“Who is more intersectional than me?”

An ethnography of the social locations of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, Belgium

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Abstract

In this thesis, I apply an intersectional approach to the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels. I pay attention to the multiple interlocking axes of racialisation and sexualisation that intervene in shaping processes of identification for LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, the oppression they encounter, and the sites of potential disruption of binarised norms that they inhabit. I present an analysis of ethnographic data collected in Brussels between August 2017 and August 2018. Methods of data collection included participant observation in spaces connected to the LGBTQ Muslim scene of the city, 30 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels, and a weekend of participatory theatre activities with nine LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. The research was conducted in collaboration with Merhaba, an organisation working with and for LGBTQ people from a migratory background in Belgium. This thesis illuminates the specific social location occupied by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, beyond mainstream discourses that heavily rely on tropes of civilisational clash between the West and the Arab/Muslim East on lines of attitudes towards sexual diversity and gender equality. I argue that such an illumination not only allows for a better understanding of the lived experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, but it also produces a radical disruption of essentialising discourses of difference, and their materialisations at the scale of the city. By focussing on the experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, and the disruption that their social locations entail, this thesis contributes to postcolonial approaches to the study of sexualities, to conceptualisations of intersectionality and its applications in the European context, and to the study of geographies of sexualities and geographies of race and ethnicity.

Dedication

To Marti. Still missing you.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

In November 2015, news about Salah Abdeslam's familiarity with some of the bars on Brussels' gay street started circulating in Belgian and international media (Drake and Warburton, 2015; Mortimer, 2016). Abdeslam was the only fugitive still alive among the people who planned and conducted the terror attacks on Paris in that same month. The cell was based in the Brussels municipality of Molenbeek, and it is the same that less than one year later would carry out the attacks in the Belgian capital (BBC, 2016b). The news of Abdeslam's frequentation of the gay street was presented as an odd element. What was the reason for his venturing outside of Molenbeek, the area that has become the "Muslim ghetto" (Schram and Fredericks, 2016) par excellence in Belgian imagination? And what would an "ISIS fighter" be doing in the gay scene? Various hypotheses were offered by the media. He might have been planning for an attack in the area, or he might have been trying to steal patrons' IDs (Drake and Warburton, 2015). The owners of one of the bars reportedly said that they were convinced he was a sex worker looking for potential clients (Williams, 2015). The possibility of his "gayness" was never seriously contemplated, as too impossible a feature to be attached to an Islamic terrorist. When reporting on the news, The Independent (2016) asks, in the title of its article, "Who is the 'gay' Isis fighter who fled the Paris attacks?", where the inverted commas inevitably distance the possibility of him being found in the gay bars for the most intuitive of reasons.

In the first days of 2016, media around Europe reported the news of around 90 complaints brought to the Cologne police department, in Germany, by women who were sexually assaulted while celebrating New Year's Eve in the city (BBC, 2016a; Deutsche Welle, 2016). Authorities soon released a report stating that most alleged attackers were from migratory backgrounds, and specifically of North-African and Arab ethnicity. The report directly linked the events of the night to the sexual assaults against women that had taken place in Cairo's Tahrir Square during demonstrations against the Egyptian government. It referenced "*taharrush gamea*", an Arabic expression indicating group sexual harassment in a crowd located in a public place, to draw this link (BBC, 2016a). Both mainstream media and the authorities thus framed a connection between the ethnicity of the perpetrators, their "cultural" practices, and the events of the night. This resulted in a spike of racist and Islamophobic attacks in the following months (Fitzpatrick, 2016), as the event worked as a catalyst for the emergence of racist discourses and behaviours in Germany (Boulila and Carri, 2017).

In March 2019, a primary school in Birmingham, England, temporarily stopped its program "No Outsiders" as a result of demonstrations carried out by pupils' parents against it. The contestation was over a series of lessons aimed at contrasting homo/bi/transphobia among pupils, and the majority of the parents who took part in the demonstrations were Muslim (Parveen, 2019). The tension over the program was framed as one where Islam played a central role, which resulted in a nation-wide debate over differences in values across religious/cultural groups and the State's responsibilities in offering an inclusive public education. Allegations on the infiltration of radical Islamist groups among the demonstrators contributed to the linking of the events in Birmingham to wider discourses on the failed integration of Muslim communities, the insurmountable cultural differences between Englishness and Islam, and the threat of international Islamist terrorism (Powys Maurice, 2019a; Powys Maurice, 2019b).

The news presented above point to the existence of direct links between sexual diversity and gender equality and constructions of the Muslim Other in contemporary European discourses. The framing of civilisational difference between the West and the Muslim East is often accompanied by the reiteration of images and tropes on different attitudes towards sexualities and gender that are attached to the two fields (Razack, 2004; Ticktin, 2008; Fassin, 2010; Bracke, 2011; Bracke, 2012). This discursive terrain is the one where this research project was thought of, planned, and conducted. The timing of the three events shows how this debate has been relevant in all phases of this project. The assaults in Cologne, and the attacks in Paris and Brussels, took place before the beginning of my doctoral studies, while I was writing the first draft of this project as part of my application. The debates over LGBTQ education in England unfolded during the phase of data analysis and the writing of this thesis. The discourses traced in these news items are the ones that informed my choice to focus on the intersections of sexualities and racialised Islam in Europe in the first place, and are the ones that I aim to deconstruct in this work through an illumination of the specific intersectional social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background.

As noted by El-Tayeb (2012) and Rahman (2010), while these discourses widely circulate in a continuous cycle of self-reinforcement, the voices of certain subjects are regularly left out of them. In this sense, the position of LGBTQ Muslim people is particularly interesting, as their lives and experiences are only incorporated in mainstream discourses when they confirm the existence and rigidity of essentialised imaginations of West/East difference. Similarly to what has been noted in relation to Muslim women's voices (Mahmood, 2004), these are allowed to participate in the production of discourses when they confirm an irreducible difference in

sexual attitudes between the West and the Muslim East. This work aims at illuminating the intersectional social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, highlighting the complexities and nuances that mark their lives, identifications, and narratives. This illumination, and a centring of the (counter)discourses that are constructed from it, has a radical potential for the disruption of the rigid civilisational binaries that undergird imaginations of difference in the West (Rahman, 2010).

This thesis radically centres the experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels, applying an intersectional framework to their experiences. The data presented and analysed here was collected during one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Brussels, where three distinct methods of data collection were employed. First, I conducted participant observation in spaces that were variously linked to racialised LGBTQ communities and groups in the city. Second, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. Third, I organised and conducted a weekend of participatory theatre activities with nine LGBTQ participants from a Muslim background. Merhaba, an organisation working with and for LGBTQ people from a migratory background in Belgium, was collaborative partner for this research.

1.1 Research questions

As stated in the previous section, the goal of this work is to illuminate the intersectional social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels. This highlighting of the complexities and nuances in their experiences and narratives works as a starting point for a radical disruption of binarised ways of thinking, narrating and imagining difference between the West and the Muslim East along sexualised and gendered lines (Rahman, 2010; Rahman, 2014a).

The research questions that guided this exploration are the following:

1. How do LGBTQ people from a Muslim background navigate different urban spaces in Brussels?
2. What are the features of the specific intersectional locations that they inhabit as LGBTQ people from a Muslim background?
    i) What are the features of the specific oppression that they experience as LGBTQ people from a Muslim background? In what ways do Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia intersect in their daily lives?

ii) What are the potentials for social change offered by the different intersectional locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels?

These questions have been used as a guideline for the collection and analysis of data. They have been developed and refined in consultation with Merhaba (my collaborative stakeholder organisation), and research participants at different stages of data collection. Rather than treating them as prescriptions that would strictly inform what kind of data was collected, I viewed them as flexible guidelines that would develop through a constant dialogue with participants' narratives and experiences.

With the first question, I intended to look closely at participants' movements through various spaces of the city, and identify the negotiations that they would make when navigating them. I initially thought that this question would mainly deal with participants' experiences of different material spaces of the city: neighbourhoods, LGBTQ venues, and spaces linked to their Muslim communities. During my fieldwork, I soon realised that, in addition to these material spaces, a more metaphorical spatialised binarisation between an "in" and "out" of the closet condition had a huge impact on the lives of participants. The focus of the question was thus enlarged in order to include and analyse the workings of these spaces in the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, and their navigations of them.

The second question refers more directly to participants' experiences and narratives of their intersecting identities, experiences of discrimination, and social relations. In this case too, the initial scope of the question was modified during data collection and analysis. Initially, the "intersection" in the question was mainly framed in terms of the oppression that participants experience as LGBTQ and from a Muslim background. An analysis of their experiences and narratives highlighted the multiple ways in which it does also work as a site where communities are built, counter discourses are constructed, and potentials for social change envisioned and enacted. An exploration of the potential for social change that emerges from the intersectional social locations of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels thus became a central focus of this work.

1.2 Personal, political, academic: the inextricable motivations behind these questions

For me, the research questions presented above certainly respond to a scholarly interest in further understanding how LGBTQ people from a Muslim background experience life and social relations, and what are the implications of such understanding in the interpretation and disruption of mainstream discourses of civilisational difference. As pointed out in feminist

espistemologic reflections (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991), any project of knowledge production entails elements that do not only pertain to the sphere of scholarly and academic interest, and any knowledge produced cannot be the result of an impartial and neutral look on the social world. The researcher is not an external, objective observer, whose scientifically neutral gaze impartially gathers data from the context under study. Their personal experience, political conviction, and more generally all those elements that intervene in creating their specific subjectivity, shape and inform all phases of their enquiry. The knowledge that results from the research process can therefore be nothing but the result of their specific "situatedness" (Haraway, 1988). My positionality, and its influence on the findings of this work, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. It is nonetheless important to outline here some of the personal and political motivations behind my interest in the topic of this research, as these are inextricably linked to my scholarly interest in the intersections of sexualities and racialised Islam.

I was born and raised in a mixed Moroccan-Italian family. My religious education during childhood and adolescence was heavily Islam-oriented in the household. While people do not always read me as having a Moroccan background in Italy, my surname has often worked as a marker of Arab/Muslim Otherness. When I came to terms with my sexuality, which I first framed as "gay" and then gradually moved towards "queer", I was confronted with a lack of representations around me of what it means to be a queer Arab/Muslim. I did not know of anyone who identified as LGBTQ and was from a Muslim background, nor was I exposed to any form of media representation of non-heterosexual sexualities in Muslim communities. I had a sense that my experience was different from that of my (mostly) white peers, but it was hard to communicate what were the differences, as I had a constant feeling of being at a loss for words. Later on, these feelings further developed as I got involved in LGBTQ and anti-racist activism in my city, Torino. The organisation in which I worked as an experiential learning facilitator was involved in both antiracist/Islamophobic educational paths, and antihomo/bi/transphobic ones, yet the two were mostly treated as separate social issues. While there was starting to be talk of intersectionality, this was mostly an abstract idea, rarely applied in our work. In this phase, I started feeling, with increasing urgency, a political desire to develop tools that would allow for a deeper understanding of intersectional identifications and oppression. For obvious reasons, that personal sense of confusion regarding the absence of LGBTQ Muslim/Arab experiences in the discourses that surrounded me got entangled with my political drive towards a deeper intersectional look at social injustice.

It is as a result of this decade-long process, both personal and political, that the idea for this project came to form. It is in interaction with these elements that my scholarly interest for the intersectional locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background unfolded in the development of this research.

1.3 Why Brussels?

Brussels was chosen as the research location for a number of reasons. Chapter 4 will contextualise the findings of this research in the city, and thus explain these in more details. Some of the motivations that moved me towards Brussels are linked to specific features of the city itself, while others are elements that facilitated my access to participants, thus allowing me to collect the data presented and analysed in this work.

Among the features that make Brussels a particularly relevant place for the study of LGBTQ Muslim experiences and narratives, three are of particular note. First, the city has a sizeable Muslim population, which resulted from various waves of immigration from the Middle East and North Africa in the last century (Bousetta and Martiniello, 2003; Torrekens, 2007; Martiniello and Rea, 2012). According to Manço and Kanmaz (2004), the city is one of the most Muslim cities in the West. Second, Belgium is generally considered a very progressive country in terms of its policies, and general attitudes, towards its LGBTQ population (Borghs and Eeckhout, 2010; Eeckhout, 2011; Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011). While this image has been problematised as too simplistic (Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011), it does nonetheless result in a public discourse that sees Belgium, and its capital city Brussels, as an LGBTQ heaven. In Brussels, LGBTQ movements, groups, and spaces are very visible in the urban landscape, and the scene is vibrant with activities and events (Huysentruyt *et al.*, 2015). Lastly, the political administration of the city makes it an interesting place for the observation and analysis of social relations between the different communities that share its spaces. The fact that Brussels is the only region in the country where the two biggest linguistic/national Belgian communities – the French-speaking and the Flemish – share power, has an impact on processes of integration and inclusion of the other communities that are present in its territory. This particular political and administrative landscape has strong influence on both the LGBTQ movement in the country (Eeckhout, 2011) and racialised communities from migratory backgrounds (Bousetta *et al.*, 2017). In addition to this, the absence of the image of a single nation in a context that is to be considered (at least) binational (Fitzmaurice, 1996) renders the study of topics pertaining to constructions of national difference particularly interesting.

In addition to these elements, Brussels is a place where my access to LGBTQ people from a Muslim background and their communities was facilitated by a series of factors. A first element is again to be found in the demographic outlook of the city. The biggest group making up the Muslim population of the city is of Moroccan descent. As a person who was raised in a half-Moroccan family myself, my understanding and ability to navigate the cultural references that circulate in the Muslim population of the city were much higher than they would have been in places with different demographic outlooks. Second, Brussels was a city in which I could more easily communicate with people, as I had previous knowledge of the French language. While French is not the only official language in the city, and it is far from being the only language needed to communicate with participants, it is anyway the most spoken (Treffers-Daller, 2002; Janssens, 2008)[1]. A combination of French, English, and a familiarity with Moroccan *darrija* worked to allow vast communication with a number of participants with different linguistic backgrounds. Third, previous professional collaboration with the organisation Merhaba allowed me to conduct this research in dialogue with a group of people who could share their knowledge and expertise on the city with me from the beginning of my fieldwork. More details on my collaboration with Merhaba, and its value for the conduct of this project, are given in Chapter 3.

1.4 Naming the group: "LGBTQ" and "from a Muslim background"

As it is explained in more detail in Chapter 2, the intersectional framework applied in this work is one that is in dialogue with post-structuralist views on identity categories and processes of identification (Anthias, 2002b; Ehrenreich, 2002). As such, the rejection of rigid essentialisations of individuals and groups around specific categories of identification is central. The choice of words to describe the group of participants was thus the result of a long process of reflection on the best way to convey a sense of flexibility and internal diversity in the group itself, without jeopardising the possibility to effectively communicate the findings of this research. The choice was made in the awareness that a reliance on a "necessary fiction" is unavoidable when speaking about minoritised groups that are imagined, defined, and oppressed as a result of identity categories being attached to them (Weeks, 1995). The choice of focusing on "LGBTQ people from a Muslim background" responds to these needs. Importantly, the expression is one that could generally be understood by participants, thus facilitating communication with them during the recruitment phase. In addition to this, it allows a certain margin of flexibility in the ways the two categories – LGBTQ and from a

[1] The limits of my language knowledge in the Belgian context, especially in relation to the Flemish language, are detailed in Chapter 3.

Muslim background – can be interpreted by participants. This resulted in the possibility to include experiences and narratives that differ greatly from one another, which gives a wider scope to the research presented here.

With regards to the choice of employment of the acronym LGBTQ, early on in the fieldwork I noted that it was widely recognised both among groups of non-heterosexual, non-cisgender people, and the general population. While the situation is far from being one where everyone recognises each letter for what it stands for, nor is able to explain what they mean beyond a more superficial knowledge, "LGBTQ" seems to commonly be read as marker of identifications that are located outside of the heterosexual and cisgender fields. I felt that LGBTQ would be the best expression to include in the research people that would not necessarily identify as gay, bisexual, lesbian, trans, or queer, but would nonetheless recognise themselves as being somehow part of the wider group that the initials connote. This was confirmed by the participation in this study of people who do not feel that the words gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender capture their complex identifications, but had no problem in being included in the wider group of "LGBTQ people". For some, the inclusion of the letter Q was fundamental, as the flexibility and fluidity it conveys mirrored their experiences of their own identification (Levy and Johnson, 2011). For others, the meaning of the word "queer" was not clear (Panfil, 2019), but they nonetheless interpreted the acronym as leaving wider margins of interpretation than single words indicating sexual orientation or gender identity. It is also important to note how some letters have been left out from the acronym. This is especially the case for the letter A, standing for "asexual", and I, "intersex". This was done not to diminish the identifications and experiences that these words connote, but because no participant identified as such during our conversations. While this is certainly a result of some limits of this study – e.g. the spaces where I conducted participant observation and recruitment, my own positionality, the inability to overcome structural power dynamics that might make it harder for people to come out as asexual or intersex to LGBTQ people – it felt important to not claim any kind of knowledge production on categories that have not been part of this study.

When it came to choose which expression to employ to indicate the relation between participants and Islam, I opted for a more generic "Muslim background". Had the expression chosen been "LGBTQ Muslims", some of the participants that ended up being interviewed for this study would have been excluded from it. First, it is quite hard to (self-)assess one's level of "Muslimness", as with the degree of proximity or affiliation to any faith or religion. The word "Muslim" implies the existence of a clear-cut binary between being and not being

Muslim. It also implies the existence of one specific way of being Muslim, which participants did not always imagine as corresponding as and being descriptive of their ways of relating to Islam. Many of the participants interviewed did not identify as Muslim, or were not sure whether they did. On the other hand, all of them were adamant on the important role that Islam played during their upbringing, and in most cases their adult lives, and felt some form of attachment to it. I acknowledge that some scholars, including Rahman (2014a), whose work is central to this research, utilise the word "Muslim" as an indicator of cultural identification, rather than as marker of religious faith. Nonetheless, as my theoretical framing of racialised differentiation in the European context is highly critical of an over-reliance on images of "cultural difference" (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Lentin and Titley, 2012), I preferred to avoid such conflation in the expressions I employed.

A last specification is needed with regards to my choice of words in referring to the movements, communities, and spaces created by and for non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-cisgender people in Brussels. I use two expressions, and I use them interchangeably. The first is "racialised queer". This is the literal translation of "queer racisé.e" the most common way to refer to such groups and spaces among the French-speakers who have access to them. The choice to refer to people of colour and their spaces as "racialised" is motivated by the need to highlight those processes by which different groups are constructed as "having a race". In addition to this, it was important to refuse a language that presupposes some form of ontological features to the concept of "race" itself, independent of the discourses that produce it (Barot and Bird, 2001; Wolfe, 2002; Bonnett and Nayak, 2003; Murj and Solomos, 2005; Nayak, 2005). As this reflection is in line with the theoretical foundations of this study, outlined in Chapter 2, the use of the expression "racialised queer" fits perfectly in this thesis. In addition to this, I employed the phrase "queer of colour" to refer to these same spaces, groups, and communities. The phrase is also widely used in Brussels, and it denotes another important element of the production of counter-discourses in the city: the incorporation of words that circulate in transnational Anglophone queer and anti-racist networks and their counter-discourses (Bacchetta and Haritaworn, 2011; Bacchetta *et al.*, 2015).

1.5 Doing intersectional research

As genealogies of intersectionality show, the concept itself originated in the interstitial spaces between different disciplines, movements, and schools of thought. Intersectional thinking and action are in dialogue and contrast with feminist and anti-racist movements alike, as they are with critical race theory and feminist scholarship (Collins and Bilge, 2016). As it originally

focused on the absence of racial thinking in feminist theory and praxis, and the erasure of the category of gender from the study of race and ethnicities and the fight against racism, it created a metaphorical space that would potentially disrupt both fields in showing their gaps, lacks, and internal oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). Any intersectional project is thus necessarily located in-between different perspectives, as the aim is to offer a new and more complex view on social issues and relations, rejecting unidirectional analyses that privilege one or the other category. This project aims at making a contribution to the field of geographies of sexualities, as well as those of race and ethnicities. It responds to calls for a deeper understanding of the intersections of various lines of domination and identification, and their relationship to the spaces minoritised people navigate in their daily lives (Valentine, 2007; Hopkins, 2017; Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina, 2018). As pointed out by Gopinath (2005) and Fortier (2002), a focus on the ways in which sexualities and ethnicities/racialisations intersect has the potential to disrupt and contribute to both analyses of queerness and of ethnicities, through an ethnicisation of the first and a queering of the second. The literature employed in the following chapters comes from both fields, in the attempt to offer an intersectional vision, capable of observing and analysing the ways in which sexualities and racialised identifications intersect in the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels.

There is another important way in which this research is located at an interstitial space, in dialogue with different scholarly work. This research was conducted as part of my doctoral studies in a British institution, data collection was conducted in Belgium, and the entirety of my previous education was completed in Italy. My positionality as a researcher is one that has been influenced by work produced in different linguistic/national contexts, and this thesis is a reflection of that. For the purpose of this research, an engagement with literature produced in various continental European contexts was of extreme importance, as it allowed to better understand some dynamics that are specific to the context under study. In addition to research conducted in and from Belgium, I engaged with work produced in France, the Netherlands, and Germany. This meant that some of the central literature of the following chapters is written and circulates in the French language.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

This first chapter has introduced the research project, highlighting some of the fundamental elements that contextualise the findings presented later in the thesis. I outlined the research questions that guided the collection of data and its analysis, and I reflected upon the reasons

that prompted me to engage with these questions. In addition to the academic interests in the topic, I highlighted how these are inextricably linked to my personal and political motivations to explore and illuminate the intersection of sexualities and racialised Islam in the European context. I contextualised this research project in the city of Brussels, and outlined my reasons for choosing the city. I then reflected on the choice to focus on LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. I concluded the chapter with a reflection on the literature that I engaged with in this study, and a brief outline of the thesis structure.

In Chapter 2, "Not just a buzzword", I outline the theoretical foundations of this work. After a brief discussion on the origins and definition of intersectionality, and its value in the study of LGBTQ Muslim lives and experiences, I proceed by addressing some of the challenges that its application in this study entails. First, I reflect on the application of intersectionality in a context that presents relevant differences from the one where the concept was first articulated. As pointed out by Bilge (2013) and Knapp (2005), conducting intersectional research in the European context presents some challenges. One of them is the need to take categories of race and ethnicities, and processes of racialisation seriously, in a context that often frames itself as "raceless" (Goldberg, 2006). This challenge is to be understood in a wider context of "buzzwordy" applications of the concept of intersectionality (Davis, 2008), as its usage is seen to become more and more ornamental and devoid of political radicalism (Bilge, 2013). Elaborating on these critiques, I thus ground my research in a serious attempt at observing and analysing how processes of racialisation shape the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, in interaction with other lines of oppression at work in the city. Second, I discuss the risks of essentialisation that intersectionality entails, with its focus on identity categories and identity politics (Ehrenreich, 2002; Nash, 2008). I argue for an interpretation of intersectionality that goes beyond a rigid categorisation of identities (Collins and Bilge, 2016), by understanding processes of identification as narrative, and resulting from the continuous interactions between the agency of individuals and groups, and the categories made available by mainstream discourses (Anthias, 2002b; Dhamoon, 2010).

In Chapter 3, "Power, trust, and translation", I present the methodological design of this project and some of the epistemological reflections that emerged as it was conducted. The first section will discuss how the three methods chosen for this research were interpreted and applied in the field. These were participant observation in various LGBTQ racialised spaces of the city, 30 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels, and a weekend of participatory theatre activities with nine LGBTQ participants from a Muslim background. In this section I also discuss the nature of my

collaboration with Merhaba. In the second section I present some of the reflections that shaped the collection of data, its analysis, and the writing of this thesis. Specifically, I focus on my insider/outsider status in the field, and the power dynamics that accompanied such positioning; the multi-linguistic character of my fieldwork and the strategies employed to translate data; the challenge of building trust with the collaborative partner, research participants, and queer of colour groups in the city; how I managed the difficulties in writing about a specific group of people without running the risk of reinforcing essentialising discourses on difference.

In Chapter 4, "Brussels, a city at the intersection", I contextualise this research in the city of Brussels. I explain why Brussels was chosen as the fieldwork site for this study, and outline the contextual elements that shape the findings of this work. First, I discuss the relationship of Brussels with its racialised groups. I briefly outline the main discursive tropes on difference that originated in Belgian colonial history, and discuss demographic data on the presence of Muslim populations in the city. Second, I outline the main features of the LGBTQ scene in Brussels, by discussing and problematising imaginations of Belgium, and Brussels, as an LGBTQ "paradise" (Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011). Third, I situate the relations between and across racialised and LGBTQ communities in the wider political and administrative context of Brussels. In particular, I focus on the ways in which power-sharing mechanisms between the French-speaking and Flemish communities in the city shape social relations between and across different identity groups. Finally, I discuss how the contested notion of *one* Belgian nation opens up a space for different ways of observing and analysing the impact of discourses of difference (Fitzmaurice, 1996).

In Chapter 5, "In, Out, or somewhere else entirely", I present and analyse data on participants' experiences of concealment and disclosure of their sexualities. The chapter begins with an overview of queer of colour critique to the rigid binarisation of the in/out of the closet conditions. Such critiques move from the acknowledgement of the problematic prescription of "coming out" as the only possible path to LGBTQ self-acceptance, empowerment, and emancipation (Fisher, 2003; Ross, 2005; Decena, 2011; Provencher, 2016). Research on processes of concealment and disclosure among queer people of colour shows how the path prescribed by "coming out" discourses often does not mirror participants' experiences. The data presented and analysed in the chapter shows how this binary needs to be deconstructed in order to understand the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels. While for some a "coming out" trajectory is descriptive of their process of sexuality disclosure in their families and communities, others' experiences are radically different. In the

chapter, I argue that framing some forms of communication surrounding sexualities in terms of tacit circulations of knowledge (Decena, 2011) is useful to understand the complexities of experiences of some participants, and ultimately, framing processes of sexuality disclosure in ways that go beyond the paradigmatic prescriptiveness of the image of the closet (Ross, 2005).

Chapter 6, “When the spotlight is always on the neighbourhoods”, deals with participants’ experiences and narratives of their navigation of differently racialised and sexualised areas of the city. Differently racialised neighbourhoods are often imagined as presenting different attitudes towards sexual diversity and gender equality (Stehle, 2006; Hancock, 2017; Donnen, 2019). In the case of neighbourhoods perceived as “Muslim”, these imaginations mirror and reproduce global discourses of irreconcilable civilisational difference (Dikeç, 2006; El-Tayeb, 2011). This results in the discursive construction of rigid borders between different areas of the city, the crossing of which marks the passage from/to zones perceived as LGBTQ-friendly, to/from areas felt as homo/bi/transphobic (Donnen, 2019). Elaborating on work by Hancock (2017), Donnen (2019) and Dikeç (2006), I argue that a more fluid view on such borders, and the difference that they mark, is necessary to understand the complexity of the daily navigations of the city by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. Analysis of the data shows how such a deconstruction allows for five specific elements to emerge. These, in turn, show the ephemerality of rigid discourses of difference in relation to different spaces of the city. These elements are: the agency of LGBTQ people in racialised-as-Muslim neighbourhoods to produce social change, their feelings of belonging to these neighbourhoods, their acknowledgement of cultural and social resources that these neighbourhoods have, the presence of Arab/Muslim men who play a positive role in supporting processes of LGBTQ self-acceptance and empowerment, and the relevance of the category of class in shaping participants’ perceptions of different areas of the city.

In chapter 7, “Between two seats”, I analyse data on participants’ experiences of the intersectional oppression they live in Brussels. I begin the chapter with the acknowledgement of the wide circulation of the concept of intersectionality in the city. Such circulation is contested, by some participants, as presenting the same problems of “ornamentality” (Bilge, 2013) and lack of political radicalism that I outline in Chapter 2. A distancing, from the part of participants, from mainstream usage of intersectionality as a “buzzword” (Davis, 2008) does not imply a rejection of the role of multiple interlocking lines of domination in shaping their lives, identifications, and oppression. Most participants describe their specific positions as being highly influenced by the multiplicity of lines of power that interconnect in their

social worlds. The most intuitive of these interconnections is represented by the ways in which participants often feel targeted by homo/bi/transphobia in their communities of origin, and by racism/Islamophobia in white-dominated spaces. In addition to these, my analysis of data shows how specific roles are attached to the figure of the LGBTQ Muslim person by discourses that circulate in the city. The first has to do with the "exceptional" character attached to LGBTQ Muslim identifications. This results in feelings of loneliness, and a pressure to constantly explain and legitimise one's identifications. The second, closely linked to the first, is the image of trauma and pain that LGBTQ Muslim lives are assumed to endure. The third, expressed by all gay and bisexual men interviewed in this project, relates to the specific sexotic (Schaper *et al.*, 2020) imaginations of the body of the Arab/North-African man in gay/bisexual environments, and the impact these have on the romantic and sexual encounters that participants have in the city.

Chapter 8, "Oh, you're here too!", focuses on participants' experiences of community building with other racialised queer people in the city. The point of departure for the chapter is the acknowledgement that the intersectional social location inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background is not only marked by oppression, but it can function as a site that is productive of counter discourses and a disruption of rigidly binarised imaginations of civilisational difference. I analyse both more structured and formalised ways of coming together in queer racialised associations, groups and spaces, as well as the informal networks of friendship and solidarity that participants build in their lives. All participants shared a need to build racialised queer communities, as these provide them with spaces and times where they do not feel the pressure to explain and legitimise their experiences that they face in other contexts. For some participants, being with people who share their same identity categories is not enough, as it is important for them to be surrounded by people who attach similar meanings to such categories, and who narrate lives at the intersection in similar ways. A narrative approach to intersectionality (Anthias, 2002b), with its focus on the interaction between the availability of identity categories and the stories individuals and groups construct around them, is useful in understanding these differences between participants. All communities built by participants result in a sense of being understood at a deep level, and ultimately in a sense of self-empowerment. Moreover, their coming together with other racialised LGBTQ people, and the mutual recognitions that take place in such collective presence, allow for the emergence of radical counter discourses, that have the potential to decolonise discourses and imaginations of difference in the city (Lewis, 2017; Mompelat, 2019).

Chapter 2. "Not just a buzzword, we actually mean it": The intersectional framework of this project

This project aims to observe and analyse the experiences and lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels through an intersectional lens. Intersectionality aids understanding of the complexity that marks social relations, by focusing on the ways in which different domains of power and lines of oppression interlock in shaping the specific experiences of the social world by minoritised subjects (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Because of its radical potential for social critique and change, intersectionality has become increasingly popular in academic research, activist practice and policy-making, and the last three decades have seen a flourishing of projects labelled as intersectional. Such wide circulation has resulted in a conflation of different meanings attributed to the word "intersectionality" (Jordan-Zachery, 2007), and in some cases to a dilution of its original radical potential for social critique and change (Bilge, 2013). Applying an intersectional framework today, in a context that is very different from the North American one where intersectionality originated, necessarily entails a reflection on and discussion of the way in which it is defined in the project at hand. In this chapter, I articulate my position in relation to the main debates surrounding uses of intersectionality, specifically focusing on the problems that arise from its wide circulation and its perceived loss of radical political value.

In the first section, I argue that a focus on the specific intersectional social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background allows for a deep understanding of their lives, narratives, and experiences in/of the city of Brussels. I begin with a brief overview of the existing literature on LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities, as well as on the relations between "clash of civilization" (Huntington, 1997) discourses between the West and the Muslim East, and categories of gender and sexual diversity (Rahman, 2014b). An analysis of the literature suggests that the application of an intersectional framework can be useful in three distinct yet complementary ways. First, by shedding light on the existence of LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities, it counters their discursive erasure, which often accompanies the imagination of East/West difference and tension along sexual and gendered lines (Rahman, 2010). Second, it complicates the simplistic images that are attached to LGBTQ Muslim individuals, as some of their voices are selectively mainstreamed to mirror and confirm tropes of civilisational tension and difference (Bracke, 2012). Third, through these processes of visibilisation and complication, it can unleash a radical disruption of the East/West binary that undergirds mainstream civilisational discourses (Rahman, 2010).

In the second section, I discuss the interpretation of intersectionality that I have adopted in this project. I do so by reflecting on two of the main critiques that have been raised to uses of intersectionality in recent literature. First, I outline critiques to the "whitening" of intersectionality (Bilge, 2013). This allows me to articulate how the application of intersectionality in this project is grounded in a serious accounting for processes of racialisation and categories related to race and ethnicity in their post-colonial European specificity. Second, I present post-structuralist critiques to applications of intersectionality that heavily rely on identity categories and identity politics, running the risk to fall in further essentialisations of minoritised groups (Chang and Culp Jr, 2002; Ehrenreich, 2002; Nash, 2008). I address such critiques by adopting a framework that is influenced by procedural and narrative approaches to intersectionality (Anthias, 2002b; Dhamoon, 2010), which allows for the conceptualisation of multiple processes of identification and oppression without necessarily attributing a fixed ontological status to identities. The intersectional approach that I outline in this section is one that is informed by postcolonial, antiracist, queer and queer of colour critiques.

2.1 Studying LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities from an intersectional perspective

2.1.1 Erasure and selective incorporation: points of departure

Interest in the study of LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities, both in existing literature and in this project, stems from the role played by categories of sexual and gender diversity in shaping discourses of difference and tension between the West and the Muslim East. In western imaginations, Muslim civilisation is often posited as inherently and monolithically sexist and homo/bi/transphobic. This is contrasted with the construction of western civilisation as the natural repository of values of acceptance of and support for gender and sexual diversity (Ticktin, 2008; Fassin, 2010; Bracke, 2011; Bracke, 2012). Such binary construction of East/West difference and tension is thus built along the lines of a "clash of civilization", as articulated by Huntington (1997). The images underpinning the clash rest on specific roles assigned to the subjects involved in such civilisational script: women and LGBTQ people are constructed as vulnerable, to be protected from Arab/Muslim sexism and homo/bi/transphobia (Haritaworn, 2010; Haritaworn, 2012), while the Arab man is imagined as *the* perpetrator of homo/bi/transphobic and sexist violence (Razack, 2004; Smeeta, 2007; Mack, 2017).

The rigidity of these discursively assigned roles results in the use of categories of gender and sexualities as fundamental in the construction of an irreparable fracture between Muslim

communities and LGBTQ populations. The binary "Muslim or gay" (Puar, 2007: 19) becomes a central tenet of this discourse, resulting in the erasure of LGBTQ Muslim lives and identifications in both mainstream western discourses and those at work in Muslim communities. Such erasure is the point of departure of many of the studies that focus on the lives and identities of LGBTQ Muslims in the West. According to Rahman (2010), a focus on such lives and identities allows to illuminate the erasure produced by rigid oppositional frameworks. Such highlighting has the radical potential to disrupt and subvert discourses of civilisational clash, exactly by pointing to the existence of identities that are posited as impossible. Similarly, El-Tayeb (2012) points to the condition of impossibility that is attached to the lives and identities of LGBTQ Muslims in Europe, echoing queer of colour critiques that focus on the constructed mutual exclusions of other racialised identifications and LGBTQ sexualities (Gopinath, 2005).

Erasure is not the only element that marks the interstitial space between differently imagined civilisations along lines of gender and sexualities. Mahmood (2008), Mayanthi (2013), and Farris (2017), in their analyses of western imaginations of the Muslim woman, note the workings of a selective inclusion of certain voices and experiences. While the overall complexities of the stories of Muslim women are erased, and the differences between individual stories neglected, some voices and experiences are incorporated in mainstream discourses to maintain and reinforce tropes of East/West tension. As the aim of this selective incorporation is the reinforcement of civilisational discourses, the included voices necessarily articulate stories of trauma and pain. The Muslim woman emerges as a victim of Arab/Muslim sexism, a condition that she can escape only by leaving her Arab/Muslim community and fully entering the white/western world, imagined as a safe haven where women's rights are unproblematically supported (Clyne, 2003; Mahmood, 2008; Kemp, 2009). Such discourse not only relegates the Muslim woman in a position of lack of agency and vulnerability, but it also allows the western, European, white subject to emerge as the saviour, producing another important role in the civilisational script that regulates imaginations of difference across East/West lines (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Fayard and Rocheron, 2009). The same process of selective incorporation, and the resulting reinforcement of oppositional discourses, is at work with regards to LGBTQ populations from Arab/Muslim communities. Support for LGBTQ rights, assumed to be an inherently western (and white) feature, is deployed to reinforce the idea of a western sexual exceptionalism, which is in turn used to legitimise the policing and exclusion of Muslim/Arab populations (Puar, 2007; Haritaworn *et al.*, 2008; Bracke, 2012; Haritaworn, 2012). Studying LGBTQ Muslim lives

and identities is therefore not solely aimed at the illumination of the location they inhabit as one of possibility and intelligibility, countering the erasure that is produced by mainstream discourses of clash. In addition to this, it is necessary to highlight the complexity and internal differences and nuances that mark such location, rendering it not only visible, but also less prone to being instrumentally essentialised. The intention is that of complicating the simplistic images attached to LGBTQ Muslim subjects once they are allowed to escape the condition of discursive erasure that they are generally relegated to.

2.1.2 Sexualities, Muslim communities, and European nations

Existing work on LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities has such visibilisation and problematisation as its central aims. Nonetheless, studies have tended to focus on the experiences of homo/bi/transphobic oppression that LGBTQ Muslim people live in their religious/cultural communities, and the strategies deployed to overcome this oppression and reconcile senses of religious/cultural belonging and non-heterosexual sexualities. Such topics have been approached through an analysis of the specific homophobia experienced in Muslim communities (Siraj, 2009; Hooghe *et al.*, 2010b; Yip, 2012), the strategies deployed by LGBTQ Muslim populations to address such homophobia and negotiate relationships with their communities of origin (Jaspal and Siraj, 2011; Siraj, 2011; Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2013; Yip, 2004b), and interpretations of the sacred texts that allow for a conciliation of religious faith and freedom to live one's sexuality (Yip, 2004a; Yip, 2005). This last subject has been particularly fruitful in showing the multiple and complex ways in which LGBTQ Muslim individuals and groups interpret the relationship between Islam, Muslim communities, and sexual diversity and freedom. Building on Islamic liberation theological frameworks (Esack, 1997; Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 2006; Kugle, 2010), this work sheds light on the multiple functions that spiritual faith and religious belonging play in the lives of LGBTQ Muslim people. Far from being always a source of oppression, these studies show the emancipatory role that Islam often has in the lives of LGBTQ people (Yip, 2005; Kugle, 2014), complicating the monolithic imagination of Islam and Muslim communities as homo/bi/transphobic. Assumptions of impossibility and the constructed oxymoronic character of LGBTQ Muslim juxtapositions are thus deconstructed, and complications and nuances in the relations between religion, belonging and sexual diversity highlighted.

Despite the important contributions that these works represent, their limit is represented by their somewhat unidirectional focus on the social relations between LGBTQ Muslim people and their Muslim communities, and the power dynamics that shape them. These scholars do

sometimes explicitly recognise the need for an intersectional exploration of the topic. Yip (2009: 4), for example, states that "the examination of the lived experiences of queer Muslims, particularly within the Western context, would be more fruitful and informative if it takes seriously the intersection between sexuality, ethnicity, and religion". Despite such calls, these studies have tended to focus on the side of the specific homo/bi/transphobia experienced in Muslim communities, relegating experiences of racism/Islamophobia to somewhat marginal positions in their analyses.

The work of other scholars complements the studies outlined above by focusing on the discursive construction of Muslim populations as sexist and homo/bi/transphobic, and the subsequent reinforcement of racist/Islamophobic tropes and practices. While not necessarily focused on how LGBTQ Muslims experience and react to such tropes and practices, this body of work is nonetheless fundamental in advancing the understanding of the positions that they inhabit in contemporary western contexts. Such studies often build on Massad's (2002) work on the role played by international LGBTQ rights discourses and policies in imperialist projects in the Middle Eastern and North African region, and on the concept of homonationalism as articulated by Puar (2007). In her work, the concept of homonationalism highlights the connections between homonormativity, "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan, 2002: 179), and white supremacist and nationalist projects. Homonationalism thus marks that specific "collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism that is generated both by national rhetoric of patriotic inclusion and by gay and queer subjects themselves" (Puar, 2007: 39). The result is the imbrication of the progressive inclusion of certain (white) LGBTQ bodies in the enjoyment of full citizenship, with the exclusion and policing of bodies framed as dangerous and threatening to western national and civilisational projects. Among these, the figure of the Arab/Muslim man figures as prominent.

The concept of homonationalism has been widely applied in different geographical contexts to understand and interpret processes of nation- (and civilisation-)building (Morgensen, 2010; Yue, 2012; White, 2013; Davidson, 2014; Murray, 2015; Dreher, 2016). In continental Europe, the concept has been used in analyses of discourses on Muslim populations in different countries. According to Bacchetta and Haritaworn (2011), a "rescuing" narrative towards non-western LGBTQ individuals, that builds on an imperialist framing of colonised women as passive victims of patriarchal violence, is at work in various European contexts.

> "In Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, white gay men have mimicked this strategy by actively inserting a new notion of gay victimhood into existing figurations of hyper-oppressed female subalterns" (Bacchetta and Haritaworn, 2011: 131).

In their analysis of the rhetoric surrounding hate crime legislation in Germany, Haritaworn (2010) notes the emergence of a discourse associating migration and homophobia. This discourse is most palpable in big urban centres, such as Berlin (Petzen, 2004). In the city, homophobia and transphobia are increasingly depicted as "an anomaly that can be located in particular times and bodies", which leads to the marking of "groups 'in this city' whose cultures and lifestyles are *intolerable*" (Haritaworn, 2010: 74). Berlin, and Germany in general, thus emerge as exceptional sites, in a narrative that builds on the construction of the migrant Other as the only threat to the achievement of their full potential as safe haven for LGBTQ people. In this exceptionalism, the figure of the migrant homophobe and that of the terrorist are constantly juxtaposed and merged into one single threat to western values:

> "The exceptionalist, militarized state offers queers a dual place: as icons of Western freedom and as symbols of Western vulnerability, whose protection warrants ever harsher policing and incarceration. In defending the victim of the hate crime, the state is also 'defending' the core values of the community, which are under attack from terrorists and now also homophobes" (Haritaworn, 2010: 79).

In many ways, the Netherlands have been exemplary of the links between nationalist narratives and the deployment of categories of sexual diversity (Jivraj and de Jong, 2011; Dudink, 2017). This is particularly relevant for this research, due to the geographical, cultural and linguistic proximity of the country to Belgium. In Tauqir *et al.* (2011), Petzen traces the roots of what she calls "homoimperialism" in the Netherlands to a well-rooted narrative built on the imperative for white populations to save subaltern brown women from their male counterpart, echoing Spivak's (1988a) influential articulation of postcolonial relations. Stemming from the construction of the Netherlands as exceptional in their secularism and acceptance of sexual diversity (Bracke, 2011), homosexuality has increasingly become a fundamental category in public debates on multiculturalism and migrant communities (Dudink, 2017). In public discourses, the category of homosexuality comes to represent Dutch national identity in opposition to cultural minorities, working as a metonymy of values constructed as western. Jivraj and de Jong (2011) observe how even public documents aimed at promoting acceptance and support for sexual diversity are imbued with homonationalist narratives, while Bracke (2012) and Dudink (2017) note how homonationalist tropes can be found in the public speeches and interventions made along the years by politician Pim Fortuyn. Probably the clearest example of the unfolding of a discourse of sexual exceptionalism in Dutch national narratives is represented by its civic integration test. The

test, introduced in 2006, is aimed at measuring perspective migrants' ability to integrate in the Dutch society, based on their knowledge of the Dutch language and their understanding and acceptance of Dutch norms and values. Homosexuality prominently features among those elements of the Dutch culture that migrants are expected to accept (De Leew and Van Wichelen, 2005).

Another national context that is relevant in its proximity to the Belgian one is that of France, where homonationalism is inextricably linked to narratives that stress the *laicité* of the French nation, as secularism is posited as a fundamental marker of French exceptionalism (Fassin, 2006; Bacchetta and Haritaworn, 2011). Such construction rests on the dichotomic construction of "a good, national-normative (French) Islam" against a "bad (transnational) Islam", hidden in the peripheries of French urban centres, always threatening to put the nation in jeopardy (Bacchetta and Haritaworn, 2011: 132). What has been stressed by numerous scholars is that the French Republic does not wish for Islam to disappear, or to be completely separated from the State; rather, the goal is the creation and reinforcement of a "good", French, nationalised Islam (Bouzar, 2001; Dakhlia, 2005). This project leads to another binary on which the French homonationalist discourse is constructed: the division between assimilable and unassimilable racialised subjects (Bacchetta and Haritaworn, 2011). While the first are invited to participate into the national community, the second are to be controlled and disciplined.

Mack (2017) notes how sexualities have increasingly gained centre stage in French public debates over the relationships and tensions between differently racialised groups and communities:

> "Indeed, sexuality has emerged as a new battleground in the public debates about whether postwar immigration from the former colonies has eroded French identity. Since the 1990s, long-standing concerns about religious or ethnic diversity increasingly have been accompanied by a sexualized rhetoric that accuses Muslim immigrants of advocating rigid gender norms and being intolerant of homosexuality" (Mack, 2017: 2).

Mack (2017) stresses the importance of analysing the phenomenon by accounting for the national specificities that differentiate it from other forms of collusion between nationalism and the promotion of sexual diversity. While recognising the value of the concept of homonationalism, he argues that its meaning is deeply embedded in the specificity of the North American context. In other words, it "needs to be nuanced before it is applied to the French context" (Mack, 2017: 22). In his view, one of the differences between the two is the prominent role of cultural institutions, rather than military ones, in the production,

reinforcement and maintenance of a discourse that links sexuality and the nation in France. He also notes how a focus on homonationalism can prevent researchers from recognising specific cultural formations that emerge among minority groups in western societies. He identifies two such formations in the context of the French *banlieue*, that work as resistance forces against the collusion of LGBTQ groups and nationalist ideologies: “nongendered virility and chosen homosexual clandestinity” (Mack, 2017: 23). A focus on the specificity of these figures, namely the female subject that adopts a gender expression that is viewed as masculine, and the male subject who engages in homosexual intercourse without self-identifying as a gay man nor disclosing his sexual desires to society at large, allows for a deeper understanding of the ways in which sexualities are lived among racialised and minoritised groups, and can be a useful starting point for the disruption of mainstream discourses.

> “These banlieue figures are interrelated in the sense that they ostensibly reject as culturally other what some might find to be progressive advances in the domain of women’s and sexual minorities’ freedoms, for reasons of identity-based demarcation and sometimes Islamic affirmation. These figures, immediately rejected as backward and patriarchal, are in my argument the main examples of a queer of color backlash against homo and sexual nationalisms […], contemporary reactions to a feminist and gay rights movement that does not always include minorities” (Mack, 2017: 23).

Studies that focus on national projects and the othering of Muslim populations along gendered and sexualised lines do acknowledge a need to take into account the multiple lines and dimensions of power that intervene in shaping the experiences of these populations. Nevertheless, as their aim is a radical critique of white supremacist and imperialist projects, they rightly focus on the experiences that these produce, and the effect they have on the discursive positioning of racialised and/or queered individuals and groups. In other words, their interest is not primarily that of understanding the effects of these discourses on LGBTQ Muslim individuals and groups, nor the ways in which they interlock with other oppressive discourses and practices, such as the homo/bi/transphobic ones that can be at work in racialised communities. This body of work is aimed at illuminating the workings of exclusionary and oppressive discourses produced by western, white-dominated, societies, by highlighting the collusions and entanglements between liberatory LGBTQ discourses and racist/Islamophobic rhetorics and policies, and the effect they produce in racialised groups and communities. In doing so, it provides fundamental tools for the dismantling and subversion of racist, Islamophobic, and colonialist discourses, and the practices they legitimate. Nonetheless, such focus runs the risk of downplaying the discrimination and oppression that LGBTQ people can be exposed to in their racialised Muslim families and

communities, and the ways in which such oppression interlocks with the homonationalist discourses at work in wider societies.

2.1.3 Taking intersectionality seriously

Some explorations and analyses of LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities have been going in the direction of understanding and accounting for the multiple ways in which racialising lines and homo/bi/transphobia intersect in producing their specific ways of identifying, as well as their experiences of social relations. These studies are in dialogue with the texts discussed in the previous sections. At their core is an attempt to combine precise analyses of the ways in which racist/Islamophobic discourses shape the lives and experiences of LGBTQ people from racialised backgrounds, at the same time taking into account the important ways in which heteronormativity, patriarchy, and homo/bi/transphobia, both in racialised communities and in society at large, impact their lives and experiences of oppression.

As mentioned in the opening of the chapter, Rahman's (2010) work represents an important cornerstone in the application of an intersectional framework to the exploration and analysis of the lives, identities, and experiences of oppression of LGBTQ Muslim people. His point of departure is the acknowledgement of specific discourses of civilisational opposition and tension constructed along lines of gender equality and sexual diversity. Importantly, he highlights how the category of modernity is conflated with westerness in this civilisational discourse, which locates homo/bi/transphobic attitudes in a pre-modern, Muslim elsewhere, differentiated both spatially and temporally from the LGBTQ-friendly West (Rahman, 2014a).

In his view, LGBTQ Muslim identities are the perfect entry point to observe the workings of such binarised discourse. Rather than viewing LGBTQ Muslims as occupying both civilisational fields, Rahman (2010: 945) suggests they be observed in their inhabiting a specific "intersectional social location *between* political and social cultures". Such location, in addition to being marked by the oppression lived by LGBTQ Muslims, "caught between cultural and political Islamophobia and homophobia" (ibid., 946), also represents a potentially disruptive site. Acknowledging its existence already results in a partial crumbling of the rigidly dichotomic discourse that builds on the necessary opposition between the discrete categories of an LGBTQ-friendly West and a homophobic Muslim East. Rahman thus analyses LGBTQ Muslim experiences in the oppression that is directed at them both by white, structurally Islamophobic societies, and the homo/bi/transphobia that is produced in racialised Muslim territories and communities. In *Homosexualities, Muslim cultures and modernities*

(2014), he explores how that liminal, and discursively impossible, intersectional social location is continuously maintained by both sides of the civilisational discourse, through the deployment of the category of "modernity" as something that, whether framed as the marker of civilisational advancement or as external threat, is necessarily conflated with LGBTQ identities and rights. In his view, the lives of LGBTQ Muslims are stuck in the specific entanglement of progressive views on LGBTQ advancement, the imperfect homonationalist discourses that build on rigid civilisational tropes, and Muslim homo/bi/transphobia as civilisational resistance. He names such entanglement "homocolonialism", and he articulates its disruption as one of the main aims of a study of LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities (Rahman, 2014a).

A more European-centred look at the intersectional identities and lives of LGBTQ Muslims is the one offered by El-Tayeb (2012). Her focus is on the city of Amsterdam, and specifically on the challenges faced by racialised queer Muslim organisations in the city, and the potential that such organising opens up in the queering of the civilisational dichotomies that structure social relations. Similarly to those scholars outlined above who analyse the figure of the LGBTQ Muslim, and its erasure from mainstream discourses, as a central feature of nationalist and racist projects, her focus is on the white, western, nationalist side of the production of the intersectional location of LGBTQ Muslim subjects, rather than on the homo/bi/transphobia that they might be exposed to. The point in which her analysis is different from the ones outlined in the previous section, though, is her bringing the analysis forward to an exploration of the ways in which LGBTQ Muslims organise and build community at that "impossible" intersectional location, actively subverting the discursive tropes that are attached to their lives, or that work to invisibilise them and render them inauthentic. Their lives, identities, and practices are viewed not only as targets of erasure, exclusion, and discrimination, but as constituting a counterdiscursive site from which to subvert mainstream tropes and norms. This work is in line with her wider project of exploring and analysing the transnational diasporic spaces and communities created by minoritised, racialised and queered populations across different European contexts (El-Tayeb, 2011), and is in dialogue with other work on the negotiations around queer spaces for racialised Muslim populations in other European cities (Petzen, 2004; Kosnick, 2015). Importantly, these analyses offer a further refinement of an intersectional approach to LGBTQ Muslim lives, identities, and daily experiences, by not limiting their focus to the oppression they are subjected to, but recognising the ways in which their agency unravels in contesting exclusive spaces, and in producing and reinforcing queer of colour counter-discourses.

More recently, scholars across different European national contexts have elaborated on such intersectional approaches and explored the lives of LGBTQ Muslim people from a variety of perspectives. In France, Provencher (2017) has analysed the life stories of queer Maghrebi men, focusing in particular on their identity formation, processes of identity disclosure in the communities and spaces they navigate, and the hybrid, disidentificatory, and transnational tropes that mark their stories. Similarly, Amari (2012; 2013) worked on the complex communications around the sexuality of lesbian and bisexual women of North African descent in the communities they feel a sense of belonging to, contributing to a deeper understanding of the multiple ways in which lines of domination intersect in producing their experiences. Akachar (2015) applied an intersectional lens to the lives of LGBTQ Muslims in the Netherlands, and in the context of Belgium, Peumans's (2017) ethnography represents an important step towards an analysis of the specific experiences of LGBTQ Muslims in the country. While the topic is gradually gaining interest in academic and activist settings, research entirely dedicated to the lives and experiences of LGBTQ Muslims is still taking its first steps. The last section of Rahman's *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures, and Modernities*, published in 2014, was aptly entitled "Beginnings", to highlight the many facets of the topics that are still unexplored, and the potential for fruitful future research in the field.

With this study, I intend to apply an intersectional approach to the lives, identifications, and daily experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, by taking into serious account the social context in which lines of racism/Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia intersect, as well as the spatial dimension and effects of such interplay. As noted by, among others, Hopkins (2017) and Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina (2018), social geographies can contribute to a refinement of intersectional frameworks and methodologies, through their focus on social context as a fundamental category of observation and analysis of the social world, as well as highly benefitting from applications of the concept, and the possibilities of recognition of the complexities in social relations that it opens up (Collins and Bilge, 2016). In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss how I intend to apply the intersectional framework that is needed to explore and understand the experiences, lives, and identifications of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in continental Europe. Specifically, I pay close attention to the need to avoid an essentialisation of identity categories by incorporating concepts and frames articulated by queer of colour critique, and to include serious considerations on the category of race and processes of racialisation when applying intersectionality in a context that presents relevant differences from the one where the concept originated.

2.2 Some reflections on the uses of intersectionality

Since its first articulations at the interface of US black feminist activism (Combahee-River-Collective, 1995) and academic scholarship (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991), intersectionality has gained increasing popularity, and uses of the concept have expanded greatly across disciplines, social and political movements, and geographical contexts (Carbado *et al.*, 2013). The range of categories that have been included in intersectional research has expanded beyond the original triad of race, gender and class. These include, but are not limited to, sexualities (Taylor *et al.*, 2011), age (Krekula, 2007; Moore, 2009), disability (Artiles, 2013; Moodley and Graham, 2015), nation (Collins, 1998; Kim-Puri, 2005), and religion (Mirza, 2013; Singh, 2015). Intersectionality has widely surpassed its original location in radical political activism for social justice, to be included in more institutionalised statements, documents, and policies around themes of gender equality and the recognition of rights of multiply discriminated groups (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Finally, and importantly, the concept of intersectionality has travelled to contexts that greatly differ from the North American one in which the term was first articulated (Bilge, 2013; Carbado *et al.*, 2013). Of particular relevance in this study is its application in continental Europe, where categories related to race, ethnicities, and processes of racialisation are interpreted in ways that are radically different from their uses in North American politics and scholarship (Knapp, 2005; Goldberg, 2006).

The increased popularity of the concept, and the multiple ways in which it has been applied, led some scholars to highlight the problems that arise from such a wide circulation. Some have noted how different meanings have been attributed to the concept of intersectionality, making it too open-ended, and its validity needs to be rediscussed (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). Famously, Davis (2008) critiqued current uses of intersectionality as rendering it a mere "buzzword", making it devoid of its original radical potential. In light of these critiques, it becomes necessary to discuss the interpretation and use of intersectionality that are foundational to this project.

2.2.1 When intersectionality travels: Including an analysis of race and racialisation in Europe

The metaphor of the "travelling theory" (Said, 1983) is useful to understand some of the issues that arise from the application of an intersectional framework outside of the United States. By situating theories and ideas in specific historic and cultural contexts, and

conceptualising them as the results of the power struggles at work in the society that produces them, Said (1983: 226) argues that:

> "One should go on to specify the kinds of movement that are possible, in order to ask whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation".

Elaborating on Said's metaphor, and analysing the reception of the race-gender-class triad in Germany, Knapp (2005) highlights two relevant issues of intersectionality as a "travelling theory". First, the link between race, gender and class is often reified in the form of a sterile formula, cited to signal one's political correctness and awareness of the latest trends in feminist theory, without necessarily being committed to an intersectional understanding of social inequalities. Bilge (2013) also notes an increasing use of what she calls "ornamental intersectionality", the opportunistic use of intersectionality to rebrand one's studies and practices as morally sound without taking an active politicised stance against social injustice. The second issue relates to the use of the concept of "race" by German and European scholars. Knapp (2005: 257) notes how "*Rasse* [German for race] is a category that cannot be used in an affirmative way in Germany: it is *neither* possible to ascribe a *Rasse* to others nor is it acceptable to use *Rasse* as a basis for identity claims, which by comparison is a common practice in the US". While the reasons for this reluctance can be traced back to the institutional racism that characterised nations across continental Europe during World War II, this aversion towards the concept of "race" in contemporary Europe results in the silencing and suppression of discourses around racisms and colonisation. While these systems of oppression are at work, the desired image of a "raceless Europe" (Goldberg, 2006: 359) works to render them invisible, without making them any less effective. In this sense, the erasure of the category of race from intersectional studies produced in Europe is problematic because it makes them unable to take into account a category that, even if unnamed, contributes in shaping the experiences of oppressed groups (Tomlinson, 2013).

Bilge (2013) also argues that intersectionality, like other "travelling theories", "falls prey to widespread misrepresentation, tokenization, displacement, and disarticulation" (Bilge, 2013: 410). In her view, particularly problematic is the reception of intersectionality by what Bilge (2013) calls "disciplinary feminism", the part of academic feminism that is responsible for deploying strategies that work to neutralise the radical visions of the intersectional project. The strategies used by disciplinary feminism to silence and erase the radical nature of intersectionality are two. The first works through a focus on metatheoretical discussions on intersectionality at the expense of empirical grounding. Particularly common in continental

Europe, this tension towards theory contributes to move intersectionality away from social injustices as experienced by individuals and groups. The second way through which the radicalism of intersectionality is neutralised is through its "whitening" (Bilge, 2013: 412). She argues that most scholars, by conceptualising intersectionality as "the brainchild of feminism" and stating the need to "broaden its genealogy", detach the intersectional project from one of its fundamental tenets, race. When intersectionality is thought as the product of feminism, its origins in critical race theory are erased (Bilge, 2014). Similarly, when looking for alternative genealogies, the voices and experiences of the black women that first theorised the interconnectedness of race, gender and class are downplayed, if not outright silenced.

