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A place where there is no need to explain: LGBTQ Muslims, collective disidentification and queer space in Brussels, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the communities of support that LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels build with other racialized LGBTQ people, and the spaces of disidentification and resistance that these produce. It does so by analysing qualitative data collected over a year of ethnographic research with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels. In particular, the article focuses on the functions that queer de color communities serve in the lives of research participants. It shows how communication in these often takes place on a non-verbal level, in contrast to a 'pressure to explain' that marks participants' interactions in other contexts, and the sense of mutual recognition, understanding and political empowerment this communication produces. The article then discusses how the co-presence of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background and their collective resignification of cultural scripts produce counterpublic spaces that have the potential to disrupt social norms and dominant imaginations of difference.

Un lugar donde no hay necesidad de explicar: musulmanes LGBTQ, desidentificación colectiva y espacio queer en Bruselas, Bélgica

Este artículo examina las comunidades de apoyo que las personas LGBTQ de origen musulmán en Bruselas construyen con otras personas LGBTQ racializadas, y los espacios de desidentificación y resistencia que estas producen. Lo hace mediante el análisis de datos cualitativos recopilados durante un año de investigación etnográfica con personas LGBTQ de origen musulmán en Bruselas. En particular, el artículo se centra en las funciones que cumplen las comunidades queer de color en la vida de los participantes de la investigación. Muestra cómo la comunicación en estas a menudo tiene lugar en un nivel no verbal, en contraste con una 'presión para explicar' que marca las interacciones de los participantes en otros contextos, y el sentido de reconocimiento mutuo, comprensión y empoderamiento político que produce esta comunicación. El artículo examina más adelante cómo la co-presencia de personas LGBTQ de origen musulmán y su resignificación colectiva de

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guiones culturales producen espacios contra públicos que tienen el potencial de alterar las normas sociales y las imaginaciones dominantes de la diferencia.

Un endroit où on n'a pas besoin de s'expliquer: les musulmans LGBTQ, la désidentification et l'espace queer à Bruxelles, en Belgique

Cet article présente les communautés de soutien que les LGBTQ d'origine musulmane à Bruxelles établissent avec les autres LGBTQ racisés et les espaces de désidentification et de résistance qui en découlent. Pour ce faire, il analyse des données qualitatives recueillies pendant un an de recherche ethnographique avec les LGBTQ d'origine musulmane à Bruxelles. L'article focalise en particulier sur les fonctions que les queers des communautés ethniques occupent dans les vies des participants à cette recherche. Il expose la manière dont la communication s'y produit souvent à une échelle non verbale, à l'opposé de la « pression pour s'expliquer » qui imprègne les interactions dans d'autres contextes, et le sentiment de reconnaissance mutuelle, de compréhension et d'émancipation politique qu'engendrent ces communications. L'article débat ensuite sur la façon dont la présence simultanée des LGBTQ d'origine musulmane et leur nouvelle signification collective des codes culturels produisent des espaces « contre-publiques » qui ont le potentiel de dérailler les standards sociaux et les imaginations dominantes concernant la différence.

Introduction

Western discourses on sexualities often posit LGBTQ Muslim identities and lives as impossible (Boussalem, 2021; El-Tayeb, 2012; Rahman, 2010, 2014). Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia interlock in ways that detract legitimacy and authenticity from identifying as LGBTQ *and* Muslim, producing a sort of oxymoronic quality to the juxtaposition of the two markers (Puar, 2007). In this context, highlighting LGBTQ Muslim existence is already a disruption of social norms and imaginations of difference (Rahman, 2010), as it shows how the 'zone of uninhabitability' (Butler, 1993) to which they are relegated is, indeed, inhabited. A useful way to illuminate such intersectional zone, and unleash its disruptive potential, is to look at the relationships and communities that are built in and from it. Collins and Bilge (2016) stress the importance of a relational approach to intersectionality, calling for a recognition of the alliances and solidarities that result from the acknowledgement of the interlocking(s) of multiple lines of oppression.

This article focuses on the potential of resistance inherent in LGBTQ Muslim intersectional social locations. I discuss data on how LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels find and form communities, creating spaces where they feel safe and free. In particular, I focus on how queer of color communities allow LGBTQ people from a Muslim background to create discourses that destabilize the intersecting works of Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia.

