critically distinguished traditional models of psychology that frame internalized homophobia among LGBTQ+ individuals and its critique which observes such an approach as "a new pathway to pathologizing LGBT identity" by portraying internalized homophobia not "as a relational phenomenon but as an individual pathology" (Russell & Bohan, 2006, p. 346). In studying the psychological phenomenon of "sexual prejudice," Herek (2016) has also argued that there is a complicit mirroring of infrequent and negative portrayals of homosexuality (and, in extension, LGBTQ+ individuals).

This article then observes that key urban stakeholders such as brokers, landowners, neighborhood resident-families, and hostel wardens informed by cis-heteronormative moral sensibilities work in tandem in shaping the on- and off-campus student housing market in the Deonar campus of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) University, Mumbai, India. Collectively, these powerful urban stakeholders perpetrate a "psychology of oppression" (David & Derthick, 2018) by contributing to what I argue are two mutually feeding phenomena—"studentphobia" and "cis-heteronormative familification"—which in turn effectuate a homonegative labyrinth of representational distortions of the HE-LGBTQ+ student-image. When compounded with an increasingly unaffordable urban housing market in Mumbai, it results in relatively acute experiences of spatial dysphoria for HE-LGBTQ+ students that cannot be comprehended within the neat binary of socio-spatial un/belonging.

This article begins with a critical review of the studentification literature, a term first coined in 2002 by socio-economic geographer Darren P. Smith to study the negative changes neighborhoods (closer to university campuses) underwent due to an influx of student population: in its current form it is wanting a sexualities framework, is trans-negative, and altogether overlooks HE-LGBTQ+ students' perspectives. The article then introduces the emerging student-image within the national-urban-institutional research context and notes the transdisciplinary methodological approach to the research. Next, three facets of the student-image are provided as they emerge from analyzing HE-LGBTQ+ student encounters with various in/formal social actors at the scale of

the neighborhood home: the student-client, the promiscuous non-adult, and the ascetic. This is illustrated through "spatial stories" (de Certeau, 1984) of disbelonging accentuating the voices of 13 HE-LGBTQ+ at TISS University. These spatial stories, respectively, follow the three stages of (a) securing a home, or more colloquially known among students as "house-hunting"; (b) making a home; and (c) leaving home. Often contingent of cis-heteronormative actors, HE-LGBTQ+ students must navigate a homonegative labyrinth of representational distortions intensified by the two mutually feeding phenomena I mentioned before—"studentphobia" and "cis-heteronormative familification"—which work together to "restore" residential landscapes to a homogenized "spatial purity and temporal order...and its carefully organized family activities" (Bain et al., 2018, p. 11). Finally, the article concludes by considering how sub/urban planning in a context where the unaffordable housing market gets routinely compounded with "studentphobia" and "cis-heteronormative familification" might enable a sense of belonging for HE-LGBTQ+ students in India.

## 2. Queering the Student-Image Within the Urban Scholarship on Studentification

In the last two decades, a strand of urban geographical literature emerged—predominantly in the wealthy Anglo-American-Australian context—that attends to the rapidly changing university-city relationship, also referred to as the town-and-gown relationship. The scholarly focus on the changing town-and-gown relationship is committed to studying the historical "social rift" (Croog, 2016) and "inherent tensions" (Addie et al., 2015) between university students and the local neighborhood residents. "Studentification," "youthification," and "gentrification" have gained currency as concomitant concepts embedded in the contested territorialization of the town-and-gown relationship. Some scholars have attended to students' perceptions (Yu et al., 2018) within the binary relationship of university and the city, and rarely taken a non-dualistic approach by studying the "campus edge" (Croog, 2016).

Ehlenz (2019, p. 286) notes that often the urban scholarship on HE institutions is "one-sided, representing the university's perspective" to the neglect of non-student neighborhood residents. In contrast, the studentification scholarship has attended to the community side of the town-and-gown relationship, however, like the geographies of HE scholarship, it too neglects sexual and gender non-normative university student experiences. Both works of literature also reaffirm the dichotomous nature of the university-city boundary. Scholarly research employing the studentification concept often negatively portrays a homogenized student-image as the new young and transient "apprentice gentrifier" (Hubbard, 2012) at once responsible for neighborhood decline and change, social segregation,

and the displacement of longer-term residents (e.g., Haghighi, 2018; Kinton et al., 2018; Lager & van Hoven, 2019; Revington, 2021; Revington et al., 2020; Smith & Holt, 2007; Smith & Hubbard, 2014). Rapidly globalizing studentification, gentrification, and town-and-gown works of literature that pay critical attention to socio-spatial inequality and injustice in and around academic campuses across intersecting axes of class, race, age, and more rarely even gender (though trans-negative)—but not sexuality. There has been a normative absence of a queer framework for studying the town-and-gown relationship wherein the city, neighborhood residents, and university students are all as if de-sexualized. Although more recently, Revington (2021) has focused on different “lifestyles” among single students, post-student couples, and non-student families, it should be noted that LGBTQ+ identities are not “lifestyles,” and that sexuality is central to defining “a home outside of heteronormative coupledom” (Wilkinson, 2014).

Central to the town-and-gown, studentification, and gentrification scholarship is, unarguably, the question of belonging. The homogenized student-image, representative of students’ bodily behaviors and spatial occupations, is routinely perceived in not-in-my-backyard terms by long-term residents as that which does not belong in “their” neighborhood. Yet, to the dismay of residents, the transient outsider student body seems to have been gaining the power to displace them symbolically and materially from their original place of belonging. The concern of “territoriality,” whether in the context of changing university-city relationship or in the formation of student ghettos and exclusive student enclaves, is inherently connected to the geographies of belonging.