> "A tool elaborated by women of color to confront the racism and heterosexism of White-dominated feminism, as well as the sexism and heterosexism of antiracism movements, becomes, in another time and place, a field of expertise overwhelmingly dominated by White disciplinary feminists who keep race and racialized women at bay" (Bilge, 2013: 418).

The erasure of the racial dimension from intersectional analyses has been noticed by other scholars in their studies on the interlocking of sexism and homo/bi/transphobia with other axes of oppression (Erel *et al.*, 2011; Petzen, 2012). According to them, "'intersectionality' can be a descriptive formula the analytical power of which is only realised by embedding it in an anti-racist, post-colonial critical context" (Erel *et al.*, 2011: 64). If this condition is not met, the result is a theoretical framework that excludes women and LGBTQ people of colour, while publicly legitimising its stances by declaring their allegiance to a feminist/LGBTQ perspective. A depoliticised intersectional analysis that does not address existing power relations and inequalities, that is limited to listing differences without discerning what are the "differences that matter" (Ahmed, 1998), is bound to be unhelpful in any emancipatory project of knowledge. Petzen (2012) argues for the centring of race in queer and feminist politics, noticing how intersectional literature in Germany, and in the wider context of continental Europe, is produced and disseminated almost exclusively by white scholars of gender and queer studies. The "travelling" of intersectionality to European academia and activism is thus seen as problematic due to its erasure of race and the consequent silencing effects on "the knowledge production and political activisms of trans people of colour, queers of colour, women of colour and migrant women" (Erel *et al.*, 2011: 265).

When addressing the reception of intersectionality in Europe, it is important to note how the history of race and racial relations differentiate the North American context and the European one in very complex ways. In Europe the category of race cannot be separated from the colonial history of its nations, and its erasure from intersectional analyses inevitably results in

a concealment of such history, as a number of authors have pointed out in their analyses of the French-speaking context (Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud, 2012; Bouteldja, 2013). Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud (2012) argue that the reception of intersectionality in France has been characterised by an omission of postcolonial relations, voices and experiences. The scholars that have adopted an intersectional perspective have done so without making any attempt at adapting it to the specific postcolonial context of France. Moreover, the works of scholars that observe and study society from a postcolonial perspective have been systematically excluded from feminist academia. According to Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud (2012), making reference to theories that can lead to emancipatory projects elsewhere in the world is not sufficient to contribute to a socially just project in France. Such project cannot avoid addressing European colonial history, and the racial relations that result from it. It is not about breaking the reception of American black feminism, but about recognising its benefits by locating them in the French and French-speaking context (Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud, 2012: 21).

The intersectional approach that I applied to the observation and analysis of the experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels is informed and shaped by the critical perspectives outlined here. As a racialised person who grew up in a continental European context where the category of race is constantly erased from public discourse, the call to move towards a serious consideration of the workings of processes of racialisation was deeply felt at both a cognitive and emotional level. The recognition of a need to surpass the unspeakability of race in continental Europe has been articulated by multiple scholars, who see the ongoing erasure of the category as a potent way to silently maintain a status quo of structural racism (Goldberg, 2006; Moschel, 2007; Lentin and Titley, 2012; Salem and Thompson, 2016; Maneri, 2020). El-Tayeb (2011) makes such recognition central in her work on racialised transnational solidarities in continental Europe, constantly reminding, throughout her book, of the problems inherent in the mainstreamed image of a raceless Europe. "'Political racelessness", she contends, "does not equate experiential or social racelessness, that is, the absence of racial thinking" (El-Tayeb, 2011: xxviii). It is necessary not only to illuminate the hidden mechanisms of racial(ised) exclusion, but also to locate and contextualise that political racelessness in its European specificity, considering such silencing and concealment of "race" as an active mechanism for the maintenance of white supremacy. The continental European context becomes a fertile terrain for the exploration of the hidden workings of race, when discourses at work invalidate its currency as

an analytical and heuristic category, thus allowing for a smooth perpetuation of social injustices and exclusions:

> "Europe begins to exemplify what happens when no category is available to name a set of experiences that are linked in their production or at least inflection, historically and symbolically, experientially and politically, to racial arrangements and engagements. The European experience is a case study in the frustrations, delimitations and injustices of political racelessness" (Goldberg, 2006: 335-336).

With regards to Muslim communities in continental Europe, public discourses often employ the categories of "culture" and "cultural difference" as explanatory of the tensions between white majorities and minoritised Muslim communities and groups (Lentin and Titley, 2012). Such cultural distinction is the one that structures and sustains the discourse of civilisational clash presented in the introduction to this chapter (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Lentin and Titley (2012) note how the rooting of topics related to interethnic relations in an exclusively cultural field works to hide and mystify dynamics of racialised constructions and oppression. In European history, "culture" and "race" cannot be easily disentangled from one another, as both categories have been central in colonial projects of invasion and domination of territories occupied by populations that were at once racialised and culturalised as inferior (Balibar, 1991; MacMaster, 2001). Abu-Lughod (2002) highlights how the constant framing of relations between the West and the Muslim East in cultural terms operates as an erasure of the (post)colonial power dynamics and social injustices that should be given serious attention to understand these relations.

Discourses around "race" in continental Europe are often confined to traumatic historical experiences of the past, namely the genocide of the Jewish and Roma people perpetrated by nazi and fascist States, or to experiences that are imagined as temporally and spatially far, i.e. the experience of apartheid in South Africa, or the enslavement of, and subsequent movement for the rights of, black people in North America (Salem and Thompson, 2016). Subsequently, the term "race" is rarely applied in analyses of the issues that arise from current postcolonial relations between groups that are, nonetheless, differently racialised. Elaborating on the work of the authors outlined above, I argue that a serious consideration of processes of racialisation is fundamental in order to understand the postcolonial social relations at work in continental Europe. In this sense, it is useful to think of race in terms of assemblage, to further clarify the distancing from an essentialised and biologised view of race, which is the image that comes to mind to most Europeans upon reading the word "race" and its derivates. Puar's (2007) understanding of the workings of racism and white supremacy goes beyond traditional notions of race as a category mainly mediated by the visual and resulting in "races" that can be

discretely and unproblematically discerned from one another. By pulling affect into an analysis of processes of racialisation, it is possible to recognise how discourses, policies, materialities, visual elements, and emotions concur in shaping the specific racial formations that regulate social relations (Musser, 2018; Vila and Avery-Natale, 2020). Through such understanding, the workings of processes of racialisation emerge in their complexity and entanglement with other lines of power and domination. In this sense, Puar (2007) is able to recognise how people who are not Muslim can be, and are, targets of racialised Islamophobia, in the moment in which they are felt, through an assemblage of visual signs, other materialities, and the emotions that they produce, as Muslim/Arab.

The entanglements between racialisations and Islam in western societies have been noted by a number of scholars working across different disciplines and national contexts (Hopkins, 2004; Bayoumi, 2006; Meer and Modood, 2012; Rootham, 2015; Karaman and Christian, 2020). This important work points to the need to analyse the oppression lived by minoritised Muslim groups, communities, and individuals as entangled with complex processes of racialisation whereby these groups, communities and individuals are racialised partly because of their (actual or perceived) religious faith. Other scholars importantly highlight the impossibility to study and understand contemporary relations between Muslim communities and the western nations where they live without taking into account the specific colonial history of domination/subjugation that inevitably shape the attitudes of the west towards the Muslim other, and vice versa (El-Tayeb, 2011; Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud, 2012). Some current debates are central in highlighting the link between western national projects, the presence on western territories of Muslim communities and groups, and the wider colonial history in which they need to be contextualised. A case in point is the debate surrounding the wearing of the hijab in public spaces, which is variously declined in multiple continental European national contexts, but has France as its epicentre. As noted by, among others, Lazreg (1994) and Bouteldja (2007), the public discourses and State policies towards the veil are the direct consequence of discourses and policies that originated and flourished in the colonial conquest and rule of Algeria by France, and in the subsequent relationship between the centre of the French empire and its Othered, racialised populations.

Elaborating on these reflections and critiques, in this research my intention was that of accounting for the processes of racialisation that communities, groups, and individuals who are Muslim, or are perceived to be Muslim, are subjected to in the city of Brussels, and the roles that categories of sexual diversity and gender equality have in such processes. The choice of focusing on LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, rather than on people who

identify as "religiously" Muslim, goes in this sense. While elements of faith and religious belonging are certainly important for many research participants, and they have been included in the analysis of data where relevant, the spiritual elements of their processes of identification have not been the central focus of this inquiry. The presence or lack of faith, or the identification of participants as Muslim or non-Muslim, was not always relevant in shaping the specific intersectional oppression that they encountered in the city. What was often more relevant is whether they were read, perceived, or even slightly felt as being Arab/Muslim, suggesting that it is a conflation of racial, cultural, and religious elements that determined their experiences of racism and Islamophobia, or rather, of racialised Islamophobia. By adopting this focus, I do not mean to discount those studies that explore and analyse the complex negotiations that LGBTQ Muslims adopt in order to reconcile their religious faith and their sexualities (Yip, 2004a; Yip, 2009; Kugle, 2010; Kugle, 2014). These analyses are certainly important, but they represent only one part of the ways in which various lines of identification intersect in the lives of LGBTQ Muslim people. As this is the side that has been given the most importance and space in the limited research on the lives and identities of LGBTQ Muslims in western contexts, I believe it is important to include a deep and rigorous analysis of the ways in which racialisations contribute to further complicate the intersectional location inhabited by LGBTQ Muslims, or from a Muslim background. Moreover, such focus allows to acknowledge, observe and analyse the ways in which different types of solidarities and communities are built around identificatory categories that are not necessarily, or solely, linked to cultural/religious identification, but are based on a collective acknowledgement of different processes of racialisation that take place in the context of a Europe that is continuously constructed and imagined as white. This is the case, for example, of "queer of colour" or "racialised queer" communities and movements, analysed in detail in Chapter 8.

2.2.2 Intersectionality and its "identity problem"

As mentioned above, scholars have noted how the circulation and increased popularity of intersectionality have resulted in a conflation of meanings attributed to the concept, rendering it difficult to discern the theoretical and political underpinnings of its various applications (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). This is particularly true in relation to the use of the concept of identity in intersectional approaches, whereby different scholars and activists interpret and use it in various ways under titles that are similarly defined as "intersectional". While intersectional scholarship and activism have often been critiqued for their reliance on identity categories and their calls for identity politics, the uses of such categories in intersectional

research and practice can vary greatly, with some approaches being explicitly aimed at avoiding the essentialist pitfalls that an over-reliance on identity entails (Collins and Bilge, 2016).

In the same years in which Crenshaw was coining the term "intersectionality", other theoretical perspectives stemming from feminist academia and practice were taking more radical anti-essentialist stances, negating an ontological dimension to gender identity categories. In particular, queer theorists ventured into a radical deconstruction of gender and sexual categories, by showing they are discursively constructed, and their reiteration work to maintain and reinforce the regulatory system at work in society (Butler, 1989; Butler, 1993a; Corber and Valocchi, 2003). Crenshaw (1991), while acknowledging to a certain extent the need to deconstruct the category of "woman" in order to fully grasp the intragroup differences that had been erased by the feminist movement, was also aware of the importance given by society at large, and by minoritised groups, to identity categories.

> "To say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people – and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful – is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others. […] It is, then, a project that presumes that categories have meanings and consequences. And this projects's most pressing problem, in many if not most cases, is not the existence of the categories, but rather the particular values attached to them and the ways those values foster and create social hierarchies" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1296-1297).

In Crenshaw's view, the intersectional project is thus not in contradiction with a disruption of identity categories as social constructs, its goal being that of highlighting "the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245). Aware of the role of power structures in shaping the categorisation of identities, Crenshaw also acknowledges the role of minoritised groups in defining categories and in using them as tools to fight social injustice. In her view, identities represent "sites of resistance" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1297), which can lead to positive (counter)discourses of self-identification. Finally, Crenshaw calls for an identity politics that instead of focusing on the identities of few privileged portions of the groups fighting for recognition and justice – black men in the antiracist movement, and white women in the feminist movement – includes all subjectivities.

> "Recognizing that identity politics takes place at the site where categories intersect thus seems more fruitful than challenging the possibility of talking about categories at all. Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground

the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1299).

Collins and Bilge (2016: 133) suggest that we view identity categories as "strategically essentialist". The term "strategic essentialism", coined by Spivak (1988b; 1990), refers to the deployment by individuals or groups of certain aspects of their identities in order to achieve political goals in a specific social and historical context. Far from considering identities as fixed and unchanging, this perspective allows to observe the need of minoritised groups to use identity categories as part of their political strategies, while conceptualising those same categories as social constructs. Attempting to reconcile social constructionism and essentialism, Fuss (1989) warns about the dangers of viewing the two as rigidly separated. "The bar between essentialism and constructionism is by no means as solid and unassailable as advocates of both sides assume it to be" (Fuss, 1989: xii), and a rigid dichotomy between the two risks impeding the production of innovative knowledge.

A number of scholars have pointed out to the problems that arise from a reliance on identity politics, and the identity categories that undergird it (Chang and Culp Jr, 2002; Ehrenreich, 2002; Nash, 2008). Ehrenreich (2002) identifies four major problems that intersectionality faces when conceptualising identities. The first is the "zero sum problem" (Ehrenreich, 2002: 267): one's victory can be achieved only at the expense of the other, making it impossible to satisfy the interests of all subgroups. The second problem is that of the infinite regression of categories: once we start breaking down a group into the different subgroups that compose it, we start a process that is potentially infinite. Every category that refers to more than one individual cannot be homogeneous and coherent, and it is possible to decompose it into smaller units. The third problem, directly connected to the first two, is that of the necessity of identifying which oppressions matter the most, and the interests of which subgroups should be promoted. Finally, the fourth problem is that of relativism. Conceptualising identities as intersectional results in the impossibility to distinguish between oppressor and oppressed, since any individual could be either, depending on the context in which they are observed. In other words, it is not clear whether intersectionality can be considered a generalised theory of identity, that can be applied to both oppressors and oppressed, or if it is a "theory of marginalized subjectivity", limited in its explanatory power to the positionalities and experiences of multiply oppressed groups (Nash, 2008: 9-10). In addition to these problems, some scholars have highlighted how intersectional analyses tend to reproduce the same assumptions about categorical sameness and homogeneity that feminism was criticised for by those same intersectional studies (Nash, 2008; Dhamoon, 2010). Nash (2008) argues that the

early focus of intersectional scholars on black women assumed the category "black woman" to be as monolithic as the category "woman" had been for earlier feminist theorists.

> "Conceptualizing 'black womanhood' as its own contested, messy terrain requires that intersectionality theory abandon its commitment to sameness. […] Intersectionality can consider the differences between black women, producing a potentially uncomfortable disunity that allows for a richer and more robust conception of identity" (Nash, 2008: 12).

The intention that guided the application of an intersectional framework in this project was certainly not that of contributing to further essentialisations of LGBTQ Muslim identities, assuming a fictional unity and sameness of experiences and homogeneity of narratives. Rather, the goal was to show the complexity of the social location inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels. A rigorous focus on the multiple interlocking lines of power, oppression and identification that intervene in shaping the blurred and constantly (re)negotiated contours of such location has been a valuable tool in highlighting and nuancing it. In this sense, approaches to intersectionality that focus on processes and narratives of category-formation guided the application of intersectionality in this project. Rather than viewing the identities of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background as ontologically independent of the narratives that participants make of them, dynamics of identification have been observed in their continuous processes of negotiation between discursively produced identity categories and the agency of individuals and groups who chose if, when, and how to use them to express their identifications (and disidentifications).

In recent decades, various scholars have attempted to articulate frameworks that allow for the study of multiple interlocking systems of oppression without necessarily relying on concepts of (more or less fixed and essentialised) identity and identity politics (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Anthias, 2001; Anthias, 2002b; Yuval-Davis, 2007; Dhamoon, 2010; Weston, 2011). The attempt was that of reconciling a poststructuralist perspective, with its deconstruction of identity categories and binary systems, and those elements of intersectionality that allow to identify the various axes of oppression that shape specific experiences of groups and individuals (Staunæs, 2003; Brah and Phoenix, 2013). In this process of reframing intersectionality, some even conclude that "intersectionality is inevitably disruptively queer, and queer must be analytically intersectional" (Rahman, 2010: 956).

As a way to escape the essentialist *impasse* in which a focus on identities and categories can trap intersectionality, Dhamoon (2010) suggests to rather look at processes and systems. She argues that intersectional studies should focus on the processes that produce identity categories and differences among subjectivities, and the systems of domination that structure

those processes. Elaborating on the formulation of interlocking systems of oppression as "part of a single, historically created system" (Collins, 1990: 24-25), she coins the term "matrix of meaning-making" (Dhamoon, 2010: 9) to refer to the interaction by which categories, and their meanings, are produced, maintained and contested in the relation between individuals and groups and society at large. Instead of conceptualising identities and categories as rigid and fixed, she views them as blurred and fluid, constantly redefined through the interaction between the individual and the system. Dhamoon's conclusions describe intersectionality itself as a disruptive tool that allows for the deconstruction of the rigid and essentialised norms and categories that shape social relations:

> "An intersectional-type research paradigm serves to not simply describe and explain complex dynamics of power in specific contexts and at different levels of society but also critique or deconstruct and therefore *disrupt* the forces of power so as to offer alternative worldviews" (Dhamoon, 2010: 11).

Another way in which scholars have applied an intersectional lens, while avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism and its reliance on identity categories, has been that of reframing it in terms of narrative of location (Anthias, 2001; Anthias, 2002a; Anthias, 2002b; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2007; Weston, 2011). Weston (2011) argues that stories might be better at explaining the interactions of different systems of oppression than the geometric models used in traditional intersectional scholarship:

> "Could it be that stories do a better job than geometric models of conveying how race, class, gender, sexuality, and the like come alive? Embedded in stories are particular *renditions* of gender that are already raced and classed, renditions that show people in action, chasing down the curve-balls that identity throws their way. The moral of the stories? Gender may assume a million shapes, but it is never just gender" (Weston, 2011: 16).

The concept of "translocational positionality", introduced by Anthias (2001), is useful to understand how the interactions of sexualities, race, and gender can be observed and analysed without resorting to the category of identity. Anthias (2002b) questions the value of identity itself as an analytical tool:

> "The more important question relates to the very issue of the heuristic value of 'identity', to its *analytical* purchase as opposed to the lay or practical concept of identity used by actors themselves. […] We must ask what does the actual concept, for analytical purposes, enable or alternatively what does it disable?" (Anthias, 2002b: 492).

Her conclusion is that the ambiguity inherent in the concept of identity, together with the unsolved conceptual problems that underlie its deployment, work to disable scholars in understanding how the social world is experienced. She argues that not even a "soft" use of

identity, such as that of intersectional scholars who view identities as multiple and fragmented, can solve the problems inherent with its use, since they "still suggest that identity might be a possessive property of individuals rather than a process" (Anthias, 2002b: 495). According to her, the only way out from the essentialist trap of identity is to focus on narratives of location and positionalities, accounts that tell "a story about how we place ourselves in terms of social categories such as those of gender, ethnicity and class at a specific point in time and space" (Anthias, 2002b: 498). The term "translocational positionality" allows to view the subjectivity of the individual at its intersection between structure – the norms and roles that are socially constructed around identity categories such as those of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race – and the agency of the individual in identifying with categories and in performing them in their lived experiences. Moreover, by attributing a "translocational" character to the positionality of individuals, Anthias acknowledges the impossibility of addressing questions of exclusion, oppression and political mobilisation without taking into account multiple constructions of identity and difference, which can at times be in contradiction with one another. Such a narrative approach opens up possibilities for an analysis that accounts not only for processes of identification with the categories that are available in mainstream and counter discourses, but also on processes of disidentification, whereby groups and individuals respond and partially use the categories offered by such discourses, at the same time resignifying them by deploying them in unorthodox ways. Concepts of disidentification and disidentificatory practice have been articulated in queer of colour critique by Muñoz (1999). In the theoretical introduction to his work, he explicitly references black feminist and intersectional literature, further disentangling intersectional approaches from a rigid and essentialised view of identity categories.

It is with an awareness of these issues, debates, and possible solutions that I applied an intersectional approach. Following Rahman (2010), the belief is not only that queer perspectives on the fluidity of identity categories and a denial of their independent ontological status and intersectional approaches are not incompatible with one another. Rather, certain intersectional social locations can be viewed in all their queerness, as their existence, and the illumination of their existence, works exactly to disrupt and subvert the rigidity, fixity and essentialism of categories of identification and difference that shape social relations. In this sense, the study of LGBTQ Muslim subjectivities represents a privileged location to understand how an intersectional and a queer perspective can work together to unveil the ways in which identity categories are socially constructed.

> "[…] gay Muslims illustrate this nexus of oppression, caught between cultural and political Islamophobia and homophobia. […] the queer focus on unstable ontologies can be a relevant way to theorize this intersectionality because the lived experiences or standpoint of gay Muslims illuminates their identities as always ontologically deferred from the dominant identity categories of 'gay' and 'Muslim'" (Rahman, 2010: 946).

While "intersectionality theory directs us to researching the standpoint of those identities located at the site of the intersection", queer theory can in turn "help us to think about these issues of researching intersectionality precisely because it is focused on the uncertainties of identity categories" (Rahman, 2010: 951-952).

2.3 Conclusion

In the month of June 2018, when the end of my data collection in Brussels was approaching, the 7th European Transgender Council was taking place in Antwerp, about 50 km from the capital. Some participants to this study were there, as well as other friends and acquaintances from Brussels. When they came back from the Council, they all described it as an event where important issues and topics crossing the trans movement in Europe were raised, and lines of power and oppression linked to race and ethnicities actively disrupted by racialised participants to the meeting. When telling me about it, Sharky, one of the participants to this research, described it as the most radically anti-racist event he had ever been to in his life. When I was shown the zine that was produced during the event, one of the images in it immediately caught my attention, as it explicitly references some of the issues I was working on at the time in relation to the theoretical framework of this project.

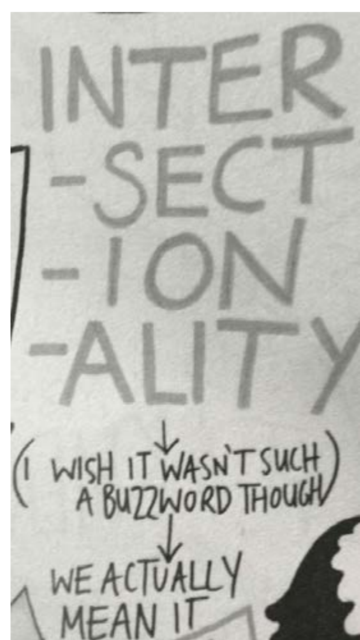

Figure 1: Extract from zine produced at the 7th European Transgender Council, Antwerp (2018)

The decision to include this image in the conclusion of the chapter in which I outline the theoretical framework of this project is motivated by two reasons. First, an acknowledgement of the origins of intersectionality at the interface of activism and academia serves as a reminder that scholarly work on the topic needs to be read and analysed in dialogue with texts and voices produced in movements for social justice. While this dialogue will be a central element in Chapter 7, I believe that the inclusion of this text at this point of my thesis can further signal my intention to ground the intersectional lens applied to this project in the ways in which the interlocking of multiple lines of domination is experienced, interpreted and narrated by individuals, groups, and movements for social justice in Brussels. Second, the words that appear in the text, wishing for intersectionality to not be such a buzzword, because "we actually mean it", are at the heart of the reflections that I presented in this chapter.

The chapter began with a brief overview of existing scholarship dealing with LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities, and the deployment of categories of sexual and gender diversity in the construction, maintenance and reinforcement of discourses of East/West civilisational clash. Through an analysis of the literature, I argued for the need to focus on LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities through an intersectional lens that allows to account for both the homo/bi/transphobia at work in racialised and white communities, and the racism and Islamophobia at work in western societies. The wide circulation of the concept of intersectionality, and the various meanings that have been attributed to the word in this circulation, make it necessary to further elucidate what is intended with intersectionality when applying it. I did so by focusing on two of the main critiques that have been moved to the concept. These are critiques of its whitening and loss of radical potential in its travelling to contexts other than the US, and of its heavy reliance on the concept of identity in its analysis of social relations. In the second section of the chapter, I argued for an intersectional approach that is in dialogue with postcolonial, queer, and queer of colour critiques in order to address issues that arise from some applications of intersectionality. In particular, I argued for the grounding of any intersectional approach in a serious consideration of processes of racialisation, resulting from specific colonial and imperial histories, and the adoption of a more procedural and narrative intersectional framework. To echo the text of the Transgender European Council zine, and adding to it a twist of my own, I also wish for intersectionality to not be such a buzzword, and this chapter is my attempt at explaining what I mean when I say "I mean it".

Chapter 3. Power, trust, and translation: Methodological reflections

Data collection for this research began on the day of my arrival in Brussels, on August 31st, 2017. Walking through Gare du Midi, after the short train ride from London, I was beginning my year-long ethnographic fieldwork in the city that I had learned to appreciate from afar and on a few short visits along the years. Suddenly, everything I saw, heard, thought and felt became potential data to be attentively observed, carefully collected, and later thoroughly analysed. I was finally in the role of "researcher" that I had been thinking and writing about for the good part of the previous year. The process of data collection started then and there, with me looking around the station trying to find the right exit, mentally recording the way I was feeling and what I was seeing around me. It continued later, in the flat that I would occupy for the next year, jotting down the first field-notes, with an enthusiasm for the recording that can only be attributed to it being the first day in the field. In the following twelve months I lived in Brussels, initially getting acquainted with the city and its communities, at times being annoyed with its more chaotic sides, and then becoming increasingly attached to it and to the people met along the way.

The research conducted in those months aimed to observe and analyse the daily experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in the city. This exploration would allow me to gain insight into the processes of identification and disidentification of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, as well as into the multiple and intersecting oppression they experience, and the alternative spaces of resistance to oppressive power dynamics that they create. The methodology designed to reach these aims is deeply influenced by postcolonial, black feminist and queer of colour epistemologies. The research was framed as an ethnography, and three distinct and complementary qualitative methods of data collection were employed: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and participatory theatre. The ethnographic approach that I employed is shaped by and in dialogue with post-structuralist reflections on power dynamics, knowledge production and circulation, and the role, positionality and reflexivity of the researcher. Such reflections, and their necessary blurring of the boundaries between the figures of "researcher" and "researched", and of "insider" and "outsider" (Mohammad, 2001; Kim, 2012), became particularly relevant when thinking about my specific positionality in relation to this project. As I will explain in more detail in later sections of this chapter, certain sides of my experiences and ways of self-identifying gave me some degree of insider status in the context of this research – namely, self-identifying (and being perceived as) an LGBTQ person from a

Muslim background. Other sides, such as my Italian upbringing, my citizenship status, my being in higher education, differentiated me from some or all the participants that I encountered.

This chapter is divided in two sections. The first, more descriptive one, outlines the methodological design for this project, focusing on how I employed participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and participatory theatre. The second section discusses some of the epistemological, ethical and political reflections that emerged from the collection of data, its analysis, and the writing of this work. After outlining the ways in which the concept of "ethnography" has been conceived and applied in this research, I proceed to focus on three interconnected aspects of this research that illustrate the complexity of power relations as they unfolded in this project, and the epistemological stance from which I addressed them. First, I discuss my positionality as researcher, showing how it does not fit in a strict binary differentiation of insider/outsider, but how my presence in the field was marked by constant fluctuations between being recognised in my similarities to participants and distanced in my differences. Such complex positionality, in relation to an equally complex context where the research was conducted, is particularly relevant when reflecting upon the languages used in this project and the challenge of translating the data, which is the focus of the second section. After this, I discuss the ways in which I built trust with participants in the field, in my attempt to overcome their initial diffidence and scepticism. Finally, I present my reflections on the differences that exist among participants and their experiences, which often led to their voices being in contradiction with one another, and how I addressed this internal diversity when writing this thesis.

3.1 Methodological Design

I conducted my ethnographic research for 12 months in the city of Brussels, from August 2017 to August 2018. Three methods of data collection were employed: participant observation in various spaces and events connected to LGBTQ and/or Muslim groups and communities; 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels; one weekend of participatory theatre workshop with nine LGBTQ participants from a Muslim background. The data collected in the field consists of field-notes that recorded my observations in the various activities, events and conversations I participated in, journal entries that recorded my reflections, feelings and preliminary analyses of data, and the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews (see table 1).

Format of data	Recording
Fieldnotes	Participant observation in a total of 53 semi-public or public events and activities I participated to in the 12 months of research
	Observations from the semi-structured interviews, and the communication that happened immediately before or after
	Observations from the residential weekend of participatory theatre activities
	Observations of informal and unstructured conversations with participants and other actors encountered in the field
Journal entries	Personal reflections, feelings, and preliminary interpretations of data
Transcriptions	30 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ participants from a Muslim background

Table 1: Summary of data collected in the field

The methods above were chosen because they allow for the understanding of complex interconnected dynamics of processes of identification, disidentification and identity negotiation that are the object of inquiry. Specifically, a qualitative approach enables the observation, exploration and analysis of the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in the nuances that can be conveyed through the narratives they make of them. The methods chosen as part of this ethnography aimed to collect different but complementary data. Its analysis as a unitary corpus would then result in a complex image whereby participants' experiences and movements through the city, and their narratives about such experiences and movements, would be in dialogue, offering a nuanced and complex insight into their relationship to Brussels. Specifically, participant observation aimed to collect data on the daily lives and experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background moving through the city as observed by me, including the ways in which they respond to the dynamics of power at work in the city. Complementary to this, in-depth semi-structured interviews were more focused on the narratives that participants produce about their daily experiences and movements. Finally, participatory theatre allowed for the collection of narratives produced by

participants in not-only-verbal ways, thus offering an insight into the affective experiences of shifting identity negotiations in the city.

The research was designed and conducted in collaboration with Merhaba, a Belgian organisation working with and for LGBTQ people from a migratory background. Ethical approval was sought from Newcastle University, and this was granted before the beginning of fieldwork (see Appendix F). Informed consent was sought from participants, and confidentiality forms were signed by all the interviewed participants (see Appendix C). All data is presented through the use of pseudonyms, in most cases chosen by participants themselves. In some cases, when I was worried about the delicate nature of information that had been shared with me in the field, even when consent had already been given, I contacted participants again to make sure they understood the ways in which the information could be used in this thesis, and that they agreed to its use. This reflects a view of informed consent as an ongoing process that unfolds through time, rather than something granted and concluded through the act of signing a form (Lipson, 1994).

3.1.1 Collecting Data I: Participant observation

Despite being a common method of qualitative data collection in the social sciences, it can be difficult to find a consensus on a single definition of participant observation (Dewalt *et al.*, 1998). For some, participant observation is inextricably linked to ethnographic practice (Spradley, 1980), while for others the expression can function as an umbrella term encompassing all the observational activities carried out by the anthropologist (Agar, 1996). According to Malinowski (2002 [1922]), participant observation requires the researcher to carry out their observations from within the community under study, to adopt the perspective of the observed subjects in order to understand how they see the world. What I refer to here as participant observation is its somewhat narrower definition given by Dewalt et al. (1998): "one among a number of methods that are used in anthropological fieldwork", its characterising features being "the explicit use of behavioural analysis and recording of the information gained from participating and observing" (Dewalt et al., 1998: 259). What distinguishes participant observation from the activities of observation and participation that all human beings engage with, is the recording and analysing of the information gathered in the process. In turn, what distinguishes participant observation from other activities of observation carried out by researchers is exactly their "participation" in the context that is being studied (Ashworth, 1995): being "in" the groups under study and "among" research participants, rather than observing from an objective "side".

While the origins and development of this method of inquiry are closely linked to an anthropological disciplinary framework, participant observation has been applied across a wide variety of disciplines in the social sciences. With regards to geography, Nayak (2003: 29) argues that the adoption of ethnographic methods and perspectives in the discipline can result in a “more detailed treatment of people and place”, as “ethnography is an excellent meeting point for geographers and other social scientists wishing to pursue spatially embedded analyses of cultural identity”. Watson and Till (2010: 122) add that “geographers have brought our discipline’s theorizations of space, place, scale, landscape, and environment to develop further understandings of spatial processes and concepts in ethnography. We study how everyday social interactions create public and private spaces at multiple scales, including bodies, cities, neighbourhood, and tourism sites”, as well as “the complex power and ethical relations that accompany such practices”. The most intuitive benefit of the method is that it allows for the observation of individual and group behaviour, without relying solely on the narratives produced about it. Focusing uniquely on verbal accounts of lived experiences, such as those produced during interviews, could represent a limit, especially when what is researched is not easily verbalised (Becker and Geer, 1957; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Watson and Till, 2010). The focus of participant observation on behaviours and practices thus makes it “a uniquely useful method for uncovering the processes and meanings that undergird sociospatial life” (Herbert, 2000: 550).

One of the first steps taken in the field was to start participating in events organised by LGBTQ groups and associations in Brussels. The RainbowHouse soon became central in my exploration. RainbowHouse Brussels, created in 2001, is the network organisation that includes most of the LGBTQI+ associations operating in the city. Counting more than fifty member associations (RainbowHouse Brussels, [date unknown]-b), and having its headquarters right in the central Rue Marché au Charbon, informally known as the Gay Street, the RainbowHouse represented a perfect access point to a range of different groups and activities connected to the LGBTQ scene in the city. During my first weeks in Brussels, I made it a habit to spend my evenings at the bar of the RainbowHouse, each night managed by a different organisation of the network. This allowed me to have informal conversations with other patrons and to gain more familiarity with my surroundings. Being clear and transparent about my position and role as a researcher was a priority since the beginning of fieldwork. When a person would ask me about my job, or about the reasons that had brought me to Brussels, I was always open about my being a PhD student, and I would always tell them about my research topic. Opting for openness was necessary in order to give people freedom

in their decisions on whether to interact with me and on what information to disclose and/or retain if they decided to have a conversation.

The range of spaces that I accessed gradually expanded over the months. I soon started making my way out in other bars and clubs along the Gay Street. Through Merhaba, collaborative partner for this study, I was granted access to specific events organised by the association. These included a day of video shooting for an advocacy campaign, conferences and seminars, activities aimed at the empowerment of participants, and parties. In addition to these, I participated to the public events that mark the LGBTQ calendar of the city. Among these, of particular relevance for this research were the queer film festival Pink Screens, the Massimadi Film Festival – a festival of LGBTQ movies of Africa and its diasporas, and the activities and celebrations connected to Pride. Finally, some informal conversations and interviews led to a deepening of bonds of friendship and trust with participants. This, in turn, prompted them to invite me to share with them moments of their daily lives that were not connected to the more public events and spaces outlined above. In some cases, I was invited to their place for a meal or a coffee, and this led to the possibility of meeting their friends, partners, and/or family members. In other instances, I just met them in the city for a drink or a walk. All these moments proved to be unique opportunities to explore and observe the city together with participants, and to get closer to their perspective on it.

While this was not my initial intention, or quite simply it was not something I had given much thought to prior to my arrival in Brussels, my participant observation inevitably extended from material spaces to more virtual spaces that, I increasingly realised, are very important for racialised LGBTQ persons and groups in Brussels. In the month of November 2017 I was invited to a secret Facebook group by and for LGBTQ people of colour living in French-speaking Europe, mainly Belgium and France. I was unaware of its existence, and I soon learned that it is a non-mixed group – i.e. non-LGBTQ and white people cannot be invited to it – and it works as a networking space where people post relevant events and inspiring and/or informative articles, as well as ask for help if they need support from the community. Regularly checking the group page allowed me to observe how online communities of LGBTQ racialised people formed and functioned. In addition to this, the group was a useful tool to help me orient myself in the universe of groups, networks and events that are related to the community. These networks go well beyond the city of Brussels, and online observation allowed me to note and analyse the transnational dimension of the community, at least in the French-speaking context. I conceived of my participation on these platforms as any activity of participant observation that I engaged with in the city. When I observed something that I

deemed relevant to this research, I took notes on it, being aware of not breaking anyone's anonymity.

Data recording is a fundamental feature of participant observation as a method of data collection (Dewalt *et al.*, 1998). The ways in which this can take shape are varied, and choosing which one works best in the specific context of the research project is a necessary task of ethnographic work (Watson and Till, 2010). For this project, the main criteria guiding my choice was the need to guarantee the safety and well-being of the people who accessed the spaces where I conducted my observations. All the spaces I accessed as an observer were somehow delicate. People who participated to events and activities might face negative consequences should their participation be rendered public. Some of the activities I was given access to, such as those organised by Merhaba, had the creation of a safe space for participants as one of their explicit goals. In addition to being as transparent as possible about my status of researcher, I intended to avoid any behaviour that might cause discomfort. I therefore decided to refrain from taking field notes in public, as well as from taking videos or pictures. The only exception to this rule was my taking quick notes on the phone when I was worried I would forget some piece of information that I had just received. Immediately after each event or activity, once home, I would write down my field notes in my notebook. These would then be retrieved, copied and digitised on my computer in the following days.

3.1.2 Collecting Data II: Semi-structured Interviews

A second method of inquiry for this research was the undertaking of 30 interviews with LGBTQ persons from a Muslim background living in Brussels. Halfway between the two ends of a continuum that sees structured interviews on one side, and unstructured forms of interviews such as oral histories on the other, the form of semi-structured interviews "has some degree of predetermined order but still ensures flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informant" (Dunn, 2005: 80). While the interviews had a structure, determined by a list of questions/topics that I wanted to touch on during the interaction, this was very flexible, and participants were free to direct the interview towards topics they considered relevant. Interviews took the form of a conversation in which both researcher and participant shared the power to decide what issues to discuss, and from what angle to tackle them (Longhurst, 2016). Appendix E offers the first list of questions that guided the conduction of interviews. This changed significantly over the months, but it nonetheless offers an insight into the broader topics that were touched upon during the interviews, and the form of the questions used to introduce them.

The reason behind the adoption of semi-structured interviews is linked to the epistemological perspective from which my research questions stem. While working on the theoretical framework for my research, I grew increasingly uncomfortable with the essentialising risks that intersectional approaches have been critiqued for (Chang and Culp Jr, 2002; Ehrenreich, 2002; Nash, 2008; Dhamoon, 2010; Anthias, 2012), as presented in Chapter 2. Analyses that heavily rely on identity categories and identity politics, however multiple and interconnected they are conceptualised, risk to fall into the trap of essentialism, by considering such categories, and the "identities" they refer to, as ontologically coherent and distinct from one another. In this project, intersectionality, and the interconnectedness between different experiences of group and individual identification and oppression, are understood as "narratives of positionality" (Anthias, 2002b). Framing the intersections of different axes of power as the stories that participants make about them allows for a deeper understanding of the ways in which the agency of the individual and the norms and roles at work in society constantly interact in shaping their story and their vision of self (Anthias, 2002b; Weston, 2011). Semi-structured interviews can function as an access point to the narratives that LGBTQ Muslim persons make of their positionality, as well as their relationships with the urban space they inhabit and move through. "Words, stories, narratives matter. It is how we explain ourselves to others, how we justify our actions (or inaction), how we present ourselves to others" (McDowell, 2010: 156), and interviews can function as a tool to collect such words, stories, narratives.

As I began my research, I intended to recruit participants for interviews through the informal conversations I had while conducting participant observation. I thought it important that recruitment would stem smoothly from my presence in the field and the interactions I was having with people around me. Participants were recruited through various channels, reflecting the variety of events, spaces, communities, and networks that I had access to in the field. Recruitment of a potential participant would always begin with an informal conversation. In most cases, talking about the research project was a natural consequence of my explaining the reason for being in the city. During these conversations, I would briefly outline the research topic, and, in case they were interested, suggest we meet for a coffee or tea, when I would give them further details. During this second informal/informative meeting participants would receive an information sheet (see Appendix B) containing the details of the project, and they would have the chance to ask questions about it. During this meeting, particular attention would be paid to explaining how I would ensure their anonymity and confidentiality. They would then decide whether they still wanted to participate. If they did,

we would meet a third time for the interview. Before the interview, participants were given a consent and confidentiality form to sign (see Appendix C), and we would have another moment to make sure that all relevant details of the research process were clear and agreed upon. In addition to this, they were given a questionnaire to fill before the beginning of the interview, which allowed me to collect some demographic information about them (see Appendix D).

Almost two thirds of participants – 19 out of 30 – were recruited through informal conversations that took place at various public or semi-public events and spaces in the city. These include cultural festivals, public demonstrations of the LGBTQ community, parties, and regular nights out at the Rainbow House and in the Gay Street. It is important to mention that out of these nineteen, five were recruited at events organised by Merhaba. Of the other participants, four were recruited through snowballing, one over an informal conversation at a private party, and five through Grindr, a dating application for gay and bisexual men.

Grindr was not one of the channels that I intended to use for recruitment prior to my arrival in Brussels. In fact, the recruitment of the first participants through this platform was somehow accidental. I had had a Grindr account, and had been active on it, long before beginning this research. As soon as I started using the application in Brussels, I realised that I needed to make some decisions regarding my online presence while in the field. Just by scrolling down the grid of profiles, lots of information that was relevant to my research questions started catching my attention: flags of North African countries, racial "preferences" stated in profile descriptions, and profile descriptions written in Arabic. As I stated earlier in the chapter, the ethnography I conducted in Brussels was intended to be as overt as possible, which prompted me to try and be completely transparent regarding my status of researcher in the city whenever possible. This was easier to do in material spaces, where the "what do you do" question is often one of the first lines in a conversation with a stranger. On Grindr, though, interactions can be very goal-oriented, and people who started chatting with me were not necessarily interested in knowing what had brought me to Brussels. I wanted to make sure that people, especially people from a Muslim background, had the freedom to choose to interact with me, aware of my status as a researcher, or refrain from it, or even block me should they be uncomfortable with the idea that a person conducting research would have access to their Grindr profile. I therefore took the decision to change my profile description. The new description read: "PhD researcher exploring the experiences and narratives of the city by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background". I did not change the description with the intention of recruiting participants, but I wanted to inform them of my positionality. While I

cannot know whether anyone decided against contacting me, or blocked me, because of my description, I know that a few people contacted me expressing an interest in my research. Conversations on the project and its guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality ensued, and some of these developed into face-to-face meetings, which were then followed by the five semi-structured interviews.

The group of participants who were interviewed was highly diverse. With being/self-identifying as LGBTQ and from a Muslim background and living in Brussels as the common features among participants, they differ along every other possible line: age, gender, national/migratory background, citizenship status, race/ethnicity, languages spoken, length of time spent in Brussels prior to the interview, degree of religious affiliation. Despite this diversity, a look at the composition of the group of participants shows some trends that are indicative of my positionality in the field (see Appendix A). In terms of age, the bulk of participants were in their 20's at the time of the interview, which is also the age group I was in. Something similar can be observed with the gender composition of the group of participants. While the initial intention was that of being as equal as possible in the representation of people identifying as men, women, or non-binary, this proved to be a bit more complicated in the field. While delving into the counting of numbers of "men" and "women" in a group of participants where four people indicated their gender identity as fluid, queer or neutral is a bit complicated, we can try to use their preferred pronouns to assess some sort of gender proportion in the group. If we do so, we can see how people who prefer the use of the pronouns "she/hers/her" are 10 out of 30. In addition to this, only three participants identify as trans. In terms of national background of participants and/or their families, most participants are from a North African background, with Moroccan origins being the most recurrent. This partly reflects the demographic composition of the population in Brussels, where migratory flows from Morocco have been the most prominent in the past century. Nonetheless, people from a Turkish background are underrepresented in this research, Turkish communities being the second most numerous Muslim group in the city. All these disproportions in representation stem directly from the recruitment strategies that I used in the field, namely the engagement in direct conversation with participants in the spaces I moved through. As such, they reflect my positionality in the field as a 28 years old cisgender queer man from a Moroccan background. While the main goal of this research is not representativeness, it is nonetheless important to notice the limits that my positionality produced in giving me access to different groups and communities. Along the different phases of the project, I aimed to be constantly aware of this, and attempts at widening the

representation and inclusivity of the research have always been a priority. Despite these attempts, the composition of the group of participants can be considered only partially inclusive and representative of the diversity that can be found among LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels.

3.1.3 Collecting data III: Participatory Theatre

The organisation of a weekend of participatory theatre activities was one of the ways in which the collaborative partner organisation Merhaba and I directly collaborated with one another (more on this in the next section). The theatre activities took place over the weekend of the 9th-10th-11th of March 2018. Activities started on the Friday evening in a guest house rented by Merhaba in Sint-Niklaas, a small town 40 minutes away from Brussels. The weekend workshop was attended by nine LGBTQ persons from a Muslim background who live in Brussels, and it was facilitated by Sam Mouissat, project manager at Merhaba, and myself. All participants, apart from one, were already regular participants to activities organised by Merhaba. The other one, Sharky, was a person I had interviewed a few weeks earlier.

The idea of incorporating theatre-based methodologies in the research design emerged from reflections on the limits of more "traditional" qualitative methodologies in allowing for the collection of the narratives people make of their lives and experiences, and the possibilities that arts-based methodologies open up (Fabian, 1990; Conrad, 2004; Leavy, 2015; Erel *et al.*, 2017). The benefits of using theatre-based techniques include the possibility for participants and researcher to open a channel of communication and self-expression about themes, topics and subjects that cannot easily be verbalised. Instead, they can be represented "only through action, enactment, or performance" (Fabian, 1990: 6). Some aspects of their lives might be particularly difficult to verbalise for participants, such as their experiences in relation to processes of identification (Leavy 2015) or to episodes of discrimination and oppression (Erel et al., 2017: 8). In light of these observations, participatory theatre as a research method seemed particularly relevant to the research at hand. As noted, among others, by Puar (2007), Rahman (2010) and El-Tayeb (2012), the position of LGBTQ Muslim subjectivities in western societies is one that is characterised by discursive erasure, invisibility and impossibility. In such a context, narratives pertaining to processes of identification and disidentification, as well as everyday experiences of discrimination and oppression, might be better expressed by participants through the creative use of their bodies and voices.

In the original methodological design of the project, I had planned to organise an entire cycle of workshops over the course of three months. In that scenario, I would meet participants two

hours a week, and the cycle of workshops would end with a final performance. When I first pitched the idea to Merhaba, the reaction was enthusiastic. When we started having more practical conversations about it, we realised that a three-months theatre project was not the most feasible of options with the time and resources available. Rather, we opted for an intensive residential weekend out of the city that would be part of the regular calendar of activities that Merhaba offers to its members.

The activities that were proposed to the group during the weekend mainly drew from the technique of Image Theatre, formulated by Augusto Boal (1979, 1992, 1995) as tools for the empowerment of disenfranchised communities and groups. In Image Theatre workshops, participants are asked to create individual and group images inspired by a theme that has previously been agreed upon. After the creation of the images by participants, these are discussed in group (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 2008: 7). As a technique, it was articulated precisely out of a necessity of freeing the body and its capabilities for communication and self-expression from the limits posed by words and language (Boal, 1992: 174). It is this attempt at overcoming words and text, and the power relations these mirror and reproduce, that leads Perry (2012: 116) to argue that "Image Theatre may provide an opportunity […] to facilitate the emergence of participants' individual and collective stories of domination and oppression for the purpose of developing strategies for personal and social transformation". Data from the workshops was recorded in the form of notes, treating the weekend activities as any other event where participant observation was conducted.

3.1.4 Working with Merhaba as a collaborative partner

The association Merhaba, collaborative partner for this research project, is a "movement comprising women, men and trans-gender persons mainly with roots in the Magreb [*sic*], the Middle East, Turkey and sub-Saharan Africa who feel attracted by persons of the same sex and/or question their own sexuality or gender identity (Merhaba, [date unknown]-b). Its aim is "to promote the welfare, emancipation, social participation and acceptability of all LGBTQIs […] from ethno-cultural minorities" (ibid.). The organisation offers counselling services, as well as a number of other initiatives aimed at increasing the well-being and self-empowerment of participants. In addition to this, the association is committed to raising awareness and transferring knowledge about the relations between culture, ethnicity, religion and sexuality across a variety of communities and social actors.

My collaboration with Merhaba started in the very first phases of this study, and the organisation was involved when the first drafts of the project proposal were being written.

During the first year of the project, there were regular contacts, via e-mail and Skype, between Merhaba and me. On these occasions, we discussed the feasibility of my fieldwork plans, as well as how to deal with potential issues of access and how to ensure the well-being of participants. This phase of conversations culminated in my preliminary visit to Brussels in June 2017. On this occasion I had the chance to meet my contact person in Merhaba face to face, and agree the terms of our collaboration.

In practical terms, Merhaba and I collaborated in three distinct ways. First, Merhaba provided me with useful feedback and insight while I conducted my fieldwork. During my stay in Brussels, I would have regular meetings with Merhaba's project manager. These meetings would begin with a general conversation about the project and its progress. Sam would then ask specific questions about interesting, relevant or problematic nodes of the research process. Such asking and probing from her part proved extremely useful in directing my focus, and in helping me refine my methods. Second, Merhaba allowed me to participate as an observer to various events that it organised for its members. These included Merhaba Funky Parties, regular parties organized in bars around the city and targeted at the LGBTQI population from ethnic and cultural minority backgrounds; Merhabar, a monthly informal gathering for Merhaba members and their friends; one-off activities and events aimed at creating a safe space for the sharing of experiences among participants and to devise strategies for individual and group self-empowerment. These spaces and activities were extremely important in the recruitment phase of my research. Participation to these allowed me to engage in conversations with members of the organisation, and to introduce myself and the project. Finally, Merhaba and I collaborated in the planning and facilitation of the weekend of participatory theatre activities outlined above.

3.1.5 Analysing data

The corpus of data that resulted from the employment of the methods outlined above consisted of field notes, journal entries and interview transcripts. All field notes were written in English and transferred in digital format a few days after each observation was conducted. Interviews were transcribed in English or French, the two languages in which interviews were conducted, by the month of October 2018 (I say more on the languages used during research and the process of translation in later sections of this chapter). All the documents that contained data were stored on my laptop, and they were analysed as part of a unitary and organic corpus. The analysis was conducted on the files in their original language, and only extracts that are quoted in this thesis were translated from French into English.

The data was analysed in two phases. The first started a few weeks after my arrival in Brussels. As soon as I started collecting data I began working on it in NVivo. In this phase, this meant finding broad codes that would help me notice macro-themes that were emerging as I was conducting my research. These broader themes would then become gradually more detailed, and the data subcoded accordingly, as the research proceeded. This operation of preliminary coding while in the field was useful in two ways. On the one hand, it allowed me to have a sense of what was emerging from the data, beyond the more immediate feelings of satisfaction or frustration for the perceived richness or poorness of data collected during a specific interview or observation. On the other, reflecting on these preliminary findings helped me refine my inquiry. As a result of the emergence of certain common topics from the data, I could slightly modify the structure of the interviews, or make more informed choices about which spaces of the city to explore through my participant observation. The second phase of the analysis took place upon my return from fieldwork, once all data had been collected. In this phase, rather than starting from broader codes to then refine them at a later stage, the opposite strategy was used, as a way to counterbalance and, in a way, test the codes produced in the preliminary phase. Documents were thus coded in high detail, and in a second moment more general codes were found to regroup them.

3.2 Reflections from the field: What kind of ethnography? What kind of ethnographer?

Ethnographic approaches, and more generally qualitative approaches to research, have gone through a process of re-framing since the 1970s, as a consequence of post-structuralist critiques to the power relations at work in processes of knowledge production (Clifford, 1986; Geertz, 1988). Ethnography, in its early articulations, was seen as a somewhat objective methodology, in which the researcher/observer would gain knowledge on the observed communities by "being there" and scrutinising social reality through their neutral, objective gaze (Malinowski, 2002 [1922]). From the 1970s on, the assumed objectivity and neutrality of the researcher's perspective was gradually rejected (Clifford, 1986; Collins and Gallinat, 2010). Reflections on the situatedness of knowledge by feminist theorists (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991), and postcolonial critiques to the influences of power in knowledge production (Said, 1988; 2003), had a great impact on conceptualisations and applications of qualitative inquiry. As a result, the role of the researcher is not framed as that of the observer who could neutrally and objectively reach some form of scientific truth on the ways in which individuals behave, interact and perceive the social world. They can now be seen as bringing to the field all the complexity of their past experiences, memories and layers of identities (Collins and Gallinat, 2010). Not only are these unavoidably there, but they are in fact a

resource that allows them to find that partial truth that "no other such observer can recognize" (Leach, 1984: 22). In the words of Collins (2010: 228), "as the self is a resource in life, so must it be during the doing of ethnography".

A queer perspective on qualitative research can provide further insights into the meaning of "participation" in the field, and of the ethnographic "being there". Giametta (2018) deals with questions that resonate with those that guided my data collection:

> "every social researcher I knew was talking about it with such unquestioned confidence yet I could not figure out *how* to 'participate'. Participate in what and where? […] It became clear to me that before researching I needed to search for the *sense of participation* in my study" (Giametta, 2018: 6).

According to Giametta, participant observation needs to be queered if one is to overcome the limits inherent in its traditional assumptions about a "distance" between researcher and researched. Because of the multiplicity of meanings attributed to the word "queer", it is not easy to define what the act of "queering" a methodology entails (Browne and Nash, 2010; Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha, 2017). Queer calls for a disruption of the rigidly binarised and essentialised categories that discipline social relations suggest that "queering" refers to the active disruption of all those social norms and identity categories that function as the assumed pillars of mainstream discourses. In Seidman's (1997: xi) words, "to queer" is "to make strange […] what is considered known, familiar, and commonplace". Such estrangement does not only involve the social world that is being observed and analysed, but all those norms and categories that serve to discipline, by fixing and essentialising them, research roles and relationships. A queer methodology is thus not only one that focuses on non-normative performances and identifications, and the disruption they produce in systems of power, but it is also attentively focused on how those systems of power shape conceptualisations and applications of social research, and envisions possible ways to disrupt them from within the research itself (Hammers and Brown, 2004; McCann, 2016; McDonald, 2017).

According to Valocchi (2005), ethnography can be particularly receptive of such queer disruptions, as it already understands knowledge as partial in its being situated in a specific context. Moreover, the rich and multi-layered data that is produced through ethnographic methods is useful in illuminating the nuances and complexities that queer approaches to research call for (McDonald, 2016). As shown by Rooke (2009), a queer ethnography is one that takes into serious account, at all stages of research, the fluidity of roles, emotions, affects, and shifting relations of power and proximity that colour the field between and across researchers and researched. In addition to, or rather as the quasi-inevitable corollary of, the

application of a queer deconstructive lens on the social relations that are being observed, a queer ethnographer is required to "work from an honest sense of oneself that is open and reflexive" (Rooke, 2009: 154). At one time open to different affective possibilities, and reflexive on how these influence and are influenced by the research as it unfolds, the ethnographer becomes increasingly aware of the embodied nature of their presence in the field. In this sense, participation cannot simply refer to their material immersion in the context under study, nor can observation simply refer to what the researcher can see with their eyes. In this reflexive openness, the participant observer, coming to the field with all their baggage of memories, past experiences, layers of identities, and performing body, can let themselves be affected by the specific interactions they engage with in their research (Pink, 2009; Favret-Saada, 2012). The result is thus a participation that is, in Di Feliciantionio and Gadelha's (2017: 280) words, "dirty", as it does not "clean those elements that could compromise the analysis according to the positivist model of knowledge […] (intuitions, feelings, affects) […], as they belong to the field of inaccuracy".

In resonance with these reflections, this study was guided by a desire to keep an openness to such "inaccurate" elements during research. To do so, it was necessary to avoid presumptions of distance and intellectualised neutrality between me and the data collected from participants. The data that I was committed to collecting required an immersion in the social context of Brussels, and its LGBTQ racialised scene, that went beyond the simple "being there as an observer". Moreover, such a limited immersion would probably not have been possible for me. Arriving in the field as a queer person from a Muslim background, with years of experience in LGBTQ and anti-racist activism prior to my doctoral studies, distance, neutrality and "clean" participation were not something that I ever thought I would be able, or want to, achieve during my research. These experiences, embodied memories, and layers of identification had an inevitable impact on the attitudes and behaviours that I put in place during fieldwork, and they influenced the nature of my participation in all the contexts that I accessed in Brussels. On a practical level, this meant that, during my fieldwork, I played a number of different roles in addition to that of the "external researcher". All these roles have been fundamental in shaping the kind of knowledge that was co-produced in the interaction with research participants. They enabled some encounters and exchanges, while limiting, and even prohibiting, others (Howard *et al.*, 2016).

Most of the time I was a simple participant, and my observation was based on interactions with peers during activities that we participated to. During the weekend of theatre activities with Merhaba, I helped the organisation in the planning and conduction of the activities. At

other times, in my interactions with participants, I was in a position of being able to help them in ways that went beyond the scope of the research. An example of this is an informal conversation that I had with Medhi. A few weeks after our interview, Medhi contacted me to ask if I could help him with something. During the interview he had told me that he was in the process of requesting the status of refugee in Belgium on the grounds of his sexual orientation, and his impossibility to live safely in his country of origin. He texted me when the commission set the date for his hearing, and he was very worried about the kind of questions they would ask. Specifically, he asked me if I could discuss some of the vocabulary related to LGBTQ groups and communities, since he felt confused about them. We met for a drink, and I was happy to clarify his doubts and try to reassure him about the whole process. This is one example among many interactions with participants where the main aim was not that of collecting data, but which smoothly stemmed from the specific relationship that was being built between us.

The following sections present and discuss in more detail four themes that emerged in their relevance when reflecting on the most challenging methodological aspects of my research. They are all linked to the more general conceptualisation of queer ethnography outlined above, and each section is aimed at both illuminating the limits of the data presented and analysed in this work, as well as the specificity of the knowledge that was co-produced with participants in the field. In the first section, I address issues of power and positionality, specifically in relation to my positions of privilege in the field, and how I attempted to address these. In the second, I outline and discuss the challenges, limits and potentials that a multilingual approach to this ethnography entailed. Thirdly, I discuss one of the most challenging aspects of my presence in the field, that of building trust with participants over time. Finally, I address the great diversity of positions, narratives, worldviews and ways of self-identifying that emerged from the data collection and analysis. I argue that what could be considered as a detrimental element to the coherence of the thesis, becomes of great value in a project that aims to apply an intersectional and queer framework to the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, as it allows to illuminate the complexities and nuances that differentiate them, in contrast with and disruption of mainstream discourses that work to homogenise, flatten and essentialise the group.