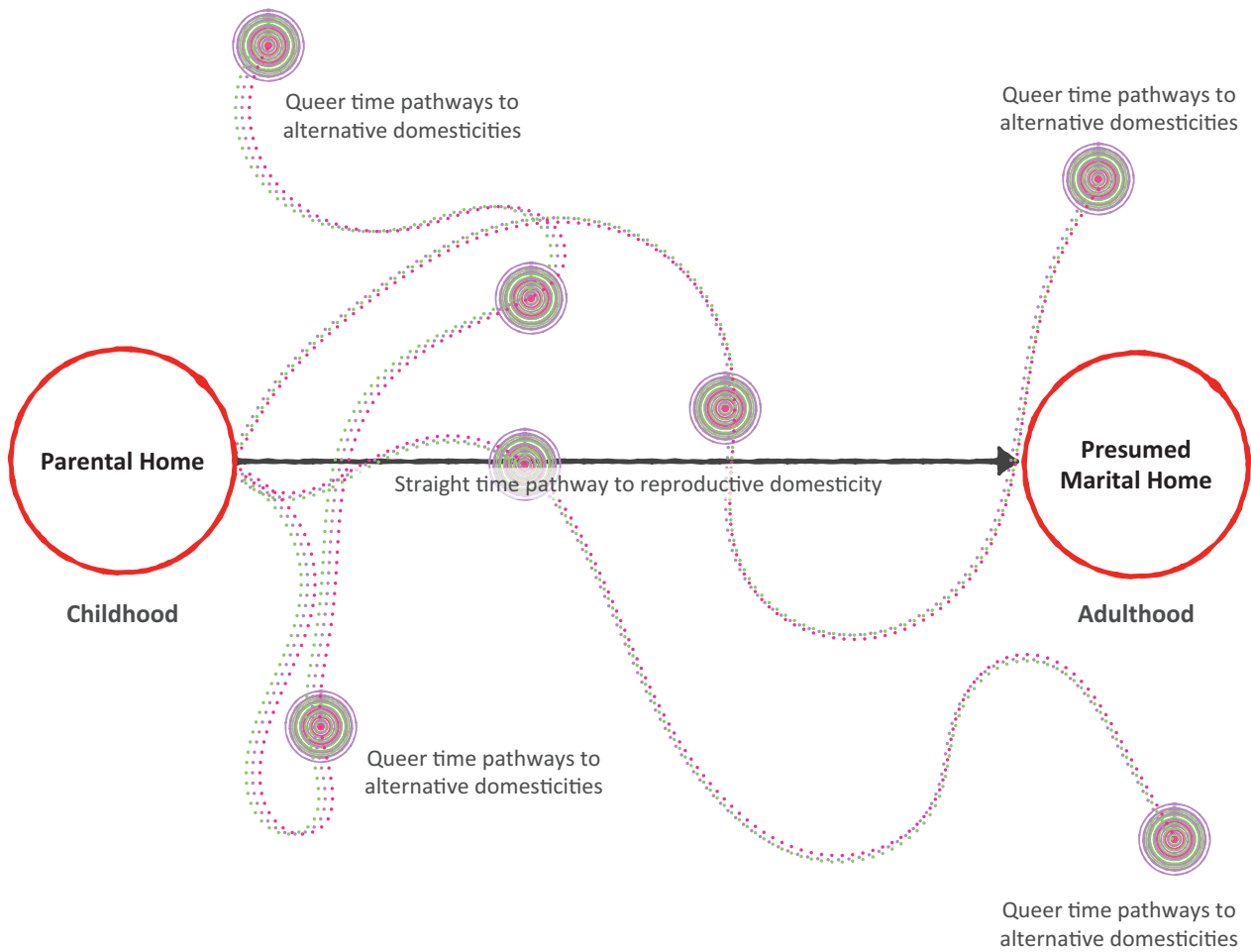
In the 2009 themed issue of *Environment and Planning A* titled “Geographies of Belonging” (Mee & Wright, 2009), the editors highlight two key strands of scholarship in which belonging has emerged as a core concept: geographies of home and geographies of citizenship. Located between the spatial scales of the home and the nation, neighborhoods function as “sub-national territorial spaces” (Cameron, 2006, as cited in Mee, 2009, p. 843) that possess many resources for intensifying “chrononormative” (Freeman, 2010) performances of “domestic” belonging. Therefore, transient students may experience a temporary sense of disbelonging away from their parental home and presumably on their way to marital home (representative of a spatiotemporal conflation with adulthood). But not all students will marry, nor—even if desired—can marry. In the national context of India which is yet to legalize same-sex relationships, LGBTQ+ students live with an acute and perpetual sense of socio-spatial disbelonging across the spatial scales (national, neighborhood, and home) where they are routinely infantilized for “belonging outside” (Probyn, 1996) the marital domesticity. Away from home and their respective parental family units, “free-floating” university students are, due to their transient nature, governed by local communi-

ties firmly grounded in cis-heteronormative family values. Landowners and neighborhood residents as key community stakeholders in the provision of local student accommodation assume authority as the moral gatekeepers of students’ bodily and spatial relations and occupations outside of a heteronormative marital home. Elsewhere, I discuss how “reproductive heteronormativity also informs advertising slogans” such as “home away from home” (Podmore et al., 2022, p. 303) by uncritically “attaching a sense of home [as] a positive value in itself” (Boccagni & Miranda Nieto, 2022, p. 2) to student housing (Figure 1). To ensure that all students stay on the “straight time” pathway, not only the student-image but also transient homes that students occupy during their education witness “representational distortion.”