3.2.1 In(sider), out(sider), or somewhere (someone) else entirely

Reflections on my specific position as a researcher have been central in all phases of this project, and they involved a continuous attempt at being aware of, and finding ways to

address, the privileges and power differentials that are linked to such a position. My positionality is one that confirms the blurring of clear-cut boundaries between the positions of insider and outsider as framed by feminist scholars (Mohammad, 2001; Watson and Till, 2010). Traditionally, an insider position in ethnography has been formulated as that whereby researcher and researched share the identity traits that are central to the research. In ethnographies of groups and communities of colour, this has been understood in terms of "racial matching", where researcher and researched share the same racial/ethnic identity (Kim, 2012). This view has been criticised and nuanced by pointing out the simplifications it operates in considering racial/ethnic backgrounds as homogeneous, binary and fixed categories (Rhodes, 1994; Nayak, 2006), and thus on the erasure of the multiple difference that may shape the research relationship beyond identity categories (Twine, 2000). Kim (2012) points out the need to complicate the idea of "insider" ethnographer on the ground of "racial matching" in a world where multiple migration trajectories and mobilities result in a variety of positionalities occupied by researchers and researched, for whom having a certain racial/ethnic background might mean radically different things.

If I were to frame my status on an insider/outsider binary, my identifying as a queer person from a Muslim background could be viewed as some form of racial/sexuality "matching" between me and participants. Nonetheless, a number of differences among us resulted in relationships that oscillated between mutual recognition and a sense of distance. First, Brussels is not the city I live in, nor the one where I grew up. My being a foreigner in Brussels, and in Belgium in general, distanced me from the participants I interacted with. My native language, Italian, was not shared with any of the participants I encountered, and my accent, together with my Italian first name, were features that would often be perceived as markers of difference between me and participants. Another element that is important to mention when talking about the factors that influenced my research was my involvement in LGBTQ activism. As pointed out by Kobayashi (1994), in a situation in which the researcher shares some of the experiences of participants and is involved in political action for social change, there is the risk of substituting the voice of participants with one's own, led by the illusion that between the two there can be an almost intuitive understanding. What often emerges from ethnographic data is instead a variety of political views from the part of participants, that can be in contrast with one another, and with those held by the researcher (Twine, 2000; Alexander, 2003), further contributing to the blurring of clear boundaries between insider and outsider status. All these elements – my sexual orientation and gender identity, my ethnic and religious background, my nationality, my status as researcher, and my

past experiences in activism – influenced the ways in which I collected data, interpreted them, and wrote about them. Moreover, they influenced the ways in which participants read me and my presence in the field, prompting my reflections on it to move beyond the insider/outsider dichotomy. Rather, I learned to view my position as one that was constantly shifting and moving between different degrees of "insiderness" and "outsiderness", depending on the specific context in which I was conducting research, and the specific relationships I was building with participants. Recognitions of similarities and tensions over differences have been equally important in the co-production of the specific knowledge that is presented in this work. In other words, the interactions that constitute the backbone of this thesis took place in a field marked by "instances of confirmation and reactions regarding commonalities and difference" (Kim, 2012: 136), the complexity of which I tried to retain and valorise in the writing of its results.

Some of the elements outlined above – e.g. my sexual orientation and racial background – do not necessarily imply privilege over research participants. Others, like my being a person with access to higher education, receiving a monthly scholarship to conduct my research, or having an EU citizenship and passport, marked a striking differential in access to opportunities between us. Research activities that involve communication between a researcher and a (group of) participant(s) are rife with power dynamics. To make this point, McDowell (2010) compares the research interview to a police interrogation. While a self-reflexive approach is fundamental if the researcher is to be aware of the power dynamics at play, reflexivity alone can only "make us more aware of asymmetrical or exploitative relationships, but it cannot remove them" (England, 1994: 86). As England (1994) notes, feminist researchers have tended to assume the role of supplicant in their interactions with participants, trying to level the power ground by recognising that the researched is the repository of knowledge. Nonetheless, this could be just an easy path towards a concealment of those elements of qualitative research that are inherently exploitative, by covering them under an altruistic façade (Smith, 1988). "In fact, exploitation and possibly betrayal are endemic to fieldwork" (England, 1994: 85). It becomes imperative for the researcher to carefully think about what kind of role they want to play in their interactions with participants.

According to Kobayashi (1994), a possible answer to the inevitability of power disparities in research is a reframing of research practice in terms of a means to social change, not limited to the interpretation of the social world. Instead of speaking *for* someone, the researcher would be speaking *with* participants. "This situation establishes a starting point for analyzing the politics of involvement and representation, at which we might ask not whether our

position of power and authority denies us the right to conduct research but, rather, how we use our privilege to social ends" (Kobayashi, 1994: 76). This view of research, which entails a high degree of collaboration between researcher and participants, is not aimed at erasing power relations, but at disrupting them by bringing the political at the forefront of scholarly endeavour, going beyond critical scholarship and towards activist scholarship (Kobayashi, 2001; Ruddick, 2004). An intersectional approach to methodology is helpful in this re-framing of research as political in its aims. As pointed out by Collins and Bilge (2016), social justice necessarily is a central aim of any intersectional project. According to Rice *et al.* (2019), its working towards justice is precisely what distinguishes intersectionality from other frameworks, to the point that "the degree to which a knowledge-making project embraces social justice" needs to be the "standard for gauging the degree to which it enacts intersectionality in exemplary or problematic ways" (Rice *et al.*, 2019: 415). This intersectional commitment to social justice unfolds through a constant awareness of the dynamics of power and shifting positions of privilege and disadvantage that shape the research relationship, as it observes the role of such dynamics and positions in social relations more broadly. In resonance with the reflections outlined above on the blurring of the distinction between insider and outsider, the intersectional approach that I applied in this research aimed to observe, record, and render visible the multiple, constantly moving, commonalities and differences that intervened in shaping relationships with participants (Hamilton, 2019).

In the context of this study, interactions with participants were not thought of as tools that enabled data collection. In a way, the building of relationships of trust, exchange, and communication during those interactions, and the ways in which this happened, was as relevant in the process of data analysis as the specific content that was verbalised by participants during interviews or informal conversations. The knowledge presented in this work is thought of as co-produced by me and participants, in a field marked by the mutual recognitions, misunderstandings, tensions over differences, and assumptions of commonality that we enacted during our communications (Kim, 2012). Rather than "police interrogations", where the authority of the researcher frames and influences the exchange of information all the steps of the way, my intention was to engage in deep, informal conversations with participants. Strategies were employed to ensure that the power to decide in which direction such conversations would flow was shared by both parties. The challenge was to take into account the needs of both communicants in the exchange. On the one hand, there were my research needs. On the other, those of participants, which were varied and at times contrasting

with mine (Hamilton, 2019). There was, at times, the need for participants to express their perception on their lived reality, a need to tell a story about how their present self is influenced by episodes and events that took place in the past, a need to try and express in words experiences, memories and feelings that often go unnamed.

In some interviews, participants also expressed the need to contest the legitimacy of the questions I was asking and the angles from which I was tackling the topics discussed. Instead of recoiling from such tense exchanges, and/or render them invisible in the analysis and presentation of data, I chose to treat these moments as highly productive of insight and, ultimately, knowledge. The data collected is thus the specific result of the messy process of interaction and negotiation over multiple sets of needs, mediated by the multiple and intersecting lines along which me and participants found similarities, dissonances, and tensions with each other. Rather than viewing the partiality of the knowledge produced as detrimental to the overall value of the project, I believe that its value rests exactly on the – partial, as it could not be otherwise – awareness of the complicated, intersecting, and constantly shifting dynamics that shaped its emergence.

3.2.2 An Italian-Moroccan enters a French-Flemish-Arab-English speaking queer scene: Positionality, context, and translation

Reflections on power and positionality in this project must also include a discussion on the role of different languages in enabling and limiting communication with participants, and on the translation conducted at different stages of the research. Language, and hierarchies between languages, have a huge role in shaping positions of power in ethnographic research, as in the subsequent dissemination of its results (Temple and Young, 2004; Kim, 2012). Language is not only a tool used to effectively convey contents between two or more communicators, but it reflects, expresses and construct the worlds of significations that are shared among the people who use it. Issues of translation are not only limited to the technical transposition of semantic and syntactical structures to render content understandable to people outside the group (Shaw, 1987). The process necessarily entails a certain level of contextualisation of what is being expressed in the universe of meaning as perceived by the person who does the expressing. This complex process of cultural transposition cannot but be imperfect or, as Spivak (2000: 13) notes, “in every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible”. In this sense, similarities between ethnographic research and linguistic translation are not difficult to see, as both activities aim to convey actions and/or words to a reader second-hand, allowing them to understand the context in which those actions/words are produced and performed. In Churchill’s (2005: 4) words, both the ethnographer and the

translator are the “self-embodiment of a transitional space”. The parallelisms between the two roles become even more relevant when the same person, at one given time, plays both roles of ethnographer and translator.

I arrived in the field as an ethnographer/imperfect translator, with a specific and somewhat unusual linguistic positionality. I am a native Italian speaker. I have been exposed to Moroccan *darrijia* in my family from a very young age. I can understand simple conversations fairly well, but I am very ashamed of speaking it. During my childhood summer holidays spent in Morocco, I soon realised that speaking French, widely understood in Casablanca, came much easier to me as an Italian-speaker. My attempts at Moroccan were often met with ridicule from my cousins, as I was the only person in the family who was being raised in another language. French was the second foreign language that I studied at school and at university after English, which is currently my working language, as well as the one that I use most in my daily interactions in the UK. As noted by Kim (2012), much of the literature on power dynamics linked to language use in ethnographic research focuses on the historically most prevalent position occupied by qualitative researchers: the white western English-speaking scholar studying non-western, non-English-speaking groups and communities, often in territories outside of the West. According to Kim, a complication of lines of power that are entrenched in such a position is necessary, as increasingly more scholars do not fit this description, and more complex and multifaceted relations of power and language emerge in current ethnographic research. Her reflections on her translating the narratives of Korean-speaking participants into English, a language that is undeniably charged with relative power in processes of knowledge production and circulation, is nuanced by Kim not being a native English speaker herself.

The linguistic context in which I carried out this research was as complex and multifaceted as my linguistic positionality. Multilingualism is a defining feature of Brussels, as it is the only region in Belgium where the French and Flemish languages have official status (Fitzmaurice, 1996; Jacobs, 2000; Treffers-Daller, 2002). While these two are the languages employed in public administration and education in the municipalities of the capital-region, the city could hardly be described as simply bilingual. In addition to the mutual influences, contacts and mixing between French and Flemish (Treffers-Daller, 2002), a number of other languages have gained relevance in the city along the decades, as a result of the multiple migratory waves discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. “While Brussels is still a bilingual city from a political point of view, this is no longer the case in linguistic-sociological terms” (Janssens, 2008: 2), and the multilingualism of the city is often portrayed and experienced as one of

those features that reflect Brussels' multicultural and cosmopolitan identity. In addition to the languages spoken by the most conspicuous migrant groups of the past century (Arabic, Amazigh, Turkish, Italian and Portuguese), English plays an important role in daily interactions and communications in the city. Partly linked to the gradual establishment of EU institutions in the city, English often acts as a neutral language in the conflictual terrain that has historically characterised relationships between Flemish and French-speaking communities (O'Donnell and Toebosch, 2008). Survey data seems to confirm this trend, as between 2000 and 2006 the proportion of people in the city that reported having a good to excellent level in English (35.4%) surpassed that of those reporting a similar level in Flemish (28.23%) (Janssens, 2008).

The complexity of both my linguistic background and the multilingual context of Brussels is reflected in the multiplicity of languages that were used for communication in this research. While conducting participant observation, I interacted with people in different languages, depending on the context and the prevalent language at the event where I met participants, as well as the language preferences of the people around me. Language switches in mid-conversation were common, as they often are in Brussels, and a conversation that started in English would end in French, with some Italian, Spanish, and a few words of Moroccan interspersed along it. Similarly, interviews were not all conducted in the same language. I always gave participants the option to choose whether the interview would be carried out in French or English at the beginning, and they chose according to their level of confidence and comfort in the two languages. Interestingly, the language often changed during the interview, with words and sentences in languages other than the one chosen at the beginning.

My knowledge of languages presented some limits in accessing participants, and in allowing them to be interviewed in the language that they felt most at ease with. I do not speak any Flemish, and I was not able to communicate with participants in this language. While a common stereotype in the city is that Flemish-speakers have a better level of English than French-speakers, this is certainly not true for everyone. Even if that were the case, the fact remains that some participants were given the option to communicate with me in their first language, while others were not. This is not only true for Flemish speakers, but also for people who moved to Belgium from contexts in which they grew up with a language other than English or French as their native one. The limit posed by my inability to communicate in Flemish, Turkish, or in fluent Arabic, is nuanced by the fact that I, the interviewer, was also not using my native language in any of the interviews. While the smoothness of the communication was certainly impacted by the fact that many of the communications that

build this research were conducted in languages that were not native for the researcher nor for the researched, this was the result of a careful choice. As noted by Temple and Young (2004), the technical precision of language use and translation in ethnographic research, while always important, has a different weight depending on the epistemological stance that undergirds the research process. If the research is based on assumptions of ontological truth, that needs to be objectively discovered by the researcher, then issues of language precision and translation become fundamental in ensuring that words and actions are reported as perfectly as possible to readers. As stated at multiple points of this chapter, the knowledge that emerged from this research was co-produced by me and participants in the way we built our relationships and conversations together. The conversations that took place between us, with all their linguistic imperfections, partial understandings and misunderstandings, and needs for clarification, are as valuable a part of data as the more informative content that they expressed in our interactions. My choice was therefore that of embracing the limits imposed by my finite language knowledge, prioritising the building of direct bonds and relationships with participants at the possible expense of linguistic precision, which could have possibly been achieved to a larger extent through the mediation of a professional translator. In addition to this, as pointed out above, the navigation between and across multiple languages, as it took place in this research, is reflective of broader daily communications in the city of Brussels, where people are more used to language-switching than in other continental European contexts.

Valuing the multilingual character of this research, and of the context in which this research took place, was central in the process of translation of the collected data as well. As can be evinced from the previous paragraph, the corpus of data that resulted from this research was in multiple languages. While field notes were mainly taken in English, interviews were in both French and English, with some sentences in Spanish and Moroccan. A single transcript would often include more than two languages. During the phase of data analysis, I chose to keep it in the original language, so that nuances of meaning would not be lost at such an early stage. Only the quotes that were included in this thesis were translated into English, if the original language of the transcript was different. When single words, expressions, or sentences were in a language other than the prevalent one in the interview, their translation is given in brackets and they have been kept in the original language, so as to present the reader with the language fluidity that marked this research.

3.2.3 The challenge of building trust with participants

When I arrived in Brussels, I was new to the city. I was not a familiar face in the LGBTQ scene, and even less in the racialised queer scene. When I first started to talk to potential participants, I was often met with reactions that suggested people around me were not willing to interact with me as a researcher. These interactions initially made me anxious in a way that is very similar to the one described by Hamilton (2019) as characterising the beginning of her research. Like her, I had also arrived in the field with an idea that racial, and in my case sexuality, matching between me and potential participants would grant me an advantage in access to spaces and recruitment. While this advantage certainly existed, many other elements concurred in enabling and limiting access to spaces and people in Brussels. First, I soon realised that, while my queerness was easily readable by people around me, my racial/ethnic background was more complicated to understand. My accent, my general preference for English over French as a vehicular language, my Italian name, and my being a PhD student in the UK, were all elements that people around me would not necessarily link to a Moroccan background. Moreover, my racial background and my sexual orientation were sometimes not important categories in determining the choice to participate in this project. Some of the elements outlined above, especially my status as researcher, and other features of my personality and body, made me more or less likable depending on the person I was interacting with, and influenced their openness to participation or lack thereof. Generally speaking, a long process of trust building with potential participants, and the groups they are part of, needed to be initiated in these first phases of fieldwork.

The following episode is one of many interactions that followed a similar script during my first weeks in the city. Here it is, as recorded in my field notes on September 15 2017, after an evening at the RainbowHouse.

> “Thomas than introduced me to a friend of his, Ahmed. Ahmed immediately asked me, in Arabic, if I spoke Arabic. I said that I spoke it a little, and he continued in French. He was speaking very fast, and Thomas told him to slow down, that I had just got to Brussels. […] When I told him that it would be possible to participate in the research, he said no, laughing. I asked ‘Can I ask you why not?’, and he said that his private life was for himself only. I asked him if anyone had ever asked him to participate in a research project, to which he replied something I didn’t get. He then left to talk with friends”.

The notes that follow were taken the day after meeting Ahmed at the RainbowHouse, and they provide a glimpse of the reeling of questions and reflections that would take place in my head after each interaction:

> "The encounter left me a bit confused. […] I'm left with the important question of 'Why doesn't he want to?'. I didn't get the chance to understand if it was a matter of me, and the way I presented myself to him (maybe he just didn't like me), or maybe I had failed a test when he spoke to me in Arabic and I didn't reply in the same language. Or maybe his dislike for Merhaba influenced his choice not to speak to me, or maybe he's just not interested in research, or he is concerned about anonymity. This leads me to ask myself many questions about what best ways to go around in recruiting participants. What questions to ask them? How to present myself in a way that is not threatening, but that at the same time is transparent about what it is that I do? I haven't looked for him for the rest of the evening, thinking it better to just leave it. But I have been thinking about this encounter since then".

Not all of these first encounters marked the end of the research relationship between the potential participant and I. Some of these developed, with time, into a different kind of relationship, and they led to the decision from the part of the participant to be interviewed. These can offer a glimpse on the process of building trust with participants, and the different elements that intervened at different times in shaping their perception of me and my research. My relationship with Barwaqo is particularly relevant in this sense. As with Ahmed, I first met Barwaqo at the beginning of fieldwork, at the RainbowHouse. I was introduced to her by a local activist who thought we could have an interesting conversation. As soon as I told her about the research, Barwaqo said that she didn't have time for such things.

> " 'My life here is not pink. It's not rainbow. It's struggle after struggle after struggle. I'm just surviving. I don't have time for this'" [Field notes, 30/09/2017].

She then continued by saying that it is often useless to share one's story, particularly because white people can't fully understand it. "They don't know", she added. "You, a white guy, can't know". I realised that she had perceived me as a complete outsider to the group my research was on, and that my outside position was irremediably marked by what was being read as my "whiteness". I tried to communicate my identifying as Italian/Moroccan, stressing what I see as my not being white, but my statements were met with what I interpreted to be, at the time, scepticism. "I guess now there's all kinds of black and white" was her reply. Soon after this exchange I decided to disengage from the conversation. Later, at home, I couldn't stop asking myself questions about my presence in the field. How was I being read by people I was interacting with? Why some clearly read my Moroccan background, and others framed me as white?

A few months later, on an April afternoon, Barwaqo and I were having a drink in the outdoor sitting area of a bar in the gay street with other two friends. Between September and April, Barwaqo and I had met on a number of different occasions. Her being very active in the racialised queer scene of the city and my trying to be in every space that could be relevant to

my research resulted in us two starting to get to know each other better. At the beginning of March, I was informed by Merhaba that she would be among the nine people who would participate to the theatre workshop. After that first interaction in September, I had taken it for granted that she would not want to be interviewed for this study, and I never asked her again. On that April afternoon, Barwaqo turned towards me, and she said that she had thought about it a lot, and that we should agree on a date for the interview to take place. I asked her if she was sure, and what made her change her mind. She said that she trusted me by now, and that knowing me better allowed her to feel more comfortable with it. In a similar way, Sam, another participant encountered during the first week of observation in Brussels, met me for an interview in the month of May. On this occasion, I asked her why it took eight months for us to manage to meet, even though she had expressed her interest in participating to the study on that very first meeting. She replied that she needed to get to know me better. I had made a good impression on her the first time we met, but she wanted to be sure that she could trust me before meeting for the interview. Between our first encounter at the RainbowHouse and our interview, Sam and I saw each other and had the opportunity to chat on multiple occasions, and these allowed her to assess whether she could trust me enough to be interviewed.

These two examples show how the research required a complex and at times lengthy process of gaining the trust of participants through maintaining an active presence in relevant spaces of the field and allowing them to approach me and deepen our knowledge of one another. At the beginning of my stay, the multiple levels on which I could be read as an "outsider" were prevalent in my interactions with potential participants. My being new to Brussels and therefore often unable to understand what was happening around me, my speaking English with an accent that was not easily recognisable, my insecure French, and my being a PhD student from a British university were among the few things that people saw and recognised when they were interacting with me. My constant presence in LGBTQ racialised spaces and events in the city over a long period of time allowed me to be more confident in navigating my surroundings and in communicating with the people I met. Conversely, participants who would see me regularly in the spaces they move through in the city, had the chance to talk to me and get to know me better. This in turn allowed them to see and acknowledge those sides of me that could work more as markers of similarity rather than difference, and therefore see me in my partial status of insider, rather than as an outsider tout-court. Interestingly, some of the elements that allowed participants to "trust" me had nothing to do with my racial

background, or my sexual orientation. When I asked them about this, some of the elements that were included in the answers were my political views, my politeness, my Italianness.

For other participants, their recognition of me as an LGBTQ person from a Muslim background was central in allowing them to feel safe in sharing certain episodes of their lives or certain views on the city. Sharky, when asked about his impressions on the interview, said:

> "when I consider someone as an Arab LGBT, I'm very *à l'aise* [comfortable] with him and I just talk, and I don't think about what I'm going to say, or going to tell, what part of my life I'm going to make me naked for them. So, with you it was easier. I don't think if… I had some interviews with people that have… with journalists or with people that are doing studies, and it was not easy at all. Because it's… For me, I don't know, since I consider you as Arab, it's easier for me to talk".

This element of recognition has been noted by many participants, with slightly different nuances to it. While in the quote above Sharky states how his recognising me as an "Arab LGBT" allowed him to feel a general sense of comfort, Sarah said that talking to a person who shares certain identity traits means not having to over-explain things:

> "Like with you, for instance. I can talk about Arab homophobia without feeling the need to give much information or justify myself or blah blah blah".

Finally, an element that was added by some participant when explaining the role that their perception of my identities had on their opening up during their interview is of a more political nature. Ghalia linked my being a racialised queer person to her trust in the fact that I wouldn't instrumentalise her words and use them in racist discourses. According to her, talking about certain topics with white people can often lead to the reinforcement of racist discourses and practices against non-white populations in the city. During the interview, when approaching the topic of the issues that people face in certain racialised neighbourhoods of the city, she said:

> "The things I am going to say about the neighbourhoods maybe will be a bit harsh. I wouldn't say them to everyone, because I know that, to a certain extent, if I say them to everyone, these would be instrumentalised for racist purposes".

The quotes above show how personal trust and identity recognition interwove in the field in allowing participants and I to find a safe communicational space where my presence would not be perceived as threatening and where an exchange of knowledge could take place. This process unfolded, in some form or another, with the people who accepted to participate to the project. As the interaction with Ahmed shows though, this is not the entire story. In some cases, that initial rejection from the part of a potential participant did not lead to a development of the relationship, the building of mutual trust, nor a participation to this study.

3.2.4 Writing difference: intersectional ethnography, contradictions and complexity

The previous sections outlined some of the ethical and political reflections that I conducted in the field. However, the power dynamics that prompted them were not confined to the phase of data collection. Their ramifications had important effects on the data analysis that was conducted for this project, and the writing process has been constellated with questions of representation and power differentials between me as researcher/narrating voice, and participants. In this section I address the complex challenge of writing an ethnography that, on the one hand, conforms to the requirements of the academic text presented here – clarity, accuracy, and more generally the making of a set of arguments, however nuanced, about a group of people – and the need to convey the complexity of experiences, life stories, and world views that emerged from the data. As pointed out in the sections above, tensions and differences between me and participants emerged quite clearly at multiple points of the research. In a similar way, the experiences and narratives of participants themselves often are in tension with one another, producing sets of narratives that are in high contrast, and that suggest the existence of a multiplicity of worldviews on a number of topics that are relevant to this research.

As noted elsewhere, participants differ greatly in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, age, profession and class, race and ethnicity, citizenship status, country of origin, religious and national background, and time spent in Brussels prior to their participation to the project. This diversification in ways of self-identifying and personal trajectories is reflected in the variety of collected experiences and narratives. The ways in which participants see the city and their role in it present extreme differences that were at times difficult to reconcile with one another. If we add to this my personal views on the city, and on being an LGBTQ person from a Muslim background living in it, we have yet another layer of complexity in the interaction between the different voices involved in the project. How to reconcile the voice of a genderfluid person born and raised in Belgium with that of a gay man who had reached Belgium as an asylum seeker less than a year before the interview took place? How could the experience of a 37 years old trans woman and those of a 21 years old gay man be in dialogue with one another, even if just in a thesis? Was the difference across this group too big to allow this study to say anything relevant? And what to make of my voice, always there, in my interpretations, in the details I gave importance to and those that I discarded as irrelevant?

A reflection around such complexity, and on how to convey it to a readership without impacting the heuristic value of the work produced by overcomplicating it, is not merely aesthetic or functional (Armstead, 1995). Its ethical and political ramifications have been one

of the most challenging obstacles to the writing of this thesis. As the etymology of the word "ethnography" already makes clear, the "writing" (*grafeín*) is one of, if not *the,* central moment of the methodological approach. As argued by Clifford (1986), a post-structuralist view of ethnographic writing compels us to see it as not merely the act of representing a certain group, but as part of a wider process of construction of self and other. Ethnographies are thus "caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures" (Clifford, 1986). If this is the case, then surely questions around what cultures are being invented/constructed through this text, and who is the writing self that emerges from it, are in order. This is particularly true in light of the reflections about the risks of essentialising minority groups discussed in the previous chapter.

As a queer and antiracist researcher, with past experiences in LGBTQ and antiracist activism, I approached my research with political views that accompanied me along all of its phases. The views presented by some participants were not only very distant from mine, but in some cases I strongly disagreed with them. Some participants, for example, held strong views against their Muslim communities of origin, and during interviews they expressed opinions that I would consider Islamophobic, and which would run the risk of feeding mainstream discourses directed against Muslim communities in Europe. At the same time, their statements were motivated by life experiences of oppression and discrimination that are not the same as the ones that I experienced. Relegating such voices to the margins of this text, or somehow considering them result of some form of "false consciousness", felt deeply wrong, after framing the entire research in terms of queer co-production of knowledge with participants. With a deep belief in the need to deconstruct and subvert power relations in knowledge production, how could I possibly claim the right to "know better" what their views and narratives would/should sound like?

Intersectionality has been a useful tool in navigating the doubts and frustrations that these reflections produced, and in tracing a path towards the choices I took in writing this text. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the concept of complexity is central in the ways I conceived and applied intersectionality in this research (Collins and Bilge, 2016). When multiple and intersecting lines of power are observed and analysed beyond rigid categorisations of identities, they allow for the emergence of categorical instability and the ephemerality of essentialised ideas of minoritised groups (McCall, 2005). When intersectionality and queer theory are not seen as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable, but are applied in combination with one another, they can fruitfully illuminate the complexities of intersectional social locations, contributing to deconstruct binarised imaginations of

difference and tension (Rahman, 2010; Fotopoulou, 2012). In light of these reflections, differences and contradictions in the data have not been seen as an obstacle to the project. Rather, their emergence has been welcomed as an important proof of the ephemerality and instability of identity categories, and of the need to de-essentialise the images attached to the intersectional location of “LGBTQ Muslims”.

In terms of writing, this meant paying constant attention to the nuances that emerged from the analysis of data, and trying to convey the diversity of experiences and narratives shared by participants. After the first draft of each empirical chapter, I asked myself whether any of the participants involved would strongly object to the argument as it was built in the text, and what their objection would be. When this was the case, I always went back to the data, trying to refine the chapter so that it would be as reflective as possible of the tensions, contradictions, and complexities that mark the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background that I met in Brussels. In some cases, key participants were re-contacted, and we had online conversations over the content of specific sections of the thesis. This operation was not undertaken under the unrealistic expectation that this text would reflect the views of every participant. The aim was rather that of effectively conveying the degrees of difference and, potentially, contradiction that emerge from the data collected. As banal as it might sound, this variety is an important finding of this study and, I believe, something that needs to be stressed over and over again, as simplistic essentialisations and fictitious homogeneisations of LGBTQ Muslims still dominate in mainstream discourses and public imaginations.

3.3 Conclusion

Ethnography, and qualitative research in the social sciences more generally, is traditionally built on a divide between the self – the researcher, and the parts of the social world that they represent – and the other – the researched, the one about whom knowledge is produced. The relationship between the two is thus one that is fraught with power differentials. As noted by Clifford (1986), the ethnographer is responsible for the specific construction of selfhood and otherness that emerges from their work. Qualitative research, being inevitably located in the field of representation, needs to be interrogated in its risks of Othering minoritised and oppressed groups and populations (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012), marking their difference as morally inferior (Pickering, 2001). Such interrogation is necessary in all phases of research, from the inception of a project to the writing of its results.

In this chapter I charted the development and unfolding of this research project, outlined the methods employed in the field, and detailed some of the most relevant ethical and political reflections that emerged from the collection, analysis, and presentation of the data. The main aim of the chapter was to convey some of the complexities of the constant interrogations of the methods that I chose to employ. In particular, the focus has been on those elements and sides of the research that required a deconstruction of the fictitious fixity of positions of insider/outsider, and the de-homogeneisation, and thus de-essentialisation, of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. In a way, reflections on my position as both insider and outsider, or as neither of the two, mirror reflections on the similarities and commonalities that bring participants, and their stories, closer to one another, and the differences, tensions and contradictions that set them apart. As processes of homogeneisation often work to essentialise minoritised or distanced populations, these reflections became particularly important in the context of this research, as one of its main aims is that of illuminating the complexities and disruptive potential of the intersectional location inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background (Rahman, 2010).

All sections of this chapter, with their different but complementary focus points, outline the reflexive approach that I attempted to adopt at all stages of research. Such reflexivity is equally informed by queer calls for the disruption of norms and roles that reflect power dynamics in qualitative research processes (Browne and Nash, 2010), and intersectional attentions to the ways in which multiple lines of difference and domination, as well as similarity and recognition, interplay in shaping the specific relationships that are built in the field (Hamilton, 2019). Translation of data, the building of relationships of trust with participants, and the writing of this work are all aspects of this project that show how two epistemological perspectives, often seen as distant and incompatible, have been applied in combination to interpret relationships on the field, and to guide the different actions required by the research process.

Chapter 4. Brussels, a city at the intersection

In my third month of fieldwork, another researcher asked me why I chose Brussels as my study site. The answer formed almost intuitively in my head: “Because Brussels is a big intersection itself”. I then proceeded to explain how Brussels is interesting and relevant in its history of migratory flows to the city, and how newer communities interacted and crossed paths with those already there, the Flemish and the Francophone. How the tensions between these two “original” groups inform the political system and all frameworks for social action and change (Jacobs *et al.*, 2002). How its vibrant LGBTQ scene is crossed by all these lines of difference and tension, sometimes mirroring them and sometimes contesting them (Celis and Meier, 2016; Paternotte, 2016). How the city is a constant and complex crossing of groups and communities and is depicted both as un unproblematic multicultural hub and as the site where the failure of Belgian multiculturalism is the most visible (Bousetta and Jacobs, 2006; Jacobs and Rea, 2007). None of these elements, alone, explains the relevance of conducting this research in Brussels. It is their coming together, and their being in tension with one another, that makes an exploration of the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in the city interesting, timely, and relevant.

This chapter aims to outline the main features of the urban context where this research was conducted, and to present and analyse the elements that make it a particularly relevant one for the study of LGBTQ Muslim lives, experiences, and narratives. In the first section, I present some of the elements that shape relationships between differently racialised communities in Brussels: Belgian colonial history, and the narratives of racial difference that it constructed, and the in-flows of migrant populations to the city in the past century. In the second section, the focus is on the LGBTQ communities and movements in the city, and particularly on the myth of Belgium and Brussels as safe havens for LGBTQ populations. Finally, in the third section, I provide an overview of the administrative structure of city government in Brussels, and the influences that inter-community relationships and tensions between the French-speaking and Flemish-speaking communities in the country have on social change and urban politics. The chapter thus complicates some of the popular images that circulate on the city of Brussels, and contextualises the data analysed in this research in the specificity of the context in which it was collected.

4.1 Postcolonial, multicultural Brussels

Belgium, like many of its neighbouring countries, has a long history of immigration. Brussels, as its capital, is where the results of such history are more visible. Particularly relevant for this research, the city has a sizeable Muslim community, which has its origins in the first migratory flows from Morocco and Turkey in the 1960s (Bousetta and Martiniello, 2003; Martiniello and Rea, 2012). The Moroccan and Turkish communities are the biggest groups in Brussels having origins outside the EU (Torrekens, 2007). The high proportion and concentration of Muslim population in Brussels led some to describe it as one of the most Muslim cities in the western world (Manço and Kanmaz, 2004).

This section presents the demographic outlook of the city, discussing available data on its composition in terms of religious affiliation, ethnicity, and nationality. In addition to this, it contextualises such figures in the broader Belgian history, specifically in its relations to processes of racialisation and construction of alterity. Such contextualisation is necessary to understand the roles assigned to racialised communities in contemporary Brussels. Only through a deep understanding of the historical unravelling of processes of colonisation and racialisation it is possible to make sense of contemporary relations between differently racialised groups in European cities (El-Tayeb, 2011). For this reason, this section begins with a brief overview of Belgian colonial history. The aim is to show how the contested memories of the nation’s history still haunt and shape life in Brussels. It then proceeds to present a brief history of migratory flows to the country from the end of World War II to the present. Thirdly, figures on the presence of racialised communities in the city are presented and discussed, with particular attention to the numbers of Muslim populations.

4.1.1 Belgian colonial past and its contested memory

Unlike neighbouring France, Belgium did not have a strong colonial presence in territories of the Middle East and North Africa, those more commonly associated with Islam. Its only presence in these territories was its co-administration, with other six European countries, of the Tangier International Zone, in Northern Morocco. Therefore, the connection between its colonial history and the relations between Muslim groups and communities living in Belgium and the State seem to be less direct than it is the case for France (see, as an example, Ticktin, 2008). Nonetheless, the colonial history of the country is an important starting point for any analysis that looks at the dynamics of power between the Belgian State and society and migrant communities. As noted by, among others, Rahier (2003) and Ewans (2003), Belgian colonial presence in Central Africa represented a cornerstone for the construction of the myth

of the Belgian nation. Colonial institutions, among them the Belgian Royal Museum of Central Africa, had the goal of educating their audiences to adopt a worldview infused by racism and white supremacy, and to spread the image of Belgium as a powerful colonial nation (Rahier, 2003). These myths and narratives, and the legitimacy of such institutions, are at the heart of debates that still continue in the country, shaping the ways in which white and non-white Belgians, as well as foreign residents in the country, think, interpret and (re)produce their roles in Belgian society (Castryck, 2006).

Belgian colonial experience was limited to the region of Central Africa, with the Congo representing its biggest territory, and it was characterised by such levels of brutality that the word genocide has been used to describe it (Weisbord, 2003), and parallels have been drawn to the Holocaust (Hochschild, 1999; De Mul, 2011). The crimes inflicted on the local populations started in the first phase of Belgian presence in the region, between 1875 and 1908, when the then ironically called "Congo Free State" was a private property of Belgian King Leopold II. The lack of formal backing by the Belgian Parliament in this phase is usually used to depict the Belgian nation as not having a direct responsibility for the crimes committed (Castryck, 2006). Evidence collected by historians though suggests that atrocities continued well beyond the official annexation of Congo by the Belgian State in 1908 (Ewans, 2003). The publication of *The assassination of Lumumba* by de Witte in 1999 uncovered the direct influence of Belgian institutions in the murder of the first Prime Minister of the newly independent Democratic Republic of Congo in 1960. The confirmation of these findings by an independent Parliament commission led the country to reopen the hidden debate on the role of Belgium in the region (Ewans, 2003). If we add to this the role that Belgium had in its other colony, Rwanda, in contributing to the fragmentation of its population by arbitrarily classifying and dividing it into Hutus and Tutsis, and the catastrophic consequences this led to in the 1990s (Melvern, 2004), the history of Belgian colonial experience emerges in its particular violence and atrocity.

The presence of the Royal Museum of Central Africa, in the Brussels suburb of Tervuren, has been central in debates around Belgian colonial memories and the persistence of colonial institutions. The museum, founded directly by Leopold II, had two aims. On the one hand, it would work to counter critiques that were mounting internationally to the brutality of Belgian presence in the Congo. On the other, it would serve as an educational tool for the Belgian population, contributing to the process of nation building by constructing a Belgian "civilised" identity in contrast to the colonised Other, represented as barbaric and in need of saving (Rahier, 2003; Aldrich, 2009). Importantly, one of the myths that infused this image

was the role of Belgium as the saviour of the native population of the Congo from Arab slave traders, as showed by many of the objects collected by the Royal Museum (Rahier, 2003). The museum hosted its permanent exhibition on Congo and Central Africa until 2013, when it closed for renovation. Well into the 2000s, it attracted criticisms for its colonialist representation of the region and the lack of critical perspectives on the colonial history of the country (Rahier, 2003; Hasian and Wood, 2010; Hasian, 2012). In response to these critiques, a project for renovation was approved in 2006, with the aim of presenting "a contemporary and decolonised version of Africa", acknowledging that the permanent exhibition was "outdated and its presentation not very critical of the colonial image" (AfricaMuseum, [no date]). The museum reopened with its renovated exhibition in December 2018, thus indicating how current the debate on the memories and representations of colonialism is in the city (Psaledakis and Lohman, 2018). The museum is but one of the contested colonial sites in Brussels. Such contestations include, among others, Brussels streets named after "colonial heroes"; statues that celebrate the colonial achievements of Leopold II (Goddeeris, 2015); representations of the Congo in the famous comic books *Adventures of Tintin* by Hergé (Dunnett, 2009); and the perpetuation of colonialist and racist "traditions" such as the black-face painting on Saint Nicolas Day (Rutazibwa, 2016). These discussions become particularly relevant in Brussels, where they interlock with conflicts over the various ways of imagining and representing a city that experienced (and continues to experience) massive flows of immigration from territories that were formerly occupied by white Western European powers.

4.1.2 A brief immigration history

During the 20th century Belgium increasingly became a destination for migrant workers. The history of immigration to the country can be divided in four phases. The first corresponds to the period between the two world wars, and it is marked by the arrival in Belgium of workers from other European countries: France, Italy and Poland (Martiniello and Rea, 2012). In this period, foreign workers were highly welcomed in the country by State institutions, as they were needed to satisfy the demands of the mining and steel industries of Wallonia (Timmerman *et al.*, 2003). The second phase started in 1964, with the signing of bilateral worker agreements with Morocco and Turkey. While it has been noted that a Moroccan presence in Belgium could be traced to earlier decades, the 1960s represent the time that mainstream narratives designate as seeing the origin of Muslim communities in the country (Bousetta and Martiniello, 2003). In 1974 Belgium officially halted guest-worker policies and closed its border to "unqualified" workers. Far from representing the end of immigration fluxes to the country, this date marked a shift in the type of migration directed to Belgium.

Between 1974 and 1991, family reunification was the main route for non-EU nationals to enter Belgium and settle on its territory (Martiniello and Rea, 2012). In addition to this, the progressive opening of national borders to EU citizens, resulting from the political and economic integration in the continent, allowed an increasingly high number of people to move in and out of Belgium. The establishment of the headquarters of European institutions in Brussels further contributed to the in-flux of EU citizens (Favell, 2001; Van Criekingen, 2009). The opening of internal borders in the EU has resulted in the evolution of a particularly absurd two-tiered status system for migrants in European countries. EU citizens, who “may be near-total strangers to the language, customs, and history of their host country, […] enjoy special status and privilege by virtue of being nationals of states that are EU members” (Benhabib, 2002: 158), which creates an insurmountable gap with non-EU migrants. In Brussels, this differentiation is particularly noticeable in the language utilised to describe the two. While people from a non-EU background are designated with words such as “immigrant” or “migrant” – a designation that transcends generation, whereby a person can be a third-generation “migrant” without ever having moved from the Brussels municipality in which they were born –, EU nationals are more commonly referred to as “expats”.

After 1991, migration routes to Belgium went through yet another change. An element contributing to this change was the globalisation of international asylum and protection after the end of the Cold War, earlier framed in the context of international tensions between the Eastern and the Western blocs (Julie, 1998). In Belgium, the number of asylum claims greatly increased in the 1990s, going from 12,897 claims in 1990 to the peak of 42,691 in 1999 (Martiniello and Rea, 2012). In addition to this, the gradual narrowing of the legal channels to enter Belgium and settle on its territory meant that an increasing number of people fell into the category of “undocumented migrant” (Martiniello and Rea, 2002). It is not easy to determine how many undocumented migrants are present in the country, but there is consensus on the fact that this number has increased in the past three decades. The increasing number of people who are not entitled to the rights that a residency permit guarantees have informed discourses around migration in the last decades in Belgium. The birth and expansion of a transnational movement for the rights of undocumented migrants (*sans-papiers* in French), shed light on the harsh conditions experienced by masses of residents in European cities living in a condition of extreme vulnerability to State violence (Siméant, 1998; McNevin, 2006). In Belgium, the episode that sparked a national debate on the conditions and treatment of undocumented migrants was the death of Sémira Adamu. The young migrant woman from Nigeria was suffocated with a pillow by policemen on the airplane in the attempt

to calm her down during her expulsion procedure (Amnesty International UK, 2002). National outrage for the episode resulted in the resignation of the then Minister of Internal Affairs, followed by a series of governmental initiatives aimed at the (limited) regularisation of undocumented people living in the country (Martiniello and Rea, 2012). Finally, Belgium witnessed an increased diversification in terms of the national origins of people who enter the country. Since the 1990s, growing numbers of migrants have moved to Belgium from Eastern European and Sub-Saharan African countries, resulting in the exponential diversification of the population of the country, and of its capital in particular (Deboosere *et al.*, 2009).

4.1.3 Muslim populations in Brussels

In the case of Brussels, it is impossible to know the exact number of people with a migratory background living in the city. Because of the particular history of Belgium, where the living together of different cultural and linguistic communities has been traditionally precarious and a source of conflict, categories such as ethnic, religious and linguistic community affiliation are not collected by census surveys (Bousetta *et al.*, 2017). The available data shows the number of people in the city who have a non-Belgian nationality, as well as the number of people who were born outside of Belgium. While this data cannot give us the whole picture in terms of ethnic, religious, and linguistic composition of the city, it is enough to strongly suggest that immigration flows have been one of the most relevant factors shaping the demography of the city in the past 50 years (Deboosere *et al.*, 2009). Data from the 2011 census showed that 32.29% of the population of the city did not have a Belgian citizenship. While a considerable proportion of this consisted of EU citizens, in some municipalities the proportion of non-EU nationals was attested at around 20%, like in Brussels Central (18.9%), and in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode (21.5%) (Direction générale statistique - Statistics Belgium, 2011b). Data on the place of birth of city dwellers confirms this image. In 2011, 25.56% of people residing in Brussels were born outside of the EU. In some municipalities, namely Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, Molenbeek and Brussels Central, more than one inhabitant in three was born outside of the EU (Direction générale Statistique - Statistics Belgium, 2011a).

The data presented above paints the image of a diverse and multi-national Brussels, but it does not tell much about the composition of the city in religious terms, and, more relevant to this study, the proportion of Muslim population. In this case, the lack of official data on religious affiliation makes it particularly difficult to get the whole picture (Torrekens, 2007; Zibouh, 2011). Many have attempted to produce estimates based on the proportions of population that moved to Brussels, across the decades, from predominantly Muslim countries.

Already in 2003, it was estimated that 17% of the city population was Muslim, consisting of approximately 160,000 people, against a national proportion of 4% (Torrekens, 2007), leading some to describe Brussels as one of the most Muslim cities in the western world (Manço and Kanmaz, 2004). These numbers are interpreted to be the direct result of migratory flows from North Africa and the Middle East, with 70% of Muslims in the city having Moroccan origins, and 20% Turkish (Torrekens, 2007). In addition to this, it is important to note the spatial concentration of the Muslim population in the city. As pointed out by Torrekens (2007: 3), "nearly 75% of this population lives in only five of the 19 municipal districts in the Brussels-Capital Region". This concentration is best understood as the direct result of migratory policies, and the moving of newcomers to the city into affordable, working class urban areas. The five municipalities – Anderlecht, Brussels Centre, Molenbeek, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, and Schaerbeek – also figure among the areas in Brussels that present the worst economic indicators (Dujardin *et al.*, 2008).

The lack of official data on the religious affiliation of the population leads to contested estimates, especially when it comes to such a politically meaningful and delicate figure such as the proportion of Muslim population. In the last two decades a number of studies have attempted estimates of the number of Muslims in the country. Those elaborated by sociologist Jan Hertogen (2015) have been widely received in both Flemish and Francophone media. According to him, the Muslim population in the country had been growing at a rate of approximately 2% per year between 2013 and 2015. In his estimates, the proportion of Muslim population in Brussels was particularly striking, reaching levels higher than 30% of the population in five municipalities – Saint-Josse-ten-Noode 45%, Molenbeek 41.2%, Schaerbeek 37.3%, Brussels Central 31%, Anderlecht 30.2%. Such estimates fed into right-wing fears of an "Islamic invasion", and they have often been used by the media to portray racialised, and specifically Muslim, communities as dangerous groups that pose a threat to the integrity of the country. Soon after the publication of this data the terrorist attacks in Paris took place (November 2015), which were orchestrated by a cell operating in the municipality of Molenbeek, followed less than a year later by the Brussels bombings (March 2016). This particular juncture contributed to the construction and reinforcement of specific discourses on the presence and role of Muslim groups and communities in the country in general, and in certain neighbourhoods of Brussels in particular. A look at titles on mainstream and right-wing media outlets from these years shows how Muslim presence in the country was increasingly portrayed as threatening. The images that such discourses employ are those of an imminent Islamic take-over, with alarmist titles about Islam becoming the first religion in

Belgium in the near future (J.S., 2016), and metaphors depicting Brussels, and especially some of its municipalities, as beacons of international terror. Designations of the Brussels region as a "hotbed of Belgian Jihad" (Van Vlierden, 2016), and of Molenbeek as "Europe's jihadi central" (Traynor, 2015) have become more and more common, both in Belgian and foreign media.

4.2 LGBTQ Brussels

A quick glance at descriptions of Brussels on webpages dedicated to LGBTQ tourism reveals the existence of an image of the city as extremely gay-friendly. The city is depicted as having a vibrant LGBTQ nightlife, numerous events targeted at the LGBTQ community, a very well-established LGBTQ movement, and a progressive legislation. Queerintheworld.com (2018) describes Brussels as "one of the most progressive and liberal cities in Europe, [...] a leading gay city with a rich history, thriving nightlife and delicious cuisine". GayCities.com ([date unknown]) opens its web-guide to the city with the statement: "Simply put, Brussels is a gay travel natural". Curiously enough, both pages stress the connection between the friendliness of the city and its national and cultural diversity. On GayCities.com we read that Brussels is a "multicultural hub of the European Union", while Queerintheworld.com stresses that "30% of its residents are foreigners".

These online sources do not tell much about the actual LGBTQ scene of the city as experienced by people who live in Brussels. They are nonetheless useful in highlighting the existence of a certain image of Brussels as a cosmopolitan, diverse, multicultural and LGBTQ friendly city. While Belgium has undoubtedly adopted some progressive legislation in relation to the rights of LGBTQ people in the past decades, the image of Brussels as a "gay natural" is partial at best, if not outright misleading (Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011).

4.2.1 Is Brussels an LGBTQ heaven?

At a first glance, Belgium appears as accepting and supportive of the LGBTQ individuals and groups who live on its territory, providing them with safe spaces to express themselves and recognising rights that in other countries are far from being sanctioned. Eeckhout and Paternotte (2011) list the reasons that concur to this image of the country. These include Belgium being the second in the world, preceded only by the Netherlands, to allow same-sex couples to marry, and the early passing of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that made discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation a criminal offence (Sägesser, 2005). In addition to this, adoption is open to same-sex couples, and medical technologies of assisted

reproduction are accessible to women. Various governmental organs are aimed at promoting equal opportunities at the federal, regional, and community level, with relatively high levels of funding being granted to various LGBTQ organisations. While Eeckhout and Paternotte (2011) include the rights accorded to trans people with the law on transsexuality passed in 2007 among the elements that contribute to such an image, the value of this has been highly contested by trans groups and movements. Its most problematic aspects are the high levels of pathologisation and psychiatrisation of trans persons, and the rigid and binary view on gender that transpires from its text (Motmans *et al.*, 2009; Simon, 2016).

While the partial presence of legislation granting rights and protections to LGBTQ people is certainly to be acknowledged and lauded, the rosy picture that these elements suggest is not the whole story. Eeckhout and Paternotte (2011), after listing all the reasons why Belgium is often considered an LGBTQ heaven, proceed to explain why and how the Belgian context can be considered paradoxical when thinking about LGBTQ rights. First, the image of Belgium as a pioneer in promoting and advancing LGBTQ rights does not exactly correspond to the unfolding of political events that preceded the approval of its LGBTQ legislation. A comparative look at the chronological approval of LGBTQ-relevant legislation in EU countries shows how the opening of civil marriage to same-sex couples was preceded by years of legal stagnation. While other countries in Europe were refining their anti-discrimination laws, and recognising the rights of couples in cohabitation, Belgium seemed to lack any political drive towards the promotion of LGBTQ rights (Waaldiijk, 2007). The approval of the ground-breaking laws that put Belgium in the spotlight as one of the most LGBTQ-friendly countries in the world seems to be more the result of two interacting dynamics. On the one hand, this was a time of international pressure towards the recognition of LGBTQ rights, with the adoption of a same-sex marriage law by neighbouring Netherlands, and the anti-discrimination directives approved by the European Parliament. On the other, Belgium was going through a peculiar political juncture (Borghs and Eeckhout, 2010; Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011). The national debate over equal marriage, and its final legal recognition, seems to have been enabled by the absence, for the first time in about four decades, of Christian-Democrats from the government coalition. Their federal demise was not a consequence of a general detachment of Belgian voters from the values represented by the party, but rather a result of the Dioxin Scandal that had shaken Belgian politics in that same year (Hooghe and Rihoux, 2007).

A discourse positing Belgium, and its capital city, as unproblematically LGBTQ-friendly also hides some relevant features of Belgian society and politics in relation to sexual and gender

diversity. Despite all the laws approved in the past twenty years, the occurrence of homo/bi/transphobic episodes is attested at both the individual and systemic level (Huysentruyt *et al.*, 2014; D'haese *et al.*, 2016). When the persistence of homo/bi/transphobia is mentioned in the Belgian context, its presence is usually externalised, and attributed to the growing size of “foreign” communities that allegedly present higher levels of homo/bi/transphobic attitudes, among which Muslim communities are the most prominent. These discourses seem to be backed by certain research that correlates anti-gay sentiment and religious affiliation (Hooghe *et al.*, 2010a; Hooghe *et al.*, 2010b). This trope is so ingrained in discourses surrounding LGBTQ rights in the country that Borghs and Eeckhout (2010: 22) conclude their historical overview with this assessment of what the future holds:

> “In some demographic constituencies, like the Muslim community, LGBTs and their sexuality are still often problematical. It is important that the political authorities pay sufficient attention to these groups otherwise Belgium runs the risk of experiencing the same difficulties that have begun to plague the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, there has been a notable rise in the number of LGBTs bullied and even physically assaulted by immigrants, as well as of the number of LGB teachers who no longer dare to ‘come out’ or of schools in which education on non-heteronormative sexualities is no longer being offered”.

What emerges from this quote is a relationship between sexual and ethnic, national and religious diversity that differs greatly from the one that was presented on the websites cited at the beginning of the section. The cosmopolitan and multicultural touristic attraction becomes the potentially dangerous and unfriendly place, because of that same diversity that was making it attractive in the first place. Following this discourse, it becomes imperative for Belgium to protect its natural(ised) LGBTQ friendliness from the plague of “immigrant homophobia” that has already hit its neighbouring countries. As argued by Bracke (2011; 2012), discourses that externalise homo/bi/transphobia, by naturalising a supposedly intrinsic European acceptance and support of LGBTQ rights, often work to hide all those ways in which heteronormativity, patriarchy, and homo/bi/transphobia persist and thrive in white Western European societies themselves. In Belgium, the very visible – and yet often hidden behind Muslim scares – sign of a lack of acceptance of LGBTQ people, if not of utter homo/bi/transphobia, is represented by the emergence, growth and thriving of the oldest, and one of the biggest, far-right populist parties in Europe (Erk, 2007; van Haute and Pauwels, 2016).

The Vlaams Blok (“Flemish Blok”) was founded in 1978 as a radically right-wing independentist party. In 2004, the party dissolved and reconfigured under the new name “Vlaams Belang” (Flemish alliance), after it was found to be in violation of the law against

racism (Erk, 2007). The party is inscribed in the paradigm of the populist right-wing nationalist European party, with the myth of the Flemish nation at the heart of its social, political and identitarian program. Among its many conservative positions, for decades the party was vocally opposed to LGBTQ rights, and particularly to the recognition of same-sex unions, the opening of adoption to same-sex couples, and anti-discrimination laws (Borghs and Eeckhout, 2010; Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011). More recently, following a somewhat common trend among right-wing parties in Europe, the Vlaams Belang started marketing itself as a supporter of LGBTQ people and their rights (de Lange and Mügge, 2015; Cammaerts, 2018). This process of re-branding instrumentalises LGBTQ rights discourses to justify their Islamophobic, racist, and anti-migrant positions. Sam van Rooy, a spokesman for the party, was reported to declare by the Economist that the Vlaams Belang is the most LGBTQ-friendly party in the country, since "all other parties are willing to import thousands of Muslims who have very violent ideas against being gay or transgender" (van Rooy, cited in TheEconomist (2018)). Alliances between a certain part of the LGBTQ movement and right-wing, anti-migrant groups and parties are not limited to the case of the Vlaams Belang, and they represent an important terrain of tension in the LGBTQ scene of the city. A perfect example of this is the contestation of the participation of the National Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a more moderate nationalist right-wing party with anti-migrant positions to the Brussels Pride parade in May 2018. On this occasion, a group of counter-demonstrators was arrested after sitting in front of the N-VA float, in protest against the inclusion of a party perceived as highly conservative, racist, and homo/bi/transphobic, in official Pride celebrations (Hope, 2018; LeSoir.be, 2018).

Another element that gets erased in externalisations of homo/bi/transphobia as a foreign phenomenon is represented by the huge disparities in the feelings towards, and treatment of, LGBTQ people in different regions of Belgium. One of the elements that has already been mentioned is the different configuration of political formations and parties in French-speaking Belgium and in Flanders. The far-right parties discussed above were born out of a dissatisfaction and frustration of a certain part of the Flemish establishment and electorate with the mechanisms of power-sharing between the two linguistic communities in the country. Before being an anti-immigration party, the Vlaams Belang is a nationalist party that calls for the independence of Flanders from the rest of (Francophone) Belgium. In contrast to this, and as a reaction to it, the strongest side of the LGBTQ movement in the country has traditionally been located in Flanders. Moreover, the Flemish community government is the most active in financing organisations, events and projects aimed at the protection and

promotion of LGBTQ rights (Eeckhout, 2011). While things have changed in recent years, with Francophone institutions also participating in the funding and support of various LGBTQ initiatives and organisations, this change only took place after the major legislative wins of the LGBTQ movement. Collaboration between Flemish and French-speaking organisations also seems to have increased in the past two decades, following the first Brussels Pride in 1996, arguably the first event that saw the two movements coming together. Despite these changes, the influences of the Belgian ethno-linguistic divide on the organisation and mobilisation of the LGBTQ movement(s) are undeniable. Whether this divide represents a "federalism disadvantage" (Celis and Meier, 2016: 417) for minorities that cross-cut the linguistic border, or whether it is this disunion in the organisation and structuring of groups, communities, and regions that created the political space for a fast legislative progress towards the recognition of LGBTQ rights (Paternotte, 2016) is up for debate. Whichever the case, the structure and workings of the LGBTQ movement(s) in Belgium show how an awareness of the dynamics between the two main linguistic communities is necessary to understand processes of social change in the country.

4.2.2 LGBTQ spaces in the city: the Gay Street

The number of venues that cater to an LGBTQ audience in the city often work as another element reinforcing the image of Brussels as a friendly place. The already mentioned Gaycities.com lists 42 activities in the city that target a gay audience. The activities include bars and clubs, restaurants, saunas, shops, and a gym (hotels were excluded from the count). This number needs to be integrated with all the venues only partially listed on touristic webpages: less commercial places – i.e. squats, political circles, informal gatherings, cruising spaces – , as well as those commercial venues whose clientele, albeit LGBTQ, is not mainly composed of white cis men.

An interesting aspect that can be inferred from an observation of the venues listed on Gaycities.com is their concentration in the city center. Of the 42 listed venues and activities, 37 are located in the municipality of Brussels Central. Of these, 16 are located on a single street, Rue Marché au Charbon, informally known as the Gay Street. While some important events of the gay scene do not take place in the Gay Street – for example, La Démence, an internationally renowned gay monthly party– its centrality in the structuring of Brussels LGBTQ life is clear. Most of the venues found on the Gay Street are commercial, but they gather different crowds. Hamid, a 25 years old participant, suggested to divide the street in three separate segments. The first, coming from Grand Place, is saturated with bars that are

mainly frequented by gay men. In the midst of them, there is the RainbowHouse, the physical home of the network of LGBTQ organisations of the city. The organisations of the network have a rotating scheme for managing the bar of the RainbowHouse on different nights of the weeks. In an alley just behind the RainbowHouse, another room is used by the network. During my stay in the city, I participated to three different events in the small room in Lollepotstraat: the launching of an association of LGBTQ deaf persons, a queer open-mic night organized by a collective of young EU institutions interns, and a gin and tonic party that would fund the rugby LBT team of the RainbowHouse. Walking further along the Street, the scene somewhat changes, with bars, cafés and cabarets that gather a more mixed crowd. In this section of the street, it is less rare to see heterosexual couples. Finally, towards the end of the street, one finds the biggest sauna of the city, Macho Sauna, and its only cruising bar, Stammbar. The variety of spaces on the street makes it a destination for different parts of the LGBTQ population of the city, who come here at different times and for different reasons.

While it is important to acknowledge the value of this area as a sign of the vitality and vibrancy of the LGBTQ scene in the city, it is also necessary to contextualise this in the power dynamics at work in the wider urban context. Already in 2006, when the Gay Street as it is today was still quite recent – the RainbowHouse was established in 2001 – Deligne *et al.* (2006) noted how the emergence of a gay area was more driven by economic and commercial calculations rather than by the interests of the community. According to them, the presence of cultural, social and political organisations in the street, represented by the establishment of the Rainbow House, came after, and as a consequence of, the emergence of such a “pole of homo-sociality and homo-consumption” (Deligne *et al.*, 2006: 144). As a result, the Gay Street and its spaces can work as exclusionary sites towards certain groups of people that are not fully invited to participate in the commercial scene. The situation is somewhat nuanced by the presence of the RainbowHouse, which offers its services to a wider and diverse public, not only in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, but also in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, and class. Nonetheless, it has been noted how homonormativity, the rooting of homosexual politics in neoliberal consumption, and its resulting reinforcement of heteronormative models of domesticity (Duggan, 2002), is at work in the spaces of the Gay Street. This process, which the gay area of Brussels shares with a number of similar LGBTQ areas in other western cities (Bell and Binnie, 2004; Binnie and Skeggs, 2004), results in the active exclusion of a “queer unwanted” (Casey, 2007) population from its spaces. In this sense Huysentruyt *et al.* (2015), in their intersectional analysis of the exclusions at work in the gay area of Brussels, have pointed out how people of colour, and especially those who are

perceived to be from North African countries, can feel (and often are) excluded from such space. In a narrative that mirrors the far-right discourses outlined above, "the exclusion of "outsiders" from the homosexual territory was motivated by a fear for homophobic and other aggressions, and racist, classist, or sexist explanations" (Huysentruyt *et al.*, 2015: 166).