This irremissible proximation of the spatiality and the spatial conduct of “floating homes” (Arun-Pina, 2021) with a heteronormative marital home as a datum, results in continued experiences of spatial dysphoria for HE-LGBTQ+ students. Marital homes, conflated with adulthood, are not an option for LGBTQ+ students in India, even for those who might desire them. Thus, representational distortion has implications for symbolic as well as material disbelonging for HE-LGBTQ+ students in India. This article now turns to the national-urban-institutional context of the analysis.

### 3. Research Context and Approach

The aspirational global-nationalist dimensions of contemporary India produce a peculiar brand of neoliberal urbanism that works to fundamentally define who and what belongs to “real India” (Banerjea, 2015; Shah, 2015). Such a rebranding of the image is not limited to “an ideal city” alone, but also translates onto the image of “an ideal citizen.” In the case of HE-LGBT+ students, what has emerged is an extremist student-image in its duality—“the anti-national terrorist” or “the future global citizen-leader”—as an empty signifier. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aspires to a global expansion of a knowledge-based economy casting the ideal student-image as “a truly global citizen” (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, p. 6). Such aspirations are also reflected institutionally in the university’s vision statement of “moulding responsible and socially conscious citizens and citizen-leaders” (TISS, 2018, p. v). Concomitantly, there has been a hike in the mass criminalization of faculty members, student leaders, and student activists for participating in virtual and/or physical peaceful protests under the anti-terror Unlawful Activities Prevention Act law, tagging them as “anti-national terrorists” (“Those booked by police under draconian laws,” 2020). Students have massively protested NEP 2020 citing, among other things, privatization and centralization of education. Utilizing Twitter hashtags such as #rejectNEP2020 and #NEPQuitIndia (PinjraTod, 2021), student groups were committed to a both virtual and physical presence beyond classrooms



**Figure 1.** “Home away from home.”

to extend “an act of pedagogy” (Flock, 2021, p. 532) to wider non-academic communities. Despite embodying the primary objective of NEP 2020 of producing “truly global citizen[s]” through these activities, several students were arrested for protesting in both virtual and physical public spaces. A new student-image emerged—that of an anti-national terrorist. Following the charge sheet filed against 50+ persons, mostly students during the Queer Azadi March, the campus became a panic ground for students (Hafeez & Jain, 2020). In the wake of ongoing government violence on university campuses in India, where student-leaders are forcibly evicted, found committing suicide, and have gone missing from their hostel rooms in university housing, students have realized a need for autonomy in student housing. However, for LGBTQ+ students, living off-campus presents its own set of challenges for navigating the homonegative labyrinth. As one Mumbai-based urbanist, urban manager, and academic argued: “The traditional idea of housing lies embedded in community and neighbourhood; but students are running away from them because of the constant surveillance and gaze, being perceived by them as ‘an alien,’ and being denied privacy” (PS, interview, September 7, 2022). Elsewhere, I provide an in-depth discussion on how privacy is exclusively validated for mar-

ried couples through National Census constitution of a “congested household” in India (Arun-Pina, 2021).

### 3.1. Deonar Campus, TISS University, Mumbai

TISS was established in 1936 in Bombay, India (then under colonial rule). Offering one of the first professional education and training programs in social work, post-independence the university moved the campus to its current location to Deonar, Chembur in 1954, aiming to integrate work with the community. Chembur, a north-eastern suburb of Mumbai, is known as the gateway to Navi Mumbai, a planned city and an active business hub that is part of the extended Mumbai Metropolitan Region (Figure 2). The Deonar campus district reflects the city’s deep socio-economic inequality, surrounded by various gated bungalow societies for families of the government service sector (such as Teachers’ Colony) and industrial workers (BSNL telecom factory), Bollywood celebrities’ farmhouse bungalows, as well as high-density living in slums and chawls.

Between both its old and new campuses, TISS has six gender-bifurcated hostels and one gender-neutral hostel (GNH) wing housed within the PhD women’s hostel. Hostel rooms may be double-, triple-, or multi-seater





**Figure 2.** Contextualizing Deonar Campus, TISS. Map of Deonar Campus district, TISS (top left); Regional Plan for Mumbai Metropolitan Region (top right); axonometric drawing of Deonar Campus, TISS, by the author (bottom). Sources: Google Maps, annotated by the author (top left); Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority (2021; top right).

rooms. With an ongoing shortage of hostel capacity, TISS is currently able to house only one-fourth of its total number of students. As a result, the university has additionally rented two buildings as “add-on off-campus hostels” for “men” students. However, students easily pay double the annual rent for off-campus living. Despite little financial mobility, senior doctoral candidates responsibly move out to make room for their junior colleagues who cannot afford to live off-campus.

### 3.2. *Trans-Methodological Approach*

I first met and interviewed some student-members of the student-led Queer Collective at TISS University in 2017 when I was an in-resident research assistant for the education and housing-focused teams for An Exploratory Study of Discriminations Based on Non-Normative Genders and Sexualities project housed at TISS University. Three years later, as part of my doc-

toral research project (forthcoming), 13 HE-LGBTQ+ student participants were recruited through the trusted queer network of the Queer Collective. All student participants were enrolled in the graduate program at TISS at some point between 2010–2020 and had lived for anywhere between one and ten years in different on- and off-campus living arrangements. The dissertation focuses on the decadal period of 2010–2020 when India witnessed rapid socio-legal mobility in queer politics, student politics, and protests, expansion of HE and knowledge hubs, as well as the introduction of national education and urban housing policies. All students variously self-identify as queer and trans/gender non-conforming individuals from a diverse mix of class, caste, religion, regional, and ethnic identity backgrounds. Between November 2020 to April 2021, three-hour long, in-depth semi-structured interviews split into two to three sessions with each student-participant were conducted virtually via Zoom due to Covid-19 related travel

restrictions. Semi-structured interviews had thematically guided prompts for student participants to share their “spatial stories” on the changing university-city relationship, student life, and housing biography. For this article, I primarily focus on the second theme (what does it mean for them to be a student), and the third (their off-campus housing biography). While HE-LGBTQ+ students’ voices are accentuated in this research, the voices of urban stakeholders such as housing brokers, and landowners, as well as urban professionals such as urban planners are also taken into consideration.

An anthropologist and architect, Stender (2017) advocates for collaborative research approaches that transgress disciplinary boundaries. Although I take on this research work “solo,” in effect it is a trans-disciplinary collaboration within myself being professionally trained as an architect, a visual artist, and a geographer. My multiple trans-location—disciplinary and gendered—critically informs the approach of this article invested in reworking normative disciplinary boundaries by putting “pictures, diagrams, and other graphic materials [in communication with] the text” (Stender, 2017, pp. 34–35). I first draft architectural technical drawings of the case study site in AutoCAD 2020 which is then digitally overlaid with graphical narratives of students’ spatial stories. Simultaneously, transcripts were coded and thematically analyzed using qualitative data analysis software NVivo 11. In addition to the pre-identified themes from analytical diagrammatic drawing as part of the fieldnote-taking practice, new themes emerged from open coding during analysis primarily foregrounding the accepted, the contested, and the persecuted student-image.

Distilled from these three themes are three facets of a student-image as they emerge from LGBTQ+ students’ encounters with various in/formal social actors at the scale of the neighborhood home: the student-client, the promiscuous non-adult, and the ascetic. What implications do these representational typologies have on LGBTQ+ students’ access to and experiences of housing? Often contingent of cis-heteronormative actors, HE-LGBTQ+ students must navigate a homonegative labyrinth of representational distortions intensified by two mutually feeding phenomena—“studentphobia” and “cis-heteronormative familification”—which work together to “restore” residential landscapes to a homogenized “spatial purity and temporal order...and its carefully organized family activities” (Bain et al., 2018, p. 11). Having established the context and methodologies, the article now turns to the empirical section.

#### **4. Three Facets of the Student-Image: In/Formal Social Encounters**

##### *4.1. Student-Client: Securing Home*

When asked how they found a place to stay when they first arrived in the city, most students responded that

they relied on the vetted list of housing brokers, landowners, paying guest owners, and other students looking for flatmates that were posted on the university website. Some of these vetted brokers would also set up a desk on campus to better reach out to student-clients. After securing an initial landing place in the city, students would connect with other LGBTQ+ peers whose had first-hand experience with brokers, landowners, and the neighborhood they could rely on. Often students stayed in the same homes their LGBTQ+ peers had lived in and had pre-established a rapport with landowners and neighbors to avoid navigating unpleasant and distressing, if not outright threatening experiences of house-hunting. Housing-hunting as a non-cis-heteronormative student—whether solo, with a friend, or a partner—routinely involves confronting cis-hetero-gazing, layered screening, and profiling of students’ bodies and behaviors, patronizing and discrediting students’ sense of *adulthood* outside the chrononormative straight time pathway (Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2005; Jaffe, 2018), discrimination, and refusal of housing, prohibiting visitors and their sense of building a community. In a sense then, outgoing LGBTQ+ students informally paved secure and trusted housing pathways for incoming LGBTQ+ students. In what follows, I attend to forms that one set of urban actors—housing brokers—function as the first steppingstone on the housing pathways of LGBTQ+ student-clients.

Housing brokers cater to the housing needs of their student-clients as well as the tenant preferences of their landowner clients. As mediators interested in their double brokerage for both their clients, their role as negotiators is (neo)liberally market-oriented. They have developed a keen sense for swiftly profiling their student-clients. They diligently foreground characteristics that present the student to the potential landowner as “responsible” and “docile,” while tactfully pushing the undesired aspects of their identity out of the landowners’ sight. While brokers are usually unbothered by students’ gender and sexual identification, the expression and embodiment of their gender and sexual identity are intricately scrutinized. This entire process is often very quick because the demand for real estate is high, supply is limited, and the market is hot.

The moral upper hand remains with landowners, for example, the client-with-the-property. Yet, with the inside knowledge of the real estate market and their network of tenant clients, housing brokers enjoy local power in establishing successful lease agreements. For LGBTQ+ students, the possibility of securing a home in neighborhoods where cis-heteronormativity is routinely compounded with the unaffordable housing market could appear bleak. They noted, however, that their housing needs were often better understood when the network of the housing broker had been gradually queered. I illustrate challenges to queering of housing networks through excerpts from LGBTQ+ students’ recollections of their house-hunting experiences in the residential neighborhoods proximal to the TISS Deonar campus.