4.3 Governing difference in Brussels

Understanding social relations in the city of Brussels requires their contextualisation in the wider political system that governs Belgium and its capital. The consociational character of Belgian democracy, with its multiple levels of government, each with its own competences, can at times be confusing to the external eye. A detailed explanation of how these levels function would be impossible in the context of this chapter. The aim of this section is therefore to provide an overview of the main bodies and institutions that share power in the Brussels Capital Region. This overview in turn enables an awareness of the foundational role that communitarianism has in the political structuring of the city, allowing for a better understanding of processes of identity formation, contestation, and negotiation in Brussels.

4.3.1 A political/administrative overview of Brussels

From an administrative point of view, when this thesis refers to the city of Brussels, what is meant is actually the Brussels Capital Region. This is one of three regions in which Belgium is divided, the others being majority French-speaking Wallonia, and Flemish-speaking Flanders. Brussels is the only region in the country where Flemish and Francophone communities share power in the regional government. The region takes the name from one of the 19 municipalities that make up the urban area, that of Brussels Central. The city of Brussels is located in the middle of Flanders but has historically been governed by a French-speaking elite. Today the Flemish population is in minority in the city, but complex procedures are in place in order to ensure that both communities are represented at the regional and federal level, and French and Dutch are both official languages in the city (Fitzmaurice, 1996). On a scalar vertical division of power, the next level of government in Brussels is represented by the local municipalities. Municipalities do not guarantee representation to both communities, and as a result some municipalities do not have any elected Flemish-speaking person in office. Consequently, issues of community (over- or under-) representation sometimes cause tensions between Francophone and Flemish communities in certain municipalities, enabling the emergence of deep-seated fears of being overpowered by the other side, and mirroring a certain degree of instability in these inter-community power-sharing mechanisms (Jacobs, 2000). To the levels of government outlined

above – federal, regional, and local – we need to add a very specific element of the Belgian consociational system, which is the formal institution of "communities" as governing bodies. The three communities in the country are the Flemish, the Francophone, and the German-speaking one. They all have their own assembly, and specific legislative competences in the fields of education, cultural matters and health and social assistance (Fitzmaurice, 1996; Deschouwer, 2012). In Brussels, both the Flemish and the French-speaking communities administer the provision of services in these areas, further complicating the political landscape of the capital.

The structure outlined above not only suggests the complexity of Brussels' administrative machine, but it also helps understand how inter-community tensions, and political efforts to manage and harmonise relations between the two biggest communities in the country, are at the heart of the Belgian system of government. Brussels, being the capital city of such a divided country, and the only region in which space and power are shared by the two communities, is the perfect location to observe these dynamics at work.

4.3.2 Nationless Brussels, and its communities

The acknowledgement of such levels of administrative complexity allows us to complicate and problematise the concept itself of Belgium as a nation. The question of whether the Belgian nation exists, or whether it is but a bureaucratic system for managing conflict in a divided territory, has been a common question in popular representations and cultural, political and social analyses (Judt, 1999; Billiet *et al.*, 2006; De Winter and Baudewyns, 2009; Vogl and Hüning, 2010; Delpérée, 2011). What is relevant to this study is the understanding that the different groups and communities in Brussels conduct their lives and move through space in a city that is founded on, and mirrors, the historical tensions between these two communities. The structure that frames political and social action is both the result of and an attempt at managing such tensions. Other communities, like those of people with a migratory background, as well as those that cross linguistic lines, such as the LGBTQ community, had to adapt to and navigate the complex political, administrative and communitarian terrain that is the city of Brussels.

The in-flows of migrations that took place in Belgium from the 1970s onwards produced an inevitable interaction between communities and groups of newcomers and the historical ethno-linguistic communities of the country. While the constitutional asset of the country is based on a series of rights and representational guarantees for the Francophone and Flemish communities, these have never been granted to the ethnic communities that formed in the

country as a result of migratory flows. As a result, “ethnic minorities have no independent public recognition outside the dual Flemish-Francophone structure of the political field” (Jacobs, 2000: 292). Attitudes towards migrant groups have historically been, and continue to be, very different between the Francophone and the Flemish communities, reflecting their different cultural universe of reference. While the Flemish government has an approach that is inspired by Anglo-Saxon and Dutch models of multiculturalism, Francophone institutions have been more aligned with a French assimilationist model. If Flemish governing bodies have been willing to grant ethnic minorities a specific status, and to fund the work of community-based migrant organisations, Francophone institutions have refused to do so. Rather than being merely a reflection of the values upheld by the two communities, these differences can be explained in the context of the political strategies adopted by the two sides in their fights over power in the country. Commenting on the Flemish funding of migrant organisations, Jacobs (2000) argues that “it is definitely not too farfetched to denounce these activities as – at least partially – strategic attempts on the part of the Flemish government in Brussels to incorporate immigrant (often Francophone) self-organisations into its policy networks, thus hoping to strengthen the sphere of influence of the Flemish community within the region” (293). This multi-national, multi-level, system of political organisation can represent both an obstacle and a resource for racialised communities in the country. On the one hand, it can create spaces for participation in the political sphere that go beyond classic party and electoral politics, and that can work as sites for the expression of voices from migrant communities (Bousetta *et al.*, 2017). On the other, the entanglement of Belgian politics and Flemish-Francophone relationships leaves migrant groups constantly out of the game, reproducing historical exclusions and allowing for meaningful inclusions only when they serve the political strategy of the Flemish or Francophone community.

4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion to his analysis of the Belgian political system, and referring to the ways in which Franco-Flemish relationships have been managed in the country, Deschouwer (2012: 256) states that “there are indeed two stories to be told about Belgium”. The first story is one of success, whereby the country found the best way to ensure the peaceful coexistence of its major communities. The second is one of constant compromise, in such a complex system that no community can ever be completely satisfied. What is true about the country with regard to Flemish-Francophone relations can be extended to the various groups and communities that live in the country. While contemporary Belgium presents itself as a highly multicultural country, where different communities coexist in peace, and institutions are in

place to safeguard everyone's rights, the country is also crossed by inter-community tensions that sometimes escalate in outright conflict and violence.

Brussels is portrayed as a hub of different cultures, nationalities, ethnicities, and sexualities and its diversity is very often perceived to be the main feature of the city as a whole. An appreciation of these crossings and mixings often appears to be the glue that keeps the social fabric of the city together. This characteristic of the city even has a specific name. "'Zinneke' is a term used by *bruxellois* and *brusselaars* to refer affectionately to the hybrid 'mongrel' identity of the 'true' people from Brussels, who often have a complicated mix of Flemish, Francophone and other origins" (Favell, 2001: 10-11). From an administrative point of view, it has also been noted how participation in the political life of the city by different communities has been steadily increasing in the past few decades. Despite the limits that a system focused on Francophone-Flemish relations entails (Jacobs, 2000), minorities with a migratory background have found ways and venues to make their voices heard (Phalet and Swyngedouw, 2002; Bousetta *et al.*, 2017). Analyses that focus on electoral results in local, regional and federal elections show how representation of racialised minorities in Brussels has been increasing, also thanks to development in migration policies, such as the passage from a *jus sanguinis* to a *jus soli* citizenship frame, and progressive naturalisations of groups of people present on Belgian territory (Martiniello and Hily, 1998; Jacobs *et al.*, 2002; Zibouh, 2011).

Beyond the positive image of a diverse Brussels, the city also reflects the fears, frustrations and tensions that often accompany its not-always-peaceful cohabitations. Starting from tensions around a Frenchification of certain historically Flemish municipalities of the capital, to fears connected to the depictions of other municipalities as hubs of international terrorism, the main divisions around the city are on linguistic, ethnic, religious and/or racial lines. On the substratum of inter-community tensions between Flemish and Francophones, new clashes arise between white Belgians and racialised communities, complicating the image of the city as the place where diversity is celebrated and cherished. At times, tensions between different groups can emerge in particularly violent ways, showing how balances of power in the city are precarious and ephemeral, and enabling the emergence of the tensions hidden behind the presumption of peaceful multiculturalism. Examples of this are the various "urban riots" that have taken place in the city from 1991. These events worked as catalysts for the discontents and frustration of racialised youths, often from a North African background, living in deprived neighbourhoods of the city. The violent clashes between these and police forces bring to the fore the interconnectedness of social and economic deprivation and processes of

racialisation at work in the city, allowing us to get a glimpse of the other side of the story of different communities living together in Brussels (Brion and Rea, 1992; Rea, 2006; Vandezande *et al.*, 2011; Demart, 2013). The latest episode that was framed as a riot by Belgian police and media happened during my fieldwork in the city, on the night of 11th November 2017. After the win that granted the national football team of Morocco qualification to the World Cup, spontaneous celebrations took over the streets of central Brussels. The unfolding of the events is unclear, but what is known is that during the night episodes of looting and vandalism took place in two distinct parts of the city, and violent clashes between the police and young fans of the Moroccan team resulted in the wounding of 23 people (BBC, 2017; LeSoir.be, 2017). These events took place a few months before the Belgian team, during the World Cup, was celebrated as the perfect result of the multicultural and multiracial mixing of Belgian society. There are, indeed, multiple stories to be told about Belgium, and Brussels.

Chapter 5. In, out or somewhere else entirely: The need to go beyond the closet

The metaphor of the closet, and its corollary conditions of being "in" or "out" of it, are central in western discourses on sexualities (Brown, 2000). It has been argued that conceptualisations of what it means to be LGBTQ in the western world, and to be oppressed because of one's sexuality, are built upon the recognition of the "closet" as the "fundamental feature of social life" (Sedgwick, 1990: 68) for LGBTQ individuals. Discourses around sexualities and narratives that posit the necessity of a passage from a condition of concealment to one of disclosure are so interwoven that it is hard to talk about the first without, at least implicitly, referring to the second (Fassin, 2000).

However, the widespread employment of the term has not been exempt from critiques. Some focus on the multiplicity of meanings that conflate in the image of "coming out", rendering it a concept in need of a more specific formulation (Orne, 2011). Others observe that the image of the closet, and the idea of "being out of it" as the ultimate goal of processes of LGBTQ emancipation and empowerment, might not be the most useful metaphor to describe and understand the experiences of LGBTQ people who are not from a white western background (Ross, 2005; Decena, 2011; Provencher, 2017). While the in/out binary can be a paradoxical dichotomy for any LGBTQ person, regardless of their racialisation (Fassin, 2000), some argue that its rootedness in a white western context works as an oppressive tool particularly towards racialised people (Abraham, 2007). A focus on developmental narratives of disclosure as the only possible path towards LGBTQ well-being hides all those communication strategies that do not rely on the verbalisation of one's sexuality, which scholars have found to be common among racialised and minoritised communities across different western contexts (Fisher, 2003; Decena, 2011; Provencher, 2017). These reflections have been particularly relevant for LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, whose position is often depicted as one of concealment and hiding, and the closet as the most important facet of their oppression (Jaspal and Siraj, 2011; Siraj, 2011).

This chapter puts these reflections in dialogue with the narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels and the processes of sexuality disclosure and concealment they negotiate. It shows that a deconstruction of the binarism and linearity of coming out discourses is necessary to understand their experiences. The first section of the chapter outlines the main interpretations and deconstructions of the metaphor of the closet in queer studies and queer of colour critique. The other sections present and discuss the

experiences and narratives of sexuality disclosure and concealment as they were collected from LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels. The data suggests that discourses that rely on an "in and out" dichotomy fail to capture the complexities that shape the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. By not acknowledging different strategies or ways of negotiating concealment and disclosure, these discourses contribute to the erasure of the experiences and ways of identification of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background.

5.1 In and out of the closet: A binary that needs deconstructing

5.1.1 The multiple meanings of "coming out of the closet"

Sentences that use a variation of the expression above – e.g. "I came out to my parents when I was 16", "What's your coming out story?", "I think he's still in the closet" – are so common in everyday spoken English that the implicit elements in such sentences do not impair their intelligibility. Other languages have adopted the expression, both in their English form and in a translated one. In French, a person who discloses their sexuality could be said to "faire son *coming out*" (literally: "do their coming out").

As a consequence of this wide circulation, the metaphor "has collected a number of theoretical assumptions and folk meanings" (Orne, 2011: 682). Coming out has been interpreted as a process of self-acceptance, an act of external disclosure, or a rite of passage for young LGBTQ people (Herdt, 1989; Samuels, 2003), making it necessary to reconsider the term by "clarifying this tangled knot" (Orne, 2011: 682). These multiple meanings originate in different processes that framed "coming out" as a pivotal moment in the recognition and acceptance of one's sexuality. One such process was the emergence and circulation of developmental theories of sexual identity in the field of psychology and counselling (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1989; Carrion and Lock, 1997). These theories rely on the conceptualisation of a linear developmental process of sexual identities, where the verbalisation of one's sexuality is the fundamental step that allows the individual to accept their sexuality and integrate it with the other sides of their identity (Dank, 1971; Troiden, 1988). Another set of meanings attributed to the expression originate in the emergence and growth of the Gay Liberation Movement in western nations in the last century. The importance of the metaphor of the closet can be observed in many phases of the American LGBTQ movement as it emerged from the Stonewall riots (Jay and Young, 1992; Armstrong, 2002). In this context, disclosing one's sexuality was not only a sign of self-acceptance. Coming out was viewed as part of a wider political strategy that conceived the

visibility of LGBTQ people as a fundamental cornerstone towards their liberation (Gamson, 1989; Shilts, 2009). This discourse about LGBTQ visibility, and coming out as a political strategy, was not confined to the US, but moved to other western countries in the following decades, influencing their LGBTQ movements (Rossi Barilli, 1999; Burgnard, 2010; Sibalis, 2014).

The result of these processes is a conflation of different meanings, which renders "coming out" a charged metaphor that needs to be unpacked. The definition provided by Eribon (1999) shows how an individual (ethical) liberation and a public (political) one are juxtaposed in framing the linear path of "coming out" as the most desirable and legitimate way of LGBTQ existence. According to him, coming out is

> "The deliberate and liberating gesture through which, one fine day, one chooses to break with the obligation to secrecy; the act through which one makes their homosexuality public. It marks the refusal to submit any longer to the (internalised) violence committed by the intensely experienced dichotomy between what can be said in public and what needs to be confined to private life, deep down inside[2]" (Eribon, 1999: 150, my translation).

As noted by Fassin (2000), post-Stonewall definitions of coming out are paradoxical in this juxtaposition between an internal sphere of existence and acceptance and an imperative to make sexualities public and visible.

> "Language here transposes a temporal, historical-political, opposition between 'oppression' and 'liberation', to a spatial, psycho-political, one between the 'inside' of an intimate, secret, or clandestine, but in any case private, desire, and the 'outside' of a public sexuality, displayed and reclaimed[3]" (Fassin, 2000: 182, my translation)

5.1.2 The first steps at a deconstruction of the binary

The meanings behind the concept of the closet, and the normative trajectories that they seem to chart for the LGBTQ subject, did not go unnoticed to the analytic eye of queer theorists in the 1990s. Sedgwicks's *Epistemology of the closet* (1990) is the work that is considered foundational for any attempt at deconstructing the binaries that undergird the metaphor. The closet, according to her, is for many "still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people […] in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence" (Sedgwick,

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[2] "Le geste délibéré et libérateur par lequel, un beau jour, on décide de rompre avec l'obligation du secret, l'acte par lequel on rend publique son homosexualité, marque le refus de se soumettre plus longtemps à la violence (intériorisée) qu'exerce la dichotomie intensément vécue entre ce qui peut être dit en public et ce qui doit rester confiné dans la vie privée ou le for intérieur".

[3] "Le langage transpose ici une opposition temporelle, historico-politique, entre 'oppression' et 'libération', en une opposition spatiale, psycho-politique, entre le 'dedans' d'un désir intime, secret, voire clandestin, en tout cas privé, et le 'dehors' d'une sexualité publique, affichée et revendiquée".

1990: 68). Its importance does not imply the unproblematised acceptance of its workings as framed by mainstream discourses.

According to Sedgwick (1990: 71) the images of the closet and of coming out are deeply embedded in the constructions and contestations of modern western cultures and identities, crossing on "almost any politically charged line of representation". They suggest (and signify) a number of binarised categories that are foundational to western understandings of social life. "Its origins in European culture are […] so ramified […] that the simple vesting of some alternative metaphor has never, either, been a true possibility" (ibid., 72). Far from being a universal feature of LGBTQ life, the closet emerges in all its geographic/cultural/historical contingency.

The framing of "coming out of the closet" solely as a step towards empowerment, be it individual emancipation or collective political recognition, misses out on the whole range of meanings that converge in this metaphor. The image of coming out needs to be detached from its depiction as the "salvational epistemologic certainty against the very equivocal privacy afforded by the closet" (Sedgwick, 1990: 71). Rather than simply representing the act of stepping out from a clearly demarcated area of secrecy and hiding, the disclosure that takes place in the coming out process is "at once compulsory and forbidden" (ibid., 70).

The image of the closet, and the normative injunction to disclose one's sexuality, is also problematised by Butler (1993b), who deconstructs precisely the linearity of the coming out story. This destabilisation passes through the suggestion that the relation between the "in" and the "out" of the closet is co-productive and it presents more complexities than the traditional narrative of liberation-through-disclosure allows to observe. Being "in" and "out" might not be mutually exclusive conditions, but they could simultaneously exist and shape the LGBTQ experience (Fisher, 2003; Orne, 2011). This, in turn changes the questions that become relevant and interesting when thinking about the closet:

> "[…]so we are out of the closet, but into what? what new unbounded spatiality? the room, the den, the attic, the basement, the house, the bar, the university, some new enclosure whose door […] produced the expectation of a fresh air and a light of illumination that never arrives? […] For being 'out' always depends to some extent on being 'in'; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being 'out' must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as 'out'"(Butler, 1993b: 309).

5.1.3 A world beyond the closet?

Others have also highlighted the contingency of the closet, and its roots in a western context. According to Seidman (2002: 54), the emergence of the closet as a "condition of social

oppression" was a product of heterosexual domination at a specific time in American history, the decades following World War II. The construction of the category of "homosexual" and the deliberate enforcement of heterosexual domination by State institutions, resulted in the formation of the closet as that space of secrecy, shame and isolation that characterised the lives of most non-heterosexual people in "the heyday of the closet era" (Seidman, 2002: 10). A conclusion follows from this temporalisation of the closet in Seidman's (2002) analysis. If the closet emerged, and had its heyday, then nothing suggests that it is here to stay. According to him, increasingly high numbers of LGBTQ individuals in the US lead their lives unhinged by that space of secrecy. In Seidman's view, the closet is slowly and imperfectly, but steadily and inexorably, going towards an erosion. While he concedes that the reality of many LGBTQ people is not free from homo/bi/transphobia, he stresses the need to admit to the progress that has led many American LGBTQ people out of the closet, discarding it as the central feature of their experience of the social world.

Seidman's observations are important because they mirror one of the discourses that has accompanied the deployment of the metaphor of the closet in the last decades. If, on the one hand, queer theorists have worked to deconstruct the binary organisation of LGBTQ life experiences through the closet, others have expanded the dichotomised, linear, normative narrative of a passage from secrecy to disclosure. This expansion transcends the experiences of LGBTQ individuals, and the image of "coming out" comes to represent the trajectory of LGBTQ communities in the West (Borgstrom, 2018). Even when acknowledging the nuances that complicate such linearity the story is still one of progress and of western LGBTQ emancipation from the darkness of the closet. Seidman *et al.* (1999: 11) specify that it is not their intention "to narrate a one-dimensional story of the progressive social inclusion and equality of gay individuals", as they acknowledge that such processes have been "incomplete". Nonetheless, their analysis is centred on individual (and social) trajectories that result in a "declining significance of the closet" (ibid., 27). Such narratives prompt us to focus on those areas of incompleteness and partiality in this road towards an erosion of the closet. What is necessary is a change in perspective that shows the limits of such a progressive developmental discourse (Borgstrom, 2018). In other words, in a society where the relevance of the closet in shaping LGBTQ lives is decreasing, whose lives are believed to be still influenced by it? Who is left out from this story of individual and community liberation? How are these groups and people framed in discourses regarding LGBTQ rights? If the story is one that leads "beyond the closet", who, if anyone, is left behind?

5.1.4 Other ways of interrogating processes of concealment and disclosure

A number of scholars, inspired by queer of colour critique, have noted how discourses and practices employed or legitimised by mainstream LGBTQ groups, communities, and movements, can work to limit the rights of racialised populations (Puar, 2006; Puar, 2007; Haritaworn, 2010; El-Tayeb, 2011; Bracke, 2012; Haritaworn, 2012). The deployment of the metaphor of the closet is often central in the production of the exclusion of racialised populations from a "beyond the closet" condition (Ross, 2005). To understand how discourses around disclosure are interconnected to the exclusions of certain (racialised) populations from the enjoyment of its benefits, it is worth citing at length the following passage by Perez (2005: 177-178):

> "The closet metaphor spatially and temporally suggests access to privacy not collectively experienced by all sexual minorities. The privacy this metaphor takes for granted requires specific economic, cultural, and familial circumstances. Likewise, the 'coming out' metaphor suggests a kind of mobility not universally available. [...] Conceptually and materially, that freedom and self-determination are premised on the property of whiteness. The closet narrativizes gay and lesbian identity in a manner that violently excludes or includes the subjects it names according to their access to specific kinds of privacy, property, and mobility".

What is critiqued here, and in other work that problematises the images of the closet and of coming out (Fisher, 2003; Orne, 2011; Horton, 2017), is not the importance and value that processes of disclosure have in the lives of LGBTQ people. Rather, what needs to be acknowledged is the deep connection between the employment of the metaphor, the normative effects it produces, and the racialisation of certain individuals, groups and populations.

> "The question is not whether or not the closet can be made to apply to African Americans and other racialized and classed groups. Obviously, it can and does. The question, instead, concerns what happens when the closet *is* applied *as though* its operation has no dependence on the racial-class thinking or no stake in acts of racial-class discrimination and exploitation" (Ross, 2005: 182-183).

When it comes to discourses and representations of Muslim groups and communities, the metaphor of the closet emerges as particularly relevant. Muslim LGBTQ people are often represented as vulnerable subjects, forced to secrecy by the widespread homo/bi/transphobia that infuses depictions of their ethnic/religious communities (Siraj, 2009; Jungar and Peltonen, 2015). Online searches for topics related to Muslim attitudes towards sexualities offer a variety of sources that directly relate the image of the closet to the lives of LGBTQ individuals in Muslim communities. Exemplary in this sense is the article entitled "Choosing family or freedom: The trials of "coming out" as a British ex-Muslim" on Vice.com, whose

author “spoke to a number of atheists from Muslim background who are still firmly in the closet” (Cottee, 2014). Other examples include testimonies of LGBTQ Muslim people who believe it is possible to reconcile the two sides of their identification (Holmes, 2019), or conversely autobiographic articles by LGBTQ people who have not disclosed their sexuality (Noor, 2016). Other texts focus on the trajectories “from the closet to the light” that migration routes for LGBTQ people from Muslim countries represent (Ostmane and Zahed, 2016). Despite their varying levels of nuancing of mainstream discourses, these popular sources reproduce a discourse that posits the closet as a central feature of the lives of LGBTQ Muslim people. Academic work (examples are Jaspal and Siraj, 2011; Siraj, 2011) has not been immune from the risk of contributing to the reinforcement of such images, narratives, and discourses. While it is important to acknowledge the contribution of studies that focus on the partiality and limits of the coming out process for Muslim people, the result can often be that of reinforcing a connection between the image of the closet and Muslim communities. What is often missing is a problematisation of the validity of the image of the closet for all individuals, presenting the act of “coming out” again as a “disclosure imperative” (McLean, 2007). The language of articles such as “Isolated, invisible, and in the closet: The life story of a Scottish Muslim lesbian” (Siraj, 2011), or “Perceptions of ‘coming out’ among British Muslim gay men”, (Jaspal and Siraj, 2011) re-iterate the image of stepping out of the closet as the empowering and emancipatory act par excellence for LGBTQ individuals. In this work, the condition of LGBTQ Muslim subjects is presented as not providing full access to disclosure as a life option, and this, in turn, having nefarious consequences on the well-being of the people involved.

It is in reaction to such discourses that queer of colour critique moves in its destabilisation of the closet/coming out binary. Following the deconstructive questions formulated by queer theorists, scholars have noted how processes of concealment and disclosure might be best understood as a condition of constant being both in and out of the closet (Mosher, 2001; Orne, 2011). The blurring of the borders of the closet, or at least the acknowledgement of the multiple possibilities of movement in and around it, allow to demystify its negative attributes of darkness and secrecy. As argued by Orne (2011), rather than talking about the closet, it would be useful to employ analytical tools that allow for the observation of the strategies that LGBTQ people put in place in order to negotiate the degrees of concealment and disclosure they want to produce and maintain in the different contexts they navigate. He coins the term “strategic outness” to indicate “coming out as a continual, contextual, social identity management” (Orne, 2011: 685), whereby the LGBTQ subject has the agency to decide to

what extent they want to expose themselves. Once the choice to be out is thought of as strategic, then also the choice to keep silent can be seen as a strategic deployment of resources. Horton (2017: 1060) wonders whether there is a "creative potential" to be found in the non-disclosure of LGBTQ people. According to him, "acts of concealment – silence, the impossibility of speech, and even the failures surrounding coming out and being 'heard' by family" are "generative for thinking about the queer potentialities and contradictions of normative, natal kinship arrangements" (ibid., 1060). While he acknowledges the importance of avoiding a romanticisation of the closet, or its depiction as *the* non-western modality for dealing with sexual identity, he calls for an analysis of silence that goes beyond its conception as an immature, failed phase of a coming out process. Rather, it is exactly that "inhabiting contradictions between queer and normative – failing to ever be fully one or the other – [that] is perhaps the substance central to queer experience" (ibid., 1061).

What emerges from studies that look at the experiences of racialised LGBTQ people is that the "closet" is a productive site, and that silence serves an important function when people opt for it (Bing, 2004). Fisher (2003: 174) states that it is necessary to "recuperate the generative potential which closet space can offer". According to her, a rejection of the binary organisation of visibility and invisibility allows for the observation of "a fluid and productive relationship between the two", and the "advantages gained through perpetual motion suggest that the opportunity to *move* is a very real currency that cannot be underestimated as a tactical form of power" (ibid., 174). Decena (2011) not only shows how non-disclosure can serve an important function, but he also stresses how such silence does not necessarily mean that knowledge is not exchanged. Building on the concept of tacit knowledge as articulated by Polanyi (1966), he argues that the closet is a "collaborative effort", and "keeping the closet door ajar is accomplished only to the extent that the gay subject and his others coproduce the closet when they interact with one another" (Decena, 2011: 32). Rather than viewing the closet as that hiding spot where no real connection is possible with the outside world, he suggests looking at this condition in all its communicational nuances. This allows for the observation of those instances in which verbalisation might not take place, but knowledge about one's sexuality is allowed to (more or less tacitly) circulate, shaping relationships and mutual expectations. Easy or straightforward interpretations of silence as "lack of something" are impossible in a context where knowledge, skills, information, power structures and hierarchies are constantly communicated, expressed and played without necessarily attaching words to them.

These reflections call for the acknowledgement of the mechanisms by which a concept that is rendered a synonym of empowerment and liberation, that of coming out, might actually work to exclude certain experiences and narratives. The difficulties that emerge translating the expression “coming out of the closet” to non-western languages (Manalansan IV, 2003; Ritchie, 2010; Decena, 2011) are telling of the mystification at work in portraying such a verbalisation as a universal marker of LGBTQ liberation. Other conceptualisations of concealment and disclosure are needed to understand the experiences of racialised and/or non-western LGBTQ persons.

5.2 In – Out – Somewhere inbetween

5.2.1 Out

Discourses around coming out often portray LGBTQ people in Muslim communities as forced to keep silent about their sexuality (Bracke, 2012). While this discourse is reflected in some of the narratives collected for this project, others are in stark contrast with it. A first line of complication is represented by the experiences of participants who have decided to come out to their families. Of the thirty persons interviewed, fourteen went through a process of “coming out” with one or more members of their family. What I mean here by “coming out” is an explicit verbalisation of their sexuality in an oral or written communication.

The most common motivations that participants offered in explaining their need, and the decision, to open up about their sexuality with family members reflect discourses about the closet/coming out binary outlined in the first section of this chapter. These motivations are rooted in a view of the closet as a space where the LGBTQ person lives in hiding. As noted by, among others, McLean (2007) and Perez (2005), coming out becomes in this discourse a moral imperative, not only towards oneself, but also towards others.

Sarah was born in France, with a Jewish French mother and a Muslim Moroccan father. Her choice of coming out, and her planning for it over a weekend visit to her family, was accompanied by high levels of anxiety. Not disclosing her sexuality had been bothering her for a while. She carefully chose the words to use when opening the conversation with her parents. A certain connotation of the closet as a space of deception emerges from them:

> “I worked on my sentence, to just drop it. And it was ‘I lied to you by omission, and I like girls’” (Sarah).

In a similar vein, Mehmet mentions the idea of "rightness" when re-telling his coming out to his younger sister: "If I hide something from you, it wouldn't be right, so I prefer to say it" (Mehmet).

Ryzlan explains this when she talks about the choice she saw in front of her when a family member started spreading rumours about her sexuality.

> "It was the moment, a key moment of my existence, and I had the choice. I had five seconds, in front of me, to decide on the rest of my existence at the relational level, and at the sexual, and sentimental. […] Either I denied… Well, I dismissed the information […] But this means that I would lose my credibility, the day when I would really… when I want to accept and own up to it. Or well, I accepted my difference and I took a small tsunami of violence in that moment, but well, I stayed… I stayed... ahm… coherent. And I chose this second option. So, in the moment when it was snitched on, I confirmed actually".

These excerpts all conform to the normatively linear trajectory that underpins discourses around the closet, the development of a sexual identity, and LGBTQ liberation. A conformity to this discourse is expressed by other participants. Some, who are not out with their families, or who are partially and see this partiality as a limit, stressed the importance of coming out as a moral/political act, as well as a path to personal well-being. This is the case of Salim, who disclosed his homosexuality to his siblings, but never talked about it with his parents. When asked whether he thought coming out was necessary, he replied:

> "I think so. Or, anyway, it's very selfish from our part to not do it, anyway. So, it's not socially engaging, it's not engaging in a fight that is bigger than… than yourself" (Salim).

Salim's words allow for another element that is constitutive of coming out discourses to emerge: that of the political/moral necessity for coming out. In his view, coming out not only represents a path to self-development, and thus an increase in personal well-being, but it also works as the fulfilling act of a socio-political responsibility towards the LGBTQ community. In this trope, the LGBTQ subject who does not disclose their sexuality fails to "engage in a fight that is bigger than themselves", thus being in a way complicit with systemic homo/bi/transphobia at work in society. Being "in the closet" thus is not only detrimental to one's personal sense of worth and possibility for happiness, but it becomes a "selfish" omission, a failure to engage in one's responsibility for social change. The strictness of Salim's words in portraying such a morally demarcated binary between being in and out is nuanced by his specific condition of being partially out in his family.

5.2.2 In

A sole focus on the stories of participants who opted for verbally communicating their sexuality to one or more family members would not do justice to the variety of experiences collected in this research. While most participants had opened up conversations with family members regarding their sexualities or had a sense that knowledge about it circulated in their family even in the absence of a conversation, others were adamant in their refusing this as an option. In their stories, safeguarding information regarding their sexualities from circulating was a necessary mechanism for protection against homo/bi/transphobic reactions.

Only one participant, Amine, did not reveal his sexuality to any member of his family. Amine's story presents some important differences with the others collected in this project. When handed the pre-interview questionnaire, he answered the question about his identification in terms of sexual orientation (see Appendix D) by writing "gay", followed by three plus signs, and "bi", followed by one plus. As we began our interview, I asked him to explain what he meant by this. He told me that his sexual and romantic experiences when growing up had mainly been with men. In his late 20s, he started feeling more and more uncomfortable with his sexuality.

> "I started asking myself what I am doing. It's not a good thing to be in this way, because it's against all my convictions, all my religious convictions. So I decided to get married" (Amine).

The marriage was followed by a period of what Amine felt as a gradual change in his sexuality. Amine's describes his married life as happy. He still occasionally meets other men for casual sex, but these encounters have been less and less frequent.

> "So I enjoyed life with my wife, and I… maybe in the beginning it was not that easy, but now I am really enjoying life with my wife. I can say that I am moving, but very very slowly, from maybe… let's say 95% gay to mostly straight".

The conversation with Amine was one of the most complicated interactions I engaged with during my fieldwork. The choices made by Amine are very different from those that shaped the lives of other participants, or mine. It was (and is) difficult to analyse the data from this interview without attaching to it political meanings that are not necessarily relevant to understand Amine's story. The choice of getting married to a woman, and to keep information about his sexuality undisclosed if not to a very limited number of friends, was not, in Amine's presentation of it, an irrational choice, born out of fear of rejection. His motivation for his "staying in the closet" was given by his own imagination of what a happy life, a good life, would look like for him. Amine is the only person interviewed in this project who decided to

marry a woman while being sexually and romantically attracted mainly by people of his same gender. Nonetheless, a number of people met in the field spoke about other LGBTQ people from a Muslim background who made similar choices and decided to prioritise their wish to build a heteronormative family than openly living their sexuality.

From these conversations a centrality of heteronormative marriage emerges. Participants often describe it as an institution that marks the inscription of the person who gets married into a path of life that is desired and approved of by their family and community. For some, marriage with a person of a different gender remains an option to be considered even when they have no problem in accepting their homosexuality. Salim, for example, while stressing the importance of coming out as a personal and political act during his interview, also said that he might consider marrying a woman in the future. This would allow him to build a family that can more easily be accepted by his community, which is something he has a deep desire for. It has been noted how marriage, or a certain idealisation of the institution of marriage (Shannahan, 2009), is *the* site that gives legitimacy to sexual expression in religious, legal, and cultural Muslim discourses (Bouhdiba, 1998; Yip, 2004b). For a Muslim person, marriage can be a “religious duty through which one’s religious faith is deepened” (Yip, 2004b: 339). Such importance necessarily influences how LGBTQ Muslim people conceive of their sexualities, and the relationships between them and their faith (Shannahan, 2009; Yip, 2004b). My intention is not to essentialise Muslim cultures as rooted in heteronormative marriage, possibly in contrast to a West that would somehow work differently. Nonetheless, it is important to note how marriage is mentioned by many participants as the central tenet of normative life in their communities of origin. It is also interesting to mention how a negation of a desire to marry is an element around which many of the indirect communications about participants’ sexualities with their families revolve around (Provencher, 2017). These will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, and they will further confirm the importance of marriage in discourses around sexualities, norms, and life-choices in Muslim families living in Brussels.

5.2.3 Involuntarily out

Ryzlan’s story of how she was faced with the choice to come out to her family or to deny her sexuality introduced another common element in participants’ narratives around their communication, or lack thereof, of their sexuality to their families. She was brought to that “key moment” by her brother-in-law, who found out some details about her sexuality on her laptop, and disclosed these to the rest of her family. Ten of the interviewed participants

reported a family member finding out about their sexuality by chance. The most common way was the discovery of “compromising” material on their computer.

> “Actually my sister was the first one to find out. I don’t even remember what I had on my laptop. I think I was in like some dating app or whatever. And she became all dramatic and started to cry about it. I was like ‘Fuck, I have to deal with this’” (Anwar).

In a few cases, the discovery was not accidental, but brought about by someone who actively “outed” the participant. When asked about his coming out during the interview, Rachid immediately responded by describing it as a “horrible story”.

> “How old was I… I was 19? […] I used to go out, I fell in love for the first time. […] And he had a best friend. And this man was very much in love with me. Well, he wanted me to start having sexual relations, or something, and I rejected him. And he sent a letter to my place. Which he carefully didn’t… didn’t envelop. […] It spoke of the relation with the other guy, etcetera. I couldn’t see the reason, there were mobile phones already, he could have sent a text like this. So, it was voluntarily meant to damage. So, obviously, the letter was read, and my mother cried for the shock” (Rachid).

While this was a painful episode for Rachid, his family gradually learned to accept his sexuality. For other participants, the involuntary discovery of their sexuality represented the beginning of tragic processes, the consequences of which are still playing an important role in their lives. This is especially the case for participants who arrived in Belgium trying to escape contexts in which the oppression they lived because of their sexuality was putting their lives at risk. Aziz is 20, and he was born in Guinea Conakry. After realising that he was attracted to other men, back in Guinea, he started a relationship with another man his age. The two were discovered, and this resulted in Aziz having to leave the country to save his life. After a long and extenuating journey through Mali, Algeria, Morocco, and Spain, he reached Belgium, and after a year was granted refugee status. In a similarly dramatic way, rumours about Barwaqo’s sexuality were spread in her family of origin, back in Somalia, by a family member living in Brussels. This episode signalled the beginning of a period of severe anxiety for Barwaqo. Not only the feeling of this information travelling overseas made her feel more self-conscious of her movements and visibility around the city, but it caused deep worries over the destiny of her younger sister, unmarried and still living in their parental house. Barwaqo’s fear of her family reacting to the news of her homosexuality by forcing their other daughter to a non-consensual marriage led her to engage in frustrating (and, to this day, unsuccessful) attempts at having her sister join her in Belgium.

An “in/out of the closet” trajectory, as framed by LGBTQ rights discourses, does not do justice to stories such as those of Aziz and Barwaqo. The narratives of those participants whose sexuality was discovered, either because of the interpretation of signs and traces left by them in the home, or because of active and voluntary “outings” by other parties, present the image of a closet with porous and blurred confines. The border between an “in” and an “out” of the closet, in these cases, is not marked in definite tones, but rather fluctuating in processes of constant dismantling, reconstruction and reconfiguration of the “closet” itself. Moreover, the idea of “outness” as the final positive outcome starts to crumble when analysing these narratives. For some participants, the condition of “outness” was not marked with freedom and openness, but infused with danger, violence, and fear.

Mainstream discourses on disclosure and concealment depict the first as conducive to personal well-being and a sense of relief from the suffering caused by the second. Researchers have often confirmed this, by either correlating open verbalisation with an increase in personal well-being (Herek, 2003; Vaughan and Waehler, 2010), or concealment as detrimental to it (Vargo, 1998; Sedlovskaya *et al.*, 2013). This story about coming out does not reflect the emotional experience of all participants. While some certainly benefitted from a more or less open communication about their sexuality, others report feelings of distress and discomfort as a consequence of their family knowing about it. Barwaqo’s telling of her emotional reaction to her family knowing that she might be lesbian is charged with feelings of stress and anxiety. At no point in our many conversations did she consider coming out with her family as a possible way out of her suffering. In her words, the more knowledge her family had about her sexual orientation, the worse the situation would be for herself, and for her sister back home. This view of coming out in the family as a negative experience was shared by a number of participants. This is in line with more recent research on experiences of concealment and disclosure among racialised LGBTQ people, for whom processes of verbalisation can have different consequences than those usually attached to the “coming out” process by white narratives (Villicana *et al.*, 2016).

5.3 Beyond In and Out: When communication works differently than just ‘being open about it’

5.3.1 “Did he find out? I know nothing”: Uncertainties around the boundary between In and Out

Many participants report the perception that knowledge about their sexuality circulates in their families without a conversation ever being opened on it. This circulation has tangible consequences on the relationship with family members. This productive silence, as observed

by Decena (2011), is charged with unspoken communications and power negotiations. Not all of these have a positive effect on the lives of participants. Medhi's story powerfully shows how the unspoken ways in which knowledge about his sexuality circulated was cause of confusion, frustration and anxiety.

Medhi was born in Guinea Conakry. He realised he was attracted to other men in his teenage years. When he grew up he decided to apply to university abroad, and he arrived in Belgium to study for his Bachelor degree. He began his studies while living with his older brother and his wife, who had already been living in Belgium for a while. It's at this time that he began to engage more in sexual and romantic relations with other men. When asked whether anyone in his family knows about his sexuality, Medhi is in no position to give a clear-cut answer.

> "About who knows, I don't know anything. Anyway, I haven't said anything to anyone. But I know that they… since… this is since childhood, I've always… I've always had a feminine side, so… [..] Has this got them thinking?".

While from his part every effort has been mobilised to keep the information from circulating, he cannot be completely sure that his femininity did not "get them thinking". This uncertainty was still present in his adult relationship with the brother he lived with in Belgium. One day, Medhi's brother got back from work and told him that the downstairs neighbour had complained about Medhi throwing cigarette butts on her balcony. Medhi apologised. The following day, his brother asked him to leave the flat as soon as possible. One day later, Medhi was kicked out of the house, in an episode that he describes as being extremely violent, and in stark contrast with what his relationship with his brother had been up until then.

> "We had never had any problem. I had huge respect for him. […] He said "I'll give you five minutes to take what you need to get out". […] After five minutes he came back. He beat me. He pulled me from the bed. I was… I wanted to protect myself, because I was naked. He threw me on the floor. He hit me, he kicked me. With his foot. […] He was in such a state. I've never understood. Never understood. Everything he said, was out of proportion. It's not for the cigarettes, this".

It was not until later that he started suspecting that his sexuality might have had something to do with his brother's reaction.

> "One day he told me that he was looking for me, that I had left my PC open with the volume on, and he went to my room to lower the volume. I was terrified at the idea that he had touched my PC. Because I have everything. I have everything on my PC. [..] My Romeo account was always open. I mean, I went on many websites. Yeah, I watched lots of porn. […] In retrospect, I tell myself 'Did he find out?' I know nothing".

At the time of the interview, more than four years had passed since this episode, and Medhi was still unsure about what elements were the cause of the conflict. His account of the episode shows how the borders between “knowing” and “not knowing”, between “being in” and “being out”, can be blurred. What is difficult to discern is not just what Medhi’s brother knows about Medhi’s sexuality, but also what Medhi knows about his brother’s knowledge. Sedgwick (1990) highlighted how the act of verbal disclosure works to enable the emergence of ignorance (as the not knowing, or the not knowing for certain) *as* ignorance. In contrast, in a situation in which interactions take place in the absence of verbal clarification what is ignored and what is known are never completely emerging as distinct categories. As in the case of Medhi and his brother, communication unravelled in a terrain that is not one in which words come to clarify, specify and construct specific realities. In this back and forth play of assumptions, and reactions based on those assumptions, sexuality is never spoken about, and therefore, never clearly present. At the same time, exactly because it is unspoken, sexuality is always at least partially present in Medhi’s account of the episode. In his story, the “closet”, or the silence surrounding his sexuality, cannot be conceived solely as a lack of verbalisation. His reading of the episode, with his attraction to men always appearing as a possible (unspoken) explanatory element for the entire conflict, calls for a reading of silence as a productive site. As noted by Glenn (2004: 4):

> “[…] Silence is meaningful, even if it is invisible. It can mean powerlessness or emptiness – but not always. Because it fills up the space in which it appears, it can be equated with a kind of emptiness, but that is not the same as absence. […] Like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function, and a rhetorical one at that”.

Unspoken sexualities can and do have consequences on the lives of the people who opt for not disclosing such information. Silence can produce confusion, uncertainty, and frustration, as is the case with Medhi and his brother, or it can work as a rhetorical tool through which kinship relationships are maintained and reinforced. Acknowledging the functions fulfilled by silence, and thus conceiving non-disclosure of one’s sexuality as a legitimate and meaningful choice, allows to see coming out as one of the possible paths towards LGBTQ well-being, and certainly not the only one.

5.3.2 “And that’s when I realised. Ok, he knows”: Circulation of tacit knowledge in absence of a direct conversation

While a certain degree of silence around sexuality is common in many narratives collected in this project, the negotiations of such silences differ from one another. It is undeniable that for some participants silence is a source of confusion and, ultimately, oppression. For others

silence is a functional strategy that allows them to maintain meaningful and positive relationships with their families while living their sexualities on their own terms.

As mentioned above, a perception of a tacit circulation of knowledge is common among participants. As in the case of Medhi, complete certainty about this is not possible in absence of a clarifying conversation. Nonetheless, this perception is varyingly described as a feeling or suspicion, often a consequence of something said or done by family members. During his interview, Anwar told me that he never had a conversation with his father regarding his sexuality, but he is sure that his father knows about it.

> "There was the Orlando shooting happening? I was on the West Coast at the time, but the very same day my dad called me. And he was like 'Are you okay?' I was like 'Whaaat?', you know. I was like 'Yeah, I'm fine. I'm in LA, dad'. Like, you know, this happened in Florida. I think he knew it was in… you know, whatever. And that's when I realised like, I was like 'Ok, he knows'. He knows. Because, you know, he asked me how I was doing".

Anwar's narrative presents us with a communication between two family members where the sexuality of one of them seems central to the conversation without ever being named, nor acknowledged. What convinced Anwar that his father "knows" is that he called to ask how he was doing after the gay club Pulse was the target of a terrorist attack. Any reference to the attack as the reason for the call, and therefore to the fact that it was a gay club that was targeted, is missing from the conversation. Any detail that would make the reason for the call explicit, and with it the connection between a gay club in the US and Anwar, is elided from the conversation, and yet Anwar has no doubt when interpreting the call as a sign of his father's knowledge.

Even clearer examples of this come from those participants who are in long-term relationships, and whose partners have met their families, without the topic of their sexuality ever being raised. Sherif lives with his Belgian partner in Brussels, and his parents met him on multiple occasions.

> "We never talked about the topic, but they met my boyfriend three times. They know we share the bed. They know I am in Brussels, we're sharing a small apartment, where we share the bed and everything. […] But, yeah, it's a topic that we don't talk about. But my mother, for example, last Christmas, she sent some gifts for my boyfriend" (Sherif).

Keyna reports a similar experience.

> "My family met two exes. The previous one, and the one with whom I currently live. The one with whom I live, she's also Moroccan. And has even… They have even met her parents. So, it's really something… It was even some sort of… a meeting, almost a sort of… celebration. We did a party when the child was born [the son she had with her partner]" (Keyna).

In the two excerpts above, family members are not described as passive agents, simply pretending that the homosexuality of their kids does not exist. Although the topic of sexuality is never discussed, Sherif's and Keyna's families actively engage in their children's romantic life, by meeting their partners, sending them gifts, staying at their place when they visit Brussels, or participating to the celebrations for the birth of their children.

When asked about the reasons behind the absence of a verbalisation of their sexuality in their families, most participants replied with a variation of the phrase "It's not something you talk about". Such a common answer suggests the existence of a norm that prohibits to put anything pertaining to topics connected to same-sex, or non-conforming sexualities, into words. As Jacob phrased it during his interview: "We don't discuss about this, we don't talk about this, this doesn't exist". The fact that, in some cases, family members seem to be aware of relationships and life choices that suggest the participants' non-heterosexuality indicates that the injunction to "keep silent about it" might be, in certain contexts, stricter and more binding a norm than that of not engaging in certain activities or relationships. It is interesting to note how "silence", or more generally a lack of a conversation around the topic, is often present even after participants disclose their sexuality.

> "So, there is this moment when I told about my homosexuality to my sisters and brothers. So, I did my coming out [*j'ai fait mon coming out*], and all this. […] We don't discuss much about it. There you go. You live your life, we live ours, and… and it stops there. There isn't any real conversation on this, actually. This didn't… I wanted the discussion to happen, regarding this and regarding tons of others personal private things. But this didn't happen" (Salim).

Many participants specified that this absence of conversation was not limited to their sexualities. Many of them listed what other "personal private things" would not be considered acceptable topics of conversation. A recurring element is that any topic related to sexuality would not be talked about. This would extend to the sexuality of their cis-hetero siblings and family members, especially when they involved relationships and activities that distanced them from the scripts of heteronormativity: divorces and second marriages, pre-marital sex and extra-marital pregnancies.

The sharing of this silence among siblings was often the reason that participants put forward for their choice to not disclose their sexuality. Comparing their situations to that of their siblings, they found it unfair that they felt pressured to disclose details of their sexual and romantic lives, while their heterosexual siblings were not expected to have such conversations until the day in which they announce their intention to get married.

> "I never kind of followed this hype of 'mum needs to know'. Because my argument was, like, my brothers never say 'Mum, I've just had sex with this girl. Mum, I've just popped the cherry of that girl'. We don't have that type of conversation in the Arab world. Until you get married, then my brother said 'Mum, I think I met this woman'. But before that, there are like hundreds of girls he had. The same for my sisters. And we all know that, because that's how you meet somebody. But with me, they got nothing. So, I'm also like not gonna start saying 'Mum, I'm having sex with men'" (Salah).

In the excerpt above silences and tacit circulations of knowledge are a feature of communication between parents and kids regardless of their sexual orientation. The difference lies in the possibility of marriage for heterosexual kids as an "escape" from a condition of silence. Despite his living with his long-term male partner, his parents "got nothing" from Salah. As marriage is assumed in his family context to be between people of different genders, Salah felt that the option of opening the conversation about his sexual/romantic life has not been available to him as it has been for his siblings when they decided to get married.

5.3.3 Why come out "the European way"?

The last excerpt shows how, for Salah, the silences he and his siblings experience are directly linked to the "Arabness" of his family. This element emerged in multiple interviews, and it needs to be treated with the greatest care, to avoid dangerous and binarised generalisations that would reiterate and reproduce an opposition between an open and transparent western culture and a closed and silent orientalised one (Massad, 2002). It is nonetheless important to highlight how such condition of silence is often framed by participants themselves as a feature of the cultural and/or religious context in which they were brought up. The expression used by Sherif to tell me that he would not have problems, in principle, to initiate a conversation on his sexuality if pressured by his family, is telling in this sense:

> "I would have *come out the European way*, and told them about it, if they were harassing me, for example, to get married and have kids, or something".

Later in the interview he explained how different the condition of a person who hasn't "come out the European way" looks to western and Egyptian eyes.

> "For a Muslim country, it's very normal if you say 'Ok, I'm gonna share the apartment with another guy, because it would be less expensive', for example. Or 'It would be easier for us to just share an apartment, rather than everyone buying, or sharing, or renting their own apartment'. And then you have the relationship that keeps going. For the European, undercover. However, for the Muslims, they see it as going fairly well. Because that's what they're used to. So, for us, it's not something like we're hiding, but it's just something that normally no one is talking about".

Sherif's observation shows how a life-choice that could for some be perfectly rational and conducive to personal well-being can be interpreted and framed as a life "undercover", in "hiding", from a western perspective. This reflection is echoed by the words of another participant, Anwar, when he describes the tension between a western vision of LGBTQ rights and the importance given to heteronormative institutions in Moroccan/Muslim contexts. While in the previous quote Sherif was referring to life in Egypt, Anwar talks about his experience growing up in the Brussels municipality of Molenbeek.

> "The idea of being openly gay and… It's very occidental. I mean, gay rights were born in… Gay rights as we know them today anyway, come from, you know, western cultures" (Anwar).

If there is then, following the quotes above, a "coming out the European way", a question that could be posed is whether there is a "coming out" path that is not western and European. Following from critiques to the naturalisation of the European way as the only possible path for LGBTQ recognition, (self)acceptance, and personal and collective well-being, is it possible to envision other paths of disclosure, self-expression and communication that do not necessarily pass through the open and straightforward verbalisation of one's sexuality? The excerpts presented above, suggesting a circulation of knowledge regarding participants' sexualities in absence of an open verbalisation, seem to suggest so. Other research in the field has highlighted the presence of strategies of partial disclosure that successfully convey the information without causing the unwanted reactions that a more specific and complete conversation would produce (Amari, 2013; Peumans, 2017; Provencher, 2017).

In his analysis of the lives and representations of queer Maghrebi men in France, and inspired by an expression coined by a research participant, Provencher (2017: 57) used the term "coming out *à l'orientale*". The expression refers to those communicative tools and strategies employed by LGBTQ people from a Maghrebi/Muslim background to indirectly express their (homo)sexualities to their families. In this context, a statement such as "I have no intention of getting married" would signal a detachment from the prescribed heteronormative path and suggest the need for familial expectations to be attuned to such difference, without entering the perilous field of the direct naming of sexualities. According to the data collected by Provencher (2017) and Amari (2013) in France, such a naming process would require the use of words whose meaning is not equally familiar to all members involved in the conversation.

In this study, participants have often highlighted how, in their families, different meanings, affects, and connotations are attached to the same words by different family members. Scholars have noted how generation plays an important role in determining choices related to

the opening of conversations in Muslim families (Samad, 1998; Yip, 2004b). Older generations are perceived to be more attached to traditions and values that participants link directly to the national context where the migratory trajectory of their family commenced, while younger generations (siblings and cousins) are perceived to be more exposed and attached to the cultural context of Europe, Belgium, and Brussels. It is important to specify that none of the participants felt able to generalise on this point, and most of them mentioned exceptions: aunts and uncles who are described as particularly rebellious against traditional norms, or younger cousins and siblings whose reading of cultural and religious norms is particularly strict. Nonetheless, descriptions of such an intergenerational divide, mediated by the cultural/religious context in which the two generations were brought up, was a recurring observation. According to Salim, for example, his difficulties in communicating with his parents exist because "they grew up in the *bled* [isolated rural village in the North African region], you see, with their beliefs, their value systems, etcetera. We have ours".

In this context, a frank conversation about one's sexuality could result in a long and painful confrontation over social norms and familial expectation. In addition to this, and in some cases more importantly, the conversation is often rendered impossible by the lack of a common vocabulary around sexualities and gender diversity. The question that many participants face is: if the statement "I am gay/lesbian/bisexual/trans" as I intend it cannot be understood, what statement can I employ instead to communicate my sexuality to my family? Some of the solutions found by participants mirror the "coming out *à l'orientale*" talked about by Provencher (2017). In these cases, the choice falls on statements that suggest a lack of intention to follow a heteronormative path that entails marrying a person of a different gender and building a family with them. Subsequently, the family is invited to attune and adjust their expectations on the person who is making the statement. In the entire process, no words linked to the semantic fields of gender or sexualities are uttered. This is in contrast to the experiences of white European LGBTQ subjects whose "coming out", according to Provencher (2016: 132)), can generally be understood to unravel through clear, affirmative, first-person statements ("Dad, mum, I'm in love with a guy!").

An example of this is offered by Salah's reflection on how he interpreted his conversations with his mother on the topic of marriage and family:

> "I kind of came out already. Telling her [my mother] that I will not live this straight life. But I didn't tell her which life I will lead. And that kind of was the… the most right coming out. It's not the total package, but it's the one that is the most honest. Telling her "I'm gay, mama", that feels less honest, less right, than… Because the gayness that she would take in her head is the one that I'm not living. You know? So,

> it's like I kind of gave her more images of what I'm living, instead of like a word that everybody uses and that everybody kind of has in their own head" (Salah).

In an interesting turn, what Salah suggested here is that, in his case, an indirect "coming out", which passes through the negation of a desire to pursue "this straight life", is also the "most right", the "most honest". The moral imperative path of disclosure and transparency that the metaphor of the closet implies in western discourses is here reversed. In Salah's view, when the word "homosexual" as understood by the listener does not correspond to the "homosexuality" that the speaker wants to communicate, honesty compels the LGBTQ subject to find different ways of expressing it. "Giving more images" of what one's life looks like is thus more important than using that specific "word that everybody uses and that everybody kind of has in their own head".

5.4 Beyond the closet – Beyond silence

In my second month in Brussels, I met two white young Belgian artists who were working on a video project representing LGBTQ people. In the second phase of their project, their work would focus on the story of a gay character from a Muslim background. In their scripting phase, they asked to talk with me to exchange ideas about it. During our long conversation, I told them what I thought were some elements to pay attention to when writing about LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Europe, and I mentioned the need to detach the narrative from the taken-for-granted validity of the binary in/out of the closet. I told them that the metaphor is not always representative of the experiences of racialised LGBTQ Europeans, and that the discourse itself could be seen as producing and maintaining a normative path of disclosure for LGBTQ people. A few months later, another person told me that the two artists had found the conversation incredibly useful, and this had allowed them to understand that "Muslim people don't come out". Such a statement does not reflect what I wanted to express about the paths and trajectories often taken by the LGBTQ people from a Muslim background I was encountering in the field. Hearing the content of my conversation with the artists reported in these words prompted me to think about the dangers of once again essentialising racialised, cultural and religious difference, leading to equally incomplete and erroneous statements such as "LGBTQ Muslims don't come out". The difference was that, this time around, the essentialisation was coming from me.

The intention of this work is not to simply reverse the polarity of the binary in/out of the closet, idealising the "in" as *the* legitimate and unproblematic site for racialised sexualities. As stated in other parts of this chapter, and following Ross (2005), the aim is also not that of

denying any relevance or validity to the in/out metaphor for all LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. It is important to highlight that many participants, both among those who openly talked about their sexuality in the family and those who did not, expressed negative feelings when talking about times, contexts and situations in which their sexuality cannot be communicated to others, as exemplified by Youness's words:

> "I would like to tell my parents, yeah, that I'm gay, or bi, and I live my life. And… And I just want to be happy, you see. But it's impossible, you see. It's like… Here I am with you, I am gay, I feel good, we tell jokes, we talk about everything, but if I go at my parents' place in Molenbeek, 1 km from here, there, I'll go back in this Moroccan culture, you see. There is a difference, you see. This is what's hard actually".

In addition to the interplay of multiple disclosures, partial communications, concealments, and silences, some participants describe their situation as one in which they constantly try to find words and channels of communication to convey information about their sexualities to people they want to share it with. Not all participants are happy with the balance between different forms of "outness" and "inness" they found in their lives. They talk about a desire to be more direct about their communications on the subject, and they describe themselves as being in the process of attempting to verbalise their sexualities. Salah, for example, during his interview told me that he increasingly feels the need to have an open conversation about it with his mother, now that he is in a long-term relationship, and lives with his partner.

5.4.1 Learning the words

For some participants, this process of verbalisation and opening of a communication about their sexuality needs to pass through the learning of new words. Participants grew up in different contexts, and not all of them had access to the vocabulary that is commonly used when referring to genders and sexualities in western white contexts. Yasmine is a 37 years old trans woman, raised in Brussels in an Algerian-Moroccan family. When talking about her childhood and early youth, she speaks of a time in which her difference from her cisgender heterosexual peers remained unnamed for years. On the one hand, there was the vaguely defined but certainly cogent injunction to not talk about certain topics. On the other, the word "transgender", and the possibilities it implied, had never appeared on young Yasmine's radar, resulting in her impossibility to conceive her gender identity/expression in such terms.