PK, a queer woman and a former postgraduate student at TISS, could not stay on campus where hostels prohibited students from cooking in their rooms due to her dietary restrictions. She had no option but to rent an off-campus apartment, where she was the first student to live because the landowners preferred to rent only to families. Ultimately, according to PK, she was able to move in because the broker persuaded landowners to consider PK based on her upper-class/caste identity. Recollecting her experience of house-hunting, PK says:

My [upper class/caste] privilege has protected me. While I may have [been asked] personal questions on expressing my gender, it has never really affected my [securing] housing. Negotiations were always about the rent and [the prohibition on] getting boys in the house. (PK, interview, September 13, 2020)

In the context of deep social stratification, most landowners prefer, as far as possible, to lend their properties to tenants belonging to the same class, caste, region, and religion as them. For instance, so long as PK is a member of an upper-class/caste community, her landowners were unconcerned with her status as a single woman student with “queer” gender expression. They did however prefer to presume PK was straight by reinforcing cis-heteronormative rules in prohibiting entry to “boys in the house.” While talking to me, PK uncomfortably admits having never encountered difficulty or discrimination in securing housing. Arguably, however, what she experienced as an upper-caste queer woman may be understood as “heterosexism, invisibility, and double consciousness” (Lewin, 2018; Wallace, 2002). PK enjoys the caste privilege which then protects her queer selfhood. The oppressively normative network of the student housing market around her creates and intensifies the distance between the two selves of PKs—the self with privilege and the self that needs protection. The question then truly is, who secured the housing? Arguably, it is the upper caste PK who got housing whereas the queer PK got the benefit. PK, like many other LGBTQ+ students, does not experience a neat un/belonging in urban housing. Rather, she experiences a sense of distorted belonging, a form of spatial dysphoria.

AS, another queer woman student, recalls that while finding herself a studio apartment she was left feeling so exhausted by the “screening at so many levels” by brokers that she felt like altogether giving up on moving. She recalls:

[F]irst, you get screened whether you are married or not. Then, you are screened based on your gender. Brokers tell you that houses are either rented to only boys or girls which for my trans/genderqueer friends was insufferable screening of their bodies. Brokers kept telling me, “[S]ingle woman? *Bohot mushkil hai, nahi ho payega*” [it is impossible to find a place

for a single woman]. The few places that did match my needs were simply unaffordable. (AS, interview, November 15, 2020)

HE-LGBTQ+ students, especially when they do not pass as cis het, ubiquitously experience what AS described, a multi-layered screening by a cis gaze. Brokers and landowners perform extensive demographic profiling of potential tenants often by asking a line of questions—what Guru (2012) calls an “offensive archeology”—to determine their bodies and behaviors for moral acceptability often along the lines of caste and religion, but this also implies normative gender and sexuality. Most landowners consider single women as a liability and thus, prefer to rent to boys; for others, however, the house would presumably be unkempt by the bachelor lifestyle of men, and prefer women-tenants who are expected to bear homemaking and other domestic responsibilities (Bhargava & Chilana, 2020). In such residential landscapes meticulously coded in gender binary, trans/genderqueer students perpetually find themselves in a state of mental homelessness, if not also material.

Ultimately, AS could not afford to live on her own even in the smallest available studio apartment close to the campus. Instead, she decided to look for a bigger 1BHK apartment and a housemate to share it with. Sharing an intimate space of home can be tormenting if the housemate (or roommate) is trans/homophobic. Consequently, LGBTQ+ students uniquely face multiple roadblocks to securing housing which their cis-heteronormative peers and colleagues do not. AS was finally referred to a broker from her network who understood what she was looking for (see Figure 3). She further recollected experiencing a deeper sense of belonging in this home because for the first time ever, her landowner was a young single mother who was “very cooperative” unlike all her previous landlords “who were intimidating cis men always threatening to throw us out” (AS, interview, November 15, 2020).

What does this provisional and partial acknowledgement of their housing needs as student-clients mean for LGBTQ+ student-tenants? As the story will illustrate, mediators such as the university and housing brokers may, to an extent, initiate the housing pathway for student-clients. However, they soon disappear for student-tenants in their journeys to homemaking.

#### 4.2. *Promiscuous Non-Adult: Making Home*

Several HE-LGBTQ+ student-participants reflected on how uncomfortable they felt living in gated societies that were heavily surveilled and morally policed environments with particularly religion-, caste-, and class-based constructions of “respectability.” They recall experiencing of everyday socio-spatial disbelonging, either directly or vicariously through their friends and colleagues. As DL, a transmasculine doctoral candidate recalls, “this is not my story, but is still part of my story” (Figure 4).