> "I remember, in primary school, we went to watch, the first time in my life, I went to watch a Walt Disney movie. And it was Cinderella. […] And then, I had a… a revelation. I've always identified with Cinderella. All the time. With the princess. I… The way I was, it was badly dressed Cinderella, but my dream, it has always been Cinderella, that I waited for the wave of the magic wand that would transform me in princess. Can you understand? Just to tell you the kind of child language I had. Because, at the time, I didn't know what

> transgender was, you see. I knew that we couldn't talk about it, because we couldn't" (Yasmine).

Another category of participants who expressed a need/desire to learn new words that would allow them to verbalise their sexualities to others around them are those who migrated to Europe as adults, and requested the status of refugee on the basis of discrimination for their sexual orientation. As pointed out by Millbank (2002a) and Johnson (2011), the process of asylum request, assessment and granting in the case of people discriminated for their sexualities is deeply rooted in western constructions of ideas of "openness" and "disclosure". In fact, the narrative that needs to be produced in order to obtain refugee status is one that necessarily mirrors western narratives of identification and discrimination, which all revolve around the image of the closet as the paradigmatic element of LGBTQ oppression (Millbank, 2002a; Millbank, 2002b). In this research, some participants who have gone through such a process spoke of the difficulty in navigating a semantic territory that was unfamiliar to them prior to their arrival in Europe. If, on the one hand, the words learned to verbalise their sexuality are seen as powerful tools for self-expression, which ultimately led to an increased well-being, there is in their accounts a deep awareness of the fact that such learning was, in some way, enforced on them as the very prerequisite for their chance to stay in Belgium legally.

The whole process is, in fact, constellated by moments in which such a story needs to be told, and, even more importantly, it needs to be understood and believed by those who are listening to it.

> "In the moment I came here, they told me that I have to do a short interview with my support worker. I asked myself "No, but… Why ?". They said, I needed to tell my… my life story, why I'm here, and I said: "No, I can't". Because there's… There's a word I cannot say, and this word was "homosexual". So, we began, and I couldn't look at them while talking. At their face. To tell them… to tell them that I am homosexual. What is that reaction useful for? I was ashamed of myself. Of saying that I am homosexual. And then, I… I turned my back, and then I spoke. I spoke, I spoke… And then they […] sent me to a… to a doctor. And she asked me too, to explain why I'm shy, why… I said "I'm not shy, but I don't feel good with myself, here" (Aziz).

From the moment in which an LGBTQ person begins the process of requesting for asylum, they are required to produce their story continuously, at multiple sites, and to multiple actors, among which support workers, counsellors, lawyers and members of committees charged with granting or rejecting their refugee status. The confusion, frustration and anxiety that are connected to this process, and especially with the formal interview, are exemplified by the already-mentioned request for help from Medhi's part. A few weeks after our interview, he

texted me asking to meet him for a coffee to help him with his preparation for the interview. Specifically, he was worried about the confusion he had on the meanings of certain terms of the LGBTQ acronym. Among these, the meaning of the term "queer" was particularly confusing to him, and he was scared that during the interview it would be necessary for him to navigate the use of these terms proficiently in order to be believed in his story of oppression in Guinea. This episode shows the great pressure on LGBTQ people to produce a story about their sexuality and the oppression lived because of it that needs to be coherent and credible to western ears.

5.4.2 Expanding silences – Multiple closets

The data presented in this chapter points to the inefficacy of the metaphor of the closet, and a discourse that relies on the spatial dichotomy of "in/out", to allow for an understanding of the experiences and communications of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in their communities of origin. The focus of the analysis has been on the ways in which research participants experience and narrate their management of information regarding their sexuality. In this sense, it has been noted how in some cases indirect strategies of communication, and the production of what I have called, following Decena (2011), tacit knowledge, is preferred to a direct verbalisation of one's sexuality. What is important to highlight at this point is that, for some participants, the topic of sexuality is not the only one that they choose to avoid verbalising, and communications with their communities of origin are not the only ones constellated by silences and concealments of information.

The interview with Ghalia sheds light on some of the processes that are involved in the production of such silences and concealments. When asked about her experience with disclosing information on her sexuality to others around her, she started sharing a broader reflection on the difficulties, for racialised LGBTQ people, in verbalising their experiences of oppression, be it the homo/bi/transphobia they experience in their communities of origin, or the racism that they receive from society at large. The reflection begins with the recounting of a series of conversations on the topic that she had with other racialised LGBTQ people:

> "Recently, I was at an event that is called Queerasse, which is a group that was created by queer and racialised people. Basically blacks, Arabs, Asians. And we talked about this verbalisation and we realised that in those families that are quite traditional, the fact of verbalising would necessarily lead to an action. And this can be scary, this… It means that if we verbalise in… not in relation to an identity, but imagine it in relation to an aggression… "I got assaulted", or "I got discriminated". If I verbalise this, well… there is… What will happen, is "But what do we do, then? Do we seek for revenge? Are we doing something?". And we don't want this at all, we would just

> want to be able to put words to it, to be understood, and not… not for this to be perceived as a need to act, a duty of solidarity from the community behind […] Let's imagine that we'd put into words a racist aggression. It's either "Ah, but that's normal. You can't be so weak, it's better not to talk about it", or "Ok, what do we do now, then? Shall we smash their face? Or are we going to report it?" But if it's just talking to be understood, it's complicated, because it isn't… there aren't spaces for it".

In this excerpt, Ghalia quickly moves from answering a question about "coming out", to expressing the difficulties that a racialised LGBTQ person might encounter when trying to communicate their experience of racism to their family. The examples that she offers show how the words employed to "verbalise" the aggression can trigger a process whereby consequences that were originally unintended are produced, such as acts of revenge or the reporting of the episode to the authorities. In this case, as in those where a tacit knowledge on sexuality was sought, produced, and maintained, refraining from a direct verbalisation of the episode can be a strategic choice that presents certain benefits. Ghalia then expands her reflection, extending verbalisation difficulties beyond the family and the community of origin.

> "Verbalisation… Moreover, I'd say that it's not only complicated in… well, anyway, complex, in our traditional families, but also with very modern people, with whom it's not always granted that you can be understood. Because of racism. Because when we talk about our difficulties in our traditional families, our discourses can be very very quickly taken and used in a… well, in a racist flow. So, it creates misunderstanding. "Ah, I don't understand. Why don't you talk to them? It's your freedom". But that's not the issue. It's not, that's it. "But then, you're savages". We don't have… When we talk about this to friends, basically white friends, we can say that our words are added to racist prejudice. And so, this makes it complicated to be able to talk about ourselves, about our existence, in an authentic way. With our families, with our friends".

The extension that Ghalia operates here is in direct contrast with discourses that depict the condition of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background as one of closeted silence caused by their communities of origin. In her experience, this element represents only part of the story. If the aim is to understand the issues LGBTQ people from a Muslim background face, then it is necessary to take into account the oppression (and the conditions of silence) that they live in other contexts of their daily lives. While the homo/bi/transphobia lived in the communities of origin might represent one side of the oppression, the racism faced in other contexts, including when talking with white friends, can be as impactful on decisions to disclose or conceal information (Bing, 2004). It is telling that the example that Ghalia offers here, when talking about racist instrumentalisations of her words, is one of a white friend not understanding how a person could not "have the freedom" to verbally come out to their family ("Why don't you talk to them? It's your freedom"). Such a reported statement clearly shows how the person uttering it does not have any idea of the silencing effect that their lack of

understanding, and the racist judgements that follow – "you are savages, then" – have on the person they are addressed to.

5.5 Conclusion

The experiences of processes of disclosure of information regarding their sexuality or concealment shared by participants in this study radically differ from one another. These experiences represent their wider life stories, their trajectories, and the ways in which they conceive, represent and desire well-being. The stories of some participants mirror common developmental narratives linked to the closet/coming out binary, while others radically confute its validity and its ability to represent their life. Some participants see a full verbal disclosure as a moral and political act towards authenticity and visibility, while others view it as a normative prescription imposed on them by a western LGBTQ movement.

What emerges from such difference of experiences and narratives is that the closet/coming out lens is, at best, a limited device to observe, analyse and interpret the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. The uncritical and unproblematised application of such a lens hides relevant aspects of the narratives collected. Conversely, if the focus is on the productive relation between the "in" and the "out", on their co-existence and co-production (Butler, 1993b), it becomes possible to view both sites as unstable, in constant communication with one another, and both productive of a range of effects on the lives of LGBTQ people. A shaking of the linearity and rigid binarism of the in/out metaphor is necessary to discern how silence can produce confusion and frustration, but it can also form the terrain where family relationships are strengthened while sexualities are openly and serenely lived. Similarly, being "out" can, in some contexts, be emancipatory and liberating, while in others the production of a direct and open verbalised story on one's sexuality is the result of a violent imposition, such as that requested from asylum seekers in the process to obtain their documents. Going "beyond the closet", in the sense put forward by Ross (2005), allows for the recognition of how the "closet" is but one of the possible sites of oppression for racialised LGBTQ people. When this becomes the only, or the most important, feature of the oppression that is narrated about LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, the risk is that of erasing other sites that are as oppressive and as silencing, such as those reported by Ghalia in the last section of this chapter.

This chapter does not call for a dismissal of the "closet" as an important feature in the oppression lived by many LGBTQ people in a variety of contexts. Similarly, the intention is

not to essentialise, idealise and exoticise the “closet” as the preferred option for LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. Rather, the aim is to show how the unpacking of such a binarised framework allows us to glimpse the complexities that characterise the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, and the narratives they produce on such experiences.

Chapter 6. When the spotlight is always on the neighbourhoods – Beyond binarised imaginations of Brussels

6.1 Introduction

Constructions of the Arab/Muslim Other are produced and maintained at different geographical scales. As noted by Hancock (2008a), images of alterity, difference and tension between the West and the Muslim East circulate at the scale of the body, the local, the nation, and the global. The previous chapter focused on mainstream uses of the "coming out" metaphor to describe, and prescribe, specific paths of LGBTQ existence. In this way, the chapter analysed the workings of such Othering processes at the scale of the body of the LGBTQ person from a Muslim background, where discourses around irreconcilable difference around sexualities clash and intersect. As aptly observed by Brown (2000), the metaphor of the closet also functions and materialises at multiple scales, of which the body of the LGBTQ subject is the first. In this chapter, I analyse the negotiations put in place by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background at another relevant scale, that of the neighbourhood, to observe the effects of Othering discourses based on categories of gender equality and sexual diversity, and the potential for a disruption of these that emerge from participants' experiences and narratives.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Muslim populations in Brussels are concentrated in specific areas of the city, as most migrants from North Africa and the Middle East have settled along the decades in the five municipalities of Molenbeek, Schaerbeek, Saint-Josse, Anderlecht, and Brussels Central (Torrekens, 2007). In Chapter 4, I also discussed how such uneven distribution is often instrumentalised to depict certain racialised neighbourhoods as dangerous, particularly in relation to the terrorist threat they are perceived to represent (Leman, 2015; Traynor, 2015; Van Vlierden, 2016). Some of the tropes that characterise global political discourses about Islam-as-threat are reproduced and reflected in the constructions and imaginations of different neighbourhoods in the city. These intertwine with different sexualised imaginations of urban spaces, as representations of difference (both sexualised and racialised) in the city have very material effects on the movements that are enacted by its inhabitants (Brown *et al.*, 2007). As categories of gender equality and sexual diversity are central in the construction of the Muslim Other, these categories acquire importance in constructing Muslim neighbourhoods as dangerous and inhospitable for women and LGBTQ people (Stehle, 2006), and thus in limiting their movements and access to spaces in the city. This is in line with a wider process of relegation of a number of social issues,

including sexism and homo/bi/transphobia, to such neighbourhoods. As these neighbourhoods are, in turn, constructed and imagined as somehow "extra-European", through their moral and cultural distancing from the rest of the city (Dikeç, 2006), social issues themselves end up being discursively erased from western spaces (Hancock, 2017).

In this chapter, I present and analyse the experiences and narratives of research participants around such constructions of differently racialised parts of the city. In an urban context where certain imagined-as-white neighbourhoods are portrayed as LGBTQ-friendly, and others, racialised-as-Muslim, are depicted as sexist and homo/bi/transphobic, how do LGBTQ people from a Muslim background navigate space? What is the impact of such spatial discourses on their daily movements? And what can their experiences and narratives confirm, add to, or subvert within mainstream discourses at work on different spaces of the city?

In the first section of this chapter, I outline some of the critical reflections on the spatialisation and territorialisation of social issues in racialised areas of the European city that guided the collection and analysis of data. From such an analysis of the literature, the need to deconstruct rigid binarised imaginations of neighbourhoods and city areas in terms of acceptance and support of gender equality and sexual diversity emerges. The experiences and narratives of participants, presented and analysed in the remainder of the chapter, further confirm this need. While some elements of their experiences and narratives seem to confirm binary constructions of differently racialised areas of the city, an analysis of the entirety of data calls for a nuancing of this binarisation. In particular, data suggest that discourses on different neighbourhoods work to hide and mystify important elements that need to be included in analyses of the city. On the one hand, it is important to allow for the emergence of all those elements and dynamics that are present in racialised neighbourhoods and that are not necessarily linked to cultural/religious difference, and thus to moral tension between them and the rest of the city. On the other, a commitment to combating sexism and homo/bi/transphobia needs to be rooted in the acknowledgement of the existence and workings of these dynamics of power in different parts of the city, and not only in their specific and partial manifestation in racialised neighbourhoods.

6.2 The imagination of neighbourhoods and the spatialisation of homo/bi/transphobia

6.2.1 The relevance of the neighbourhood in constructions of alterity

In the observation and analysis of constructions of alterity and difference between the West and the Muslim/Arab East, the scale of the neighbourhood is not one that comes intuitively to mind. The scales that have traditionally been considered central in the production,

maintenance and reinforcement of such discourses have been the national and international ones (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Razack, 2007; Hancock, 2008a; Ticktin, 2008). Different areas of the city have more recently been included in analyses of the relationships between differently racialised groups as geo-political spaces that reproduce and reinforce discourses of difference and tension at work at the international level (Stehle, 2006; Hancock, 2008b; El-Tayeb, 2011; Hancock, 2017). While racialised areas of the city have been important in the process of discursive construction of Europe's Others for quite some time (Stehle, 2006), their centrality has been brought to the forefront by recent events such as the revolts of racialised youth in French *banlieues* in the years 2000s (Dikeç, 2006; Stehle, 2006) and the planning of terrorist attacks in European cities by cells that were based in such areas (Van Vlierden, 2016). As a result, the racialised-as-Muslim neighbourhood in the European city comes to symbolise the "problem zone of Europe" (Stehle, 2006: 59). As such, it is constructed as "extra-European", somehow representing the border of the continent and marking the beginning of the "elsewhere" where Muslim populations are relegated, while its centrality is constantly reiterated to highlight the particularly high level of danger and threat that such area represents for the integrity of western morality (Dikeç, 2006).

Hancock (2008a) analysed the role played by these zones in the French context. Her conclusion is that such intra-urban level of analysis is necessary to understand processes of Othering at work in the West and projected out of it, and the role of geographers is fundamental in attempting a disruption of its workings. According to her, two complementary elements shape the racialised spatialisation of social issues that mark the construction of different neighbourhoods in the European city: the assignation of territoriality and the assignation of identity. In the urban context, social representations mirror and reproduce lines of domination. In this process of mirroring and reproduction, specific spaces and territories are assigned to minoritised groups and communities.

> "There is nothing innovative in saying that in our western societies (and beyond them) there are processes of domination that borrow the vector of social representations, and that we can qualify as processes of identity assignation. The reason why these processes interest geographers is because they work together with processes that we could qualify as territoriality assignation – because the social representations of people or groups are accompanied by spatial representations, of the spaces associated to these 'dominated' groups or people (often spaces where we claim we can confine them, or conversely the spaces we deny them access to)[4]" (Hancock, 2008a: 116-117, my translation).

[4] "Il n'y a rien de novateur à dire qu'au sein de nos societés occidentales (et au-delà) existent des processus de domination qui empruntent le vecteur des répresentations sociales, et qu'on peut qualifier de processus d'assignation à identité. La raison pour laquelle ces processus intéressent les géographes, c'est parce qu'ils

This process of territorial assignation to different identity groups is accompanied by a specific spatialisation of social issues across different areas of the city. As observed by Tissot and Poupeau (2005), this phenomenon is not uniquely connected to the racialisation of certain neighbourhoods. According to them, a tight link has gradually formed between poverty, territory, and public policies in the history of urban development in continental Europe. Far from representing a perfect mirroring of social reality, such discursive link needs to be carefully interrogated. In addition to this, when such spaces are marked by processes of racialisation or cultural differentiation, social issues are not only relegated to specific spaces and territories, but as necessary corollary of this spatialisation they can only exist among certain groups and communities (Hancock, 2008a). Speaking about urban policies that locate specific social issues to certain areas of the city, Tissot and Poupeau (2005: 8) note that:

> "[…] The fact that these categories are indissociably territorial and ethnic, that they target populations ('immigrants', 'youth' from a migratory background) as well as spaces, feeds a homogenising vision of populations who would be *irreducibly different*, and as such subjectable to specific measures[5]" (my translation).

In the construction of this irreducible difference, categories related to gender and sexualities play a central role. As discussed in Chapter 2, "clash of civilisation" (Huntington, 1997) discourses between the West and the Muslim East heavily rely on differentiations between the two fields on their support, respect and promotion of gender equality and sexual diversity (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2008; Bracke, 2011; Bracke, 2012). This differentiation is mirrored in narrations and perceptions of racialised-as-Muslim neighbourhoods in Brussels. Their perceived levels of risk and threat to women and LGBTQ people are important lines that mark their difference from the rest of the city. In this sense, the social issues that are spatialised in such areas are not only linked to economic deprivation and poverty, as pointed out by Tissot and Poupeau (2005). In addition to the marking of such areas as poorer than the rest of the city, their being framed in terms of cultural (and moral) difference serves to discursively confine there social issues not necessarily linked to economic well-being and/or class, but to sexism and homo/bi/transphobia. As noted by Hancock (2017), the spatialisation of sexism to specific areas of the city in the case of the racialised *banlieues* of Paris serves two purposes. On the one hand, it allows the blame of specific groups – e.g. Muslims,

s'accompagnent de processus qu'on pourrait qualifier d'assignation à territorialité – parce que les répresentations sociales concernant les personnes ou groupes s'accompagnent de répresentations spatiales, concernant les espaces associés à ces groupes ou personnes « dominé(e)s » (souvent des espaces où on prétend les cantonner, ou à l'inverse les espaces auxquels on leur refuse l'accès) ".

[5] " [...] le fait que ces catégories sont indissociablement territoriales et ethniques, qu'elles visent des populations (« immigrés », « jeunes » issus de l'immigration) autant que des espaces, alimente une vision homogénéisante de populations qui seraient *irréductiblement différentes*, et à ce titre justiciables de dispositifs et de mesures spécifiques".

migrants, young people from the "neighbourhoods" – as the people responsible for certain deviant practices, such as sexual harassment and violence against women. On the other, this relegation of sexism serves to discursively erase its existence from the rest of the city, thus effectively making it a problem of "minorities". As a result, the discourse is no longer focused on sexism (and even less so on racialisation and its subsequent discriminations). Instead, the problem that encompasses all the others becomes that of the failed "integration" of racialised populations, and thus the pressure on the State to navigate a space between the need to facilitate integration and the need to contain these "external"(ised) populations (Stehle, 2006). Similar observations on a spatialisation of homo/bi/transphobia have been made across various European urban contexts, where a lack of acceptance of LGBTQ rights is increasingly attributed to specific racialised communities in the city, and this oppression against LGBTQ people discursively localised in the neighbourhoods where high concentrations of such populations can be found (Haritaworn, 2010; Bracke, 2012; Haritaworn, 2012).

This imagination of differently racialised neighbourhoods relies on a series of elements. First, it necessarily builds on a strictly dichotomic division of western and racialised/Muslim spaces, which results in the discursive construction of rigid borders between different parts of the city (Arrif and Hayot, 2001; Amilhat-Szary, 2012; Staszak *et al.*, 2017; Donnen, 2019). The main lines of alterity between these bordered areas are drawn on civilisational/cultural elements, as is the case in global processes of construction of an irreducible difference between the Muslim the western civilisations (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This, in turn, allows for the territorialisation of specific social issues in these areas marked as not-really-western, with the double effect of linking the very existence of such issues to specific spaces, and the groups and communities that inhabit these spaces (Hancock, 2017). In particular, the figure of the Arab man emerges as the discursive repository of images of sexist and homo/bi/transphobic threat, operating from the enclosed and racialised areas of the city (Guénif-Souilamas and Macé, 2004). Racialised neighbourhoods, their Muslim inhabitants, and social problems such as the persistence of gender inequality and homo/bi/transphobia are thus inextricably linked in mainstream imaginations of the city.

6.2.2 What is left out from this imagination of racialised neighbourhoods?

Butler (2009), in her reflections on the discourses at work on a global scale to legitimise the use of force against Othered populations in defence of western values, notes how it is as interesting to look at the elements that are left out of these discourses as it is to look at the elements that are included. As the construction of "frames of war" between civilisations

necessarily needs the two entities to be rigidly bounded from one another, and the lives that unfold on each side need to be assigned different values, then any element that would potentially confute, discard, or even slightly weaken this construction is necessarily kept out of the discursive frame. A similar working of culturalist frames is at work in the city of Brussels. While the discourse gains potency from its ability to draw rigid boundaries and borders between differently racialised areas of the city, it necessarily hides, erases, or simply leaves out all those elements that would make such rigid construction crumble. As these internal borders are based on representations of alterity and, despite their being more or less marked in the material space, are discursive constructions, a focus on what is hidden behind (and by) the binarised discourse of cultural borders in the city is an important deconstructive task to be carried out in analyses of intra-urban relations (Hancock, 2008a; Donnen, 2019).

In his analysis of one of the spaces that is often imagined as a border between culturally different areas of the city in Brussels – Place Fontainas, separating the Gay Street and the imagined-as-Moroccan neighbourhood of Annessens – Donnen (2019) calls for a deconstructive observation of the rigid sub-divisions that shape daily navigations of the city by its inhabitants. He elaborates on the definition of "borderland" articulated by Anzaldúa (1987) to highlight the representational and performative nature of such border-zone, and the mystifying effects that its construction entails. According to Anzaldúa (1987: 25), the border is a "dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge" that is "set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*". In her definition, it emerges in all the contradictions of a line that, while being constructed and imagined as fixed and clear, produces an area characterised by vagueness, flexibility, porousness, and precariousness.

> "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyes, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 25).

According to Donnen (2019), a focus on such intra-urban area of imagined clash between differently racialised neighbourhoods as a borderland allows us to recognise the ephemerality of the rigidity that is attributed to it by discourses. It thus enables the observation and analysis of the multiple passages, navigations and encounters that happen at this site. Despite the rootedness of this way of imagining the city, "the boundaries are not impermeable, as the spaces are not homogeneous" (Donnen, 2019: 12). Moreover, this focus allows him to observe what is hidden beyond the fictional rigidity of this border: the specific confusion

between processes of racialisation and sexualisation, and their intersecting with categories of gender and class, as well as the presence of people and activities in this “borderland” that escape a rigid conceptualisation of the city as divided into us/them areas. Specifically, Donnen (2019) points out to the presence of homeless people regularly sleeping in Place Fontainas, and it being a central spot for the dealing of illegal drugs, as elements that are downplayed, if not outright erased, by the insistence on framing the square as one of cultural tension.

In addition to the elements that are hidden in the borderland, the construction of the different areas as homogeneous and monolithic in their being irreducibly different with one another erases other important elements from one or the other side of the imagined divide. Dikeç (2006), for example, notes how the framing of difference in cultural/religious terms worked to hide the economic grievances and the political instances brought forward by the revolting racialised youth in Parisian *banlieues*. As already mentioned, Hancock (2017) stresses how the discursive assignation of sexism to racialised neighbourhoods in the French capital serves to hide the existence of discrimination and violence against women in other contexts of the city and of the nation. Donnen (2019), in his analysis of Place Fontainas as a constructed border, shows how the depiction of Annessens as *the* neighbourhood where sexism materialises prevents to see the exclusion of women from most spaces of the adjacent Gay Street, catering almost exclusively to gay and bisexual men. All these analyses call for a more nuanced look at the relationship between racialised neighbourhoods and the rest of the city, by considering such division as the result of specific representations “rather than as unproblematic reflections of reality” (Dikeç, 2006: 162).

According to Donnen (2019), an intersectional lens on the navigations of such spaces and constructed borders can help to understand what lies beyond, and what is hidden by, mainstream discourses on difference and alterity in the city.

> “[…] social limits – multiple and in intersection – run through the city, constructed in close relation to spaces. Thinking of the border in terms of sexuality, social class, ethnicity and gender allows to show that these function in a performative way, and they materialise first and foremost through practices, discourses and representations” (Donnen, 2019: 14).

Rather than viewing the border simply as that dividing line between “us”, however defined, and “them”, it is useful to observe and analyse the different navigations of such spaces by people who identify along multiple and intersecting lines. In the case of the imagined division of the city into LGBTQ-friendly white areas and homo/bi/transphobic Muslim ones, it is

useful to look at the experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. As their lives and identities emerge, in this rigid discourse, as "spaceless", their navigations of the city are a fruitful entry point into a problematisation of the binaries that underpin it. Once again, the illumination of the intersectional social location inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background can work to highlight the ephemerality of the essentialised binaries that undergird social life in western cities (Rahman, 2010). Their identities, rendered impossible by either/or discourses, work as guides in the exploration of that hybrid area of fluidity and porousness that is constantly hidden. They are in a way the "atravesados" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 25) that inhabit the mystified borderland in the city.

6.3 Worlds apart in the space of a couple of kilomteres: The effects of binary discourses on the experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels

6.3.1 Representing neighbourhoods, imagining sexual borders

In the summer of 2012, the documentary *Femme de la Rue* was released in Belgium. Its writer and director was Sofie Peeters, a young Flemish student of cinema. The concept for the video was quite simple: a camera followed Sofie as she walked in the neighbourhood of Anneessens-Lemonnier, in central Brussels, showing the huge impact that street harassment has on the movements of a young woman. Scene after scene, men whistle at her and insult her when she does not show any interest. The footage from the street is accompanied by interviews with other young women who talk about their experiences of street harassment, and with a young man who gives his interpretation of it. The documentary was shown on Belgian national TV, and the expression "*harcélement de rue*" (street harassment) started to be widely employed to indicate an issue that needed solutions (Charruau, 2015). Roughly two years later, the Parliament approved a law against sexism in public spaces. The law, harshening monetary sanctions for sexist remarks and entailing the possibility of imprisonment for up to three years in case of street harassment, was seen as a direct consequence of the debate that followed the broadcasting of *Femme de la Rue* (Charruau, 2015; Woelfle, 2016).

The growing importance that conversations around sexist acts and discourses have had in Brussels is to be welcomed and the influence of the documentary in this sense to be appreciated. Nonetheless, the discourse that the documentary both mirrors and reinforces has been found problematic, with many observing its racialised framing (Gendron, 2012; Khoury, 2012). The scene is set in a neighbourhood with a high concentration of people with North African origins. All the episodes of street harassment shown in the movie are perpetrated by

men who are readable by the audience, and framed by the director, as Arab/Muslim. The link between sexism and Arab masculinities works as the implicit assumption underscoring the narrative. The opening line of the documentary, uttered by a white woman interviewed by Peeters, marks a divide between the West and the East, as if it was natural and not requiring of any explanation.

> "It's hard to admit that you feel oppressed. It feels like a word that privileged Westerners are not allowed to use. It's not accepted. But I'm scared" (Peeters, 2012).

After this opening, the documentary unravels by playing on this line of demarcation at multiple passages, without ever explicitly formulating its analysis as one that is focused on sexual harassment committed by Arab men. The result is a narrative that proceeds unproblematised in that us/them divide that was introduced in its opening lines.

The Muslim population of Brussels is heavily concentrated in certain areas (Torrekens, 2007). Such concentration has been instrumentalised in the production and reinforcement of a discourse framing these neighbourhoods as "Muslim", and, especially after the terrorist attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016), as sites inhabited by dangerous populations (Traynor, 2015; Van Vlierden, 2016). Images and narratives such as those employed by Sofie Peeters (2012) add another layer to this construction. In addition to being hiding spots for terrorists, they are marked as territories where certain bodies and subjects cannot move freely. By depicting these neighbourhoods as inherently sexist, the question that is instilled in the mind of the viewer is whether it is possible, for a white woman, to live in such neighbourhoods, marking them as "no women's land" (Di Méo, 2011). One of the episodes that moves the narrative of the film is the decision by Sofie Peeters's neighbour to leave her apartment and to move to another part of the city because of the constant street harassment. Such images and narratives are not exceptionally employed in the documentary, but they are common ways of portraying gender relations and urban spaces in Brussels. These representations contribute to the construction and reinforcement of discourses that relegate sexism to specific racialised areas of the city (Hancock, 2008a).

During my research, many conversations confirmed the existence of these images and discourses, their entanglements with one another, and their impact on the lives of people who move through the city. The imagined dissection of the city into safe and unsafe areas is shaped by the conflation of discourses on gender equality and sexual diversity, terrorist threat and petty criminality. All these elements rely on the construction of the Arab man as the dangerous subject par excellence (Guénif-Souilamas and Macé, 2004; Mack, 2017).

Conversations around what route to take when walking in the city often revealed the presence of perceptions of risk and danger that coincided with the racialisation of certain streets or neighbourhoods. This was especially true when those making the decision were groups composed mainly of women or gay men. On a couple of occasions, some people explicitly expressed their discomfort in moving around "Arab" areas precisely because of their being "Arab" areas. Another type of conversation that often enables the emergence of such images involved the discussion and assessment of the suitability of different parts of the city where one could potentially move to. As soon as the name of certain neighbourhoods or municipalities was pronounced, reactions of disbelief were common among participants to the conversation. Molenbeek, in particular, seemed to be *the* municipality that people linked to danger and a sense of unsafety. In the month of June 2019, a contact from Brussels shared with me a telling episode in this sense. She was looking for a new flat and she had contacted some potential landlords via e-mail. One of the replies she received warned her that the neighbourhood where the flat was located was very "Moroccan" and the landlord wanted to make sure she was aware of it before scheduling a viewing. Interactions such as this confirm the centrality of discourses that frame certain racialised areas of the city as no-go zones for LGBTQ people and women. What results from this is the imagination of borders, and border areas, that mark divisions between neighbourhoods constructed as safe, LGBTQ-friendly, and supportive of gender equality and sexual freedom, and others that are discursively left in an area of pre-modern unsafety and oppression of LGBTQ people and women.

6.3.2 "We cross the canal, and it's another world": narratives reflecting the dichotomy

Many of the narratives collected reflect this dichotomic way of thinking about the city. They mirror and reiterate a discourse of irreducible difference between the "neighbourhoods" and the rest of the city, and sexuality is the element that makes crossings between the two particularly significant.

> "Well, actually, when you go to Molenbeek, you're not in Brussels any more. No matter what we say, it's not really Brussels. […] We cross the canal, and it's… it's… it's another world" (Jacob).

Youness was raised in Molenbeek, and he has recently moved to the centre of Brussels. When asked about his feelings towards different areas of the city, he took a paper handkerchief from the table and started drawing a circle and a square:

> "When I'm at my parents' it's… you see, it's very squared [indicates the square he has just drawn]. And when I'm here, at my place, in De Brouckère, even if… And the

worst thing is that here it's the centre, and this is Molenbeek, and there's not even two kilometres between the… […] You see, here it's a circle, it's…".

It was surprising for me to realise the level of precision by which the imagined borders between differently constructed areas are imprinted in the imaginations of people living in Brussels. While some of these borders do present some material signs that facilitate such precision – e.g. the canal separating the centre from Molenbeek – others would be difficult to notice to the external eye. Place Fontainas, analysed by Donnen (2019) and located at the end of Rue Marché au Charbon (the Gay Street), was mentioned in numerous interviews and informal conversations as a place of tension and friction, signalling the end of the LGBTQ area of the city and the beginning of the "Moroccan" area of Anneessens-Lemonnier.

> "The moment you go outside, to Anneessens, or… […] you wouldn't be openly gay as you are within the gay area. You wouldn't be holding hands, you wouldn't be kissing in the streets" (Sherif).

> "In Lemonnier, Anneessens. It's… One would say that there are borders, customs one would say" (Ismael).

For many participants, the passage from one area to the other is marked by a change of gender and sexuality performance. Such change is enacted specifically to avoid homo/bi/transphobic attacks and sexist remarks in racialised neighbourhoods that are perceived to be inhospitable to LGBTQ people and women. Such narratives of performance change are often accompanied by the expression of negative feelings towards such neighbourhoods, that are presented as being oppressive spaces that limit freedom of expression. Sofia was born and raised in Morocco. In Brussels, she has always lived in neighbourhoods that she described as "gentrified". She added that they were not the ones "where you would find Moroccans".

> "I don't hang out in like Molenbeek, or those areas where maybe like… Turkish or Moroccan neighbourhoods".

Struck by such a stark statement, I asked her to tell me a bit more about her perceptions of these areas. Her words confirmed that the level of freedom she feels in expressing her sexuality is inversely related to the perceived "Moroccanness/Turkishness" of the area.

> "For example, if I go to the Marché du Midi, on Sunday, I would not wear any clothes that I would be wearing maybe now, or… […]. Well, I would tend to cover myself. Cos yeah, I mean, I grew up in this, I grew up in… in a place where you're always judged, no matter what, for what you're wearing, or what you say, and then whatever".

Interesting in the extract above is the direct connection that Sofia makes between the ways she feels about certain areas of Brussels, and the country where she grew up. In this case, the connection between the global "there", framed as the Muslim North African/Middle Eastern

region marked by a lack of gender equality and sexual freedom, is at the other end of a continuum that ends in the "Turkish or Moroccan neighbourhoods". The link between these two scales of the "civilisational clash" was explicitly articulated by Sofia:

> "The impression, wow, it's… somehow it's sometimes very similar to Morocco. There are way too many Moroccans in the streets. I can go around and speak my language. So sometimes I feel judged, I feel like people are looking at me because they can tell that I'm Moroccan".

Interestingly, when I asked her if there were any specific episodes that provoked her discomfort towards certain neighbourhoods, she admitted that she rarely goes there. With regards to Molenbeek, she had been there only once, and she couldn't remember anything that made her feel unsafe. Her perception of such areas was mediated by her experience of other encounters, in other parts of the city, with Moroccan men. She mentioned episodes in which Moroccan men flirted with her in Arabic after realising that she was Moroccan.

Other participants, who have had a longer experience of these neighbourhoods, expressed similar perceptions in relation to safety and freedom. It is important to highlight that their narratives tend to be much more nuanced and complex than a straight-forward mirroring of discourses that posit a strict binarisation of white, western, safe areas of the city, and racialised, Muslim, unsafe ones. In most accounts, different and sometimes contrasting feelings are attached to such neighbourhoods, especially for those participants who grew up there. Anger and frustration at the sexism and homo/bi/transphobia that participants sometimes feel to be particularly hard in those areas is mitigated by and interwoven with feelings of deep attachment to the neighbourhood, as well as a sense of belonging. The feelings of exclusion that participants feel in some circumstances are imbricated with the acknowledgement of the support provided by racialised communities in other moments.

As stated above, Youness grew up in Molenbeek before moving to the centre. During our interview, Youness told me that he is not the only member of his family who identifies as non-heterosexual. His younger brother and cousin are also attracted to men. His story of their lives and movements around Molenbeek is constellated by episodes of homo/bi/transphobia experienced by the three of them. The differences between them, in terms of gender expression and degrees of vulnerability experienced in their lives, allows Youness to make distinctions between the risks encountered by different types of bodies. While he spoke of his decision to move to the centre as liberating, Youness does not feel unsafe when he goes back to Molenbeek. Rather, it is a sense of generalised surveillance that has a major impact on his well-being when in the neighbourhood. His feelings about the safety of Molenbeek change

when he thinks about his brother. Talking about certain parts of Molenbeek and Anderlecht, he says:

> "If I'm alone, it's ok. It doesn't bother me. But if… With my brother, for example, I don't like him going to certain parts, because he's more feminine, and I'm always scared for him, because there is, you see, a bit of… not violence, but… Always scared that they would say something to my brother, you see. You're a sissy, a fag, or… do you understand? And… But I'm not scared to go. I love going everywhere in Brussels, it doesn't bother me. But for my younger brother, I'm scared that he'd go to some places in Molenbeek where there's too high a concentration [of Moroccans], you see. There you go, there's… You see what I mean? So… But no, I love going everywhere in Brussels. I feel good, I feel safe".

In Youness' account the unsafety of certain parts of Molenbeek is directly linked to a high concentration of Moroccan population. This element was very difficult for me to listen to when conducting the interviews. As shown in the opening of the chapter, discourses that posit Muslim countries, groups and populations as inherently sexist and homo/bi/transphobic are very common in Brussels, and they are fundamental in the framing, managing and policing of racialised populations. Such discourses, and the practices that they produce and legitimise, are, in my eyes, extremely problematic, and their consequences often disastrous. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that some participants have expressed some of these elements as central in shaping the ways in which they perceive, understand and narrate their experiences. While these stories are not representative of the entirety of participants, they are not marginal either. In the experiences of some participants, the sexism and homo/bi/transphobia perpetrated by members of their Muslim communities is too central to be ignored or dismissed. When some of the participants had a sense that my view on the topic differed from theirs, they defended it fiercely, and on some occasions expressed anger at me for representing a part of population who diminishes their experiences and discounts their interpretations of it.

6.3.3 "I refuse this kind of idea": Participants rejecting mainstream discourses on the neighbourhoods

The discourse on the safety/unsafety of differently racialised areas of the city is not reflected in all the narratives collected. Some participants, when asked about their movements around the city, rejected the idea that these could be negatively impacted by the connotation of particular areas as dangerous. Assad, for example, stated early on in our conversation that, in his view, homophobia is present in any kind of context, and it cannot be framed as a uniquely "Muslim" phenomenon.

> “Because it’s not, and I really want to stress that, it’s not a Muslim thing to not... […] There still is this extra risk that just your median white Belgian guy, that he would feel offended by it somehow. So I think that you have just a heightened risk”.

Assad repeated this point multiple times, revealing his frustration at the depiction of Muslim communities in the city as the sole responsible for homophobic acts. The presence of a discourse that frames “Muslim” areas as dangerous for LGBTQ people was never denied by participants, but its reflection of their life in the neighbourhoods often doubted. This perceived detachment from the images and narratives that form discourses on neighbourhoods, and the personal experiences of those areas can produce an intention to limit their impeding effects on one’s daily movements. When asked whether there were any areas of the city where he did not feel safe to go to, Karim replied:

> “No. No. I refuse this kind of idea. I mean, I’m a Belgian citizen, I have the right to go through… It’s my duty. I refuse, you know, this kind of statements… Yeah. This part of the city is not renowned, or very quiet… and blah blah blah. It’s just… it depends always on your behaviour, and what you’re looking for”.

A few minutes later in the interview, the seemingly absolute refusal to be influenced by the discursive connotations of certain areas is nuanced by Karim’s admission that some limits to one’s gender expression are anyway to be respected if one wants to ensure their safety in those areas. Such move is anticipated by the suggestion that safety “depends always on your behaviour”. While still talking about the neighbourhoods of the city, and specifically those with high concentrations of North African populations, he adds:

> “It depends on your behaviour and your energy and your… your projections. Of course I don’t wear high heels and red lipstick and go out at midnight in the street”.

As was the case with Sofia’s and Youness’ accounts of their movements, real or imagined, across different areas of the city, moderation in the open performance of one’s sexuality is a requirement to ensure one’s safety. Such statements suggest that the limits imposed on bodies and self-expression in the neighbourhoods work to effectively invisibilise and disempower the LGBTQ population that inhabits them.

The recognition of these invisibilising and at times oppressive dynamics does not impact all participants in the same way. While, for some, the presence of big Arab/Muslim communities represents a limiting factor for their sense of freedom of self-expression, for others the presence of such communities is the reason why they enjoy living in the city.

> “Also, what I love very much in Brussels is surely the diversity of people that you encounter. This is very important for me […]. And from the moment I came to live in Brussels, this has really been a… a huge huge relief, for the opportunities of

> encounter, with people, and… […] Brussels has allowed me to really really… feel better, and recognised" (Ghalia).

The feelings reported by Ghalia resonate with those of other participants. Without dismissing, or devaluing, the importance of tackling the presence of homo/bi/transphobia in different areas of the city, they see in the presence of Muslim/Arab communities an important factor in allowing them to feel at ease. Sharky is a 27 year old trans man. He was born in Tunisia, and he travelled to Belgium to escape the violence he was living in his country of birth because of his activism in the LGBTQ movement. In the three years he has lived in Brussels, he experienced one major transphobic attack, the severity of which he conveyed by stating: "I was about to get killed". The attack was perpetrated by a group of young Arab men who followed him from Molenbeek to Schaerbeek. While this experience had an impact in his thinking of Belgium as a safe country for LGBTQ people, and of Brussels as a safe city, it did not change his attachment to those areas of the city, and it did not lead him to the essentialisation of Arab/Muslim communities as threatening. He now lives in St. Josse, another municipality with a high concentration of racialised groups, and these are the words he used to describe it:

> "Like, I'm here, and here is the *quartier européen* ["European neighbourhood", where EU institutions are located], and here there is all the Muslims and all the Arabs. In the middle, like I used to live. For me, it's… I love St Josse, and it's really charming. I find the… I see my origins there, I can find my two parts in the same place, so…".

Sharky's words are doubly interesting. First, as already mentioned, he somehow disconnects his experience of transphobia in the city from the discourses over the desirability of certain areas of Brussels. While the attack he experienced was incredibly violent and traumatic, this did not produce in him a desire to detach from Arab/Muslim communities, as they still play an important role in allowing him to feel recognised and at ease. Second, his "living in the middle", and enjoying it, disrupts that strictly binary discourse that frames differently racialised areas of the city as different worlds, in the impossibility of working out their difference. "The middle" is the space that Sharky decided to inhabit, as it allows him to "find his two parts". Together with the other experiences and narratives presented in this section, Sharky's view allows to glimpse at the complex and multiple senses of belonging that run through the daily experiences of participants, and to see how the discourses at work in the city are very limited in their abilities to reflect them.

6.3.4 "Almost a psychological play": When discourses sip through anyway

The discursive frames at work in the city have an impact on the experiences and narratives of participants, even when their words do not reflect a binary imagination of the city. Earlier in the chapter I presented Sofia's view on different neighbourhoods. Despite her limited experiences of certain areas, she spoke of them as unsafe and oppressive, which suggests the relevance of discourses around safety/unsafety in the city in shaping her perceptions. This is also the case for some participants whose view on the neighbourhoods is in contrast with Sofia's. Ryzlan was born and raised in the Francophone region of Belgium, and moved to Brussels when she was 19 years old. After living in different parts of the city, at the time of the interview she lived in Anderlecht, a municipality marked by a high concentration of racialised populations that is often painted as one of the dangerous areas of the city. When talking about her relation to the neighbourhood, Ryzlan admits that initially such images and discourses had an impact on her feelings and perceptions of safety when walking to and from her place. She soon realised, though, that such discourses would not necessarily reflect her daily experiences.

> "At the beginning, when I was in this neighbourhood, maybe some prejudices. Through these prejudices, I modified my natural behaviour, by not flaunting. But, with time, because it has been a while now that I'm there, with time I realised that it was a prejudice, and that it actually… there's no reason. And so then, I took back my… my natural attitude, my natural behaviour in relating to women. And nothing has ever happened. So, it was exactly… exactly the confirmation that it actually was a prejudice, for me anyway, in my experience. However, an important thing is that I will naturally feel more comfortable with my homosexuality, although my experiences of homophobia happened in the centre, I will naturally feel more comfortable with my homosexuality in neighbourhoods that are in the centre, or Ixelles, or that have the reputation of being more open. But not necessarily. So, it's really… it's really a play… almost a psychological play. Of… of norms, really. Perception, or reputation".

This extract taps into one of the central nodes that one is confronted with when exploring the ways in which LGBTQ people from a Muslim background navigate different areas of the city. As pointed out in multiple passages of the chapter, the discourses at work in Brussels actively shape imaginations of certain areas as dangerous and threatening. A relevant element of the construction of this image is the role played by categories of gender and sexualities, whereby these neighbourhoods are imagined as particularly dangerous and threatening for certain specific bodies – those of women, and of visible, "out", LGBTQ people. Ryzlan's experience is relevant in that it shows how it is often difficult to disentangle personal experiences and collective imaginations in the way one perceives different areas of the city. Discourses about Anderlecht had an impact on Ryzlan's feelings when she moved to the neighbourhood. She then gradually got to know the area and its people better, and most of those feelings

diminished in importance once she realised that it was a safe area for her. Nonetheless, even after living there for years, she realised that she still "intuitively" felt more comfortable, and safer, in areas of the city that are depicted as safer for women and LGBTQ people. This is despite the fact that all the homophobic episodes she experienced and/or witnessed happened in these areas, and not in the neighbourhoods framed as unsafe.

6.4 Blurring borders and moving the spotlight

Donnen (2019) and Dikeç (2006) insist on the discursive nature of the imagined border between differently racialised areas of the city to refute their pretence of reflection of some sort of ontological reality. This, in turn, allows for the recognition and observation of all those elements that are hidden behind their essentialised focus on social issues as only existent in certain neighbourhoods, and among the racialised groups that inhabit them. This point is articulated by Ghalia through the employment of the metaphor of a spotlight that is always pointed on the neighbourhoods. While such spotlight rightly sheds light on some issues that these areas have, as confirmed by the many participants who have experienced homo/bi/transphobic oppression in them, it works to keep other or similar oppression, taking place elsewhere, in the dark. She continues by saying that:

> "together with this, we don't talk about white guys, on a night out, who behave in disgusting ways… […] And we could say lots of things about those guys, who are literally serial rapists. So, yeah, there you go. This… Curious how we don't talk much about this. So, really, the spotlight is always on the neighbourhoods".

In addition to the erasure of the homo/bi/transphobia and sexism that happen elsewhere, the spotlight also allows only those negative elements of the neighbourhoods to emerge, downplaying those that are positive in the experiences of the people that inhabit them, including LGBTQ people and women. The metaphor allows to observe how certain elements are always central in the discourses that shape the imaginations and perceptions of different urban spaces, while others are kept out of the realm of recognition, and therefore often go unnoticed. The data presented in this section offer a series of elements that can be helpful in the process of rethinking the relationship of these neighbourhoods with the rest of the city. At the same time, enlarging the spotlight so that it includes these elements could potentially disrupt the rigidity of the frame that shapes how the city is imagined, allowing to "frame the frame, […] to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside, possible, recognizable" (Butler, 2009: 9).

When talking about different areas of Brussels, all participants refer to mainstream discourses, either by mirroring them through a portrayal of racialised areas as dangerous for LGBTQ subjects, or by actively rejecting them, confuting the existence of such a divide. In all interviews, it was clear to both me and participants that the discursive terrain in which our conversations were taking place was one in which strict borders between different areas of the city were constructed, differentiating the degrees of safety and freedom one could expect in their daily movements. Despite the potency of this discursive frame in shaping the overall narratives offered by participants, all of them expressed a certain degree of distancing from it. This distance was not always expressed in explicit terms, but through the insertion of certain elements that failed to mirror mainstream discourses. In this section I present five elements that emerge from the analysis of data, which can help deconstruct the rigid binaries on which spatialised discourses of difference work in Brussels.

6.4.1 "I was in the neighbourhood, in my pink trousers": LGBTQ agency in the neighbourhoods

Many of the collected narratives present the need to change one's gender performance as a requirement for safety in the neighbourhoods, suggesting that the limits imposed on bodies and self-expression in the neighbourhoods work to effectively invisibilise and disempower the LGBTQ population that inhabits them. While this is true for some, if not most people encountered, some participants actively use a disruption of performance norms to make a statement, express their identifications, and produce change towards freedom of expression *in* the neighbourhood and *among* Arab/Muslim communities. In these narratives, the LGBTQ subject emerges in their ability to disrupt the norms at work in the neighbourhood, complicating the simplistic image of the LGBTQ person as the powerless and oppressed subject, whose presence in the neighbourhoods is marked by danger and limits.

Salim, who was raised in Anderlecht, speaks of the huge impact that norms on gender expression had on his well-being when growing up.

> "There weren't many ways of being. Actually, there was only one way of being really. It was being… it was being Muslim, and… To dress soberly. There's no hair like this, no cleavage shown, no make-up… There you go. This didn't exist around me. [...] Much later I really dared wearing a bit of make-up. Or even doing my eyebrows, or doing something like this. Even the fact of taking care of oneself, is…. It's not something that is masculine, actually".

Salim gradually moved from being negatively impacted by all the limiting norms that he felt on his body and his appearance, and started "taking care of himself". Talking about his relation with such acts of self-care today, a strikingly empowering vision of them emerges,

which suggests how Salim's role as an agent of change in his neighbourhood passed through his active disruption of the norms that had been so limiting when he was growing up.

> "To apply make-up. For example, wearing eye-liner, for me it's an act… it's an act… antisexism, antihomophobia, etcetera. I wear…Yeah, for me it's a way to fight against the… to break the codes, really, the ones that they absolutely wanted to ingrain in me. So… So, yeah. It happened once that I… I wore pink trousers. To piss people off. There, it's my way. I was in the neighbourhood, in my pink trousers. What are you going to do? What happens now? [He starts laughing]. For example, ah?"

Similarly, Salah talks about being "unapologetic" about his sexuality as a way of dealing with the homophobia he perceives around him. His observations are not limited to racialised areas of the city, as he starts talking about his experiences as a dancer in the hip-hop scene of the city:

> "All straight men. Not toxic, but just real straight men, macho. […] And I would not hide any more. Because for three years I was not… I'm… This is my identity, it's like I'm proud […] So, I started making jokes about sexual stuff, in front of them, being like 'I'm gonna be me, and I'm gonna be fully me'. And I've noticed that a lot of people, especially, straight men, they react to it more accepting, if you are being you 100% […]. I started being really unapologetic about who I am".

Salah then extends these reflections on his "being unapologetic" to interactions with racialised men in the city, in spaces and situations that would be regarded as dangerous for the LGBTQ person through the mainstream frames at work in the city. Talking about the presence of Arab men on public transportation, and the narratives of danger that are often attached to such encounters, he said:

> "I started having my theory about how you connect with men like that. It's like, when you start to show fear, they're gonna react to that fear. So, that was my thing in the metro. The moment I started having fear, I had to take my responsibility and shake it off. If they want to start and come and talk to me, […] I will react to him like I would react to a woman or to... And I never had any issues, and I would always get surprised about how people would react".

As a result of this unapologetic stance, which includes vocally referring to gay sex, "flipping hair", and "getting out some Beyoncé stuff", his relationships with heterosexual racialised men in the city have changed.

> "And also, like now, it's like… the bouncers, like from the bar, super-straight Arab man joking his ass off with E [a gay non-white friend]. So, we created these identities where we are so funny and we are so witty with who we are, that we are accepted by these Arab guys. Also girls. Because they can't help it but like us".

These experiences show that a discourse framing LGBTQ subjects as powerless and oppressed in Muslim/Arab settings and neighbourhoods does not reflect the complexity of

participants' experiences. While the homo/bi/transphobia across the neighbourhoods, as elsewhere in the city, needs to be addressed, the roles played by participants in the multiple contexts they navigate are multifaceted. A frame that focuses on homo/bi/transphobia as one of the characterising features of racialised areas and neighbourhoods erases the agency exercised by participants towards change, as well as the processes of individual empowerment that some of them go through in response to that same homo/bi/transphobia that is always kept at centre stage.

6.4.2 "I'm at home": Belonging and attachment to the neighbourhood

Another element that emerges from the narratives of participants pertains to the feelings of attachment that some of them feel towards the neighbourhoods. On many occasions, participants wanted to stress their feeling "at home" in such spaces. For them, this does not automatically imply a downplaying of the sexism and homo/bi/transphobia that they see played out in such contexts. Rather, their intention is to present a picture of the neighbourhood that is as reflecting as possible of the complexities that shape their experience of them. Sam, for example, explains how communities are structured around patriarchal and heteronormative values in the area of Molenbeek where she grew up. In her experiences, such norms are maintained and reinforced through a diffused surveillance on behaviours and performances:

> "There is this tendency to snitch, so this means to surveil people, and women in particular".

In her experience, patriarchal surveillance preceded homophobic prejudice, and her perceived need to avoid disclosing her homosexuality in the neighbourhood was intertwined with the need to conform to the specific roles that women in such context are expected to comply to. It is a recognition and acknowledgement of this difference between the way she felt about her life and her future, and the limited roles she perceived as possible in the neighbourhood, that prompted her to leave it.

> "I didn't see myself with a man, making babies, and… as you see them all in Chaussé de Gand, in Molenbeek. They're there, they push their strollers, they do their groceries. It's them who take care of the kid. Because the husband, he's the one who works, and who… She is the one who stays at home. Me, I'm not for this, so… But anyway, they're happy like this. I mean, I'm not saying that… that they're unhappy, that it's really… I'm not… painting a picture that is totally dark, or something. No. I think that they… they benefit from it, some of them. But I need to be independent. So… And when you want to be independent, well, you're… immediately, you're… in another… in another… well, you're immediately projected into another system, yeah. You can't… you can't mix with all of this anymore, actually. No".

Despite her acknowledgement of such dynamics, which she had felt as oppressive at certain times in her life, Sam describes Molenbeek as an area where she feels comfortable and at ease. Acknowledging that the neighbourhood presents modes of organisation that were not conducive to the independence she needed, and resulted in her decision to live elsewhere in the city, did not produce in her a sense of resentment towards Molenbeek.

> "The thing is that I grew up in Molenbeek, eh? So, this means that when I go to Molenbeek, I feel like I'm at home, I know the streets by heart, I know all the… the shopping streets, the tiny streets, ah… I even know the… Of course, I also know people. […] I feel very good in Molenbeek. I've never had any problems. Well, there's always… this sexism, this male chauvinism, that exists over there, but generally, when they know you, that you pass there often, ah… there's no problem. Really, there's no problem".

This feeling of attachment is an element that emerges from the narratives of other participants as well. When he moved to Brussels from Liège, Sliman lived in a house located very near Place Fontainas, the square where the Gay Street ends and the "Moroccan" area of Anneessens/Lemonnier begins. As mentioned previously in the chapter, many of the narratives that are commonly reiterated in the city frame this square as marking the border between a (white) area that is safe for LGBTQ people, and the beginning of a racialised Muslim area where LGBTQ bodies are exposed to homo/bi/transphobia. Sliman was very well aware of such demarcation when he lived in the area, but the feelings of comfort/discomfort that he reports are in contrast with mainstream narratives of such crossings.

> "I live in the centre. In a place where I can choose to go to the Gay Street, to the… hm… very mainstream wannabe walking street. And that's like one option, this Gay Street. One of the options is the main boulevard but… that is walking and that is full of stores. And the other way is the other boulevard, which is the Moroccan boulevard. And I go there very often. I feel… Ok, I feel better in this Moroccan area than in this Zara area. In this mainstream Zara area. Because I don't like so much… stores and stuff. But it's true that… […] I've noticed that if I were to go out [in the Moroccan boulevard], and it's very… I don't know, I wouldn't wear something so gay, but I don't have so many… obviously gay clothes".

Sliman does not deny that a change in his expression takes place when he goes to areas that are marked as Moroccan. Nonetheless, when assessing his levels of comfort in different areas of the city, he stresses how these areas are the ones where he is more at ease, compared to other parts of the city he does not feel the same sense of attachment to.

6.4.3 "It's always a plus for the nation": The resourceful side of the neighbourhood

Some participants talked about the neighbourhoods as sites that have plenty to offer to the rest of the city, further contributing to the disruption of a discursive frame that only highlights their problems. According to Ghalia, that same "communitarianism" that is commonly framed as a negative feature of those areas, precluding any possibility of integration between differently racialised communities (Belorgey *et al.*, 2005), has some positive aspects that need to be acknowledged and celebrated.

> "There are some modes of organisation… in these neighbourhoods, to which I am very attached… with a strong community, solidarity….".

In her experience, those same elements that are thought to be leading to tensions between communities and neighbourhoods, as well as oppression of LGBTQ people living in such areas, can also be seen as empowering elements for individuals who can feel the support and solidarity of the community behind them. Once again, it is important to note how the narratives offered by participants escape simplistic renderings of this divide, and Ghalia's perception of such communitarian strength is not blind to its negative effects.

> "But, obviously, the other side of the coin, when there's this strong community, is that everyone also knows everyone's life. And the dimension of freedom, it's… it's quite fragile".

Anwar also describes his neighbourhood, Molenbeek, as a place that could be seen in its full potential, if only the discourses at work in the city were not constantly focused on its negative aspects. When he mentioned such potential, I asked him what he meant by it, and this was his reply:

> "Obviously there is a majority of Moroccans, so it's a different culture, it's a different way of thinking, you know. That would mean, you know, different… Anything, from different food, from a different perspective on life, from a different way of doing things. It's always a plus for the nation. And these people are… I mean, at least from my generation, we're Belgian, we're born here, so… you know, we're part of the system. So, instead of constantly rejecting different ideas, maybe embracing them might make us more interesting as a place. That's what annoys me about Brussels, for example. They're very set in their own ways, and they… it's very difficult for this sort of Belgian mentality to open itself to something that's very different. "Oh, yeah, but that's a bit Muslim, isn't it? It's a bit dangerous. Their women wear headscarves, they're very…". You know? Ahm… "They don't have rights. They're very barbaric". You isolate that, and… it's a time bomb, I suppose".

Similarly to Ghalia, Anwar takes elements that are commonly employed to mark the "neighbourhoods" and their communities as inherently incompatible with western ways of life – "different perspective on life", "different way of doing things" – and reframes them as being

a "plus for the nation". Following his reasoning, it is not the racialised communities who fail at integrating with the rest of the urban fabric, but it is rather the "Belgian mentality" that does not "open itself" to difference. The closing of the extract, with the metaphor of the time bomb, is quite interesting. In the Brussels context, bomb is a term that is inextricably linked with the memories, and the discourses around such memories, of the terrorist attacks carried out in 2016, and whose perpetrators were men of North African descent operating in the neighbourhood of Molenbeek. Anwar's metaphor works to reverse the discourses that revolve around the relation of the municipality and the wider city. In this case, the bomb is not one that is deployed by racialised people from the "problematic" neighbourhood, but one that is created by the mainstream closedness of Belgian public culture and "mentality", which condemns communities to remain in tension with one another in the minefield that the city becomes as a result of such process.