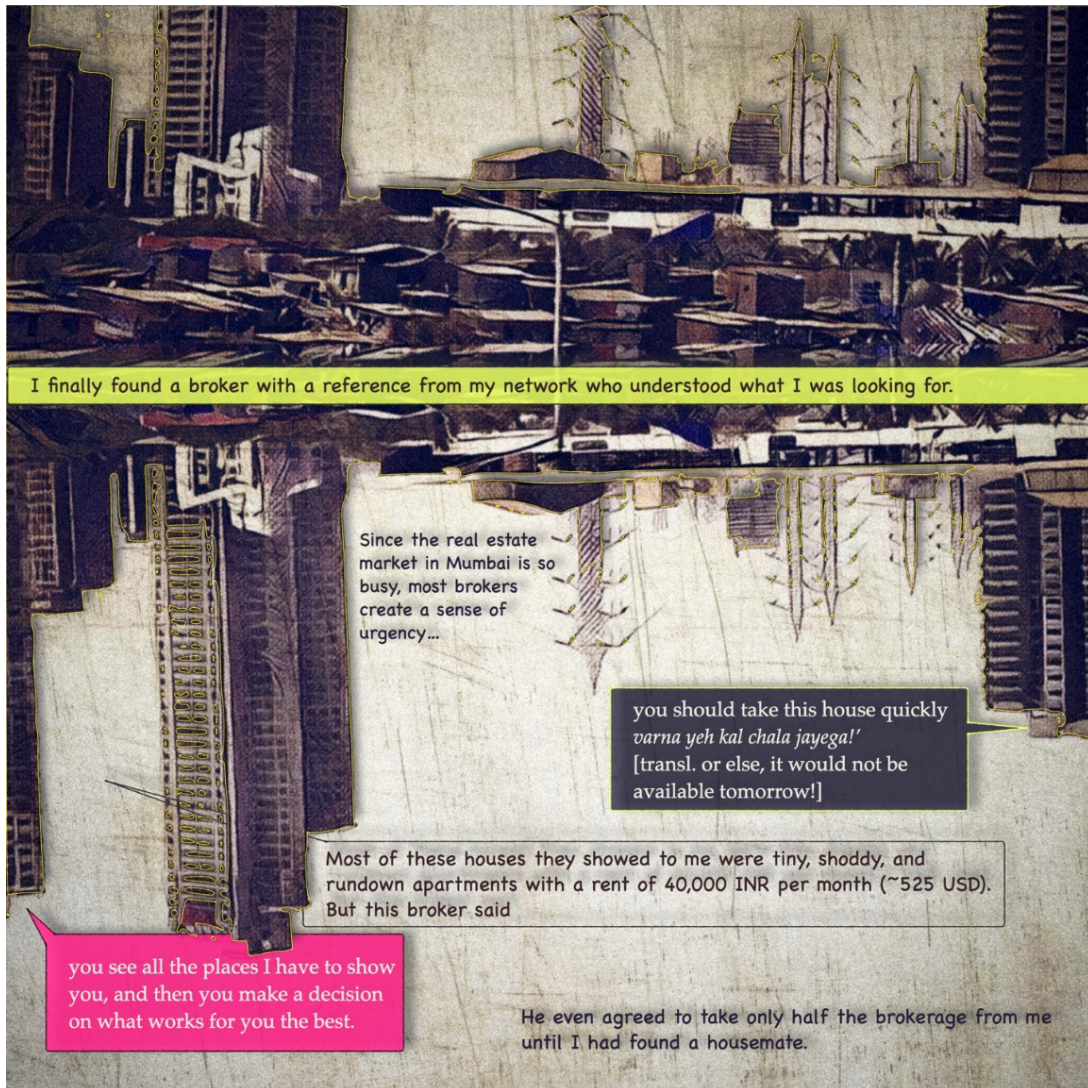
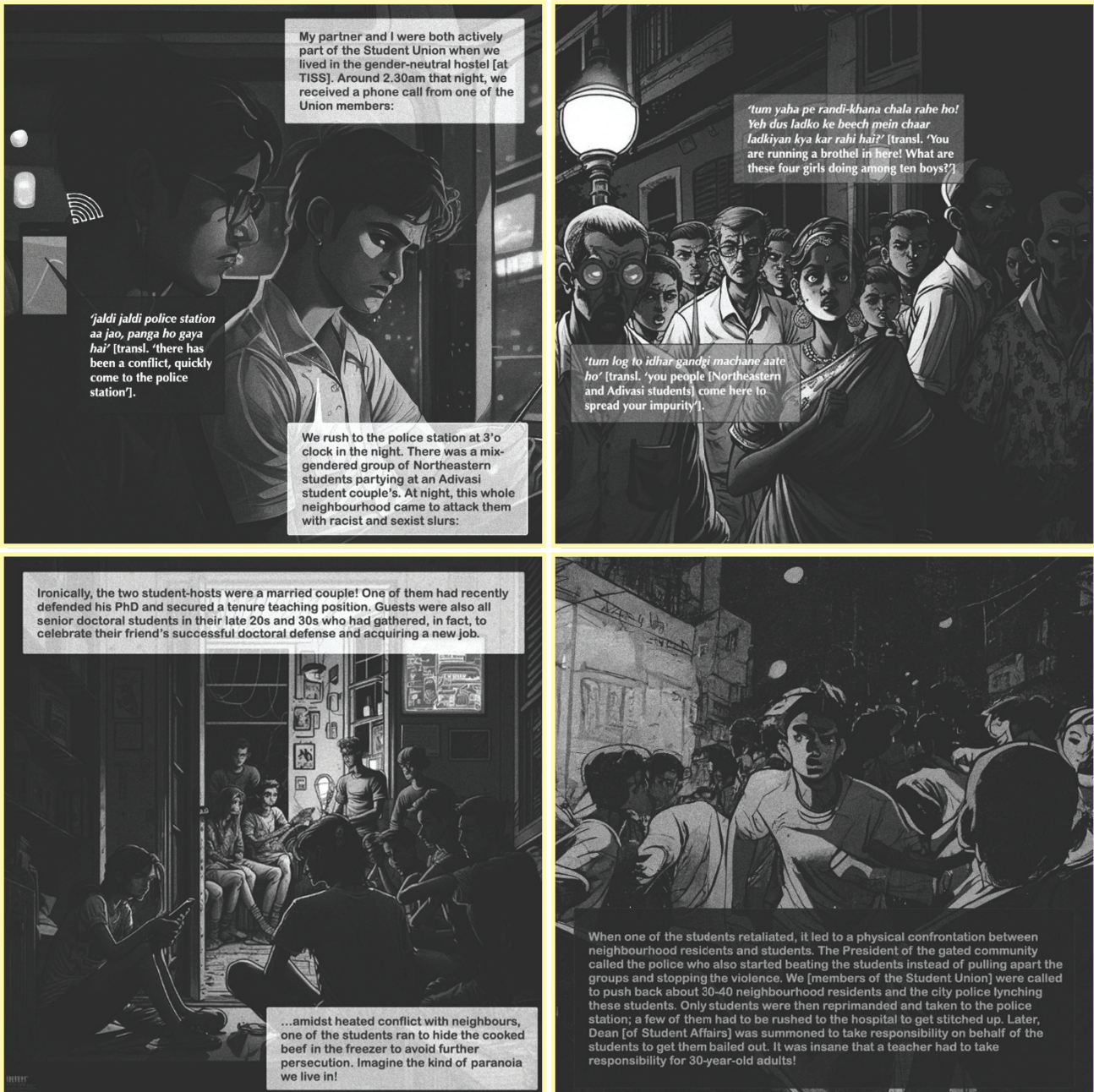


Figure 3. The “urgent” disaster that is the real estate market.

Ultimately, to avoid controversy and to secure his newly appointed position as a tenured professor, the hosts refused to register a formal complaint with either the institution or the police. A few days later, another similar incident of a mob fussing about “girls and boys partying together” was reported to the TISS Students’ Union. Since the GNH wing was the only place on campus where all gendered students could stay (Figure 5), students rescued from off-campus housing disputes were always temporarily accommodated in the GNH. Consequently, several queer, trans, and non-binary students recalled imposition of excessive surveillance and tighter housing rules in the GNH. It became “the first place to be attacked” by the administration, claimed one of the transfeminine residents. Informed by cis-heteronormative moral sensibilities of the hostel warden and security guards, these exclusive rules made their living environment in the GNH-wing “toxic, scary and repressive” contrary to the university’s proclamation of it being “liberating, progressive and novel” (AF, interview, December 16, 2020).

DL’s remark before recounting the above conflict as “still a part of my story” is critical to note here. It is neither possible nor the intention of this article to reinforce a neat division of the student body into LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students. The host couple and their guests in their encounter with the community residents get rendered as “queered subjects” (Arun-Pina, 2021; Oswin, 2010) which require “queer approaches that understand heteronormativity not as a universal policing of a heterosexual–homosexual binary, but as the geographically and historically specific coincidence of race, class, gender, nationality and sexual norms” (Oswin, 2010, p. 257). In the contemporary Indian context where marriage, family, and home get conflated with one another as morally inseparable concepts, studentphobia can be understood as a subset of queer/transphobia. Even as a heterosexual married student couple, socializing with a mix-gendered group of single students resulted in their persecution by neighborhood residents. For these long-term residents, marriage is not a one-time contract. It must be





**Figure 4.** *What's the beef?* Images courtesy of DL (interview, December 12, 2020); AI generated renderings with conceptual/visual prompts and layer-edits by the author.

ritualistically performed every day as a reassurance of heteronormativity. For the married student-couple to host a mix-gendered group of “unrelated” students was equivalent to “running a brothel” in their otherwise “respectable” society. Although no LGBTQ+ students were “directly” involved in this account, such reinforcements of the acceptable cis-heteronormative embodiments, relationships, and spatial occupations have a disproportionately adverse impact on LGBTQ+ students.

Further, post-students and early career scholars, despite gaining some financial stability, continue experiencing the same discredit and precarity they did as students. Here, gender and sexual identity are intricately

interwoven with class, caste, region, religion, and ethnic identity locations especially intensified at the scale of housing and home—a “purified” space that checks and gets rid of all the “filth.” This domesticated desirability for “purity” is at once rooted in casteism (also ethnophobia and racism), homogeneity over heterogeneity, and chastity over sexual freedom.

“It may be in your interests to deposit your impurities in us, but how can it be in our interests to remain repository of your dirt (moral)?,” asks Babasaheb Ambedkar (as cited in Guru, 2012, p. 200), a Dalit jurist and one of the key architects of the Constitution of India who first instituted the Dalit movement against untouchability in India.





liberation. This upper caste system of four life stages is comparable to what elsewhere Oswin (2012, p. 1625) has critically called the “‘straight time’ of progress, development, and reproduction...against a ‘queer time’ that is out of step, out of place, and, at best, productive rather than reproductive.”

In contemporary cis-heteronormative practice, while the last two stages of the Vedic Āśrama system are never taken on, the first two stages remain as staunch datum responsible for the continued conflation of reproductive marriage with family-home. It thus also conflates the bachelor life with celibacy and sexually active life with reproduction within marriage. This Āśrama system continues to manifest itself in the configuration and the administration of both domestic spaces of family housing as well as student housing (read non-family homes).

In my conversation with LT, a local queer woman, and a former day scholar who lived at her parents’ home, she said to me:

In the grand scheme of my family wanting me to get married, and *start my life*, I was often able to push back by asking to let me first complete my studies. I knew I just had to keep being a student [to postpone the familial pressure to marry]. However, for my extended family it was still a matter of shame for a 21-year-old woman to be unmarried. They persuaded themselves by putting me on an *ascetic...asexual...celibate-like pathway living in a different world*. In a way, being a student has been a shield for me. Even if it is not naming and “coming out” as such, it was for me, resisting these normative expectations. (LT, interview, August 18, 2020, emphasis added)

LT’s experience with her family is not unique. For her distant relatives, her choosing to not marry at the “right age” (or at all) was equivalent to being on an “ascetic, asexual, celibate-like pathway”—“the student pathway.” Wilkinson (2014) posits “the single” as the queer subject; here, the opposite also holds true where the queer student must be single. Conflating marriage with having sex works to “domesticate sex” (Hubbard, 2012) and “distort” the student image as promiscuous non-adults if they are openly sexually active but not married. Close family members become well-intentioned intimate policers of cis-heteronormativity. LT, like many other queer/trans students, found student-hood “as a shield” to defend herself against “normative expectations” at the cost of being pushed to “living in a different world.” LGBTQ+ students are also forced to experience a double spatiality—spatial dysphoria—where queer inclusion effectively diminishes our queer worlds, subsuming them/us within what is made to seem a straight universe.