6.4.4 Problematising the figure of the Arab/Muslim man

Another important element that emerged from the narratives collected in the field is related to the image of the Muslim man as a threatening subject, around whom the construction of certain areas of the city as unsafe is built. As noted across a variety of different contexts, the figure of the Muslim man is central in discourses that produce other bodies – those of women and LGBTQ people – as vulnerable and in need of protection, as well as clearly demarcating a distance between the "civilised" West and the "backward" Muslim elsewhere (Razack, 2004; Smeeta, 2007; Dwyer *et al.*, 2008). As shown in this chapter through the example of the documentary *Femme de la Rue,* the construction of certain neighbourhoods of Brussels as unsafe and limiting of personal expression is directly linked to the presence of Arab/Muslim male subjects, framed as oppressive and threatening. Some of the men that participants report encountering during their daily movements across various areas of the city fit this discursive description. I am referring here to the perpetrators of the sexist and homo/bi/transphobic episodes that participants have experienced or witnessed in the city. The relevance of such men in undeniable, and the way in which these stories emerged during the interviews is telling of participants' differing attitudes towards this element of the here/there discourse that is the focus of this chapter. Some participants highlighted the ethnicity of the perpetrator as one of the most relevant elements of the episode they were recounting. This is the case of Yasmine, who insisted multiple times during the interview on the fact that the perpetrators of homophobic or transphobic attacks towards her have been invariably men of North African descent. This statement is important in showing her perception of danger and safety in the city but is somewhat nuanced by her telling of the transphobic comments made by white Belgian

police officers as one of the most impactful experiences of discrimination she has lived with in Brussels.

> "There are times, there are some guys who know it, they feel it. You're gonna ask me 'How?'. I don't know. I mean, in the street, I can also… also go to the Grande Place [central square in Brussels old town], nobody is going to call me faggot, or… But there's some people who see it. And it's always, always, I swear, always, unbelievable but true, and without exception, since I'm here, in the centre, and since I wear female clothes, I swear, always, with no exception… so, I say something general, really I generalise, it's always Ma-ghre-bins. Every time. Every time. The ones who realise are North Africans… who recognise me, it's North Africans. And what is this… Generally, some comments in Arabic. 'Look, it's a man'. […] And when it's in French, it's 'faggot'. 'It's a faggot'. Because, actually, they don't make any distinction. Faggot, or… For them it's faggot. There is no LGBT, there is no trans. There is no… There is nothing".

Similarly, other participants see the presence of racialised men in certain spaces as markers of unsafety in the city. This is often the result of personal experiences of homo/bi/transphobia that they received mainly from racialised men. This is the case of Barwaqo, for example, who during the interview explains that:

> "It's always by men of colour, never… never never never… I've never had like white… white people coming up to me and accusing… kind of bothering me because I'm gay. Never".

Other participants employ very different ways of telling episodes of homo/bi/transphobia in the city. Sarah told me about the public episodes of homophobia she witnessed without ever mentioning the ethnicity of the perpetrators. During interviews, I usually asked if participants were able to read any specific national, religious or ethnic background of the people they were talking about. When asked this question, Sarah started laughing, and then replied:

> "Yeah, he was an Arab man. So… I think it made me… it always makes me a lot angrier".

She explained her anger by referring to two distinct elements. On the one hand, she is aware that the actions and words of the perpetrator can be used by white people to reinforce discourses about the dangers posed by Muslim/Arab men, and by their communities. On the other, the persistence of homophobia in such communities upsets her and makes her sad. The role assigned to her as a lesbian woman of Muslim descent by the intertwinement of these two elements is one that she finds particularly difficult to inhabit. Sarah's words suggest a different set of feelings and imaginations than the ones expressed by Yasmine and Barwaqo. Together with the frustration at the homophobia expressed by the Arab man, she is aware of the ways in which this episode can reinforce racist and Islamophobic tropes. The position in

which she finds herself in is one that allows her to understand both the perceptions and experiences of the white lesbian woman, and the need to contrast the man's homophobia, while wanting to block the racist narratives that feed on such episodes.

Finally, in the narratives of participants, Muslim/Arab men do not emerge only in their participation in sexist and/or homo/bi/transphobic oppression. A number of allies are mentioned by participants in their stories as having had important roles in supporting their processes of identification as LGBTQ people. These range from being simple acquaintances, to close friends, to family members and people who played more institutional roles in the lives of participants. Karim, for example, reports this episode when telling me about moving to the neighbourhood of Forêt with his partner:

> "Our place is just, I mean, immediately close to a Moroccan café. And at the very beginning they just noticed we are two men, and…. And the owner of this café-bar was really really friendly… I was also a little bit proactive. And I just introduced myself to him, and we spoke a bit in Arabic, and I say "Yeah, I'm living with my boyfriend. And I hope that it will not be a problem for you". And he said "No no. On the contrary, please feel free and if you notice something wrong just give me a call…". And they were always friendly and very correct".

What is often framed as a marker of risk in common narratives on Brussels neighbourhoods, i.e. the presence of Arab men in public spaces, becomes in Karim's experience a marker of safety and support, as the café owner not only expressed indifference to his homosexuality, but also offered his solidarity should homophobic oppression be directed at him and his partner. Jacob also tells of an important ally that he found in an Arab man when in high school. His story is particularly interesting as the ally was his Islamic religion teacher in high school, in Molenbeek.

> "So, we often talked about homosexuality [in class], and there were lots of… negative feedback on this. I was the only… There were two of us who defended… ah… gay rights, really. And he was on our side. Because he had a cousin who was gay. Ah… And… And he also had exactly the same thoughts, actually. At the time, but… Discussing with his cousin who was gay… And then […] I can't speak for him, because I can't say what he thinks, eh? But, really… But he is rather… He is tolerant, actually".

6.4.5 "A place that is rather working-class": What is left out of the cultural frame?

As already pointed out, the frames that are applied to experiences of and discourses on racialised neighbourhoods in Brussels hide some important elements that contribute to shape life in those areas. As stated by Abu-Lughod (2002), frames that insist on "cultural difference", as the ones employed to construct borders between Arab/Muslim areas and the

rest of the city, often work to silence reflections and debates that centre around other categories of analysis. One category that emerged in different ways across the data collected in Brussels is that of class. When asked about their experiences of Arab/Muslim neighbourhoods, some participants were quick to reframe them as areas primarily marked by working-classness, and economic marginalisation, and only secondarily labelled them with the cultural/ethnic/religious marker of "Arab" or "Muslim". As soon as we touched upon the topic during our interview, Ghalia started reflecting upon the best way to refer to the neighbourhoods in question. Her conclusion was that the term that would entail less problematic essentialisations was that of "popular neighbourhoods", marking them through the category of class rather than that of culture/religion.

> "Let's call them popular neighbourhoods. To not use a horrible term".

This opening reflection worked to move the conversation in a direction that would include issues related to the economic marginalisation and deprivation that Ghalia witnesses in the neighbourhoods. Her intention was not to move the conversation entirely away from talking about the roles of cultural and religious communities in shaping life in these areas, as she later talked extensively about the impact of these elements. Rather, by moving the spotlight away from "culture" as the main (racialised) category of analysis, she was able to include the category of class in her narrative about the neighbourhoods. Similarly, Jalal moved the conversation toward the category of class as soon as the topic of difference across neighbourhoods emerged in the conversation. When I asked him what he thought about discourses around the safety/unsafety of different areas in the city, he rejected the idea that cultural/religious elements might play a role in this. According to him, the economic marginalisation of certain areas is the only responsible element for the heightened sense of unsafety he experiences there:

> "I always bring it back to poor… areas. Which is different. Because if it were white people it would be the same. As dangerous, I mean".

The category of class is mentioned by participants not only as an explanatory element for the issues that arise in the neighbourhoods, but also as a feature of those areas that contribute to create a sense of belonging and attachment in the participants that inhabit them. In his interview, Sliman distinguished between a "mainstream Zara area" and an "Arab boulevard" to express his preference for the second, as it is a space that makes him feel generally more comfortable. Similarly, Ryzlan made explicit reference to her class background when talking about her sense of belonging to her neighbourhood in Anderlecht:

> "So, the place where I live, it's rather… a place that is rather working-class. And it's funny, because… ah… I have a… I have a working-class background. I was born, I grew up in a… in a place, in a neighbourhood, in V., which is really super-working-class. […] Anyway, I feel very very good where I am, because, at a social level, something developed and I created something with the people in the neighbourhoods who are… they are really in this… this working-class environment. That is really hyper-kindly, hyper…. You see?".

The data presented in this section show the limits of a frame that is solely based on racialised ideas of culture and religion to observe and explain the relationships between different areas of the city. That of class is an example of a category that emerges in the narratives of participants as having an important role in explaining some of the issues that arise in the neighbourhoods, as well as some of those elements that contribute to the creation of a sense of belonging in participants.

6.5 Conclusion

None of the narratives offered by participants perfectly mirrored, nor perfectly confuted, binarised discourses on alterity in the spaces of Brussels. Yasmine's interview, for example, centred on her experiences of homophobia and transphobia at the hands of Arab/Muslim men. Over the course of our two-hour long conversation, she repeated multiple times how homophobia and transphobia are a problem in Brussels only among Muslim people and communities and it was clear that the message she wanted to convey was a need to address such oppression in "Muslim" areas. It was only in the final ten minutes of the interview that she recounted the transphobic attack perpetrated by white police officers in uniform in the centre of Brussels. The emergence of this episode in our interview complicated her previous statements about transphobia being relegated to Muslim groups in the city. On the other side of the continuum, experiences such as those of Karim, or Assad, who vocally rejected discourses that posit Arab/Muslim areas as particularly dangerous, are complicated by their telling of the change in gender and sexual expression that they go through when moving through such neighbourhoods.

What the data show is that the discourses produced on the neighbourhoods, and the frames employed to interpret them, present some fundamental limits, and they fail to represent the experiences of the people that move through them. A disruption of these discourses and frames is necessary to include other elements that shape experiences of the city. On the one hand, the recognition of the discursive nature of rigidly binarised imaginations of city spaces allows to acknowledge and observe those instances of sexism and homo/bi/transphobia that do not take place in racialised neighbourhoods, and therefore to address such oppression at a

systemic level, without relegating it to certain areas of the city (Hancock, 2017). Second, it allows to better understand the complexity of neighbourhoods with high concentrations of Arab/Muslim populations, without focusing solely on their "issues", and on the religious/cultural elements that form the backdrop of clash discourses (Dikeç, 2006).

The last section of this chapter presented five elements that emerge from the data after enlarging the spotlight that, using Ghalia's words, "is always on the neighbourhoods". These elements are: the agency of LGBTQ Muslim people in subverting heteronormativity in the neighbourhoods and produce social change through their performances; the relevance of class in shaping both senses of unsafety and senses of belonging towards racialised neighbourhoods; the importance of belonging and attachment in the ways participants experience their racialised neighbourhoods; the different masculinities performed by cisgender heterosexual Arab/Muslim men in the neighbourhoods, and the potential support they can provide to LGBTQ people; the resources and potential that the neighbourhoods present for its inhabitants and for the wider city. This list is not conclusive and complete, but it is a starting point to observe, analyse, and represent neighbourhoods that are racialised as Arab/Muslim in Brussels in more complex tones, which would bring them closer to the experiences that LGBTQ people from a Muslim background have of them.

Chapter 7. "Between two seats" – Intersections of racism/Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia

7.1 Introduction

> "All the lesbians, and their intersectionality. I am lesbian, I am Muslim, I am black. Who is more intersectional than me?"

The words above are from a conversation with Barwaqo, while we were both attending the Massimadi Film Festival. Such a simple sentence, in the context of a wider conversation on LGBTQ spaces in the city, had the double effect of distancing Barwaqo's position from that of white lesbian women who may (mis)use the concept of "intersectionality", and of stressing the relevance of the interlocking of different layers of identifications and oppression in her life. The quote works well in introducing an analysis of the specific intersectional social locations that LGBTQ people from a Muslim background inhabit, as narrated by participants in this research. On the one hand, it shows the wide circulation of the word "intersectionality", by stressing how, in Barwaqo's view, "all the lesbians" employ it. On the other, it suggests that such usage might not accurately grasp the complexity of intersectional identifications and oppression, thus making it important to reclaim the word and its uses to signify the specific experiences of people who are minoritised as a result of the interlocking of multiple lines of domination.

Rahman (2010: 945) stresses how LGBTQ Muslims occupy "an intersectional social location *between* political and social cultures". According to him, their identities are to be understood in their relation to, and disruption of, the rigid binaries between a western civilisation, constructed as accepting and supportive of LGBTQ rights, and a Muslim one, relegated to a backward elsewhere and imagined as failing to acknowledge the lives of its LGBTQ population. Rather than viewing LGBTQ Muslim people as inhabiting both social locations – the West because of their non-heteronormative gender and/or sexual identity, and the Muslim East because of a sense of cultural/religious belonging – it is more useful to think of them as occupying the in-between space that emerges at the intersection of the two imagined worlds (Rahman, 2010). Similarly, El-Tayeb (2012) highlights the invisibility of LGBTQ Muslim subjects that results from the rigid civilisational binary that undergirds mainstream discourses. She calls for a "queer of color analysis, drawing on intersectionality" (El-Tayeb, 2012: 90) to counter the interlocked workings of Islamophobia, heteronormativity and neoliberalism.

Chapter 2 discusses how intersectionality has been interpreted and applied in this study. The point of departure was Collin and Bilge's (2016) definition of intersectionality as a way of looking at complexity in social relations, by recognising and acknowledging the interlocking of different axes of power in producing the specific oppression lived by individuals and groups. As complexity is the keyword in this definition, implicit is the rejection of additive models of multiple oppression, as intersectional social locations are observed and analysed in their specific systemic production, which is not reducible to the simple sum of the lines that result in their emergence (McCall, 2005). Elaborating on this complexity, the chapter focused on two issues that arise from widespread applications of intersectionality across various disciplines and geographical contexts.

First, it is important to acknowledge the specificity of the social context in which intersectionality is applied. As a concept that originated in black feminist activism and academia in the United States, it is imperative to consider the ways in which intersectionality is applied in contexts other than this (Knapp, 2005). As argued by Bilge (2013), intersectional scholars and activists need to particularly be aware of the risks of "whitening" intersectionality, and of using it as a merely "ornamental" device, when its applications distance themselves from the political and social context in which it originated. A second issue discussed in the chapter was related to the risks of identity essentialisations that a perspective relying on the concept of identity, such as intersectionality, entails (Chang and Culp Jr, 2002; Ehrenreich, 2002; Nash, 2008). In order to overcome such impasse, I suggest to approach intersectionality through a procedural (Dhamoon, 2010) and narrative (Anthias, 2002b) lens. This allows to observe how the framing of identities through mainstream discourses, and the agency of individuals in accepting, rejecting, or resignifying them, is the central process through which intersectional locations are produced and experienced. While the theoretical reflections that opened this thesis are relevant in all the analyses that I presented, they are of particular centrality in this chapter, as its focus is exactly on the ways in which participants experience and narrate the multiple oppression they live in their daily lives.

In this chapter I focus on the specific discursive and social locations occupied by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels. The lens that I apply is an intersectional one, aimed at recognising and analysing how Islamophobia, racism, homo/bi/transphobia, sexism, and other axes of domination influence the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. This chapter and the following one are closely linked, and they complement each

other in their focus on the complexities of the intersectional locations inhabited by research participants. In this one, I analyse the narratives that participants make of the specific oppression that they live as a result of the interlocking of racism/Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia. Specifically, I highlight how participants often feel relegated to marginal positions and forced by social expectations to play pre-determined roles that do not necessarily reflect the ways in which they self-identify, or they experience their social worlds. The following chapter will chart those processes of community building and bond forming that participants enact to resist to and disrupt the rigidity of the discursive frames that produce such constrained positions and roles. Rather than viewing their intersectional locations as solely marked by oppression, I intend to highlight how these can come to represent sites of resistance and subversion.

In the first section of this chapter I focus on the circulation of the word "intersectionality" in Brussels, and on the problems that arise from some of its usage. I then present and analyse the narratives that participants make of the specific intersectional location they inhabit. As mentioned above, I focus specifically on the roles and positions that are discursively assigned to LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, and the impact they have on their lives.

7.2 Intersectional(c)ity: Circulation and employment of the concept of intersectionality in Brussels

To introduce the concept of intersectionality as it relates to the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, it is important to highlight how it has been appropriated and employed by different groups and movements in the city. This is in line with the acknowledgement of the origins of the concept itself, as it was formulated at the interface of activist praxis and academic theorising (Collins and Bilge, 2016). In Brussels, the word intersectionality appears in numerous contexts, testifying to the wide circulation of the concept across various spaces of activism and community-building. Le Space (art@Azira vzw), for example, an association located right in the centre of the city, organises activities with and for different minoritised groups. Its permanent café is thought of as "a creative laboratory where different people meet and where a stage is given to talent who often doesn't find their way to the major, mainstream cultural centres" (Le Space, [date unknown]). The diversity of people to whom its activities are targeted is evinced from the words used on its website:

> "Woman, man, transgender and gender non-conforming people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, people of color, LGBTQIA people, old or young,

> privileged or in need… Le Space doesn't put these individuals in a normative box but hails them attentively together" (Le Space, [date unknown]).

Various queer people of colour, including some participants in this research, described the association as providing a space where they felt safe and understood when expressing their various identifications. An intersectional approach is at the heart of the association's aims:

> "Our aim is to link different, emancipatory struggles to one another. And highlight from an artistic approach the intersections between discrimination because of gender, gender identity, sexual identity, ethnic identity, body type, age, social status, disability or beliefs" (Le Space, [date unknown]).

Le Space is not the only association where intersectionality occupies a central place. Merhaba, collaborative partner for this research, states as one of their aims "to stimulate intersectional reflection", and one of their actions that of transmitting "knowledge about the relation that exists between culture, sexuality and identity" (Merhaba, [date unknown]-a).

In addition to those organisations for whom intersectionality is foundational, various events taking place in the city focus on intersectional approaches to identities and oppression. At the conference *Luttes Afro-Descendantes: Féminisme, LGBTQI+ et Antiracisme* (Afrodescendant fights: feminism, LGBTQI+, and antiracism), which took place on 2nd December 2017 and was organised by the RainbowHouse, the concept of intersectionality made its appearance multiple times. The program described the event as a "day of reflection on the concepts of afro-feminism, homophobia, intersectionality, white privileges, post-colonial racism and the convergence of fights" (RainbowHouse Brussels, [date unknown]-a). Particularly relevant in this sense was the talk by Mwanamke: Collectif Afroféministe Belge. Their intervention reflected and expanded on critiques to employments of intersectional frameworks that have been central in academic theorising on the receptions and circulations of the concept. The words of the collective resonated with those admonishments against the loss in political radicalism of the uses of intersectionality (Erel *et al.*, 2011). In particular, the stress was on how intersectionality is often appropriated by white feminist groups, movements, and scholars in European contexts, resulting in its "whitening", or the erasure of the experiences of women of colour from its analyses of social relations (Petzen, 2012; Bilge, 2013). This talk, and the event more generally, showed how academic theorisations about intersectionality and the incorporation of the concept in social praxis are in constant dialogue in their path towards an analysis of social injustices in the city. The presence, at the event, of representatives of activist movements and academic speakers is a further confirmation of the synergistic workings of both worlds in the articulation and application of intersectional projects.

In Autumn 2017, the festival "*The future is Feminist*" took place at the Beurschowbourg, an arts centre located in central Brussels. The word "intersectionality" appeared on the billboard of the event (s. image 1), listed among other words suggesting the expanded and inclusive vision of feminism that was to be celebrated in the three-months long festival. As part of the event, a reading group on intersectionality was organised, which once again proved

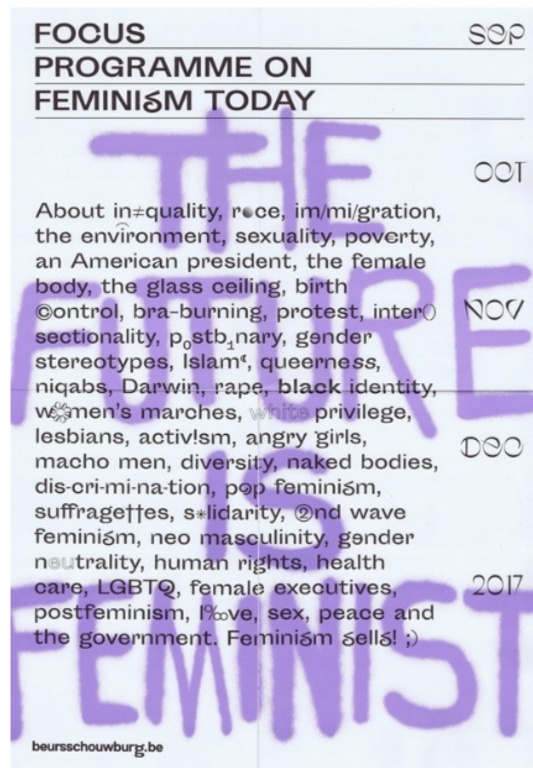

Figure 2: Billboard of the Festival "The Future is Feminist", October 2017

interesting in its showing the crossings and overlappings between activism, academia, and, in this case, art production. The group was facilitated by dramaturg Tunde Adefioye, and its aim was precisely that of sharing a moment of reflection on the meanings of intersectionality for current feminist praxis. The texts discussed testified to the relevance of intersectionality in multiple contexts: from classic academic texts such as Crenshaw's "Mapping the Margins" (1991) and Hill Collins' *Black feminist Thought* (1990), to Solange Knowle's song *Don't touch my hair,* the conversation was guided by a variety of sources that dealt with the topic of intersectional identities and oppression. Around fifty people participated, sitting on the floor of one of the Beurschowbourg rooms for more than three hours sharing their ideas, feelings, and thoughts about, and around, the texts. The event also showed the contradictions that often emerge on such occasions. While the variety of texts invited participants to discuss about different intersectional social locations and identities (e.g. Muslim women, trans and disabled people), such intersections were not visibly or audibly present among participants. I read the group of participants as being mostly white, and at no point in the discussion someone

brought up their experience as an Arab/Muslim person, or as a person with a disability (while personal accounts of white women were central to most phases of the discussion). Once again, this suggested a discrepancy between usage of the word "intersectionality" in the European context, and its original formulations as a concept that had race, and racialised identities, at its foundation (Bilge, 2013). In addition to this, the official language for the entire event was English, the knowledge of which is not shared by everyone in Brussels, especially, but not exclusively, among migrants who did not have access to English language education in their countries of origin.

Among participants to this study, those who mentioned intersectionality explicitly during interviews and/or informal conversations were the ones who were more familiar with contexts of political activism, academic knowledge production, and/or artistic practice in the city. Barwaqo, whose quote opened the chapter, was particularly keen in having conversations around the topic of intersectionality, and its different applications in various spaces of the city. During our interview, she returned on the point:

> "I am a black lesbian. So, my… my result was that… my result was that… my conclusion from this was that white lesbians, even though they are more into intersectionality, feminism, no racism, no homophobia, no blah blah blah, they need to apply this in the dating scene".

As in other conversations that we had along the year, Barwaqo was expressing her disappointment and frustration at the feelings of rejection that she feels from white lesbian women, which she reads as being caused by her race. In Barwaqo's experience, her racialisation intersects with other axes of power – such as oppression because of her age, her religion, her class, her citizenship status – to determine her experience of social relations. Her distancing from the concept of intersectionality, by saying that it is "white lesbians" who are "more into" it, does not stem from a belief in the non-validity of the concept itself. As she stated multiple times, without necessarily attaching the word "intersectionality" to such statements, her life in Brussels is deeply shaped by the interlocking of different lines of power, which results in the specific oppression she is faced with. At one point, she described her identity as an "explosive cocktail" to express the complications that are inherent in her position as a black lesbian Muslim woman:

> "It's an explosive cocktail. You are an explosive cocktail. And… and people are, like… […] The fact that I am gay, black and Muslim, I'm like… people are like: 'No. No, you gotta… Not a good idea'".

While an intersectional approach is certainly useful in understanding the specific "explosiveness" of Barwaqo's "cocktail", she nonetheless felt the need to distance herself from a specific way of thinking of and applying intersectionality, which she sees as prevalent in the contexts she navigates. Specifically, she expressed her frustration at the numbers of "white lesbians" who are "into feminism, intersectional, antiracist", and who, in their daily lives, perpetuate racist tropes which result in Barwaqo's feelings of exclusion and isolation. Her frustration resonates with those critiques of the "depoliticisation" and "whitening" of intersectionality, which becomes nothing more than an "ornamental" badge to signal the political and moral intentions of white individuals and groups (Bilge, 2013), without necessarily entailing any form of tangible commitment to socially just projects. Barwaqo's words illuminate the gap between abstract uses of the word "intersectionality", and the complex ways in which the interlocking of lines of identification and oppression are experienced by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background.

7.3 Multiplicity, specificity, interconnectedness

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the narratives that participants gave of the social locations they inhabit at the intersection of multiple lines of identification, and their respective axes of domination. Following Rahman (2010), the hope is that such "illumination" will result in the emergence of those intersectional locations in their specificity and complexity. Moreover, by rooting this intersectional analysis in the interrelations between sexualities and processes of racialisation, the intention is that of taking race and ethnicity seriously, and challenging the white, and whitening, appropriations and employments of the concept of intersectionality in continental European contexts.

Despite their distancing from ornamental applications of intersectionality, as exemplified by Barwaqo's words, most participants mobilised ideas of multiplicity, specificity and interconnectedness when talking about their processes of identification, and the oppression they live. Some used metaphors that conveyed the idea that their identities are complex, irreducible to one side or another, and that it is the interplay between these different sides that shapes and informs their daily lives.

> "Identity […] is like a millefeuille, it's several layers, and… […] This layer pops up in certain circumstances, and all the time there are other parts… […] I mean, identity is a kind of concept used by sociologists that in a certain way… it's also human that people try to understand and try to get the picture of people, and it's quite easy to categorise people. […] But I think, I'm quite convinced, that identity is just the sum of

> your experiences, and I don't like to be perceived only on one perspective, as Arab, or as LGBT, or as Belgian… I'm just the combination of all of those" (Karim).

Karim's words signal a rejection of unidimensional views of identity, as he feels that the multiple sides of his experiences are all fundamental in producing the specific combination that constitutes his social self. A certain degree of fluidity between the layers of his identity emerges as well, in his implicit statement that he feels both Arab and Belgian, actively disrupting normative discourses on nationhood and whiteness that posit Europeanness, and therefore Belgianness, as implicitly white (Stehle, 2006; El-Tayeb, 2011; Beaman, 2019). From the excerpt above, a certain distancing from "identity" as a word that is employed by "sociologists", in contrast to the complexity of his lived experiences, signals scepticism towards the abstraction that he feels when listening to debates around the topic, which somehow mirrors Barwaqo's framing of intersectionality as a concept employed by "white lesbians".

Such multiplicity of layers to one's identity, and their interconnectedness in informing daily experiences, are mentioned by other participants as well. Ryzlan, for example, states:

> "I am a concentrate of minorities. That is to say that I am a woman of colour, obviously, because my parents are originally from North Africa. Of Muslim background, even if I don't define myself as a Muslim woman. Ah… Homosexual?".

Her experience too is informed by multiple sides to her identity that interact in shaping the ways in which she sees herself, as well as how she is seen by others. While Karim felt the need to reject unidimensional gazes on his identity, for Ryzlan a multi-layered view on her identity is something that she already experiences in her daily interactions. When asked about the specific oppression she experiences as a lesbian woman, she replied:

> "My identity, it is plural. And I don't think that one could… that anyone, whoever they might be, could see me only through this prism. Or rather, only through this… this side. So, yeah. I don't think that we could be only this, for others. […] For example, let's take a micro-society, like the enterprise. So, society at a smaller scale, we could see it in an enterprise. Ahm… In an enterprise, I am not only a lesbian. I am… I am the person who is in charge of human resources, I am a woman… a woman of colour, I am… I am a leftist woman activist, I am… See? There is this aspect, but it is not called upon all the time".

For Ryzlan, not only a unidimensional lens fails to reflect the complexities she feels in her ways of identifying but, to a certain degree, it is impossible to see her only as a "lesbian", as her sexual orientation is inextricably linked to other social roles that she plays in society, as well as other facets of her identity that inevitably emerge in her interactions with others. Her sexual orientation cannot be seen as detached from her ethnicity, her political activism, or her

profession. She, too, is a combination, a “millefeuille”, or a “cocktail”, and this is reflected in the ways people interact with her.

The multiple factors that participants mentioned often result in the acknowledgement of a very specific intersectional “social location”. This is the site that Rahman (2010) sees as necessarily central in any analysis of LGBTQ Muslim lives, as well as that from which a potential queering of ethnic/racial/civilisational binaries can originate. Karim’s words are illuminating in this respect. Expanding the culinary metaphor introduced earlier in the interview, he states:

> “When we make a focus on one part or one piece of the identity, we probably lose lots of interesting things, other perspectives. We are missing perspectives. To get the real big picture of phenomena, of things, of people, we have to take all into account. And… Especially LGBT people with Muslim or Arab background, yeah, they have to make their own efforts. And it’s not by copying what happens in the western world, but the job has to be done. And it’s not to other people to do it in their place. We cannot just proceed by copy-paste. […] We have to find our own… the recipe to make our own cake, not proceeding by copy-paste”.

Karim described the intersectional location of LGBTQ people from a Muslim/Arab background as a site that is marked by the difficulty of finding their own “recipe”. The “job to be done” is that of creating ways of existing and identifying that, falling outside of the binary that posits LGBTQ identities as inherently western and white, and Muslim/Arab communities as inherently homo/bi/transphobic, are yet to be scripted. From such a description it is also possible to glimpse at the disruptive and world-making potential that such position entails. While the space inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background is often one where exclusion, oppression and discrimination have an important role, it also works, in its being outside of the normative binaries that shape criteria for intelligibility, as always already disruptive.

7.4 Intersectional oppression: the interlocking of homo/bi/transphobia and racism/Islamophobia

The interlocking of different lines of power on the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background results in the specific forms of oppression that they experience. The most intuitive of such interactions is that between Islamophobia/racism and homo/bi/transphobia. It needs to be clear, as it has already emerged from the excerpts cited in the previous section, that sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and ethnicity/race/religious belief are not the only lines of identification that shape the lives of participants. Their personal trajectories are crossed by other lines, more or less interconnected with the categories that are the main focus

of this study, but that nonetheless have a great role in shaping their lives. These are, among others, lines of class, social status, citizenship status, body size, illness, gender, blackness, language, and age. While this work is mainly focused on categories of sexual and racialised religious/ethnic identity, their interconnections with these other lines cannot be discounted as irrelevant nor as marginal. Participants talked about these elements as important in shaping their experiences as LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, and I chose to include them in the analysis of data.

7.4.1 Between homo/bi/transphobia and racism/Islamophobia

In her formulation of intersectionality, Crenshaw (1991) distinguished between a "structural" and a "political" intersectionality. The first refers to the specific social location that is produced by the interplay of different axes of domination, and where multiply minoritised individuals and groups are relegated. Examples of this in her work are the limited access to shelters for victims of domestic violence that women of colour often face due to economic restraints or language barriers, or the likelihood of a woman of colour not being believed in a court of law when reporting sexual violence due to sexualising racial discourses. Political intersectionality refers to the silencing effects on the voices of women of colour in both the feminist and the anti-racist movement, which signals the presence and relevance of racism among white women and of sexism and patriarchy in racialised communities. The result is the production of a liminal space of erasure and exclusion, where the lives of multiply minoritised subjects are constantly between one or the other axis of power. This structural exclusion can be noticed in the case of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background as well, who, in the words of Akachar (2015: 173), can be viewed as "stuck between Islamophobia and Homophobia".

The episodes reported by participants involving racism and Islamophobia in LGBTQ spaces, and homo/bi/transphobia in spaces inhabited by Arab/Muslim communities, are numerous. A common experience is that of being targets of homo/bi/transphobic attacks by members of racialised communities in the city. Some participants, reflecting on such experiences, stated that it is their being part of such communities that represents a risk factor, together with their sexual and gender expression. According to them, a white person with a similarly readable gender or sexual performance would not run the same risk in certain parts of the city.

> "In the case of white people, they tolerate it more. I think that they tolerate it more because white people are… are… Let's say that it's ok for a white person to be gay, inside… Like, if you ask an immigrant person to draw you someone that is gay, it's always going to be white. Never a person of colour" (Barwaqo).

In this extract, we can clearly see mentioned the erasure of LGBTQ racialised individuals from imaginaries of sexual difference held by racialised communities in the city. The binary "Muslim or gay" (Puar, 2007: 19), produced and maintained by western discourses on the Oriental other, emerges here in its reinforcement from the other side of the imagined clash, resulting in the construction of a position of all-rounded erasure for the LGBTQ racialised person. Sharky's reflections go further in trying to explain why it is riskier for an LGBTQ person from a Muslim background to move through the city, compared with the experiences of white LGBTQ people. During his interview, he stated that Muslim people in the city are more likely to accept a white trans person than a racialised one:

> "They don't have a problem with that. 'But in our culture, and in our religion, it's restricted, it's haram, and we don't do that'. So, if you are considered as one of them, you… they think always that they have the right".

Sharky stressed how the heightened risk is linked to the attackers seeing him "as one of them", which, in their eyes, makes his sexuality and gender identity passable of sanction and punishment. Later in the interview Sharky introduced another element that complements this "us/them" dynamic of recognition/distancing in explaining the specific position of risk experienced by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. In a reflection on inter-community relations in the city, he framed them as being shaped by a need, from the part of racialised Muslim communities, to defend their own identities from a context that they perceive as threatening in its structural racism.

> "I see that as a way of not accepting the difference of others, and getting attached to our… excuse me, to their origins. Like, I always ask why people here, in Europe, Arab Muslims, they are more Muslim than the Arab Muslims in their countries. And it's a way for them to get… I don't know how to… to find their originality, and to say: 'We defend our identity'. I don't know, it's not a good way to defend identity, but it's… I think it's their way to defend their identities".

In the context of a tension over an identity to be defended, it becomes particularly important for minoritised groups to police sexual and gender performances that they see as pertaining to a western and white cultural/religious/civilisational field. It is interesting to note how Sharky distanced himself from such communities in the space of this extract. While he began talking about attachment to "our [origins]", he immediately corrected himself, specifying that it was "theirs". While this could certainly have been just a linguistic slip, I found it interesting in that it signalled a necessary distancing from a "community of common origins" in the moment in which mainstream discourses, both in the community itself and in society at large, are constantly reiterating an either/or frame in the context of racialised and LGBTQ identities.

Mainstream discourses produced in the West portray such dynamics as indicative of the homo/bi/transphobic character of Muslim communities, countered by an assumed acceptance of sexual and cultural diversity by the wider society. The experiences of participants show how this image does not reflect the struggles that LGBTQ people from a Muslim background face in their daily lives, as they report a widespread presence of racism and Islamophobia in various contexts of the city. Most participants talked about them as elements that are present in many of the conversations they have on a daily basis. Most of the racism and Islamophobia experienced by participants took the form of ambiguous comments and awkward questions that casually emerge during conversations, rather than direct and frontal attacks. The result is something similar to what Bonilla-Silva (2006) calls "racism without racists", a discursive field where most people claim not seeing race and ethnicity as relevant categories of differentiation, and especially not holding negative stereotypes about people of colour, while indirectly reiterating racist tropes. Ryzlan distinguished between a "positive" and "negative" racism. The first one would refer to such indirect comments which signal the racist view of the person in front of her, without being necessarily perceived as racist by the people who are part of the conversation. In contrast, "negative" racism refers to the only series of actions and/or words which are discursively framed as "racist", i.e. hate crimes and hate speech.

> "So, positive racism, as I call this, is obviously racism. So, it is basically negative, we agree on that. But why do I call it positive? It's because it would want to… it would want to appear as positive. In the mouth of the one who does it. Well, who… who commits it, actually. Ahm… Contrary, in brackets, to a negative racism which there, it is clear, direct. You see? A direct discrimination. Yeah. Ah… This [positive racism] is something that is extremely common. It's something that I've lived since I was very young, actually".

Most participants shared this view. When asked whether they had ever been met with racism and/or Islamophobia, most of them would be unsure about it. "Is it really racism? I'm not sure" was a sentence that returned time and time again in interviews. When given a chance to expand on their uncertainty, they would all share examples of conversations that they found offensive, hurtful, or uncomfortable to navigate. The episodes they experienced, and the discomfort that they felt because of these episodes, suggests the presence of an underlying racist tone to many of the interactions they have with white people in different contexts. Nonetheless, their being less "open" and "direct" makes it harder to mark them as racist acts, and participants often reported a sense of confusion when assessing and evaluating the racist nature of such comments and questions. The distinction articulated by Ryzlan between a "negative" and a "positive" racism seems to indicate the relevance of racist micro-aggressions in her life, which are defined as aggressions that "deliver hidden demeaning messages that

often lie outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator" (Sue, 2010: 4). These are in no way to be considered neutral in the effect they have on the person who is their target, as numerous scholars have shown their detrimental consequences on mental health and general well-being (Yosso *et al.*, 2009; Sue, 2010; Balsam *et al.*, 2011).

Participants also highlight the presence of racist and Islamophobic attitudes and behaviours in the spaces of LGBTQ communities, further complicating the simplistic and essentialised depiction of Muslim communities as the only responsible for the exclusion and oppression of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. Karim and Anwar, for example, talked about the discrimination that they faced when trying to access an LGBTQ venue on a night out. In both cases, they felt that their ethnicity was the category that determined the choice of impeding their access from the part of the bouncer.

> "[…] We decide to go to continue our evening at Chez Maman [nightclub and drag show venue in the Gay Street]. And then, yeah, I was… probably I was… wearing a kind of jacket with… let's say, an ethnic look. Like a North African wool jacket. […] And the guy at the door said: 'No, sorry, you're not allowed to go'. And I… ah? What? And he said: 'Yeah, your clothes are not suitable for the place and blah blah blah'" (Karim).

Karim's reaction to the episode was vocal, as he insisted to see Maman, the owner of the venue, to demand for an apology. This was an episode that he reported as being extremely energy and time draining, and he refused to go the Chez Maman ever since. Anwar's episode was even more impactful in his memory, as it happened on what was meant to be his first night out in an LGBTQ setting:

> "The first time I've ever tried to go to a gay club with my best friend. I think I was 16 or 17. […] And I was really nervous, like… I don't know, the first time you go to a gay bar it's like, Christmas, you know… You're like… But… You know. And I got turned down at the entrance. The guy didn't let me in. With no specific reason as to why he didn't let me in, but I was refused at the entrance. Ahm… And that's something I've been lucky not to like… ahm… face very often. But if you're Moroccan, and that's a fair thing to say, if you're from a Moroccan background, like an Arab or a black guy, and you wanna go to a club, it's very difficult to get in".

The extract above shows how Anwar immediately linked the bouncer's action to his Moroccan background. As I was curious about the elements that made such link so immediate in his memory of the episode, I asked him to explain what might have been marking him as Moroccan on that occasion.

> "I had a leather jacket on. I remember thinking: 'I should have never worn a leather jacket'. Cos that makes me look like, you know, one of those guys. Which I am anyway, but I was like… Fuck!

> *Me: What do you mean by 'one of those guys'?*
>
> Yeah, they always have this image of like 'Oh, these guys that… on the street, you know, they…' We call them in Arabic *drari*, like guys, like with their little leather jackets, and their trainers, or whatever".

The image that Anwar evoked in this description is that of the racialised, sexualised and classed figure of the Arab man in deprived/racialised areas of the city, as analysed by Mack (2017) in the context of the French *banlieues*. Both Karim and Anwar felt excluded as a consequence of the racialising gaze of the bouncers, which relegated them to the position of one of those "Arab guys on the street", imagined as dangerous in their performances of masculinity. The attachment of such an image to their bodies made them "queer unwanted" (Casey, 2007), undesirable presences in the LGBTQ venues they were trying to access, assumed to be threatening as their performances did not conform to the (white and middle-class) scripts expected from LGBTQ bodies.

In addition to such exclusions from material spaces, participants reported a presence of racism and Islamophobia in the LGBTQ dating scene. Many of them shared episodes where they felt rejected because of their ethnic/national/religious background, or were left wondering whether such categories had any role in the way they were treated, and to what extent. In some cases, the role played by racial imaginations was clear, as in the case of racist comments some participants were faced with on online dating platforms such as Grindr. Youness told me that it happened occasionally to be called "dirty Arab" on online platforms, and in Sherif's experience such racism emerges particularly after the white person on the other side of the chat is being rejected, with messages on the lines of "you stupid Arab bitch" being sent to him on such occasions. At other times, assessing the role played by racism and Islamophobia in online rejections is more difficult:

> "There is a big silence, when they ask you your name, and then they don't reply any more. […] This has happened on Grindr, sometimes this has happened in real life. They remind you of your origins" (Rachid).

Some of the rejections that Rachid experienced on the dating scene in Brussels are directly linked to the other person learning his first name, which, in his case, works as a marker of ethnicity/national background. Without anything being directly said to him, the abrupt ending of conversations works as a "reminder of his origins", a sort of sign that racism is alive, even when not completely visible, readable, or hearable. These feelings about a constant underlying presence of racism and Islamophobia are shared by Ismael, who applies one of his father's admonitions to his analysis of the LGBTQ scene in Brussels:

> "It's my father who told me this. 'Do what you want, you'll still be Moroccan'. And… In the gay community, in any… anywhere, really, it's like this, actually. I have the impression that… that I'm on the side".

Experiences of rejection on the basis of one's ethnicity are not limited to participants who identify as gay/bisexual men. In Barwaqo's interview, the topic of racism in the LGBTQ community, and especially in the lesbian dating scene, was recurrent.

> "It's more like a place that I didn't expect, you know, to be racist. It's more the gay community, you know, where I am met with racism. And it's especially in the dating scene. […] That kind of hurts my feelings. We can say that. And also my self-confidence".

Barwaqo's feelings of rejection by other lesbian and bisexual women have a very strong impact on her well-being, and she stressed at multiple times her disappointment at discovering that a community she assumed would be inclusive and supportive of diversity proved to be racist. In her experience, it is also clear how multiple markers of "otherness" interplay in producing the specific exclusion she feels in the LGBTQ community. Race, class and citizenship status are all categories that Barwaqo felt as relevant in producing the oppression she lives:

> "In my romantic life it's very difficult because I'm black. I really feel it's because I'm black. Because before, when I used to say that I live in the centre [for asylum seekers], I… and people… girls, were not willing to date me, I would say that it's because I was a refugee. I was an immigrant, so I didn't have, you know, a stable finance…".

This extract presents Barwaqo's experience in all the complexity of multiple categories interacting and interlocking to create the specific social location that she inhabits. Sexuality, gender, race/ethnicity, immigrant/citizen status, and class are inextricable in any interpretation of the exclusions and rejections lived by Barwaqo in her daily navigations of Brussels. Not only are they all relevant in shaping her experiences, but it is often complicated, if not impossible, to assess which element has the biggest influence on her feelings of rejection in the community, leaving her often wondering about the relative weight of each of them at different stages of her life.

Observing and analysing the presence of homo/bi/transphobia in Arab/Muslim communities on the one hand, and of racism and Islamophobia on the other is only one part of the intersectional approach that I am applying. These lines of power, in addition to interlocking in the specific community contexts navigated by participants, produce a specific oppression that accompanies participants in their general movements and activities in the city. Some experiences reported by participants are particularly telling in this sense, as they clearly show

how such matrices interact in contexts that are not specifically marked as LGBTQ or as Arab/Muslim. Youness, for example, shared his experiences of oppression on the workplace:

> "I've had problems of discrimination, not gay discrimination, but discrimination… eh… because I am Moroccan. At work, for example. But, but… this might be interesting for you, I've had some discrimination at work, because they have… they know… because P [his partner], he was my boss. It's him who… It's him who hired me for the job. And they knew that I was his partner, and there was a bit of gay discrimination, because there is some Arabs that worked with me, but for them, it's difficult that… You see? They are still a bit 'Ah, gay Moroccan, that's no good', you see. This, I heard. And once, I was walking past the smoking area, you see, where… And I heard, they were saying 'Yeah, he's a big faggot', you see. And this, this hurt me. This is why, actually… I left the job, I was in burn-out. […] There, I felt discrimination. Gay and Arab discrimination. Yes. Because they don't accept that there's a director, an office manager, who is gay and Arab, you see. With the Arabs, because a gay Arab, and with the Belgians, well, the non-… because I was an Arab. Here, I felt discrimination".

This episode is exemplary of the ways in which racism and homo/bi/transphobia interlock in producing discrimination, and its tragic consequences on the person who experiences it. As was the case with other participants, Youness' sexuality gained relevance in this context as his Arab colleagues would find it "difficult" to accept his homosexuality as they read him as part of their community. Conversely, their white counterpart would not accept a person from a Moroccan background being in a position of power in the office. The specific interplay of such lines of domination produced a condition of burn-out that pushed Youness to find psychological care, and leave his job.

7.4.2 "An exception to the exception to the exception": the intersection as a lonely place

Talking about the specificity of the social location they occupied as LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in the city, participants often mentioned a sense of not being fully understood by people around them who did not share certain aspects of their identities. This sense of loneliness is powerfully illustrated by Assad's words:

> "[…] the interplay of being a person adhering to a group of faith and… while at the same time having this sexual identity that differs from the vast majority of the same group of faith to whom I belong. That's a really rare… I would even say rare happening. […] I would belong, statistically, to the minority of this country. In my country, here in Belgium, which means belonging to Belgians with a foreign background. Within this subsample, I would belong to the ones who have Moroccan origins. And within this subsample, I would belong to the group that belongs to a different sexual identity. So, for me, that's somehow really really really difficult, because at some point you feel that you're actually invisible, that people cannot relate to the struggles you are going through, because it's such a… you know, an exception to the exception to the exception, that you're almost inexistent".

For Assad, being a Muslim gay man has revealed itself to be a very solitary experience. Living in a context where a non-Belgian national background, homosexuality, and Islam are constructed as outside of the boundaries of what is common makes his life "the exception to the exception to the exception". Inhabiting such "exceptional" social location can be hard, as it leads him to experience a sense of incommunicability of his struggles to both members of his Muslim community and white peers.

The difficulty to communicate to people who do not share the specificity of one's intersectional social location is a recurrent topic across interviews. Jalal, when talking about the time he lived in France, highlighted the difficulty of finding a space where he could express both his gender and ethnic/racial identity:

> "So I was the only one with Algerian origins. There were not so much. And I was the only trans person. Everybody was nice to me, in that artistic milieu. But I was the only one, so I had nobody to share my personal experience about that. And all the time, I had to control, and to deal with… If there are interviews or something, all the time I had to manage that part. You know? I have to educate people to… how to talk to me respectfully. And… So, you don't have the space to just be yourself and to breathe. […] Because you are the only one. So, this… this is the thing that happens. You don't have the space to exist in other ways".

Jalal further elaborated on this position of incommunicability, and he framed the intersectional location of a trans person from an Algerian background as one in which he was forced into stereotyped roles, as he felt a constant pressure to manage the communication with others, and educate them on trans and racialised identities. In Jalal's narrative, the "space to breathe", "to exist in other ways" was found after he moved to Brussels, when he was able to access queer of colour groups and spaces where he felt he could finally express his uniqueness.

Sarah's experience of communication with heterosexual and/or white people echoes the description of constriction and pressure offered by Jalal. In her experience, being a lesbian woman from a Muslim background entails being relegated to certain roles of mediation between two entities that are constructed as mutually exclusive and in opposition. These roles are marked by a complexity of interactions that include attempting at educating others on the right ways to talk about certain issues and constantly feeling in danger of "being a traitor" to one of the communities she feels a sense of belonging to.

> "And I often felt in the position of being either a traitor to my community, or some kind of weird ambassador, or a censor to racist jokes, indirect jokes. Indirect, direct… Yeah, I thought about it a lot. And I think it's some of my obsessions, that I grew up with, and I think I'll always be between two seats. […] In my life, I've often played

> double agent. Like, people ask me things, like 'Oh, is it ok to say that?', or… ahm… ask me to educate them, or feel comfortable telling me not nice things, because they thought I was not… I could not relate to that. So they put me… ahm… I don't know. Like, they put me in the box of Arab, without allowing me to feel like an Arab".

In Sarah's experience, this role of "weird ambassador" emerges in all its discomfort when she discusses the topic of homo/bi/transphobic violence in Arab/Muslim communities with white peers. On these occasions, she feels that she occupies a somewhat privileged position that allows her to educate others on the complexities of social relations in such communities. Despite this, she always feels that these conversations take place on a slippery terrain, where any mention of homo/bi/transphobic violence from her part could be instrumentalised as a confirmation and a reinforcement of Islamophobic tropes. This point is shared by other participants, like Ghalia, who feels that an open communication on these topics is impossible with peers who are not LGBTQ people of colour, as the wider discourses that shape inter-community relations in the city are too rooted in racism and Islamophobia to be effectively problematised over individual conversations. It is important to note that, in Sarah's narrative, her Muslim background and her sexual orientation are not the only factors involved in producing the specific location of "weird ambassador". She talked extensively about the impact of her being a mixed-race person, and how growing up in a Muslim/Moroccan and Jewish/French family shaped her sense of being "between two seats", which is exemplary of the ways in which other lines of identification are involved in the production of the intersectional locations that participants inhabit.

7.4.3 "You make me sound like I survived Auschwitz": assumptions of trauma and pain

Another element often mentioned by participants, closely linked to the sense of loneliness and incommunicability presented above, is represented by the assumptions that the wider society has about their suffering as LGBTQ people in Arab/Muslim communities. Civilisational discourses that posit the Muslim Other as inherently homo/bi/transphobic, in addition to making LGBTQ people invisible in their Muslim communities (Rahman, 2010), constantly highlight the stories of those LGBTQ subjects who escaped from such communities, stressing the pain and trauma in their histories. The result is the production of a narrative that sees LGBTQ people from a Muslim background as always suffering – and invisible when they do, as their condition is marked by that discursive "closet" that was the focus of Chapter 5 – until they step out of their community. Only then are they effectively saved through their entrance in the white LGBTQ community (Bracke, 2012).

During a conversation that I had with Anwar before our interview, he said that his main motivation for participating to this study was to contribute to countering stereotypes about Arab gay men. Later, when he was talking about his specific position, he asked himself: “Am I really living an identity crisis? Are we? Are we really not this, not that?” He added that maybe it was not “us” (as LGBTQ people from a Muslim background) having a crisis with our identity, but society constantly expecting one from us. We returned on the topic during our interview:

> “They [white people] always assume that, you know, you were battered as a child. Like, you had just… You know? [He laughs]. Like, I remember this girl who told me once, she was like: ‘Ahhhh, oh my God, you must be a warrior’. And I was like: ‘Why?’ ‘You’re gay and you’re Moroccan? Wow!’ I was like… You know, it wasn’t… I don’t think it was harder than for anyone else, you know. In like… I mean, it’s hard for everyone, but… You make me sound like I survived Auschwitz, like if, you know… Calm… Calm down, you know? But yeah, there is always this assumption that…”

Anwar’s rejection of the stereotypes about LGBTQ lives in Arab/Muslim communities is shared by other participants. Salim told me:

> “When I say that I am homosexual, there’s… there are certain people who say “Ah, well, it must not be easy, when you’re from… well, a Muslim family, etcetera”. And… Like… A stereotype that is already all made. So, they have already created your story for you. They have already stoned you to death. I don’t know. They have… They have hanged you, they have put you… I don’t know, but well. This is anyway quite peculiar, because those who don’t ask you the question personally, ‘How is it going with your family?’, they directly prejudge that… it’s inevitably violent, actually. But it’s not necessarily violent in the sense that they imagine. Physical. It’s violence… It’s violent in silence, maybe. It’s differently violent. Or maybe it’s not violent at all”.

Salim’s words present a complex and multi-layered view of the problems that emerge when talking about his sexuality with people who are not from Muslim families. As Anwar, he recognised the presence and influence of stereotypes about the suffering of LGBTQ people in Muslim communities. The vocabulary employed by both participants conveys the high levels of pain and violence that LGBTQ lives are assumed to be subjected to in Muslim communities: Anwar is made to feel like he “survived Auschwitz”, while for Salim the story that has already been created for him is one that has “stoned” and “hanged” him. Interestingly, the types of violence mentioned by Salim are the ones that, in the collective imaginary, are linked with the actions of international Islamic fundamentalist groups. His words thus implicitly suggest a link between the stereotypes that are attached to his life as a gay man from a Muslim family, and wider imaginations of Islam as the violent counterpart to western liberalism. Salim went further by judging these stories incapable of grasping the complexities

of LGBTQ lives in Muslim contexts. He did not negate the possibility of homo/bi/transphobic violence in Muslim families and communities. At other points of our conversation, he talked at length of the factors that he considers limiting of the well-being and sense of freedom of LGBTQ people in such contexts. Nonetheless, in his opinion, the discourses that produce those stories of pain, suffering, and trauma, are unable to understand and represent the types of violence that are perpetrated on LGBTQ people. By applying a western, white lens on the experiences of LGBTQ people, and being constantly anxious of confirming and maintaining discourses of civilisational clash, such discourses fail to see how these communities can be "differently violent", as well as the possibility that they might not be violent at all.

Differences across the experiences of participants allow for another set of stereotypes to emerge as an impactful element on the lives of some LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. While Anwar and Salim talk about the processes of victimisation that mainstream discourses project on them, other participants report being stereotyped and categorised as the sexist, homo/bi/transphobic Arab/Muslim man that is assumed to be the perpetrator of "violence" in Muslim communities. Jalal, talking about the different perceptions people had of him at different points of his transition, says:

> "[…] When you are an Arab woman, you're exotic and attractive, even more when you are punky and, you know, you make art, and it's very attractive for other people. But, now you change of… clan. You live on the other side, that people expect from you that you are oppressive and you are not feminist and you are not queer. So, you have to justify all the time. 'Oh, you know, no no no. But, hey, don't take it like that. I'm feminist. I'm trans! I'm trans'. But this made a difference, because I had to justify myself as a nice person, a safe person, because I was trans. And this made me uncomfortable, because the first reaction when I participate to chats, […] women jump on me, like 'Ah, bah bah bah'. And after we met, and they knew I was trans, 'Oh, finally, he's very cute, very nice'. Yeah, but why did you react as violently as that? 'Because I identify you as a cis-heterosexual man'. Becase I was Maghrebi".

Jalal's experience of interaction and communication with people who do not share his racialised cultural/religious background is also marked by a story about him that is already in place before these conversations take place. As soon being read as a man by people around him became common for Jalal, he also started being read as an Arab man, with all the assumptions of toxicity and violence that are attached to this figure (Guénif-Souilamas and Macé, 2004). Jalal's description of his intersectional social location, as a trans Maghrebi man, is one marked by a constant pressure to explain to others the specificities of his identifications, and to disentangle his story from the one that undergirds the ways in which people perceive him. In his case, correcting this story also means being pressured to come out

as trans, as this seems to be the only way to appease the anger he faces when he is read as a cis Arab man.

7.4.4 "I represent the fantasy of the Arab": being sexoticised at the intersection

An element that appears in all the interviews with gay and bisexual men is the presence of specific sexual stereotypes about Arab men in Brussels, and the impact they have on their sexual/romantic encounters and relations. The presence of a general appreciation for the imagined body of the Arab man can be perceived in Brussels by simply scrolling through the Grindr grid. During my fieldwork, I recorded at multiple times the profiles of people that I could read as having an Arab background in the radium that was shown to me on the app. Each time, I could find at least a couple who would have the ethnicity spelled out in the name of the profile – Example: "Arab 420", "Top *Rebeu*", "*Beur*" – or whose nickname showed flags of Arab countries, often in combination with the listing of their ethnicity as "Middle Eastern" on their profile description. As choices on what information to share on social apps such as Grindr are often motivated by a wish to market one's body as desirable (Bonner-Thompson, 2017), the inclusion of elements linked to ethnicity/nationality in such profiles could indicate the presence of positive sexual stereotypes attached to Arab bodies, further confirmed by the presence of many profiles indicating a preference for encounters with Arab men. As Amine stated, when asked about the reasons behind his insertion of a Moroccan flag next to his nickname on Grindr:

> "The Moroccan flag because I have realised that being Arab attracts many gays. So, I can tell you that once I have put the Moroccan flag, there were many people that came to talk to me, just because of the Moroccan flag".

A link between processes of racialisation, exoticisation and sexualisation of Othered populations has been highlighted by a number of scholars (Mehdid, 1993; Boone, 2014; Wekker, 2016; Fay, 2018). Schaper *et al.* (2020) employ the term "sexotic" to highlight how both the sexual and the exotic shape and mark processes of Othering in western imaginations of the world:

> "We thus foreground processes of exoticization that build on alleged differences in the sexual drive, attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behavior, which construct them as the origin and determinant of the exotic quality. At the same time, we place special emphasis on processes of sexualisation that construct the 'exotic' as sexually attractive, desirable and stimulating". (Schaper *et al.*, 2020: 2).

It comes as no surprise that the authors also call for an intersectional approach towards analyses of the workings of processes of sexoticisation, holding that:

> “this multifaceted field of sexotic encounters and practices can best be charted by focusing on the interplay between different socially constructed categories like race, class, gender and sexual orientation and the discriminatory effects their interactions engender […]”. (Schaper *et al.*, 2020: 4)

The term “sexotic”, and the interaction between different processes that it pinpoints, seem particularly useful in the analysis of sexual encounters between gay/bisexual men from Arab/Muslim backgrounds and white men in Brussels. As pointed out by Boone (2014), the history of contact between the West and the Arab/Orientalised East is marked by a homoerotic sexualisation of the Other, and this is still particularly visible in western representations of Arab/Muslim men. Porn representations are telling in this sense, in their ability to shed light on the racialised fantasies that underpin imaginations of the exotic Other (Rees-Roberts, 2008). The existence of a porn company such as the French Citebeur, whose name can literally be translated as “Arab estate”, testify to the relevance of such imaginations in the French-speaking context (Cervulle, 2006; Cervulle, 2008). The company specialises in videos depicting Arab men, continuing a well-established tradition in French porn, exemplified by the popular works of pornographer Jean-Daniel Cadinot, whose works often centered on the sexual adventures of young white French gay men vacationing in North Africa. This “queer fantasy” (Rees-Roberts, 2008) is not confined to France, or French-speaking contexts. In addition to the international reach of companies such as Citebeur, whose online marketing is mainly conducted in English, Tziallas (2015) notes how an Arab-centered gay pornography has been developing in the US as well, interestingly linking such development to post-9/11 discourses of difference and alterity.

The sexualised, or sexoticised, images produced and maintained by these representations constantly emerged in my interactions with participants, showing not only their wide circulation, but their rootedness in shaping the encounters that participants have in their daily lives.

> “[…] There is, I think, in Belgium, Arabs… In Brussels, they love Arabs. You see? There’s this thing of the Belgian who loves Moroccans. You see? […] Sexually, you see. Like P [his partner], he loves Moroccans, you see. That’s it. It’s a trip, you see?” (Youness).

Participants reported the existence of two different and yet complementary images that are attached to the idea of the body of the Arab man:

> “Actually, Arab men have only two ways of being. That’s it. […] So, like, the first one would be, so this super-masculine guy, beyond hairy, you know, like… we want the masculine Arab guy to be huge, ah… sweaty as fuck. We want him to be sweaty… Like, whenever I sweat, during a gay party, there is always, at some point, some guy

> who comes to me, touches me, and is like: ‘Oh my God, I love an Arab that’s sweating’. Yaeahu. That’s not ok. That is so not ok. And, so… Yeah, this image of like super-masculine, hairy, huge, sweaty Arab guy. Or the opposite. Which would be like the hairless, skinny, ahm… Shehrazade-looking… yeah, exactly, you know. Like… Almost like… How do you call them? Eunuchs?” (Hamid).

The “two ways of being” reported by Hamid end up working as scripts that other gay/bisexual men expect Arab men to conform to during sexual encounters. Of the two, the image of the hyper-masculine Arab man seems particularly relevant in the encounters that participants mentioned, and it is the role that they most often needed to address when meeting other men. Hamid elaborated further on the statements above by saying that men usually expect from him a certain kind of sexual performance, marked by roughness and some level of violence:

> “Because I’m an Arab, I represent the… ahm… fantasy of an Arab? You know? So, like people seem to think that whenever I want to have sex with someone, it would be like in basements, or that kind of shit, you know. They always think I’m like a violent person, and like sex is always… that kind of stuff”.

He then continued by telling an episode that he presented as exemplary of this attitude towards him, which took place at a sex party:

> “And at some point one of them, […] he started becoming very aggressive. And… ah… he started grabbing my butt. And I was like ‘It hurts, you know? Don’t do that. It hurts, like, be respectful. You know? I… I really have no problems with us having sex right now, but like… don’t do that. That’s not sexy’. He was like ‘Oh my God, shut up. You Arabs like it rough’”.

After the man’s response, Hamid felt the need to “sit down with this guy”, and “talk about it for a minute”. Interestingly, the effect of the discomfort he was made to feel by the man’s behaviour was similar to the one that Jalal described as a pressure to explain and educate. Later in the interview, Hamid stated that the centrality of such stereotypes is almost a given in the Belgian context. The problem is when that fictional image is the only side of him that other people see, and therefore the only side that has an impact on how they interact with him. In his experience, when men realise that he does not fit in any of the two “ways of being”, “they stop it right there”.

> “Whenever a guy gets to know more about me, they’re often… disgust. […] Because I do not correspond to that… I… Like, either one of those ideas of an Arab, but like… I try to combine the two of them”.

Other participants frame the problematic aspects of this way of imagining the Arab man in similar ways. Amine, despite his employment of the Moroccan flag on his Grindr profile, reported discomfort when meeting men who have very specific expectations on his performance as an Arab man:

> "I don't like this. I don't like to… to play a game. I don't like to play a game. It's like if you asked me 'Could you now please put this uniform and come with this colour', and nah. I don't like this. I am like I am, I stay natural. And there were some people that, ok, they said, they asked, they wanted some brutality in the action. […] If the guy is asking for brutality, I don't like this".

The problem, for Amine, is not so much in the act itself, or in the brutality that is asked, but in the fact that that brutality is asked because of his ethnicity. There is, in Hamid's and Amine's words, a sense of rejection of the racialised roles that are assigned to Arab men in sexual encounters between men. As summarised by Manuel:

> "It gets problematic when they get a stigma out of it. When they expect something from it. […] You think about Arab guys being like super-manly, kind of… rebel, or kind of like man… super-men, super-macho, and then having big cocks, and… […] The problem comes there, I think, not before. The expectation is the problem, actually. I don't know if people expected something from me that I couldn't give. At least they didn't tell me. But some people don't... don't write me back after meeting, so maybe it was expectation that comes with it".

It is important to note how these sexualised images of the Arab man are not equally rejected by all participants. Some of them, while recognising the essentialised, and essentialising, workings of this construction, have a sort of ambivalent way of relating to it. On the one hand, they reject its more stigmatising effects. On the other, they capitalise on such exoticisation, acknowledging the forms of "erotic capital" (Hakim, 2010; Daroya, 2017) that these images produce. An example of this is the already mentioned case of Amine. While he is uncomfortable with certain expectations that are projected on him, he will still employ the Moroccan flag on Grindr to make his profile more attractive.

Salah's view on the topic is interesting in this sense, and telling of the multiple lines that concur in shaping the sexual experiences of a young Arab man in Brussels. As soon as we touched upon the topic of white men's attraction for Arab men, he acknowledged the problematic sides of it, and immediately related it to his experiences as a young Arab dancer in the Belgian arts scene:

> "I get it, where we become like this kind of candy for… this exotic candy for these white dudes. Ah… In the same way, they look at us like a stereotype that is negative, they also look at us as a stereotype that is beautiful and exotic and… […] I was more victim of it when I was younger, I think, when I was 18-19… 20. Victim of this… Victim in brackets… Ahm… Getting fucked up by these men who were into Arabs. I had this encounter with this choreographer, a really famous choreographer. […] He's all… That's the definition of these men who fetishise Arabs… it's him".

He went on to tell the story of his work relationship with this choreographer, which was marked by abuses of power from the part of the white man, and a constant feeling that he was

being fantasised upon. While acknowledging these problematic effects, Salah is also sceptic in condemning an attraction for Arab men tout-court. In his view, the topic is filled with important questions, to which there are no easy answers:

> "For me, it's like a question that is asked that I can't answer to easily. Because then we come into this level of taste, and something that is a feeling thing, to… […] and all these lines, or words, or fields, that are created, these boxes that are created by… by society, and history, and time. […] Are you into Arab men because you're like… it's a fetish? It doesn't matter if I have this type of nose, that type of nose, this… I just need to be Arab and you love me? Or is it because you just... you really like me for who I am, not because I'm Arab?"

He concluded this series of reflections by saying that he is always joking about this with his white partner. It's not a problem for Salah that his partner has an attraction for Arab bodies, as their relationship of trust goes well beyond simple racialised essentialisations. And ultimately, he added, he has an Arab body, and "how can you blame someone for liking it?", he asked me shaking his body and starting to dance and laughing at the table where we were conducting the interview. This interaction with Salah showed me how complex and multilayered the ways of relating to stereotyped sexualised images of Arab men can be. If, on the one hand, most participants have strong reactions of opposition to those instances in which they are relegated in a limiting box by the specificity of the discourse – as when a sexual encounter turns out to be shaped by unrealistic expectations on their body and their sexual performance –, it can, on the other hand, be played with, so that the "erotic capital" that is attributed to the Arab body is used without necessarily having a negative impact on their daily lives. In this sense, some participants employ practices that, following Muñoz (1999), can be described as disidentificatory. Rather than counteridentifying with the images put forward by the discourse, some participants might choose to partially identify with some sides of them, at the same time resignifying them and thus subtly subverting their workings. Salah's proudly standing up, cheerfully asking me what there is not to like in his moving Arab body, signalled a moment of rupture in our conversation. We both started to laugh, sharing a moment of pride in our "Arabness", and conceding to those images the power to mark our bodies as desirable, without enabling their objectification. While it is possible to read this statement, the gesture that followed, and the laugh as possible only under certain circumstances – the fact that the conversation was taking place between two gay men from an Arab background, for example – it nonetheless signalled an important moment in the resignification of certain images and tropes.

7.5 Conclusion

The data presented in the chapter show the relevance and centrality of the interlocking of multiple axes of identification and oppression in shaping the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels. The word intersectionality emerged at multiple points of the fieldwork, in descriptions of organisations, spaces, events or initiatives, as well as in conversations with participants, testifying to the wide circulation of the concept across different movements in the city, and its relevance in shaping counter-discourses and practices towards social justice. An analysis of the narratives produced by participants on their daily lives in the city confirms the need for an intersectional framework, with its focus on the multiplicity of lines of identification and oppression that shape one's experience of the social world, and the specificity of the site that results from the interconnections between and across such lines.

The distancing that some participants expressed from the use of the term "intersectionality" does not invalidate the concept in its highlighting the complexities of multiply interlocking social relations and lines of power. Rather, it signals a scepticism over the limited (and limiting) employments of the concept by certain privileged groups in the city, mirroring transnational critiques to widespread uses of namely "intersectional" frameworks (Erel *et al.*, 2011; Bilge, 2013). In light of this, it is necessary to distinguish between different uses of intersectionality. The concept, as it is applied in this chapter, is intended to reflect the experiences of multiply minoritised people in the city of Brussels, in a context where processes of racialisation shape their experiences of the social world. The framework is thus one that centres race and racialisations in the analysis of the interconnections between different lines of identification and domination. In doing so, I follow important calls to re-politicise applications of intersectionality in European contexts by distancing it from its more "ornamental" uses (Bilge, 2013), and by taking race seriously as a category of analysis (Tauqir *et al.*, 2011; Petzen, 2012).

As shown through the data presented above, when talking about the interconnections between different lines of oppression that they experience in the city, participants stressed the existence of specific social locations that they feel relegated to as LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. These social locations are the result of the various sexualised and racialised imaginaries that construct, shape and organise difference in Brussels. Participants described these locations as marked by a sense of loneliness, which makes communication with other people complicated and fraught with misunderstanding. Linked to this sense of

loneliness and difficulty in communication, some participants mentioned the specific pressure that they feel to explain and educate other people on topics that variously relate to racialised Muslim communities and/or LGBTQ identities. In addition to these elements, participants talked about the assumptions that the general population has on the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background as an important element shaping the intersectional locations they inhabit. In a discursive context where Muslim groups and communities are imagined as invariably and necessarily homo/bi/transphobic, the lives of LGBTQ people living in such groups and communities need to be constructed as painful and traumatic. These images once again concur in relegating LGBTQ people from a Muslim background to specific positions and roles that do not necessarily reflect their experience of their social worlds, and can be difficult to address when they emerge in day-to-day conversations. Finally, participants who identified as gay or bisexual men reported high levels of sexotisation of the body of the Arab man, which produced yet another limiting role assigned to them by mainstream discourses at work in the city. All of these elements can be recognised and discerned in the huge impact they have on the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background only through a rigorous intersectional analysis, that takes into account the ways in which racialised, LGBTQ, and other lines of identification interlock in producing the specific intersectional locations from which participants experience social relations.

As stated at multiple points along the chapter, the intersectional locations that are here the object of analysis are not only marked by oppression, exclusion, and discrimination. The sense of loneliness that some participants reported often represents a push to find other racialised LGBTQ people with whom to construct bonds, alliances, and solidarities. As highlighted by Collins and Bilge (2016), this relational aspect of intersectionality is one that has significant implications for both theorising and activism, and a focus on such potential needs to be central in intersectional projects. After having explored the ways in which the intersections of racism/Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia often relegates LGBTQ people from a Muslim background to oppressive and limited sites and roles, the next chapter will explore the potential for the disruption of such power lines precisely through an exploration of the relations, bonds and communities built by participants in the city.

Chapter 8. "Oh, you're here too!" – Collective presence, recognition, and disidentification

8.1 Introduction

In Chapter 7, I discusses participants' experiences of the intersectional locations they often feel relegated to in their daily lives in Brussels, and the specific oppression that such locations entail. It is important to highlight, as has emerged already from some of the extracts analysed in that chapter, that these locations are not only marked by erasure, oppression and exclusion. Existence itself, for LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, can have disruptive effects on the strict binaries along which difference in Brussels is imagined and organised. As Rahman (2010: 948) notes, "gay Muslim identities fundamentally challenge these [civilisational] oppositions precisely because they are an intersectional social location". Such a view on the disruptive potential of a location that is marked by erasure, exclusion and oppression echoes Butler's (1993a) articulations of the concept of abjection. According to Butler (1993a: 3), those bodies that are excluded from the normative systems at work in society – the "abject" – are relegated to a "zone of uninhabitability". This zone is fundamental in the process of emergence of the "normal" subject as subject, whereby the system necessarily relies on what lies beyond it, and on its unintelligibility, as necessary conditions for the emergence of normality and subjecthood. The fact that this zone of uninhabitability is, nonetheless, inhabited, works as a constant threat to the smooth maintenance of the status quo, representing the area of exclusion that is needed for the reiteration of social norms, while constantly threatening to destabilise it from beyond its confines.

This chapter focuses on the potential for resistance inherent to LGBTQ Muslim intersectional locations. Specifically, I present and analyse data on the ways in which LGBTQ people from a Muslim background find and form communities, creating spaces where they feel safe, free and supported in their expression of multiple sides of their identifications. The narratives offered by participants on how they found and/or built such communities, and on the effects that their participation to them has on their daily lives, show the importance of such processes in both their empowering effects on individuals, and their potential for a disruption and subversion of strictly binarised social norms. The chapter begins with an overview of the concepts that I apply in my analysis. In addition to intersectionality, concepts of diasporic communities, disidentificatory practices and presence-in-relation guide the analysis as it is brought forward in this chapter. I then present narratives offered by participants on different kinds of spaces and communities they navigate in their daily lives. The focus here is both on

more structured organisations, spaces, and initiatives in the city – i.e. the more formalised side of the queer of colour scene of Brussels – as well as the informal and more private networks of friendships that participants form. I argue that these communities and spaces, in all their differences and variety, represent important sites for a mutual recognition of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, a sense of being understood at a deeper level, and a sense of empowerment and increased well-being. This, in turn, results in the emergence, in these communities, of a decolonial potential for a radical disruption of the civilisational frames of difference at work in the city.

8.2 Coming together in-between

In mainstream discourses produced in the West, the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background are often left residually to zones of impossibility and invisibility (Rahman, 2010; El-Tayeb, 2012; Rahman, 2014a). The mere fact that such lives exist and unfold, if allowed to emerge as fact, already works as a disruption of the norms that shape social relations (Rahman, 2010), as it shows how the "zone of uninhabitability" (Butler, 1993a: 3) to which they are relegated is, indeed, inhabited. A useful way to illuminate such intersectional zone, and thus unleash its disruptive potential, is to look at the bonds, networks, communities and solidarities that are built in and from it. In this sense, Collins and Bilge (2016) stress the importance of a relational approach to intersectionality, calling for the observation and analysis of the relations, alliances, and solidarities between different people, groups, and struggles that result from an acknowledgement of the interlocking(s) of multiple lines of identification and oppression. El-Tayeb (2011), in her analysis of processes of racialisation in Europe, mobilises the concept of "diaspora" to explore the networks and solidarities that are formed at intersectional locations, and the counter-discourses that they produce.

Since the 1980s, theorisations around the concept of "diaspora" have proliferated in various fields linked to cultural studies and social sciences (Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 1993; Clifford, 1994; Brah, 1996). What the concept offers is a lens through which it is possible to look at processes of migration and displacement without relying on a linear, binarised trajectory from home country to country of arrival. Closely linked to concepts of hybridisation, creolisation and *mestizaje* (Clifford, 1994; Gilroy, 1994; Nederveen Pieterse, 2001; Papastergiadis, 2005), and the cultural and social exchanges, transformations, and expansions that these words indicate, "diaspora" becomes a decidedly "outer-national term which contributes to the analysis of intercultural and transcultural processes and forms. It identifies a relational network characteristically produced through forced dispersal and reluctant scattering"(Gilroy, 2007

[2000]: 565). In other words, diaspora represents a useful tool “to think about questions of belonging, continuity, and solidarity in the context of dispersal and transnational networks of connection”, where it becomes an “emblem of multi-locality, ‘post-nationality’, and non-linearity of both movement and time” (Fortier, 2002: 184). The links between the cultural and relational fluidity that the concept of diaspora entails, and the disruptive work performed by queer theorising has not gone unnoticed, as the analysis of queer diasporas has become an increasingly florid field of inquiry (Gopinath, 1997; Fortier, 2002; Gopinath, 2005; Wesling, 2008; Oswin, 2010). According to Fortier (2002), a combination of the two concepts results in both a queering of diaspora, through the disruption of the heteronormative discourses that undergird the social organisation of diasporic communities, and a diasporising of the queer, by allowing for the emergence of cultural (and racial) diversity and difference in queerness. According to Gopinath (2005: 11), a queer diasporic approach works both to “challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora”, and to counter that “globalization of the ‘gay’ identity that replicates a colonial narrative of development and progress that judges all ‘other’ sexual cultures, communities, and practices against a model of Euro-American sexual identity”.

It is in this context that the concept of diaspora as articulated by El-Tayeb (2011) is to be understood. Her use of the term has less to do with a community that is bound to an imagined relation to an original land, bloodline, or culture. The connection she focuses on is rather to a hybrid and queer space that is created by racialised youth in contemporary urban Europe. She shares a view of diasporic geographies with Soysal (2000), who criticises traditional conceptions of diaspora for being too focused on the links between country of origin and country of arrival, and so failing to take into account the ways in which new senses of belonging, detached from the idea of a single imagined homeland, are formed.

> “The dominant conceptualization of diaspora presumptively accepts the formation of tightly bounded communities and solidarities (on the basis of common cultural and ethnic references) between places of origin and arrival […]. A more challenging and productive perspective is achieved by focusing our analytical providence on the proliferating sites of making and enacting citizenship. In a world of incessant migrations, it is in these novel geographies of citizenship that we recognise the dynamics and distribution of rights and identities, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion” (Soysal, 2000: 2-3).

In this sense the concept of diaspora can be useful in observing and analysing the communities created by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels without necessarily viewing them as the product of an ancestral attachment to a soil or religion/civilisation. In addition to this, it is possible to view such communities in the

relationships of solidarity that they build with other groups in the city, as they emerged from an analysis of participants' narratives on the queer racialised scene in Brussels. This expanded conceptualisation of diaspora allows for the recognition of the new sites of counter-discourse production that are being imagined in the European context, in a hybridised field of alliances and solidarities between differently positioned groups:

> "In a network that includes rappers, feminist collectives, queer groups, and migration activists, Afro-Dutch, Swiss Roma, or Belgian Muslims appear not as separate, distinct groups, but as contributors to a whole that has never been merely the sum of its parts. Euro hip-hop, spoken word poetry, performance art, video, and graffiti represent a fusion that resonates with the attempt to 'queer' ethnicity, since its most significant characteristic is the use of the performative nature of popular culture to emphasise the performative, constructed nature of tacit social, racial, and cultural assignments. This strategy results in a situational, potentially inclusive identity, creating bonds between various ethnicised and marginalised groups" (El-Tayeb, 2011: xx).

The disruption of binarised systems of Othering at these intersectional locations does not necessarily take the form of an active, frontal and explicit countering of mainstream discourses and tropes. While this is surely an important aspect of some of the spaces and communities analysed in this chapter, the concept of "disidentification" is more useful in understanding how such discourses are resignified in various queer of colour contexts in Brussels. Muñoz (1999) elaborates on Pěcheux's (1982) distinction between processes of identification with dominant discourses and norms, characteristic of "Good Subjects" who conform and participate to the system, processes of counteridentification typical of "Bad Subjects" who actively resist and subvert the system, and processes of disidentification. This third way, according to Muñoz (1999: 31), "proceeds to use this [dominant] code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture". Instead of complicitly identifying with binary scripts of either/or, but not quite radically dismantling them by refusing their value altogether, queer communities of colour can often be seen as constantly resignifying elements and codes of dominant discourses, thus creating a sort of subversive zone of re-presentation that imagines and prefigures different queer futures (Muñoz, 2009). "Like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life" (Muñoz, 1999: 12). Queer of colour disidentification has often been observed in studies focusing on artistic and literary representations of queered and racialised bodies (Carter, 2009; Moreman and Macintosh, 2010; Ivashkevich, 2013; Cheng, 2014). Following feminist and queer work on racialised spaces, from scholars like Lewis (2017) and Mompelat (2019), in this chapter, I apply the concept of disidentification to contexts where mutual representations

and recognitions take place on a more horizontal field of power. Rather than focusing on the disidentificatory practices entailed in the enacting or producing, or being the spectator/audience of, a representation, attention will be given to those contexts where disidentificatory practices are collectively produced by groups of people that are co-present in the same space. The concept of “presence-in-relation”, formulated by Lewis (2017) as a specific, affective co-presence that allows minoritised subjects to recognise each other and open up a space for decolonial disruptions of norms and discourses, guides the analysis of the communities and spaces found and created by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels.

While recognising the relevance of the subversive work carried on through these bonds is certainly important, it is also imperative to avoid idealising the spaces and communities that emerge from them, as well as the representations that they produce. Gopinath (2005), in her work on queer South-East Asian diasporas, showed how some subjects – namely queer female subjects – are excluded from such representations, and therefore from the ways in which new queer diasporic communities are lived and imagined. It is important then to pay attention to the exclusions that these new geographies of coming together might put in place, as well as their potential for a radical disruption of the normative systems and racial and sexual binaries that shape society. For this reason, in this chapter, I focus on both more structured and formalised queer of colour spaces, groups, and communities, and the more informal and private bonds of mutual trust and recognition that participants create daily lives.

8.2.1 Finding people like me

Arriving in Brussels as a queer person from a Muslim background, one of the first things that I noticed with delightful surprise was the extent to which queer racialised groups, events and spaces are relevant in the city. The number of more or less formalised initiatives created by and/or targeted at the racialised LGBTQ population of the city is vast. Providing an exhaustive list would be beyond the scope of this section, but it is important to mention some to convey the breadth of the queer of colour scene. Some of the initiatives I refer to take place in venues specifically created to provide spaces that are safe and free for LGBTQ racialised people. An example of this is the already mentioned Le Space, which was opened in 2012 with the idea of linking “different, emancipatory struggles to one another. And highlight from an artistic approach the intersections between discrimination because of gender, gender identity, sexual identity, ethnic identity, body type, age, social status, disability or beliefs” (Le Space, [date unknown]). Another example of an association that provides a permanent space

in the city is that of Merhaba, which organises activities for LGBTQ people from a migratory background aimed at improving their well-being and sense of empowerment.

Other spaces of the city, while not entirely focused on the support of racialised LGBTQ people, have increasingly centred their activities around their identities and experiences. This is seen in the work of the RainbowHouse, the umbrella organisation that includes all the major LGBTQ associations of the city. Of the over 60 associations of the network, seven have a specific focus on the lives, well-being and leisure of LGBTQ people from a racialised/migratory background. In addition to Merhaba, these are: the Arab Women's Solidarity Association – Belgium, which is active in the promotion of the rights of women with an Arab background; Omnya, aimed at supporting LGBT+ persons from the Middle Eastern and North African region; Balkan LGBTQIA+, whose focus is on the lives of LGBTQI persons from the Balkan countries; Long Yang club, which organises social events for the Asian LGBTQ community; Les Identités du Baobab, a cultural association whose most prominent project is the annual organisation of the Massimadi Festival; and Why Me, aimed at the protection and support of LGBTQI+ diasporic subjects. As the list suggests, the span of activities carried out by these organisations is broad, and this breadth is reflected in the calendar of events taking place at the RainbowHouse. The venue hosts a regular Balkan Party night, organised by Balkan LGBTQI+, and some of its recent activities included a module of self-defence course in non-mixity[6] for LBTI and/or racialised women, a BPOC (Black and People of Colour) party, the screening of the movie *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson,* followed by a discussion on the intersectional location from which the Stonewall riots sparked. The queer BPOC party is particularly interesting and telling of the desire of the RainbowHouse to bridge the discursive divide that posits racialised and LGBTQ communities at odds. The webpage advertising the event asks:

> "Do we really need a reason to celebrate, meet, have a good time? This is the opportunity for all BPOCS who are reluctant to discover the Rainbow House and the bar and spend a friendly and festive time. The Rainbow House bar is meant to be safe for everyone who enters it. That's why we ask everyone to respect the charter that is placed in the bar" (RainbowHouse Brussels, 2019b).

This attempt at reaching out to communities that are often posited as antithetical to the LGBTQ one is further attested by declarations and statements from various officers at the

[6] The term "non-mixity" is used here in translation of the French "non-mixité", which indicated that participation to some events, spaces sand activities is limited to people who share identification along specific lines (e.g. women only spaces, workshops for trans people of colour, events for LGBTQ people from a migratory background, etc.) Delphy, C. (2017) *La non mixité: une nécessité politique. Domination, ségregation et auto-émancipation.* Available at: http://lmsi.net/La-non-mixite-une-necessite (Accessed: 21 February).

RainbowHouse. On an interview that can be found on the organisation's website, Rachael Moore, the coordinator of the RainbowHouse and a woman of colour herself, stated that "we also need to think about making our spaces accessible for all. From October", she added, further confirming the centrality of the topic in RainbowHouse's policy at the time, "the RainbowHouse will work with Equal.Brussels and the International Organisation for Migration, on its first European project to build a toolkit for safe spaces for LGBTQ migrants" (RainbowHouse Brussels, 2019a).

Many participants stressed the value and importance of such an extended network of racialised LGBTQ spaces in the city. Jalal, for example, compared the context in Brussels to the one that he lived in France, before moving to the city:

> "*Afrodéscendants*? [Afrodescendant] Ah… The community… is very active, compared to the one in France. […] Here it's very active, and I enjoyed it, the events, when I arrived. To see lots of black and Arab people, and some cultural and artistic events, and fashion, and design, and political… Ah… I really loved that. Ah… I felt it was very fresh. And… A kind of revolution when you're French. And also because you can work with people that you feel comfortable with, like family, that reminds you of family stuff. […] I was used in France to live it separately. There was the part that reminded me of family stuff, which was from the Arab or African communities, and it was hetero cis people. So, I felt uncomfortable because I was queer, but I needed to… to be there sometimes. So, I felt incomplete. And I was also in the LGBTI community, but I felt… I felt incomplete, because it was not African-descendant people. And here you can have both in the same place. Which is very comfortable. Because you can be unified, and the same, all the time".

Various interesting elements emerge from Jalal's words. The way he described his situation back in France is one where he felt in-between two different communities, each of them allowing him to express a part of himself, but none of them providing a context in which he could feel "complete". On the contrary, he described Brussels as a place where he found such unity, such completeness, by being part of the scene that he calls "afrodescendant". It is worth noting how his sense of "completeness" does not come from being in a group that shares his specific ethnic/cultural background. He speaks instead of a space that presents a broad variety of ethnicities, with "seeing lots of Arab and black people" the feature that is most important for his sense of ethnic recognition. This sense of belonging to a sort of hybridised queer of colour community in Brussels confirms the value of the category of "diaspora" in the extended conceptualisation that scholars such as El-Tayeb (2011) and Soysal (2000) articulate. Jalal's sense of completeness in such a community is not motivated only by the presence of people who share his North African, Muslim background, but by a group that is more widely defined as "afrodescendant".

Keyna spoke of the Massimadi Festival as one of the best occasions in her experience of the city for meeting new people and making new friends. As she had moved to Brussels only one year before our interview, and had some difficulties in finding a group of friends, this opportunity was particularly welcomed:

> "Well, it's at this festival that I met most… people, most acquaintances. Most friends, really. People who give you their phone number. We more easily exchanged our… our contacts. It's at this festival".

When explaining her choice to go to the festival, she said:

> "Well, I went there because… In fact, even if I'm North African, the Massimadi festival is more focused on the colour black, but to me, it immediately spoke to me. […] It's as if it was an emergency exit for me. An emergency exit. […] Because it was gay. LGBT. It was LGBT. And it was black, and since I am a French Maghrebi with a bit of a brown colour, ah… […] I said to myself, bah, I fit very well in there. Ah… And it was the only festival… There were festivals before, film festivals, ah… like Pink Screens. I don't know. I think it's a matter of colour. And as I know… I grew up with black people, I know black culture, so I felt closer to this kind of festival".

Keyna's words confirm the existence of a sense of "closeness" to a wide queer of colour community that, to a certain extent, transcends the boundaries between different diasporic communities. As she grew up in Parisian neighbourhoods inhabited by differently racialised groups, she feels a sense of proximity to "black culture", in contrast to other festivals and events that she later described as "too white". The existence of such spaces, that are at the same time LGBT and not white, functions as an "emergency exit" in her life, especially at those times when she needs to get to know new people and build networks of friends in a new place. Both Jalal and Keyna stated the importance for their sense of well-being – feeling "complete" for Jalal, and having an "emergency exit" for Keyna – of the existence of such a racialised queer community.

8.2.2 "Oh, you're here too! And we acknowledge each other"

What is it that makes such spaces so different in the experience that participants have of them? What dynamics make so that participants feel "complete", or provided with an "emergency exit", when they access them? An element that recurs across conversations with participants is that interactions with other LGBTQ people of colour, both at an individual and a group level, allow them to be understood in ways that are not possible with others. Sarah's words exemplify this feeling:

> "I'm always glad to find people of colour and Muslim and Jewish LGBT people at these events. […] It feels good, to… 'Oh, you're here too', and we acknowledge each

other. And there's something that we know that we… something that we don't put into words. I don't know. […] Hmmm… 'I guess it was a hard, long road for you to come here too?' [laughs]. I don't know. Ah… Yeah, I feel like we have a lot in common".

This short extract presents various elements that highlight the different feelings of proximity and commonality that mark Sarah's interactions with other queer people of colour. First, she mentioned the mutual acknowledgement that underpins such interactions. This is particularly relevant in light of the specific erasure that certain queer of colour subjects face, and therefore the zone of "impossibility" to which they often are relegated to (Gopinath, 2005). A sense of being seen by the other, and seeing the other in return, is the first step described by Sarah in that process of facilitated communication that she described. Second, Sarah highlighted the possibility of a communication that takes place without the need to "put into words" many things. This element is in direct contrast to the experiences of those participants who feel relegated to a specific location where they are always asked to explain and educate, presented in the previous chapter. As suggested by Lewis (2017), presence is the key-word, or rather co-presence, where a recognition of the other's position and minoritised identity precedes the verbalisation of their experiences. Thirdly, there is the recognition of similarity of each other's life path. The "hard, long road" that is being recognised in this instance is radically different from the one that the white person verbalises in many of the episodes reported by participants. In this case, the common ground shared with the other leads to an open communication that can be free of political implications. Later in the interview, signalling her recognition of me as one of those queer people of colour she feels more comfortable with, Sarah added:

> "Like with you, for instance. I can talk about Arab homophobia without feeling the need to give much information or justify myself or blah blah blah".

With this comment, Sarah reinforced the elements she had mentioned before, applying them to the specific encounter between queer people of colour that was our interview. During our conversation she felt more at ease in talking about certain topics that she would not be comfortable delving into with a white person, such as homophobia by Arab men, as she felt that my understanding of the topic would be more nuanced and less essentialised than that of a white person. Corollary of this is the possibility to use less words, and to explain less, as she feels that with queer people of colour there is less need "to give much information", or to "justify" the ways in which she experiences episodes in her life.

The elements mentioned by Sarah are echoed by many other participants. Jacob, for example, insisted on the commonality of experiences that there is among LGBTQ people from a

Muslim background, and the fact that it leads to an increased sense of freedom in what can be said.

> "Well, I'll speak from my point of view, it's that I find that there is a point in common with other people. And some sort of freedom when we are in front of one another, actually. We can discuss about anything. Ahm… Because you feel that the person… judges less. Judges less".

Jacob was one of the people who participated to the theatre workshop organised by me and Merhaba. Our interview took place a few weeks after the workshop, and he mentioned it as an example of a context where he felt at ease in engaging in communication around certain topics:

> "For example, the weekend with Merhaba, it was the first weekend that I spent with… where we really talked among people who were… LGBTQ from a Muslim background. […] Well, it was quite different, because we all were at a phase in which we accepted, we understood".

Interestingly, the life experiences of the nine workshop participants were very different from one another, and I could not as easily see them as being in a specific and common "phase" in their relationships to their sexuality/gender identity. They were from different national contexts, their ages spanned from the early twenties to the mid-thirties, and they differed along lines of sexual orientation/gender identity, as well as race/ethnicity/nationality. The fact that Jacob sensed a commonality across their different life paths is telling of the processes of mutual recognition that Sarah mentioned in her interview. One of the main elements that participants mentioned when giving a feedback on the theatre workshop was linked exactly to their appreciation of being surrounded by people with whom they could talk about topics that they often need to be silent about in their daily lives. A sense of "being understood" was something that participants often mentioned to explain why being at the weekend-long workshop was so important for them. During the breakfast of the last day of activities, I asked Fatima if she had slept well. She looked at me, and replied: "Slept? This is not the time for sleeping, this weekend". I asked her why. She said that this was a time for talking and sharing experiences, as it was impossible to do it to the same extent in her daily life. "This is like family", she concluded.

8.2.3 Different stories, different communities

During my fieldwork, I met a number of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background who do not participate to events targeted at LGBTQ racialised people, either because they do not feel the need for such spaces, or because they do not feel a sense of belonging or attachment to the

community that those spaces represent. What I found interesting, when interacting with these participants, was to try and discover what kind of communities they were building with their peers, and in what ways these were different from the more structured queer racialised groups and networks in the city. In particular, I was interested in understanding whether there were other identificatory categories involved in the choices not to participate to certain events, and whether these categories had an effect on the construction of alternative communities. In this section, I present and analyse the experiences of two participants, Youness and Amine, and the queer of colour communities they found in Brussels.

During our interview, Youness talked about his community of friends and family as a very important support network. As mentioned earlier, at the time we spoke Youness was at a difficult stage of his life, as he had recently left a job and started therapy as a consequence of the multiple and intersecting discrimination he had experienced in the workplace. His life story, as he narrated it during the interview, was different from that of all other participants in a variety of ways. When he was younger, he worked as a sex worker for a time, offering erotic massages and sexual services to both male and female clients. His choice of entering the sex work industry was motivated by his need to pay for his studies after he was kicked out of his family home after his father learned that Youness' girlfriend at the time was pregnant. Another element that distinguished his story from that of most participants is that he was not the only LGBTQ person in his family. His younger brother came out as gay after him, and their cousin is also attracted to men. In addition to this, the cousin is also a sex worker, thus adding another layer of similarity in experiences that are shared in the family. At the end of the interview, I asked Youness if he would be interested in participating in the theatre workshop that I was at the time organising with Merhaba. He replied that he would participate only if his friends could come as well, where by "his friends" he meant his brother and his cousin. I couldn't promise that, and the conversation ended there, but this testified to me the importance that his "group" has in making him feel protected and secure.

At the end of our conversation, Youness also said that he would have loved for me to meet his friends. He said he had already told them about me, and he would introduce us soon. In the following weeks, Youness invited me twice for dinner at his place with his friends. On the first occasion I could not stay long, and I had to leave before they all got there, but the second time I had the chance to spend the whole evening with them. The occasion was the birthday celebration of a girlfriend of theirs, a young woman of Moroccan background.

> "I arrived at his apartment at 8.30 pm, and saw all the guests already there. All the guests were men, apart from the birthday girl. Four of the men in the room were of

> Arab descent, and they all were in their late 20s, early 30s. The four men were: Youness' younger brother, also gay, Youness' cousin, a very tall and broad gay man, a friend of Youness, of Algerian descent and visiting from Lille, and Youness. The other four men where white and Belgian, all of them in their late 40s and 50s" (Field notes, 08/03/2018).

While I had some background information on the younger Arab men, as Youness had talked extensively about them during the interview, the only information I had about the older men was that one of them was Youness' partner, and that Youness had first met him as a client when he worked as an erotic masseur. As a queer man of Arab descent of the same generation of the younger men in the room, I intuitively felt closer to them than to the older white men. In addition to this, my socialisation in activist queer and antiracist circles made me hyperaware of the risks of my body being exoticised in such a context, which created some sort of discomfort in me. While everyone in the room was incredibly respectful and friendly towards me, I knew that the situation, if looked at with an external eye, could have been interpreted as problematic and essentialising, especially when Moroccan pop music started playing, and the younger men started dancing to it while the older men were watching.

It took a while to shake off the feeling that the white gaze of the men in the room was the one in control, for whom the entire stage was set. I knew that this was Youness' fundamental network of support, and that the people around us had been central in providing him with the help he needed to face the multiple discrimination he lived. As the evening went forward, I realised another important element of the group. Some of the jokes that I heard that night centered on the "skills" of some of the younger men in doing massages, which suggested that the people in the room were aware of Youness and his cousin working as erotic masseurs. Later that night, I got the impression that Youness' partner was not the only one that was introduced to the group by being a client of one of the men. Nonetheless, something that became clear was that, in this setting, Youness would not have to explain and legitimise parts of his past that he finds difficult to verbalise. When he opened up about his past as a sex worker during our interview, he explicitly said that it was not easy for him to talk about this. He asked me not to judge him, and I did my best to try and reassure him. Before starting to talk about the sides of the job that he enjoyed, he felt the need to prove to me that his choices were legitimate, by stating that it was to pay his study that he started giving massages. During our dinner at his place, I found myself thinking of the group around me as a very supportive and close-knit community, where Youness felt understood and not judged on the ways he identifies or his life choices. During the evening, the conversation in the group moved smoothly from talks (and jokes) about sex and men, to the experiences of members of the group with mental health issues, career advice given to the younger men, and general catching

up about family members, testifying to the variety of ways in which mutual support materialises in the group.

My access to Amine's experience of his group of friends was very different than the one I had with Youness. While I had the chance to meet in person the people Youness talked about during his interview, my knowledge of Amine's friends is limited to the words he used to describe them, and his feelings around them. Similarly to Youness', Amine's experiences present differences from those of most participants interviewed in this project. Amine was born in Morocco, and moved to France for his studies. When he was younger, he started having sexual and romantic relationships with men, which culminated in a long-term relationship with another Moroccan man. As he grew up, he realised that "homosexuality is incompatible with Islam", and that he could never be happy as a Muslim gay man. He therefore "decided to change", "to become bisexual". He married a Moroccan woman, and he was, at the time of the interview, happy with this choice. When I asked him whether he thought he had been successful at "becoming bisexual", he said that he was satisfied with the degree of change that he saw in himself. In his experience, the process is a long one, and he still occasionally has sexual encounters with men, but at the time of the interview he considered himself to be "mostly" heterosexual.

> "I can say that I am moving, but very very slowly, from maybe… let's say 95% gay to mostly straight".

When we started talking about the people that he spends time with in the city, apart from his wife, he was very clear that all of his friends were from a Muslim background. There are four people that he considers friends. Three of them are Moroccan, and they share with him the experience of trying to change their sexuality. Two of these friends have been married to women, and the third one is thinking about it as an option. The fourth friend is of Turkish background, and he is the only one who is openly gay and does not want to change his sexuality. Nonetheless, his Muslim background allows him to understand Amine's experience.

> "I think that any friendship, there is… there is a limit we cannot exceed, unless we have strong things in common. Ok? So, I can meet, I don't know… I have a certain background, I am Moroccan, and I can meet another [white] person, we can be friends, but this friendship will be limited".

When elaborating on his scepticism towards friendships with white people, Amine brings the example of a traumatic experience that he had with a white gay man who, at the time the events unfolded, he considered to be a friend of his.

> "I sent a message to a friend of mine, a gay friend. I had met him on Grindr, but we were very close. I sent him a joke, like ok, 'Be aware, I am preparing a bomb attack', like this. And he went to the police and he showed them the message. And I was arrested in the airport. When I was back from Morocco, I was arrested in the airport, and I have spent 20 hours with the police, asking me all my story. And they came to my place to search for suspicious stuff, and finally they found nothing, and they released me, let's say".

The episode narrated by Amine once again shows how Islamophobia is present and impactful on the interactions and relationships that LGBTQ people from a Muslim background have with white people in Brussels. During the interview, Amine makes an explicit link between this experience and his reticence to consider white people as potential friends. He reiterates at multiple points that, while a friendly acquaintance is possible with anyone, having deeper relations and sharing personal and intimate information is possible only with people who share a similar cultural background, which in his case he defines as Muslim.

> "I cannot imagine being a good friend with someone if we don't share some convictions, we don't share some background, we don't share… […] The Turkish one [his friend] is not religious. Ok. So he has not problems about this. I like this person because he understands what I am saying… Understands what I am saying. We respect each other, we don't have the same opinion, we respect each other but we understand each other. And so… And for the three other friends, one is married [to a woman], also… He is now having some problems with his wife, but I think that this will be solved. The other one plans to get married. And the third one, the third Moroccan one, is divorced. So they are all… We all share this… like…. Islam".

What emerges clearly from this extract is something that recurs over and over again in the narratives participants make of their communities, be they the more structured queer racialised groups in the city, or informal networks of friends with whom they share deep and intimate relationships. What draws Amine to these people is the fact that "they understand" what he says. In his case, "understanding" entails a lack of judgement on his choice of marrying a woman and try to "become bisexual". As his experience with his Turkish friend shows, it is not necessary for the other person to have the same opinion on the matter, nor to take the same choices. Rather, in Amine's view it is a common cultural – Muslim – background that allows his friends to understand him, and thus support him in his daily life.

Similarly to Youness, Amine has a certain degree of reticence in sharing details of his life to people that are outside his close circle of friends, and he doesn't feel any connection to the queer racialised groups in the city. When asked whether he ever thought of being in touch with organisations that work with Muslim LGBTQ people, his reply was stark:

> "No. What is the purpose? I don't know. Because whenever, here in Europe, whenever I want to ask for advice, the first advice is accept your sexuality. […] So this is why

> now I am living by my own, I prefer to read on the Internet, I prefer to share my worries with friends like me, rather than going to, I don't know, associations".

While Amine's experience and life choices are very distant from mine, which at times rendered our interaction tense and difficult to negotiate from both sides, it is not difficult to imagine the pressure that he would feel to "accept his sexuality" in most LGBTQ contexts of the city, be they racialised or not. While I knew of organisations that would have a much more sensitive stance on the topic, and would understand his life choices as legitimate (one of them being Merhaba), I could also understand why Amine preferred to share certain information with his group of friends, and avoid deep contacts with other groups in the city. Similarly to Youness, Amine's need to be understood goes beyond the need to be recognised in the specific social location he inhabits as an LGBTQ Muslim person. He needs people around him to understand his choice to prioritise building a heteronormative family over living his sexuality freely. For Youness, being understood means being seen and accepted in his life story, which includes a period of his life in which he worked as a sex worker. We can see, in the experiences of both participants, similar needs to the ones that others expressed in motivating their participation to the more structured queer racialised scene in the city: being in a place where constant explaining and educating is not necessary, with a sense of commonality of experiences and ways of identifying with people around them, which translates in a sense of being understood at a deeper level.

An analysis of these two narratives suggests the need to include other relevant categories when considering the intersectional locations of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, and the kinds of communities they build. A lens that focuses solely on the interlocking of Islam and sexuality would fail to see the ways in which the life choices and experiences that distinguish Youness' and Amine's stories from those of other participants have a huge impact on the ways they interpret, live and experience such intersection. As pointed out by Anthias (2002b), intersectional locations can be viewed in terms of "translocational positionalities". Such reframing allows to view the subjectivity of the individual at its intersection between structure – the norms and roles that are socially constructed around identity categories such as those of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race – and the agency of the individual in identifying (or not identifying) with categories and in performing them in their lived experiences. Reinterpreted in these terms, the need of participants is therefore not only that of being understood as inhabiting the specific intersectional location of LGBTQ person from a Muslim background, but also in the specific story that they have constructed around such specific location, and the way that story unfolds in their daily lives. In this sense, Youness' positionality is inextricable from his professional history, as Amine's is from his choice to pursue marriage with a woman. While

these paths could be at times viewed as contradictory with those of other racialised, LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, they nonetheless share the need to create communities of trust and understanding at the specific intersections that they live.

8.2.4 A question of culture?

When mentioning our theatre workshop, Salim agreed with other participants on the ease and sense of freedom that distinguished interactions with other LGBTQ people from a Muslim background on such occasion. In addition to the elements analysed above, he spoke of a common "cultural background" as an important element that facilitated communication:

> "Anyway, in relation to the empowerment weekend [i.e. theatre workshop], and generally all group relations with… with people like us, not… like me, North African, well, from a North African background… Well, I think that we… we understand each other directly, because the cultural background, it's… it's almost the same, in fact, even if our experiences can… can be different. It's small variations, etcetera. In fact, at the end of the day… […] It's also through culture, music, it's… the ways of having fun, ah… So, yeah, which can… which make us much closer than someone who doesn't share exactly the same background. I mean, it's easier, really, simple as that. It's… it's logical that it's easier".

For Salim it is not so much a common experience that determines an ease of communication, but a common cultural background, which allows the conversation to flow in a field of cultural references that are shared by all parties. Mehmet's view is similar, as he stressed the need to create a community for LGBTQ people from a Balkan background. Upon his arrival in Brussels, he did not know any LGBTQ person from such a background in the city, and he started looking for people who spoke Bulgarian or Turkish on PlanetRomeo. Soon, a virtual community took shape, and the new group started meeting in real life and hanging out together. That nucleus of people was the one that eventually formed the association Balkan LGBT+, which organises and hosts the regular Balkan party at the RainbowHouse. When asked about the reasons for such a need to create a community of LGBTQ people who share a Balkan background, irrespective of other identificatory categories, such as religion and/or ethnicity, Mehmet mentioned a series of elements that he defined as "cultural", which facilitate communication between him and the other members of the group:

> "Well, in fact, it's already because… Yeah, the Balkan cultures, it's a culture that requires you to have fun, to… Yeah. It's really positive. And so, at the beginning, as we started organising some nights here, we could see that if we… People from here, from Belgium, it's already another culture, and also another mentality, they couldn't have fun… they couldn't have fun on our nights. They found the music very loud, the alcohol very strong, the way of… of having fun, very vulgar. […] And that's why I thought it important to… ahm… to have a moment where we can put our music, to let

go, to dance the way we know how to do it since we were kids, to have fun the way we know since we were kids".

Mehmet's argument for the creation of a Balkan community thus rests on the need to interact with other people who share a similar view on elements like food, music, entertainment and the meaning of "having fun". All these elements are, in his experience, rooted in the sphere of the "cultural", which results in the ease and comfort he described when spending time with other people from the Balkans.

Scholars have highlighted the importance of mundane cultural elements in producing a sense of belonging and freedom in communities of migrants and racialised people (Raman, 2011; Lewis, 2015). In this study, they emerge as relevant in many of the spaces where LGBTQ people from a Muslim background create a sense of community. An example of this is the regular night organised by Merhaba, "Merhaba Funky Party". The party is targeted at queer people of colour and their friends, and it promises a musical entertainment that includes "belly dance, cha'abi, raï, Turkish pop, house oriental, RnB, disco funk, Balkan" (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Flyer of Merhaba Funky Party, September 2017

As a queer person from a North African background who grew up in a context where North African cultural references and LGBTQ spaces and events never met one another, the first time I entered a Funky Party I was overcome with memories of childhood summers spent in Morocco re-interpreted under a queer lens. It was as if elements from two cultural realms, both familiar to me, had suddenly found themselves under the same roof, transforming what was familiar into something that still was to be understood. The music was, at certain points, the same that could be heard at a wedding party in Morocco, and at other times the same I

could find in a commercial gay club in a western city. The disruption of gender performances that is often noticeable in LGBTQ spaces was taking place on a predominantly North African script, with muscular men belly dancing, and a drag queen appearing every now and then and lip-syncing to North African pop music. My sensations were being mirrored and confirmed by some of the interactions I had with people around me. "It's like being at a wedding, but with gay guys being wild. That's why I love this party", a woman from an Algerian background that I met on the night told me.

What was happening in front of my eyes could be explained through Muñoz's (1999) words in terms of "disidentificatory practices". In this sense, the performances at the Funky Party were resignifying both LGBTQ codes and scripts, recontextualising them in that discursively impossible location that is Arab culture, as well as Arab/North African/Middle Eastern cultural elements, which are in the performance charged with queer and gender-subverting meanings.

For some participants, studying and learning traditions and codes of their North African/Middle Eastern cultural heritage was an important part in a process of re-discovery and re-signification of cultural elements that mainstream discourses around them have always painted as patriarchal and anti-queer. Examples of this are the experiences of Jalal and Hamid. Both of them are involved in the arts scene of Brussels, and for both of them the process of learning about their cultural roots has been a fundamental passage in their personal and professional lives. Jalal, when explaining his discomfort with the more dogmatic and institutional sides of Islam, mentioned his knowledge of history of art to show me how Islam has not always been what it is today, and to highlight the traces of different ways of living religion along its history:

> "So, Islam, in many ways, is not representing the way I'm thinking. And… more, it's what men today do of it. I hate that. So, this part, the social one, actual one, I hate it. Because it's bullshit. It's political, it's economical, and it's bullshit. But, with my job, I had to… I was looking… I did a research two years ago on the transformation of pictorial art in Islam, since the first Quran to now. Till now. And so, I saw that it was not like that at the beginning, and it was a legend, and everything changed with the… the government, and everything. So… The history, it's very interesting".

Jalal's encounter with the history of pictorial art in the Middle East did not only allow him to cast genuine doubts over the claims of authenticity made by the most dogmatic and institutionalised part of Islam today. Importantly, such knowledge also represented a gateway to a deeper attachment to such history, opening up the possibility that certain sides of this culture could be as much his, an LGBTQ person, as anyone else's. This passage is even

clearer in Hamid’s words. As a young adult, Hamid embarked on a journey through North Africa and the Middle East with his mother. As a person involved in dance and performance art, this proved to be a great occasion for him to study and experience different performing traditions across the territories he visited. The knowledge he acquired, during the journey and in the exploration of his general interests in the cultural and artistic history of the region, is something he actively used to claim ownership of a cultural heritage that mainstream discourses strip away from him.

> “You know, I’m an Arab with piercings, and tattoos, and for this guy that’s a symbol of whiteness. That’s not true actually. That’s really not true. I mean, tattoos, our grandmothers still got them. And jewels… I mean, nose-rings, and earrings, I can give you historical sources of… I mean, one of the greatest kings in the Middle East, which would be Solomon, which… who is also a prophet, had tattoos and earrings, and was wearing gold, and that kind of stuff. And also, like… Gold is a color that is not supposed to be worn by a man, because apparently only women are allowed to wear gold. That is a modern fake idea. Gold is the representation of… ahm… royalty? You’re allowed to wear gold when you’re like… like, you know, when you have like a royal rank. […] So, all of those things I know because I’ve studied it, and I travelled across the Middle East to know more about it. I mean, people my age, even people like the age of my father don’t know about that. You know? So, I guess they just stick to what they heard, or been told, some… extremist Islamic TV channel. And they’re just guided by that. So… A guy that looks Arab wearing the color gold is seen as an enemy, you know”.

Hamid actively uses his knowledge in Middle Eastern history to subvert the ways in which Middle Eastern cultures are imagined and represented, which in turn allows him to claim a connection to that history, confuting the claims of in-authenticity, of “whiteness”, that are directed at him because of some of his performances – e.g. the wearing of piercings and tattoos. As sexual diversity often becomes a marker of westerness and whiteness in “clash of civilisation” discourses, Hamid’s reclaiming of cultural elements from the Middle Eastern and North African region also include representations of homosexuality. Once again, such resignification of historical elements allows for the emergence of an LGBTQ history inside the region, thus reinforcing his sense of belonging to this world of cultural references.

> “Because you can talk to me about women, about even homosexuality, and that kind of shit, I will find historical references”.

Towards the end of the interview, he expressed an appreciation of the already existing spaces and initiatives that bring queer Arab people together, and he says that he would like to create an art collective of Arab artists.

> “I think my secret fantasy would be to create… not a vogue house, because I love vogueing, but that doesn’t define what I do in general… I would love to create a group

> of Middle Eastern, Arabic artists in Brussels. Because I came across a lot of Afropunk groups. There's a lot of Latino artistic groups as well. But… I didn't… encounter a lot of Arabs doing that. I have friends across the world, and… that do it. But it's hard. It's really hard. Whenever you're speaking Arabic somewhere, it's seen as like a super-bad thing. People always think you're like… reading the Quran, or that kind of shit, you know. So, yeah".

Once again, Hamid expressed a desire to subvert and disrupt stereotypes and norms linked to sexualities and ethnicities, wishing for the creation of a collective of Arab people who could be seen as artists, and not first and foremost as people "reading the Quran, or that kind of shit". While Hamid's disidentificatory practices were in previous extracts directed at the policing of cultural tradition that he perceives in Arab diasporic communities – e.g. people considering his tattoos and piercing a marker of "whiteness", or legitimising homophobia as part of the Arab culture –, here it is Islamophobic scripts in white societies that need dismantling.

8.2.5 A sense of empowerment

Emotions play an important role in shaping the motivations of individuals in participating in and committing to movements for social change and justice (Brown and Pickerill, 2009). A sense of collective recognition along multiple intersectional lines of identification can be particularly impactful as a motivating factor for queer of colour political action (Labelle, 2019). Many participants mention this recognition as having a positive impact on their sense of individual empowerment, and consequently in motivating them in becoming active agents of social change in their communities. When Jacob talked about the sense of being understood that he felt during the theatre workshop activities, and immediately after highlighting the commonality of experiences across the group, he added:

> "So, anyway, they have… they have this desire to change things, and to fight to be able to change these things".

This chapter has showed how creating communities of different kinds that have an intersectional location of race/ethnicity/religion and sexuality as their starting point is necessary to ensure a sense of well-being for participants, as these function as sites where they feel like they can be recognised and understood at a deeper level than in any other context they navigate in the city. Through processes of resignification of scripts and codes pertaining both to white LGBTQ-subcultures, and non-white heteronormative contexts, such communities often create new subversive worlds through processes that can be viewed as "disidentificatory". Such processes are not only useful in the subversive effects that they have on mainstream social norms and discourses. Their effects are felt by the people who

participate to them, and who in turn feel, as Jacob stated in relation to the theatre workshop with Merhaba, that they shared with others a "desire to change things". Ultimately, the spaces created through these processes of community building can have an empowering effect on the LGBTQ people from a Muslim background who access them, providing them with tools and renewed motivation to "change things, and fight to be able to change things".

One intuitive example of this is represented by those events that are organised with the specific aim of critically addressing some of the issues that racialised queer populations live in the city. Assad talked of one such event not only as an occasion for him to learn new things, but as a surprisingly cathartic moment, where he felt that his daily work to dismantle certain stereotypes linked to Islam, Arabness, and sexuality were reflected in the words spoken by the queer people of colour present in the room. The event was, incidentally, organised by Aziza Rachid, the founder of Le Space (see earlier sections), and its central focus was on sexism and the representations of Arab men.

> "And so it was really an open space, and the discussion was more about deconstructing this whole idea, so I really went with a feeling that ok, we are going to portray again and again this story, stereotypes of Muslims, of Islam and Arab men. And my feeling when I left was joy, I can even say joy, because I talked with the professor who intervened, I talked with the person who helped to organise this panel discussion. So I had a really really good feeling that we were on the deconstructive side of the debate, on those very touchy, sensitive, but very very crucial topics. […] So, yeah, I went from black to white".

This extract is clear in showing how Assad's feelings after the event were not simply those of cognitive satisfaction at having heard useful information and discussions on topics he is invested in. The sense of "joy" that he felt upon leaving the venue was motivated by the fact that he saw his struggles, and his specific experience as a person whose life is shaped by the intersection of non-heterosexuality and racialisation, reflected in the words of the speakers and the interventions of the public. Seeing people in front of him that are on the same "deconstructive side" had an empowering effect on him, as the theatre activities, and the sharing of a desire to "change things" had a similar effect on Jacob after the conclusion of the theatre workshop activities. Youness reported a similar sense of joy after he participated, for the first time in his life, to the Pride parade in Brussels. When recounting this experience, he stressed the fact that "the theme that year was that of migrants, of refugees", and the presence of Arab bodies was an important element in shaping his positive experience of the event.

> "An emotion…. It was very… Emotion, really. Yeah, I don't know. It was… it was really… I saw all this youth, 20 years-olds, who are there, with the LGBTQ colours, who… activism, you see… who were there, dancing… everyone… It did something to

> me, really. And my brother was there as well. Bam bam. And… No, there was really a lot of emotion, I swear. […] And there were even Arabs with rainbow flags. Everyone, you see?”

For Youness, the presence of people that he read as similar to him in their ethnic background, openly displaying celebratory signs of LGBTQness, produced a sense of overwhelming emotion, which to this day he finds hard to verbalise. This emotion, as was the case with Salim and Jacob, produced in him a desire to be more active in the queer racialised spaces and movements of the city, as this moment of cathartic recognition during the parade worked as the starting point of a wider reflection on the common struggles, and wider political fights, of queer people of colour.

Not only these spaces and events empower participants, and motivate them to take a more active stance in queer of colour organisations and movements, but they work as subversive sites in and of themselves, through the disidentificatory practices and performances that they enable. The concept of disidentification has mostly been applied to artistic representations and performances that disrupt and subvert mainstream codes and discourses by working at the same time on and against normative scripts to imagine and create new and different worlds. Central to Muñoz’s (1999) work on queer of colour disidentification is the idea that such performances create counter-publics, “communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public spheres” (Muñoz, 1999: 146). Applications of this to Arab/Muslim queer performances, writings, and art has been useful in showing how such counter-publics are formed in the West, and the importance of these in producing new discourses on what it means to be LGBTQ and from a Muslim background (Provencher, 2017). These analyses, though, do not take into account the creation of disidentifying, and thus resisting, communities where disidentificatory practices are not necessarily initiated by a single artist/performer, or by a group of artists/performers. In her analysis of the queer of colour art scene in London, Mompelat (2019) moves in the direction of recognising how the creation of a counter-public through disidentificatory practices is not a process that needs to depart from, or be mediated by, artistic creation and performance, but can be co-produced by the presence of queer of colour bodies in a certain space, sharing a collective performative experience. Analysing her experience as a queer person of colour accessing such spaces, she observes that it is “relevant to assess the ways in which (queer) people of colour can redress historical erasure by announcing their presence *to each other*” (Mompelat, 2019: 14). Not only such spaces work as sites of disidentification from mainstream LGBTQ codes and discourses, but they also represent a space “where minoritarian subjects get to identify with each other by collectively and simultaneously disidentifying from a white hetero-patriarchal

world" (ibid.: 14). That mutual recognition – of common experiences, of shared intersectional locations, of similar ways of interpreting and narrating such intersectional locations –, and the fact that it is collectively performed in the same space leads to the formation of a counterpublic space, a community that detracts itself from the norms that shape social reality, at the same time envisioning and enacting new kinds of social relations. As observed by Lewis (2017: 14), this kind of "presence-in-relation" for minoritarian subjects, "those always already excluded from modernity's inscription as subjects", becomes a "decolonising move". Almost echoing Jalal's words in the opening of the chapter, where he described his sense of "completeness" in the LGBTQ racialised scene in Brussels, in Lewis's (2017: 14) analysis "presence becomes something warm, fleshy, substantial and rooted – an ego-syntonic and communal experience of 'completeness' for those who have not been counted/imagined as 'person'. Then… and now".

8.3 Conclusion

The analysis of the spaces and communities presented in this chapter, in the narration that participants make of their experience of them, allows for a series of important elements to emerge. First, a focus on these communities allows for the observation of the intersectional locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background not only as marked by oppression and exclusion, but also as sites that enable the imagination and enactment of ways of existing, living, and identifying outside (or rather, beyond) the rigid norms that shape and discipline social relations. The concept of disidentification, as articulated by Muñoz (1999), is useful in highlighting how such coming together at marginalised intersections can produce spaces that facilitate a resignification of the norms that shape gendered, sexual, cultural and racialised performances. The mutual recognitions that take place at such sites, and the freedoms of expression, communication, and performance that they open up, are important elements for a deconstruction of the rigid binaries that shape imaginations of difference. As stated by Rahman (2010), rendering the intersectional location of LGBTQ Muslim visible is already a radical political act, having in itself the potential to disrupt and subvert oppositional civilisational logics. In this chapter, this visibilisation meant showing and highlighting the ways in which LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, together with other queer racialised individuals and groups, collectively reinterpret their identities and performances, effectively creating spaces that disturb the underpinnings of mainstream discourses in both white, LGBTQ or not, communities, and racialised diasporic ones.