HE-LGBTQ+ students in Mumbai variously confront crisis in housing across all three stages of securing a home, making a home, and leaving home. Their “specific vulnerabilities” (Gorman-Murray et al., 2014) are deeply intersectional, i.e., their gender and sexuality identities

are not neatly separable from their class, caste, region, religion, and ethnic identities. Yet, cis-heteronormative gaze and micro-governance of queer students’ embodiments and spatialities manifest in relatively implicit ways, especially intensified at the intimate scale of neighborhood and home. Through transdisciplinary storytelling, this article works to counter the homonegative labyrinth of representational distortions of the student-image in postcolonial India.

## 5. Conclusions

My intention with this article and by referring to the ancient Vedic text is not to reinforce the stereotypical binary perception of a regressive Global South and a progressive Global North. Instead, I provide here a radical queer and trans spatial reading as an ongoing praxis. The “objective goal” is not of a binary resolve: “LGBTQ+ inclusive” or for that matter, “exclusively LGBTQ+” housing. Rather, it is to recognize and be committed to dismantling the socio-spatial normative traps as an ongoing project of reworking. Here, queer and trans space is an approach, not a location or an (un)achievable end goal. Thus, this article works to formulate and emphasize attending to spatial dysphoria and not simply homelessness or eviction; spatial dysphoria will and did, for instance, continue for HE-LGBTQ+ students even inside the GNH for so long it is configured and administered with—however “modern” and “progressive”—cis-heteronormative moral sensibilities.

This article has worked to queer the student-image within interdisciplinary studentification, gentrification, and town-and-gown works of literature to reveal three common observations: first, persistent dichotomous approaches to studying the university-city territory; second, a negative homogenized depiction of a student-body that is often conflated with power and privileges of the university; and third, an underlying treatment of students and neighborhood residents as if they are de-sexualized. In examining the role of various urban stakeholders in “distorting” the student-image, the article has argued that they work in tandem in producing two mutually feeding phenomena—“studentphobia” and “cis-heteronormative familification”—which in turn effectuate a multiscale homonegative labyrinth for HE-LGBTQ+ students to navigate on their housing pathways.

This study revealed that the student-image is particularly susceptible to distortion when students are perceived as “free-floating” transient subjects between their parental home and presumed marital home. Parallel representational distortion of the student-image and non-normative homes by cis-heteronormative urban actors from their fixed location on a “straight time” pathway results in a perpetual sense of spatial dysphoria for HE-LGBTQ+ students in the Deonar campus district in Mumbai. How might urban planning, in a sub/urban context where the unaffordable housing



market gets routinely compounded with “studentphobia” and “cis-heteronormative familification,” enable a sense of belonging for HE-LGBTQ+ students in India?

Various queer urban scholars noting “barriers that prevent the integration of queer concerns” (Broto, 2021, p. 310) in planning have challenged heteronormativity (Broto, 2021; Doan, 2011; Vallerand, 2020). Architect, spatial pedagogue, and community activist Olivier Vallerand (2020, p. 194) critically observes:

The idea of queerness has yet to fully transform the way we practice, teach or even experience spatial design. If queering design means multiplying possible experiences, queering design pedagogy in turn could mean multiplying points of views and resisting design norms.

Doan (2011, p. 11) points out how “planning lags behind other related disciplines” and sub-disciplines and is “mostly silent on queer issues.” Sandercock (2003) has called attention to the important role of stories and storytelling in the practice of planning for difference. Even as I find resonance with this call, and have myself employed spatial stories in this article, storytelling in planning practice might be overdue if the pedagogy of spatial design remains cis-heteronormative. To challenge this orientation, planning (planners?) should attentively consider questions that have emerged in other spatial disciplines: “Who speaks? And who listens?” (Listerborn, 2007); and “Where are the lesbian architects?” (Vallerand, 2019). Many queer/trans students of spatial studies, like myself, get pushed out of the discipline to follow the questions that we want to ask of space, gender, and sexuality, but are not allowed to pursue from within the discipline. Socio-spatially fragmented and alienated themselves, LGBTQ+ university students often have nobody in their “familiar” spatiotemporal context to witness their “everyday stories of queer experiences” (The Glass Closet, 2017), except, rarely, their own semi-formal LGBTQ+ support network of friends and teachers “beyond ‘the family’” (Wilkinson, 2014). In taking inspiration from Listerborn’s (2007) reorienting the representational question of “who speaks?” to “who listens,” this article calls for extending the emerging planning advocacy for stories and storytelling to storylistening as a queer-sensitive planning practice. While listening may seem passive to practice-based and problem-solving disciplines, active listening is a call to urban practitioners for being receptive in taking lessons from HE-LGBTQ+ students’ spatial stories towards queer and trans approaches to home that undo the cis-heteronormative conflation of reproductive marital coupledness and family, adulthood, and (the permanence of) home.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

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