Apart from the disruptive potential that such communities represent for the wider society, or maybe *as part of* such disruptive potential, these communities serve a number of different important functions in the lives of the people who are in them. Participants mentioned the sense of recognition of the multiple sides of their identities and stories as a fundamental feature of these communities. This recognition in turn allows them to feel the constriction of the positions and roles they are relegated to in most spaces of their daily lives momentarily relinquished, resulting in a feeling of being understood. Interestingly, such understanding is often described as happening on a non-verbal level. While a central feature of the narratives participants made of the oppression they are faced with as LGBTQ people from a Muslim background were the difficult conversations they feel pressured to have with others – a need to constantly explain, educate and legitimise – their description of their feelings of understanding in their queer of colour communities was described in terms of seeing and being seen. In this sense, their experiences can be interpreted as “presences-in-relation”, affective ways of being together and recognising one another as minoritised subjects that surpass verbalisations. As pointed out by Lewis (2017), this coming and being together has in itself a decolonial potential, as confirmed by the experiences of those participants who report leaving such spaces with a sense of empowerment that they rarely get from other communities and spaces they navigate.

Finally, in this chapter, the focus was not only on those more formalised structures and groups that make up the more visible queer of colour scene of Brussels. The inclusion in the analysis of communities such as those created by Youness, Amine, and their friends, allows to avoid an essentialisation of the intersectional locations analysed here. This is done by acknowledging the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background who do not necessarily participate to the (more) institutionalised queer of colour scene in the city, but nonetheless create communities that respond to similar needs of recognition, deep understanding, and a sense of empowerment and collective well-being. Such inclusion is necessary in order to avoid essentialisations of the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, framing them as having the same needs when it comes to building bonds and relations with others. The intersectional location inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background is not a single, rigidly bounded, enclosed space, encroached in-between infinitely extending social and cultural fields. Instead, it is useful to see it as an area that contains multiple possibilities for self-location, with porous borders, where different needs, desires, ways of identifying and of articulating narratives about such identifications cross and disperse. If, on the one hand, participants to this study have similar needs in terms of being

recognised and understood by people who are close to them, what it is that is to be recognised and understood differs greatly.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

In this thesis, I critically analysed the experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels. The starting point of this analysis was the acknowledgement of the specific discursive erasure of LGBTQ Muslim experiences and narratives. While the overall complexity of LGBTQ Muslim lives is hidden behind essentialist binaries of East/West difference, some elements of their stories are partially and selectively included in mainstream discourses to confirm and reproduce imaginaries of civilisational clash between the West and the Muslim East in debates on sexual diversity and gender equality. The goal of this thesis was to illuminate the social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, highlighting the nuances that mark their experiences, and countering simplistic essentialisations of their lives. To do so, I applied an intersectional framework, which allowed me to recognise, observe, and analyse the ways in which multiple lines of identification and domination interlock in shaping the experiences of minoritised groups and individuals. I argued that an intersectional approach to the study of the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background is necessary to understand the complexities that mark their narratives and experiences. Through an intersectional approach, I observed and analysed the ways in which LGBTQ Muslim identifications, narratives and communities can disrupt the binary imaginations of East/West difference. I also framed the social location they inhabit as a site of potential resistance to and subversion of normative systems.

This concluding chapter is divided into three sections. The first links the findings of each empirical chapter to the original research questions that informed this project. By doing this, I outline the main findings of the entire research. In the second section, I summarise the ways in which this work contributes to existing knowledge on LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities, and to theorisations and applications of intersectionality. Finally, I present some possible future directions of research in the study of LGBTQ Muslim lives, experiences, and identifications.

9.1 Summary of thesis

The data presented in this work was collected during one year of ethnographic research in Brussels, from August 2017 to August 2018. I employed three methods of data collection: participant observation in different spaces of the city linked to the racialised/Muslim queer community, 30 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, and a weekend of participatory theatre activities with nine LGBTQ participants from a Muslim background. The research was planned and conducted in collaboration with Merhaba, an organisation working with and for LGBTQ people from a migratory background in Belgium. The overall aim of this research was the illumination of the specific social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in the city. The point of departure for such an exploration was the acknowledgement of the erasure that these lives are subjected to in mainstream discourses on racialised/sexual difference (El-Tayeb, 2012). As a consequence of such acknowledgement, the incorporation and highlighting of LGBTQ Muslim experiences and voices becomes necessary to understand and disrupt the images and tropes that form the foundations of such discourses (Rahman, 2010; Rahman, 2014a). This work thus applied an intersectional lens, with a focus on the interlockings of multiple lines of identification and oppression, to the experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels.

The questions that guided the research, as presented in Chapter 1, were the following:

1. How do LGBTQ people from a Muslim background navigate different spaces in Brussels?
2. What are the features of the specific intersectional locations that they inhabit as LGBTQ people from a Muslim background?
    i) What are the features of the specific oppression that they experience as LGBTQ people from a Muslim background? In what ways do Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia intersect in their daily lives?
    ii) What are the potentials for social change offered by the different intersectional locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels?

As these questions informed all phases of research, from data collection to the writing of this thesis, they are answered in different ways through all empirical chapters of this work. While devising discrete research questions was important to focus my attention on specific elements in the field, these are not independent from one another. Participants' navigations and

movements through different spaces are shaped and sometimes limited by the intersectional oppression they experience in the city. Conversely, the potential for a disruption of social norms emerges also from an analysis of their movements across and beyond rigidly binarised spaces and areas. It is therefore important to read each empirical chapter as dealing with both questions, and as providing important elements to answer them.

The first chapters of this work contextualise the findings of this research, by introducing the theoretical framework that structured the research, its methodological design, and the relevant features of the urban context where data was collected. Specifically, Chapter 1, "Introduction", introduced the entire project, by outlining the reasons that motivated me to explore the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, and detailing the research questions that guided the research. Chapter 2, "Not just a buzzword", discussed the intersectional framework as it has been interpreted and applied for this project, focusing on the main critiques moved to intersectionality, and on how I addressed them in this thesis. Chapter 3, "Power, trust, and translation", discussed the methodological design of this project, and addressed the methodological and epistemological reflections that arose from the most challenging aspects of this research. Finally, Chapter 4, "Brussels, a city at the intersection", presented the features that made Brussels a relevant and interesting location for this project, and grounded the findings of this project in the socio-political context where data was collected.

The remainder of this work presents and discuss the data collected for this project, and it cab be divided in two macro-sections. Each of these focuses specifically on one of the two questions presented above. The first section consists of Chapter 5, "In, out, or somewhere else entirely", and Chapter 6, "When the spotlight is always on the neighbourhoods". These chapters discuss participants' navigations of spatialised imaginations of, respectively, processes of sexuality concealment and disclosure, and different areas of the city of Brussels. The second section consists of Chapter 7, "Between two seats", and Chapter 8, "Oh, you're here too!". These focus on the specific intersectional social locations inhabited by participants in Brussels. The first deals with the oppression that they experience as a result of intersecting lines of racism/Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia, and the discursive roles in which they feel relegated in their daily interactions. The second explores the processes of community building with other racialised LGBTQ people that take place at this intersectional site, as I analysed them with a view to recognizing their potential in disrupting essentialised imaginations of difference in the city.

9.1.1 In/Out, Here/There: Deconstructing binaries, finding that elsewhere

Chapter 5 and 6 mainly address research question 1, as they discuss participants' experiences and narratives of their navigations of spatialised binaries along which discourses of LGBTQ existence are constructed in Brussels. The "spaces" discussed in the two chapters are very different from one another. Chapter 5 deals with the metaphorical conditions of being in and out of the closet, and the movement from an "in" to an "out" that coming out discourses prescribe as *the* path of LGBTQ self-acceptance and emancipation. In contrast, Chapter 6 focuses on the images attached to differently racialised areas of Brussels. In here as well, there is an underlying assumption about a specific path that would lead to a life free from the homo/bi/transphobia that is discursively attributed to racialised-as-Muslim neighbourhoods. The movement, in this case, is the one that would lead the LGBTQ person out of the neighbourhood, in search for a personal safety and freedom of expression that are imagined as impossible there. Both discourses are shaped by imaginations of civilisational difference. Assumptions of irreducible difference in the treatment of LGBTQ people in Muslim communities, and in the territories that these communities inhabit, result in the imagined impossibility of open LGBTQ existence in these areas. The closet thus becomes the naturalised condition of LGBTQ Muslim lives, until the LGBTQ subject themselves decides to "get out", at once of the closet, and of the neighbourhood.

In both chapters, participants' narratives of their daily lives in the city present a picture that is much more complex than the one conveyed by binarised discourses of East/West difference. Some participants reflect the trajectories prescribed by mainstream discourses in their narratives. They stress a need to openly verbalise their sexualities in their contexts of origin, as well as to move out of their neighbourhoods to be able to fully live their sexualities. Others vocally reject these binarised ways of conceiving LGBTQ existence in and out of Muslim communities and spaces. My analysis of the data calls for a disruption of these rigid and simplistic constructions of the binaries "in/out of the closet", and "in/out of the neighbourhood". The illumination of the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background allows for the recognition of other possible paths of existence, as well as the observation of elements that are hidden and erased by the rigid lens that mainstream discourses apply to the different spaces across which such existence unfolds.

In Chapter 5, I discussed the various processes of sexuality concealment and disclosure that participants engage with in their lives. While some of the narratives offered by participants mirror coming out discourses, in stressing the need to openly verbalise their sexualities as the only possible path towards self-acceptance and empowerment, others are radically different.

An element that recurs across multiple narratives is the circulation of knowledge on participants' sexualities in absence of an open verbalisation. This element reflects conceptualisations of tacit circulations of knowledge that have been articulated by queer of colour scholars (Decena, 2011; Amari, 2013; Provencher, 2017). Moreover, it calls for a re-framing of the "in the closet" condition, by showing how there is a need to consider silence as a productive site (Fisher, 2003) and the result of a collaborative effort between the LGBTQ person and those who surround them (Decena, 2011). The recognition of tacit circulations of knowledge demands a reconceptualisation of the closet, by showing how it is not only a place marked by passivity, lack of agency, and pain, but how it can also be a nuanced location where information is conveyed in ways that do not conform to mainstream coming out narratives (Provencher, 2016). Ultimately, it is necessary to disrupt the rigid binarisation of the spaces that coming out discourses imagine as discrete, and the normativity that is attached to the movement from silence to disclosure. This is not because coming out processes are not relevant for all participants, as for some of them they clearly represent an important step towards self-acceptance and emancipation. Nonetheless, the data shows that not all participants follow this path, and a focus on it as the only possible way of LGBTQ existence erases their experiences and agency, and ultimately limits our understanding of their lives (Ross, 2005).

In Chapter 6, I focused on participants' experiences of and movements across another set of rigidly binarised spaces. Differently racialised areas of Brussels are constructed and imagined as divided by rigid borders (Donnen, 2019), and social issues are territorialised in some of these areas, while others are portrayed as free of them (Tissot and Poupeau, 2005). As sexism and homo/bi/transphobia are central to the social problems that are discursively relegated to neighbourhoods with a high concentration of Muslim population (Hancock, 2017), collective imaginations result in a series of assumptions on the movements of LGBTQ people across these borders. LGBTQ people are assumed to be at risk in racialised-as-Muslim neighbourhoods, and the movement that is imagined as the most intuitive for them is one that would bring them out of those neighbourhoods, where they would be free to live their sexualities fully. The data analysis conducted for this project shows how participants' experiences of different areas of the city, and the narratives of their movements across and through them, is much more nuanced. While the homo/bi/transphobia they experience in racialised neighbourhoods is certainly one of the elements shaping their navigations of the city, other factors emerge as equally important. These are related to their sense of belonging to racialised neighbourhoods, their recognition of the complexities that characterise them, and

a need to see them not only as places marked by social issues. This data shows a need to disrupt rigidly binarised imaginations of differently racialised areas of the city. Such disruption is necessary not only to better understand the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background that move through them, but also to gain a more nuanced, and ultimately more attuned vision, of the city itself, and the relations between its different areas (Donnen, 2019).

Together, these chapters show how it is necessary to re-imagine the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, detaching them from rigid trajectories of self-acceptance, empowerment, and emancipation. Mainstream discourses normatively prescribe a linear path for LGBTQ Muslim people: from point A – in the closet/in the neighbourhood – to point B – out of the closet/out of the neighbourhood. Participants' experiences show how point A is not only marked by trauma and pain. The closet can work as a productive site, where information is exchanged in absence of open verbalisation, and the neighbourhood can be a place where participants feel at home, and where their agency towards social change can take place. Conversely, point B is not the ideal site of empowerment and freedom of expression for all participants. "Coming out" is not the best option for all of them, as white neighbourhoods are not devoid of social issues that can, and do, have a negative impact on their life. As a result, the borders between the two points become blurred, and the linear trajectory that connects them appears in all its fictional rigidity. Ultimately, point A and point B might not be points at all, and an illumination of the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, in all their nuances and variations, allows for the emergence of the ephemeral nature of mainstream discourses of difference in the city.

9.1.2 Living lives at the intersection: oppression, disidentification and subversive potential

In Chapters 7 and 8, I discussed my answer to research question 2. I explored the features of the specific intersectional social locations inhabited by participants, as they emerged from their experiences and narratives. As is already clear from subquestions 2-i and 2-ii, the intention was that of observing and analysing the intersection not only in terms of the oppression it produces in the lives of participants, but also in relation to the potential for social change that it opens up. In other words, it felt necessary to avoid reiterating essentialising discourses of LGBTQ Muslim lives as solely marked by pain, as this did not reflect the entirety of experiences and narratives collected for this project. Rather, the aim of illuminating the social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in

Brussels called for a careful attention to the complexities and nuances that characterised the stories shared by participants.

In Chapter 7, I presented my analysis of data related to participants' experiences of intersectional oppression. The data shows how participants see their lives in Brussels as deeply informed by the interlocking of multiple layers of identification and lines of domination. Participants used a variety of metaphors to reflect this complexity, and they rejected the idea that this could be recognised through unidirectional analyses of their social position. Most participants talked extensively about their experiences of homo/bi/transphobia in Muslim communities and spaces, and of racism/Islamophobia in white-dominated settings. This element alone already creates a specific intersectional location, marked by the impossibility to fully express the multiple sides of their identifications in all spaces of the city. In addition to these, participants talked about specific roles that are discursively attached to the figure of the LGBTQ Muslim person, which further specifies the features of the intersectional oppression they experience in the city. These roles are underpinned by images of irreducible difference in attitudes towards sexualities and gender in white and racialised-as-Muslim communities and spaces. They are built on assumptions of pain and trauma lived by LGBTQ subjects in Muslim communities, on the particular exceptionality that LGBTQ sexualities represent in these, and, in the case of gay and bisexual men, on assumptions about sexual practices and general attitudes towards sex. Participants describe these roles as limiting in the possibilities of self-expression that they leave open, and as marked by a constant need to explain and legitimise their identifications.

The various types of communities and networks that participants build with other LGBTQ racialised people, discussed in Chapter 8, respond to a need to experience relations where this constant explanation and legitimisation is not needed. Participants speak of these communities as providing them with spaces where a mutual recognition among participants leads to a more immediate and deeper understanding of each other's experiences, often in the absence of a detailed verbalisation. These spaces have a significant impact on participants' sense of well-being and empowerment, allowing them to be active agents of social change when outside these communities. The data shows how the communities built by participants differ greatly from each other. For some, it is important to be surrounded by other LGBTQ racialised people, regardless of their specific ethnic/national/cultural/religious background. For them, it is their being at once queered and racialised by the wider society that functions as the primary element along which mutual recognition takes place. For others, the sharing of cultural/religious elements is the fundamental bonding factor. For others still, it is a set of

shared experiences and life choices that makes it possible to feel deeply understood in their groups of friends – i.e. a professional history as a sex worker, or the choice to marry a woman and try to stop having same-sex romantic and sexual encounters. The difference across such communities can be understood through a narrative conceptualisation of intersectionality. This allows us to view the intersectional locations inhabited by minoritised subjects as co-shaped by the identity categories made available by mainstream discourses and the agency of individuals in producing their own meanings and stories around such categories (Anthias, 2002b). In other words, not all stories of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background are the same, nor are the same the meanings that they attach to their LGBTQ identity and their Muslim background. When participants find ways to come together with people that they feel similar to and recognised by, they gravitate towards groups and communities where the shared understanding of what it means to be LGBTQ and from a Muslim background is similar to theirs. Finally, this chapter showed how these communities not only affect the participants who are in them on an individual level, but they also function as sites where counterdiscourses and counterpublics (Muñoz, 1999) are produced as a result of the specific collective recognition that takes place in them. They offer a space where cultural elements are appropriated and resignified, and where co-presence becomes a vehicle through which radical disruptive futures are imagined and enacted (Lewis, 2017; Mompelat, 2019).

9.2 Contributions to existing knowledge on LGBTQ Muslim lives and identifications

9.2.1 Postcolonial approaches to sexualities

The study of sexualities, and the practices that result from the knowledge it produces, have been deeply rooted in a western/global north perspective (Massad, 2002; Puar, 2002; Brown *et al.*, 2010; Rao, 2014). There is a need to envision and apply postcolonial approaches to the study of different sexual identifications and practices, to disrupt the rigidity of western conceptualisations of sexualities, and to grasp the complexities of sexualities as they are lived and performed by people other than western white LGBTQ individuals and groups (Meghani and Saeed, 2019). In the process, categories that are considered central in our understandings of the lives of LGBTQ people need to be re-thought and, possibly, re-articulated, to include the experiences of non-white, non-western subjects (Brown *et al.*, 2010). This thesis directly contributes to furthering a postcolonial approach to the study of sexualities. It does so by focusing on the lives and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in a Western European urban centre, as it enables the emergence of the complexities and nuances that mark their day-to-day lives. These complexities, in turn, call for the deconstruction of rigidly prescribed paths of LGBTQ existence in western discourses.

As highlighted at multiple points of this work, many narratives shared by participants do not conform to mainstream western discourses on collective liberation and individual well-being for LGBTQ subjects. In Chapter 5, particularly, I presented and discussed the multiple strategies deployed by participants to manage the levels of concealment and disclosure of their sexualities. Tacit circulations of knowledge (Decena, 2011) emerged as central for many participants, as did the need to disrupt the prescriptiveness and normativity of coming out discourses. In the chapter, I theorised silence (about sexuality) as a productive site, often the result of a collaborative effort between participants and their families. Rather than seeing it as a lack of something, a void where nothing happens, I argued that the closet, and the silence that marks it, can be a site where knowledge about sexualities is exchanged, and mutual expectations attuned to the non-verbal information that circulates through it. Without idealising the closet, or silence, as the ideal site for the unfolding of Muslim sexualities, I argued for the need to go beyond viewing "coming out" as the only option for LGBTQ existence (Ross, 2005). Such contestation, and re-articulation, of a basic tenet of western discourses on LGBTQ liberation and personal well-being is necessary to understand the complexities and variations in LGBTQ Muslim lives and experiences. The deconstruction operationalised in the chapter furthers an approach to sexualities that centres the experiences of non-white, non-western (or, rather, not-so-western) subjects, and from there destabilises the assumptions of universalism intuitively attached to tropes and images produced in western contexts. In doing so, my findings contribute to a refinement of postcolonial approaches to sexualities, especially in relation to the lives and identities of people from a Muslim background living in continental Europe. This work thus directly adds to important knowledge produced on the topic (Amari, 2012; El-Tayeb, 2012; Amari, 2013; Peumans, 2017; Provencher, 2017). It confirms a need to observe and interpret experiences of sexuality concealment and disclosure of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background through a new lens, detached from western tropes, while at the same time expanding on their analysis of the specific forms of tacit circulations of knowledge that take place in the communities they live.

9.2.2 Sexualities and racialisations in the city

Another important contribution of this thesis is around the ways in which LGBTQ people from a Muslim background navigate different spaces of the city, and the relation of such navigations with mainstream discourses of civilisational clash between differently racialised neighbourhoods. In Chapter 6, I critically discussed discourses of difference at work in Brussels, their effects on imaginations of different areas of the city, and participants' experiences of movement through and across such areas. The focus was on the discursive

spatialisation of homo/bi/transphobia to racialised-as-Muslim neighbourhoods, which mirrors global discourses of civilisational clash around different attitudes towards gender and sexualities (Hancock, 2008a; Hancock, 2013). The findings presented in that chapter show how rigid binarisations of western urban spaces on lines of civilisational difference are incomplete and limiting in understanding the ways in which different groups and individuals navigate space. In that chapter, I argued that it is necessary to move beyond these rigid dichotomisations, allowing for the emergence of the complex ways in which racialised neighbourhoods, and the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987; Donnen, 2019) that "separate" them from the rest of the city, are experienced by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background.

The focus on the daily experiences and crossings through imagined borders enacted by participants results in two important contributions to geographical knowledge. On the one hand, the chapter furthers understandings of LGBTQ Muslim lives and experiences, grounding these in a geographical perspective that is attentive to the ways in which they interpret, narrate, and navigate the different urban spaces they move through. This is done by showing how their experiences and movements are more fluid and complex than those depicted by rigid discourses of binarised civilisational difference. Second, this fluidity and complexity highlights the limits of such discourses, by uncovering the simplistic and essentialising assumptions that underpin them. These findings thus end up furthering understandings of broader geographies of racialisation in Brussels. An intersectional approach to constructions of civilisational borders in the city, and the framing of racialised neighbourhoods as "problem areas", enables a critical discussion of the limits of these constructions. The move was towards a deconstruction of binarised views of the city, which can potentially benefit studies of multiple groups – not just LGBTQ people from a Msulim background – , the spaces they inhabit, and the social relations they build.

9.2.3 Intersectional geographies

There have been many calls to develop and refine intersectional approaches to the study of multiply minoritised groups and individuals. In human geography, scholars have called for refined intersectional frameworks able to integrate a thorough analysis of multiple interlocking lines of domination and an attention to the social and spatial contexts in which these unravel (Valentine, 2007; Hopkins, 2017; Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina, 2018). Social scientists working specifically on LGBTQ Muslim lives and identities have also called for rigorous intersectional studies to further knowledge on the topic (Yip, 2009; Rahman, 2010; El-Tayeb, 2012). Importantly, these calls for a focus on intersecting lines of identification and

oppression have been accompanied by critiques of the simplistic circulation, and consequent popularisation, of "intersectionality" as a buzzword (Davis, 2008). In particular, the travelling of the concept to contexts other than the US resulted in a dilution of some of its original political radicalism, especially as categories of race and racialisations have gradually been losing centrality in its applications (Knapp, 2005; Erel *et al.*, 2011; Bilge, 2013). In addition to this, some scholars have pointed out to the problems that arise when applying a concept that heavily relies on identity categories in its interpretation and understanding of social relations, especially in light of post-structuralist unveilings of the normative and essentialising assumptions that lie behind such categories (Anthias, 2002b; Ehrenreich, 2002; Nash, 2008). This thesis responds to the calls for rigorous analyses of intersecting lines of identification and oppression outlined above, and it addresses the critiques moved to applications of intersectional frameworks. It contributes to a refinement of intersectional approaches, as well as the maintenance (or recuperation) of their radical potential, in three distinct, yet interconnected, ways.

First, this work moves beyond additive models of multiple discrimination and oppression, and contributes to the application of an intersectional framework able to grasp the complexities and nuances that mark social locations, without further essentialising the identities of the people who inhabit them. The framework applied in this thesis moves from, and is informed by, Collins and Bilge's (2016) articulation of intersectionality as a way to understanding complexity in social relations. Complexity became a keyword in this work, and the findings presented in the empirical chapters painted a complex, nuanced, multi-faceted, and varied image of the intersectional social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels. Chapter 7 showed how participants often feel relegated to specific roles and positions, the production of which is informed by the particular interlocking of racism/Islamophobia, homo/bi/transphobia, and other lines of power that intervene in their lives. In order to avoid essentialisations and misleading homogeneisations of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, their experiences of such intersectional social locations have been presented in their great variations across participants' accounts. This has been particularly central in Chapter 8, where the analysis of the different communities and networks built by participants unfolded through the acknowledgement of the different elements that participants are on the lookout for when they seek groups of people where they can feel understood. In this case, the application of a procedural and narrative approach to intersectionality (Anthias, 2002b; Dhamoon, 2010) enabled the emergence of participants' social locations as resulting from the interlocking of different lines of identification and domination, as well as of the

stories that participants themselves produce on these lines, and the categories that underpin them. Through this analysis, the empirical chapters of this thesis showed how not only an intersectional approach that does not over-rely on identity categories and identity politics is possible, but also that a fruitful dialogue between traditional interpretations of intersectionality and post-structuralist re-articulations can take place. In this thesis, such dialogue resulted in the illumination of those complexities and variations that mark the social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background (Rahman, 2010).

In line with the articulation of intersectionality as a tool to understand social complexity, in this thesis I rejected a view of the social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background as solely marked by erasure, discrimination, and oppression. Chapter 8, in particular, focused on the potential for social change and subversion of normative systems that are envisioned and enacted at such social locations. Once again, it is a dialogue between intersectionality and post-structuralist theorisations, in this case queer of colour critiques, that enabled the analysis and critical discussion of the communities and networks built by participants in the city, and the decolonial potential that they express and perform. The findings of that chapter directly contribute to knowledge around queer of colour formations and communities in Western European cities. Specifically, the chapter shows how disidentificatory practices are enacted by participants in a multitude of spaces in Brussels. Resignifications of both diasporic and LGBTQ (sub)cultural elements converge in the production of counterdiscourses, and queer of colour solidarities and networks function as the counterpublics that receive and refract them. A focus on intersectional social locations as productive sites, where resistance to and subversion of mainstream discourses of difference is envisioned and enacted, is important in order to counter the limited discursive construction of certain bodies and identities as invariably marked by trauma, oppression, and silencing. Without dismissing the oppression that takes place at the intersections of racialised Islam and LGBTQ sexualities, this does not tell the entire story of what it means to identify and move through the city as an LGBTQ person from a Muslim background in Brussels. The intersectional social location inhabited by participants thus emerges, from the findings presented in this work, as a complex area, irreducible to one or the other of its components. It is exactly this complexity, and the variations and difference that can be discerned inside it, that result in its subversive potential.

Thirdly, the theoretical framework applied in this thesis showed the analytical and political potentials of a (re)centring of categories of race and racialisations in intersectional projects conducted in continental Europe. This work responds to critiques of imaginations of Europe

as a “raceless” continent (Goldberg, 2006) and the color-blind applications of intersectionality that result from them (Ait Ben Lmadani and Moujoud, 2012; Bilge, 2013). It does so by observing how processes of racialisation shape social relations in Europe, in interaction with other lines of power and domination. In order to avoid the essentialisation of West/East relations as unfolding solely along cultural/religious/civilisational lines (Abu-Lughod, 2002), these have been observed and interpreted in those discursive processes that racialise Islam and Arabness in western contexts. The findings of this thesis confirm a need to look at processes of racialisation to understand the complex experiences of Muslim groups and individuals living in Brussels. Chapter 7 shows how participants often encounter racial stereotyping and racist micro-aggressions in their daily lives, and it discusses the impact these have in interaction with other oppression they experience. In addition to this, Chapter 8 shows how a focus on processes of racialisation enables the observation of specific dynamics of coming together as queer people of colour in Brussels. As the chapter discusses the different elements that concur in shaping the needs that participants fulfill in their creation of communities and networks, an element that emerges as central is the need for many to bond with other racialised LGBTQ people, irrespective of their specific nationality, ethnicity, religion, and thus the specific racialisation they are subjected to. This finding directly contributes to analyses of queer of colour formations, communities, and solidarities in Europe (El-Tayeb, 2011; Bacchetta *et al.*, 2015). The thesis thus shows that intersectional approaches that take race and racialisations seriously in continental Europe are not only possible, but fruitful in the analytical and political paths they open up.

9.3 Future directions of research

As pointed by Rahman (2014a; 2016), research on the lives and identities of LGBTQ Muslims is still in its early stages. Any enquiry into the subject is thus bound to open up further relevant directions for research, and opportunities for a refinement of understandings of the intersections between sexualities and Muslim identifications. The work presented here was set in a specific geographic context, and the analysis conducted at a specific geographic scale. It is in dialogue with other research conducted on similar topics in other geographic contexts, the UK (Yip, 2004a; Jaspal and Siraj, 2011; Siraj, 2011; Yip, 2012), France (Amari, 2012; Amari, 2013; Provencher, 2017), and the Netherlands (Akachar, 2015) in particular. Nonetheless, existing research is still limited to few geographic areas. Thinking about the European continent, for example, there is virtually no research on the topic in Southern Europe. Processes of racialisation (Lazaridis and Koumandraki, 2001; Silverstein, 2005; Calavita, 2006; Keskinen and Andreassen, 2017) and conceptualisations of gender and sexual

diversity (Binnie, 1997; Štulhofer and Rimac, 2009; Kuyper *et al.*, 2013) vary greatly across different areas of the continent. Therefore, there is no reason to assume that the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in these areas would reflect those that current research, including this work, has allowed to observe, and our understanding of LGBTQ Muslim lives in Europe would greatly benefit from their inclusion. Similarly, analyses focusing on different scales – national, transnational, regional, global – could provide deeper understandings on the processes of identity formation and the production of counterdiscourses among LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, as discussed later in this section.

This project aimed at exploring the experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, illuminating the intersectional social locations they inhabit. Its findings importantly show how complex and nuanced such intersection is, and how it is crossed by multiple ways of identifying and experiencing life in the city. Differences between some of the subcategories that cross the group of participants call for further research focusing on the specificity of their experiences. While research on gay and bisexual men of Muslim background (Provencher, 2017) and lesbian and bisexual women (Amari, 2012; 2013) in Europe has been produced, there is no work specifically focused on trans Muslim experiences. Such work would be extremely useful in further nuancing understandings of the intersections between sexualities and racialised Islam, as well as contributing to enquiries into the imaginations of racialised masculinities and femininities in the West.

As already mentioned, the exploration of LGBTQ Muslim identifications, lives, and experiences would benefit from analyses that take place at different geographical scales. One such scale, which emerged with a certain relevance in the phase of data analysis for this project, is the transnational one. In the production of counter-discourses on LGBTQ Muslim identities, and the creation of racialised queer communities and networks, the transnational dimension emerged as a prolific site. Participants often made reference to discourses produced by subjects and groups located elsewhere – France, Canada, the US, the UK, the Netherlands – as important elements that helped them shape their view on their identities and social relations. Of particular relevance is the network of transnational groups and communities in place across French-speaking contexts, often formed and reinforced through online platforms. As mentioned in Chapter 3, I got access to various Facebook groups during my fieldwork, where racialised queer subjects from a variety of places would share events, initiatives, and requests for support. This data, while certainly shaping my understanding of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in the city, and their relation with contexts located elsewhere, was largely not included in the writing of this thesis. As online spaces had not been central in my

planning for this project, once I got access to these I did not have strategies in place to ensure confidentiality and consent, and the complications of using data from such spaces did not fit with the ethical stance that I had decided to keep during fieldwork. Nonetheless, a specific exploration of such virtual spaces, and the circulation of counter-discourses that takes place on them, would certainly make for relevant further enquiry in the topic.

Closely linked to the theme above, another topic that would represent a fruitful site for future research is the use LGBTQ people from a Muslim background make of digital technologies, and the possibilities for community-building and production of counter-discourses that these open up. The relevance of digital communities among racialised queer is not only relevant on a transnational level, as showed by the experiences of participants who built them locally through the mediation of online platform (s. the experience of Mehmet, analysed in Chapter 8). In a similar way, the Facebook groups mentioned above did not only work as links to people located in different contexts, but they are used to advertise events taking place in the city of Brussels, as well as finding local support for people in situations of needs. An exploration of the various uses of digital technologies as spaces of mutual support and recognition for LGBTQ people from a racialised background, and in connecting them to other racialised groups in the city, would thus further refine the understandings of community-building at the urban level that were the focus of Chapter 8.

Finally, another theme that would benefit from further research is represented by the processes of sexoticisation (Schaper *et al.*, 2020) attached to the body of the Arab man that were presented in Chapter 7. As these had a profound effect on all gay/bisexual men interviewed in this research, the need emerges to explore in detail the sexualised representations of Arab men in the gay/bisexual male community, and their effects on the lives gay/bisexual man who are racialised as Arab. This theme was treated in this work as the result of the intersectional imaginations of sexual and racial alterity, but the implications of these processes could go far beyond the analysis of interlocking lines of domination and representation. The theme has close links to debate over consent among gay/bisexual men, on colonial imaginations of the racialised body, and on links between porn representation and real-life sexual and romantic encounters among men. Presenting such multi-layered elements to it, it is certainly a subject that would benefit from future research.

Appendix A: List of interviewed participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Background [Parents]	Country of birth	Time in Brussels
Karim	46	Cis Man	Gay/Bisexual	Algerian	Algeria	11 years
Assad	26	Cis Man	Bisexual	Moroccan	Belgium	3 months
Amine	32	Cis Man	Gay/Bisexual	Moroccan	Morocco	5 years
Sofia	28	Cis Woman	Biromantic	Moroccan	Morocco	9 months
Youness	27	Cis Man	Gay/Bisexual	Moroccan	Belgium	27 years
Lola	38	Cis Woman	Bisexual	Moroccan	Belgium	38 years
Sarah	28	Cis Woman	Lesbian	Jewish French/Moroccan	France	5 years
Sharky	27	Trans Man	Heterosexual	Tunisian Jewish Muslim	Tunisia	3 years
Ghalia	35	Genderqueer (she)	Pansexual	Belgian Algerian	Belgium	10 years
Elias	38	Genderneutral (he/him)	Gay	Moroccan	Belgium	2 years
Jalal	36	Trans Man	Generally heterosexual	Algerian	France	5 years
Rachid	37	Cis Man	Gay	Moroccan	Belgium	26 years
Anwar	25	Cis Man	Gay	Moroccan	Belgium	20 years

Esra	32	Queer (she/her)	Queer	Turkish	Turkey	4 months
Manuel	24	Cis Man	Gay	Spanish Moroccan	Spain	2 years
Medhi	34	Cis Man	Gay	Guinean	Guinea Conakry	4 years
Aziz	20	Cis Man	Gay	Guinean	Guinea	4 months
Jacob	21	Cis Man	Gay	Moroccan	Belgium	21 years
Salah	28	Cis Man	Gay	Moroccan	Belgium	10 years
Salim	28	Cis Man	Gay	Moroccan	Belgium	28 years
Ryzlan	29	Genderfluid (she/her)	Lesbian	Moroccan	Belgium	10 years
Mehmet	33	Cis Man	Gay	Turkish	Bulgaria	8 years
Yasmine	37	Trans Woman	Heterosexual	Algerian Moroccan	Belgium	31 years
Sam	29	Cis Woman	Lesbian	Moroccan	Belgium	29 years
Ismael	28	Cis Man	Gay	Moroccan	Belgium	28 years
Barwaqo	28	Cis Woman	Lesbian	Somali Djiboutian	Somalia	5 years
Hamid	25	Cis Man	Gay	Tunisian Indian	France	3 years
Sherif	30	Cis Man	Gay	Egyptian	Egypt	1 year
Keyna	42	Cis Woman	Lesbian	Moroccan	France	1 year
Sliman	32	Cis Man	Gay	Algerian	France	2 years

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: Lives at the intersection: Exploring the daily lives and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, Belgium.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What does this study aim to do?

Mainstream media and political discourses in Europe are increasingly framing the support of sexual diversity and the respect for LGBTQ rights as a Western process. As a result, the experiences, narratives and daily lives of non-heterosexual people who do not share a Western background are often erased and made invisible. This study aims to explore the daily lives and narratives of LGBTQ Muslim people as they move around the city of Brussels.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide to join the study. I will describe the study and go through this information sheet with you. If you agree to take part, I will then ask you to sign a consent form. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part, and what will I have to do?

During the study you will be asked to take part in one or more of the following. You won't have to take part in all these, unless you want to.

- Complete a participant information questionnaire gathering demographic data (age, nationality, job, etc.)
- Participate in an in-depth interview with the researcher. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes, it will be audio-recorded and transcribed. All data used from these interviews will be made anonymous.
- Participate in a series of participatory theatre workshops. These will take place over the course of a three months period (from January to March 2018). The theatre group will meet once a week during these three months, and each weekly meeting will last two hours. If you are interested in participating to this phase of the project, you will have a one-on-one meeting with the researcher prior to the beginning of the workshops, when you will receive more detailed information.

Confidentiality

All information that will be shared will be treated in confidence and you will be anonymised by the use of a pseudonym. All ethical regulations of Newcastle University will be upheld throughout the research. You have the right to withdraw yourself and your information at any time.

Results

The research is part of a post-graduate geography PhD project. If you wish to be provided with a copy please leave your details and I will forward the completed project.

Contact information

Alessandro Boussalem +44 7908780088 A.Boussalem2@newcastle.ac.uk

Appendix C: Consent and confidentiality form

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

School of Geography, Politics and Sociology

Study title: Lives at the intersection: Exploring the daily lives and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, Belgium.

Research Interview Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research.

The researcher will provide a written document for you to read before you confirm your agreement to take part. If you have any questions arising from this, ask the researcher before you decide whether to take part. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

I confirm that I have read the statement provided for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, without needing to give a reason.

I agree that the interview will be audio-recorded.

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in the research project and publications.

Name of participant Date Signature

Appendix D: Questionnaire

Research Study – Lives at the intersection : Exploring the daily experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels, Belgium.

Questionnaire

Participant pseudonym :

Age :

Profession :

Gender identity (use the words that would better describe your gender for how you feel it):

Sexual orientation (use the words that would better describe your sexual orientation for how you feel it) :

National/religious background of parents :

How long have you lived in Brussels ?

In what area of Brussels do you live right now ?

In what areas of Brussels have you lived before ?

Does your family live in Brussels ?

Thank you !

Appendix E: Initial interview structure

1) Tell me more about yourself
2) Tell me more about Brussels
   - How long have you lived here?
   - Where were you living before?
   - Where did you grow up?
   - Do you like the city?
   - What parts of the city do you generally move through?
3) Tell me about being an LGBTQ person from a Muslim background in Brussels
   - What are your favourite spots in the city?
   - What spaces do you feel comfortable in?
   - Are there spaces that you feel excluded from because you are LGBTQ or from a Muslim background?
   - Are you usually recognized as an LGBTQ person or as a person from a Muslim background when you move through the city?
   - Have there been any episodes of discrimination against you? Where? By whom?
   - Do you feel safe in Brussels?
4) Tell me more about the LGBTQ spaces in Brussels
   - Do you go to bars, or clubs? Do you often go to the gay street? Do you feel comfortable in them?
   - How about Pride? Do you participate? Do you feel comfortable?
   - Do you ever go to spaces of activist organizations, like the rainbow house?
   - Do you often meet other LGBTQ people? Where, and how do you meet them?
   - Do you feel excluded from any LGBTQ space in the city?
   - Has any episode of discrimination ever happened to you in an LGBTQ space?
   - Do you feel safe in LGBTQ spaces?
5) Tell me more about spaces that are more connected to the Muslim community.
   - Does your family live in Brussels? How do you feel when you visit them?
   - Do you move through neighbourhoods/parts of the city where there is a high concentration of migrant population? How do you feel when you do?

6)Tell me more about this interview.

- How did you feel before and during the interview? (Phase of recruiting, introductions, while talking, now that it’s almost over?
- Is there something you want to add, or ask me?

Appendix F: Ethical approval

University Ethics Form Version 2.1

Date submitted
18/07/2017 15:48:55

Applicant Details

Is this approval for a:
Student Project [A2]
What type of degree programme is being studied?
Postgraduate Research (e.g. PhD) [A3]
Name of Principal Researcher:
Alessandro Boussalem
Please enter your email address
a.boussalem2@ncl.ac.uk
Please select your school / academic unit
Geography, Politics and Sociology [A16]
Please enter the module code
Please enter your supervisors email:
Peter.Hopkins@newcastle.ac.uk
Please select your supervisor's school/unit:
Geography, Politics and Sociology [A16]

Project Details

Project Title
Lives at the intersection: LGBTQ Muslims in Brussels
Project Synopsis
In Europe, discourses around sexual diversity and cultural minorities often frame the recognition of LGBTQ identities in society as incompatible with Islamic religious and cultural values, which results in the erasure and exclusion of non-heterosexual subjectivities from Muslim backgrounds (El-Tayeb 2012). This research project will explore the relationship between space and identity for LGBTQ Muslims in the city of Brussels. The methods used in this research will be interviews, participant observation, and participatory theatre. Interviews and participatory theatre will provide an insight into the narratives and representations that LGBTQ people from a Muslim background make of their lives, the spaces they move through, and the specific oppression they face. Participant observation will allow the researcher to explore the lived experiences of participants within the urban context, observing changes in the identity performance of the individual as they move through different spaces. Merhaba, an organization working specifically with LGBTQ Muslims in the city of Brussels, will be collaborative partner in the project.
Project start date
20/09/2017
Project end date
23/05/2018
Is the project externally funded?
No [A3]
Does your project involve collaborators outside of the University?
Yes [Y]
Please provide a list of the collaborating organisations?
Merhaba

Existing Ethics, Sponsorship & Responsibility

Has ethical approval to cover this proposal already been obtained?

No [N]

Will anyone be acting as sponsor under the NHS Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care?

No [N]

Do you have a Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals (NUTH) reference?

No [N]

Will someone other than you (the principal investigator) or your supervisor (for student projects) be responsible for the conduct, management and design of the research?

No [N]

Animals (I)

The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act defines protected animals as: 'any living vertebrate other than man…in its foetal, larval or embryonic form……from the stage of its development when— (a)in the case of a mammal, bird or reptile, half the gestation o incubation period for the relevant species has elapsed; and (b)in any other case, it becomes capable of independent feeding'.
In practice 'Protected' animals are all living vertebrates (other than man), including some immature forms, and cephalopods (e.g. octopus, squid, cuttlefish).
Using this definition, does your research involve the observation, capture or manipulation of animals or their tissues?

No [N]

R

NHS, Health & Social Care: Facilities, Staff & Patients (I)

Will the study involve participants recruited by virtue of being NHS patients or service users, their dependents, their carers or
human tissues or the use of NHS & Health/Social Care Facilities or otherwise require REC approval?

No [N]

Human Participants in a Non-Clinical Setting (I)

Does the research involve human participants e.g. use of questionnaires, focus groups, observation, surveys or lab-based
studies involving human participants?

Yes [Y]

Does the study involve any of the following? [a. The study involves children or other vulnerable groups; as defined in Section 59 of the Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults Act 2006 as those who are relatively or absolutely incapable of protecting their own interests, or those in unequal relationships e.g. participants who are subordinate to the researcher(s) in a context outside the research?]

Does the study involve any of the following? [b. The study requires the co-operation of a gatekeeper (defined as someone who can exert undue influence) for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited e.g. students at school, members of a self-help group, or residents of a nursing home? NB. The IoN & School of Psychology volunteer pools are not considered gatekeepers in this case.]

Yes [Y]

Does the study involve any of the following? [c. It is necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places?.]

Does the study involve any of the following? [d. Deliberately misleading participants in any way?]

Does the study involve any of the following? [e. Discussion of sensitive topics e.g. sexual activity or drug use?]

Yes [Y]

Does the study involve any of the following? [f. The administration of drugs, placebos or other substances (e.g. food substances, vitamins) to the study participants.]

Does the study involve any of the following? [g. Invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind?*]

Does the study involve any of the following? [h. Obtaining blood or tissue samples?*]

Does the study involve any of the following? [i. Pain or more than mild discomfort?]

Does the study involve any of the following? [j. Psychological stress, anxiety, harm or negative consequences beyond that encountered in normal life?]

Yes [Y]

Does the study involve any of the following? [k. Prolonged or repetitive testing i.e. more than 4 hours commitment or attendance on more than two occasions?]

Does the study involve any of the following? [l. Financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time)?]

Data (I)

Does the research involve the viewing, usage or transfer of Sensitive Personal Data as defined by the Data Protection Act 1998 or data governed by statute such as the Official Secrets Act 1989 / Terrorism Act 2006, commercial contract or by convention e.g. client confidentiality? (If you are unsure please tick YES and complete the sub-questions).
No [N]

Environment (I)

Will the study cause direct or indirect damage to the environment or emissions outside permissible levels or be conducted in an Area of Special Scientific Interest or which is of cultural significance?
No [N]

International Projects (I)

Will the research be conducted outside of the European Economic Area (EEA) or will it involve international collaborators outside the EEA?
No [N]

Next Steps

Your project has been flagged as requiring further review from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. You will now be prompted to provide some additional information in the next section of the form. Once complete the finished form will be forwarded to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee automatically.

Project Outline and Proposed Research Methods

Project Outline & Aims

In everyday language, briefly explain the aims of this research including the anticipated benefits and risk. In cases where the use of technical or discipline specific terms is unavoidable please explain their meaning clearly.

This research project will explore the relationship between space and identity for LGBTQ Muslims living in Brussels, by observing and analyzing their lived experiences, their performances and their narratives. The focus will be on how the multiple identities of LGBTQ Muslims are performed, negotiated and represented while individuals move across spaces in the city.

Discourses around sexual diversity and cultural minorities in Europe often frame the promotion of LGBTQ rights as incompatible with Islamic religious and cultural values, resulting in the exclusion of non-heterosexual people from a Muslim background. The findings of this research will contribute to academic debates about the intersections of ethnicity, religion and sexuality; specifically, it will seek to explore the specific positionality of LGBTQ Muslims, taking into account the multiple discrimination they are subjected to and the physical spaces they occupy and move through in the city. The findings of the research will also provide organizations working with LGBTQ Muslims in European cities with knowledge about the specific intersectional identity of LGBTQ Muslims, as well as with tools to face the specific issues they face in their daily life (the identity negotiations they live in the different spaces they move through and the specific oppression and exclusions they face in different urban spaces). Merhaba, an organization working specifically in this field in Brussels, will be collaborative partner for this research.

The research project will have the following aims:

1. Explore how LGBTQ Muslims live, perform and negotiate their intersecting identities in different everyday spaces of urban Brussels
2. Understand the specific oppression faced by LGBTQ Muslims in Brussels
3. Provide civil society organizations working with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background with tools to address the specific oppression they face in the city

These will be achieved through the following objectives:

- Collect narratives and representations of urban spaces from LGBTQ Muslims
- Observe the lived experiences and daily identity performances of LGBTQ Muslims
- Analyze the relationship between space and identity formation, negation and renegotiation in the case of LGBTQ Muslims living in Brussels.

The research questions that will guide the collection and analysis of data will be the following:

- What is the relationship between space and identity formation, negation and renegotiation in the case of LGBTQ Muslims living in Brussels?
- What are the features of the specific oppression that LGBTQ Muslims face in Brussels, and how does this influence their daily lives and movements in the city?

Proposed Research Methods (Experimental Design) In everyday language, please provide an outline of the research methods in a clear step by step chronological order. Noting any pertinent information such as whether the research involves overseas partners and how you will handle the research data.
The methods used in this project will be participant observation, semi-structured interviews and participatory theatre. Participant observation will start on the first days of the project (September 2017) and will continue for its whole duration. Initially my participation will be limited to activities organized by Merhaba, the collaborative partner for this project, and will then be extended to other activities, events and contexts that are relevant to the exploration of LGBTQ Muslim subjectivities in the city of Brussels. While participants will be at all time informed of my role as researcher, I will take fieldnotes outside of the context that I will be observing. This decision was taken in agreement with Merhaba, so as to avoid research activities, such as note-taking, to have a negative impact on the degree of freedom and safety that participants are used to in the spaces I will observe. To this end, after each observed activity I will take some time to individually record observations, conversations and other exchanges with participants. After the first month, a phase of recruitment of participants for the semi-structured interviews will begin. These will be aimed at collecting narratives that participants make of their multiple identities, and their relation to the urban space they move through in their everyday lives. I will interview 20 participants, and this phase of the research will span from October 2017 to January 2018. The interviews will be accompanied by short questionnaires that will work to collect demographic data about participants. Interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, translated if the interview is conducted in a language other than English (i.e. French), and analysed. In the last four months of the project (January-April 2017) a participatory theatre initiative will be conducted in collaboration with Merhaba. 10 participants will be involved in this phase. They will engage in theatre activities once a week (2 hours sessions), with the aim of exploring their narratives of identities and their relation with the urban space through verbal and non- verbal creative expression. The activities will be facilitated by me, but participants will have an important role in all the steps of this phase. Due to the participatory nature of the method used, participants will be responsible for choosing the specific directions in which the theatrical exploration should move, as well as whether a final performance (or other form of dissemination piece) should be prepared. The method of participatory theatre has been chosen not only for the possibilities it opens up in the collection of data from participants, but also for the opportunities of active participation that it will give to participants themselves. The use of theatre or other forms of creative practices in research can in fact provide participants with tools and skills to express their voice without it being mediated by the language and perspective of the researcher. As in the case of participant observation, I will record data resulting from theatre sessions after each workshop.

Human Participants in a Non-Clinical Setting - Additional Detail

Participant Details Does the research specifically target participants recruited who are: [Adults (over 18 years old and competent to give consent)]
Yes [A1]
Participant Details Does the research specifically target participants recruited who are: [Children / Legal minors (anyone under 18 years old)]
No [A2]
Participant Details Does the research specifically target participants recruited who are: [People from non-English speaking backgrounds]
Yes [A1]
Participant Details Does the research specifically target participants recruited who are: [Persons incapable of giving consent]
No [A2]
Participant Details Does the research specifically target participants recruited who are: [Prisoners or parolees]

No [A2]
Participant Details Does the research specifically target participants recruited who are: [Recruited through a gatekeeper]
Yes [A1]
Participant Details Does the research specifically target participants recruited who are: [Welfare recipients]
No [A2]
How many participants do you plan to recruit?
30
From which source and, by what means do you plan to recruit your participants?
At the beginning of the project, participants will be recruited through Merhaba. By participating to activities organized by the partner organization, I will have the chance to engage in conversations and exchanges with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, and I will be able to present to them my research and ask them if they would be interested in participating as interviewees or as part of the participatory theatre group. After the first weeks, I plan to recruit participants who are not necessarily part of Merhaba or who do not an affiliation to LGBTQ organizations. This will be done by asking participants if they know anyone who might want to participate in the research project. In order to collect voices and perspectives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels, I think it important for these not to be limited to those of people who are linked to activist LGBTQ organizations. For this second stage of the recruitment process, I will ask participants who have already accepted to take part in the project to think if they know anyone in their network that could be interested in being interviewed or in being part of the participatory theatre activities.
Participant Information [Will you inform participants that their participation is voluntary?]
Yes [A1]
Participant Information [Will you inform participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?]
Yes [A1]
Participant Information [Will you inform participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?]
Yes [A1]
Participant Information [Will you provide an information sheet which includes the contact details of the researcher / research team?]
Yes [A1]
Participant Information [Will you obtain written consent for participation?]
Yes [A1]
Participant Information [Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them an explanation of the study aims and hypotheses)?]
Yes [A1]
Participant Information [Will you provide participants with a written debriefing too?]
Yes [A1]
Participant Information II [If you are using a questionnaire, will you give participants the option of omitting questions that they do not want to answer?]
Yes [A1]
Participant Information II [If your work is experimentally based, will you describe the main experimental procedures to the participants in advance so that they are informed about what to expect?]
Not applicable [A3]
Participant Information II [If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?]
Yes [A1]

Participant Consent Please describe the arrangements you are making to inform potential participants, before providing consent, of what is involved in participating in your study and the use of any identifiable data, and whether you have any reasons for withholding particular information. Due consideration must be given to the possibility that the provision of financial or other incentives may impair participants' ability to consent voluntarily.
Each participant will receive an information sheet containing general information about the research project (its aims, context, and methods used) and my personal contacts. Information sheets will be handed in person, so that participants have the chance to ask questions if they think something is unclear. An electronic copy of the information sheet will also be sent to participants by e-mail. Participants will be informed about the guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality that will be put in place by using pseudonyms in any written material that will result from the research. They will also be informed that any information that discloses the existence of immediate harm or danger for participants themselves or other people will be communicated to authorities, and they will be reminded at different stages (i.e., when the information sheet is discussed and at the beginning of the interview or of participatory theatre activities), that their participation is voluntary and they can opt out of the project at any moment.
Participant Consent II Participants should be able to provide written consent. Please describe the arrangements you are making for participants to provide their full consent before data collection begins. If you think gaining consent in this way is inappropriate for your project, please explain how consent will be obtained and recorded. (A copy of your consent form must be provided with your submitted application)
As said above, participants will be given an information sheet containing the aims, context and guarantees in terms of confidentiality of the project. In addition to this, participants will sign two copies of a consent form (one for me, and one for them). It is important to add that consent will be considered a process, and it will be my responsibility to ensure that participants are fully aware of the nature of the project, and are willing to participate in it also after the signing of the consent form. Participants will be reminded that they can avoid answering questions or engage in activities that they consider sensitive for any reason, and that they are free to opt out of the research at any moment. During the whole process, I will make sure participants are aware that I can be reached via phone or e-mail (my contacts will be on the information sheet) to answer any question or clarify any doubt they might have regarding the research and the nature of their participation.
Participant Debriefing It is a researcher's obligation to ensure that all participants are fully informed of the aims and methodology of the project, that they feel respected and appreciated after they leave the study, and that they do not experience significant levels of stress, discomfort, or unease in relation to the research project. Please describe whether, when, and how participants will be debriefed. (A copy of your debriefing sheet must be provided with your submitted application)
Participants will receive a short report via e-mail at the end of the research project. This will be a chance to thank them for their contribution to the research, and to present them the main results of the research. The text of the report will be written in a non- academic language, so that every participant will be able to see some results of the project. I will make clear that I will be available for clarifications and communication after the end of the project as well, should any participant feel the need to comment the report or simply to have more information about results or publications.
Potential risk to participants and risk management procedures Identify, as far as possible, all potential risks (small and large) to participants (e.g. physical, psychological, etc.) that may be associated with the proposed research. Please explain any risk management procedures that will be put in place and attach any relevant documents in the section below. Please answer as fully as possible.
The main risk I foresee for participants is the possible emotional and psychological distress they can feel in engaging in interviews and theatre activities that deal with sensitive topics. In particular, for some participants talking about or enacting past traumatic experiences could have a negative impact on their well-being. As said above, participants will be reminded at different stages that they are free to opt out of the project, or avoid answering sensitive questions, or engage in activities that they think might have a negative impact on their well-being. Furthermore, the research will be conducted in collaboration with Merhaba, a local organization that works specifically n supporting and creating a safe space for LGBTQ Muslim people. If a participant feels particularly uncomfortable, or is in need of support services, Merhaba and the other LGBTQ organizations that collaborate with it can provide the necessary support. In this case, if a participant discloses information that reveals potential harm for them or other, I will inform the organization that is better equipped to respond to the situation, after discussing it with the participant themselves.
Please upload any appropriate documents here. Typically you should include anything the committee would need to complete its full review. E.g. Consent form(s), Information Sheet(s), Debriefing Document(s), Questionnaire(s) and risk assessment(s).
Information%20Sheet%20-%20edited.docx (59.423KB) Information Sheet - Int%20consent%20form.docx (54.739KB) Interview consent form - Participatory%20theatre%20consent%20form.docx (54.783KB) Theatre consent form -

filecount - Please upload any appropriate documents here. Typically you should include anything the committee would need to complete its full review. E.g. Consent form(s), Information Sheet(s), Debriefing Document(s), Questionnaire(s) and risk assessment(s).
3

Data - Additional Detail

Please describe how data will be accessed, how participants' confidentiality will be protected and any other relevant considerations. Information must be provided on the full data lifecycle, from collection to archive. Alternatively please upload a copy of your data management plan below.
See Data Management Plan attached.
Please upload a copy of your data management plan (if required).
Data%20Management%20Plan%20%281%29.docx (14.716KB) Data Management Plan -
filecount - Please upload a copy of your data management plan (if required).
1

Permissions

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Risk Considerations and Insurance

What are the potential risks to the researchers themselves? This may include: personal safety issues, such as those related to lone working, out of normal hours working or to visiting participants in their homes; travel arrangements, including overseas travel; and working in unfamiliar environments. Please explain any risk management procedures that will be put in place and note whether you will be providing any risk assessments or other supporting documents.
I don’t foresee any substantial risk for me in conducting my research in Brussels. I have a strong network of support (friends and former colleagues) in the city, and I will make sure that at least one person knows where I am conducting participant observation, interviews and theatre activities. Interviews will not be conducted in participants’ home, and theatre activities will be conducted in places managed by Merhaba or other LGBTQ organizations.
Please upload any relevant / related documents.
filecount - Please upload any relevant / related documents.
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Supporting Documentation

Please upload any documents (not uploaded elsewhere in the application) which you think are relevant to the consideration of your application.
filecount - Please upload any documents (not uploaded elsewhere in the application) which you think are relevant to the consideration of your application.
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Summary and Submission

Declaration I certify that: [the information contained within this application is accurate.]
Yes [Y]
Thank you for completing the University's Ethical Review Form. Based on your answers the project requires approval from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee before ANY research can begin. Confirmation of this decision will be emailed to you. Please complete the declaration to submit your application. Declaration I certify that: [the research will be undertaken in line with all appropriate, University, legal and local standards and regulations.]
Yes [Y]

Thank you for completing the University's Ethical Review Form. Based on your answers the project requires approval from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee before ANY research can begin. Confirmation of this decision will be emailed to you. Please complete the declaration to submit your application. Declaration I certify that: [I have attempted to identify the risks that may arise in conducting this research and acknowledge my obligation to (and rights of) any participants.]
Yes [Y]
Thank you for completing the University's Ethical Review Form. Based on your answers the project requires approval from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee before ANY research can begin. Confirmation of this decision will be emailed to you. Please complete the declaration to submit your application. Declaration I certify that: [no work will begin until all appropriate permissions are in place.]
Yes [Y]

Dear Alessandro

Thank you for your application for ethical approval of your project "Lives at the intersection: LGBTQ Muslims in Brussels". I confirm that Dr Simon Woods has approved it on behalf of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. However he has recommended that you amend the typo on the "confidentiality" section of your information document and that you provide copies of an documents that you translate for our records.

Please note that this approval applies to the project protocol as stated in your application - if any amendments are made to this during the course of the project, please submit the revisions to the Ethics Committee in order for them to be reviewed and approved.

Kind regards,

Wendy

Wendy Davison
PA to Lorna Taylor (Faculty Research Manager)
and Sue Mitchell (Research Funding Development Manager)
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
5th floor, Daysh Building
Newcastle University
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU

Telephone: 0191 208 6349
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