The article begins with an overview of the concepts that I apply in my discussion and a brief section on methods. These are followed by a discussion of the narratives offered by participants on different spaces and communities they navigate. This discussion is organized in three sections. First, I discuss data on contexts where participants feel pressured to explain and legitimize how they identify and/or address collective imaginations of what it means to be LGBTQ and Muslim. In the following section I discuss how LGBTQ people from a Muslim background find, create and maintain communities and networks with other racialized LGBTQ people. I discuss the functions that these communities serve in participants' lives, focusing on how the 'pressure to explain' that they feel in other contexts is momentarily relinquished. In this section, I pay attention to both the more structured organizations and spaces in the city (i.e. the more formalized side of its queer of color scene), as well as informal networks of friendships. The final section discusses the effects of participation to these communities on the lives of participants and on wider social relations. The focus is on their potential to destabilize social norms and imaginations of difference, as well as on the empowering and mobilizing effects they have on participants.

Intersectionality, disidentification, co-presence

Research on the intersections between Muslim and LGBTQ identifications has focused on the experiences of erasure and oppression that the interlocking of Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia produces in LGBTQ Muslim lives (El-Tayeb, 2012; Rahman, 2014). Importantly, the intersectional social locations inhabited by people who identify and/or are perceived as LGBTQ and Muslim are not only marked by passive subjection to oppression. Existence itself, at this intersection, can have disruptive effects on the strict binaries along which difference is imagined and organized. As Rahman (2010) notes, 'gay Muslim identities fundamentally challenge these oppositions precisely because they are an intersectional social location' (p. 948). According to Butler (1993), bodies that are excluded from the normative systems at work in society – the 'object' – are relegated to a 'zone of uninhabitability'. This zone is fundamental for the emergence of the 'normal' subject as subject. The system relies on what lies beyond it, and on its unintelligibility, as conditions for the emergence of normality and subjecthood. The fact that this zone of uninhabitability is inhabited works as a constant threat to the maintenance of the system, representing that area of exclusion needed for the reiteration of social norms, while constantly threatening to destabilize it from beyond its confines.

One way to discern the destabilizing potential of LGBTQ Muslim lives is to observe the intersectional social locations that they inhabit as productive of relations of solidarity. These are formed with people who share the same lines of identification, and therefore face similar lines of oppression, as well as with other, differently marginalized and/or minoritized groups (Collins & Bilge, 2016). El-Tayeb (2011), analyzing processes of racialization in Europe, mobilizes the concept of 'diaspora' to explore solidarities that are formed at intersectional locations, and the counter-discourses that they produce.

Theorizations around the concept of 'diaspora' have proliferated in various fields in cultural studies and the social sciences (Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994; Hall, 1990). The concept offers a lens to look at processes of migration and displacement without relying on a linear trajectory from home country to country of arrival, becoming an 'emblem of multi-

locality, “post-nationality”, and non-linearity of both movement and time’ (Fortier, 2002, p. 184). Bringing together the cultural and relational fluidity that articulations of diaspora entail, and the disruptive work of queer theorizing, analyses of queer diasporas have become a fertile field of inquiry (Fortier, 2002; Gopinath, 2005; Wesling, 2008). According to Gopinath (2005), 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’ (p. 11).

El-Tayeb’s (2011) use of the term ‘diaspora’ has less to do with a community bound to an original land, bloodline, or culture. What binds the community is rather the co-production of a hybrid and queer space in contemporary urban Europe. She shares a view of diasporic geographies with Soysal (2000), who calls for the observation of new senses of diasporic belonging, detached from the idea of a single imagined homeland. The concept of diaspora can be useful to discuss the communities created by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background without viewing them as the product of an ancestral attachment to a soil or religion/civilization. In addition to this, it is possible to observe the relationships of solidarity that they build with other groups. This expanded framing of diaspora enables the recognition of new sites of counter-discourse production that are being imagined in Europe, in a hybridized field of solidarities between differently positioned groups. In the words of El-Tayeb (2011):

“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. [...] This strategy results in a situational, potentially inclusive identity, creating bonds between various ethnically and marginalised groups” (p. xx).

The disruption of imaginations of difference at such intersectional location does not necessarily take the form of a frontal countering of dominant discourses. The concept of ‘disidentification’ is useful to understand how such discourses are resignified in queer of color contexts. Muñoz (1999) elaborates on Pêcheux’s (1982) distinction between processes of identification with dominant discourses, characteristic of subjects who conform to social norms, processes of counteridentification, typical of subjects who resist and contest the system, and processes of disidentification. This third way, according to Muñoz (1999), ‘proceeds to use this [dominant] code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality’ (p. 31). Instead of identifying with binary scripts of either/or, but not quite radically resisting them by refusing their value altogether, queer communities of color can be seen as constantly resignifying elements and codes of dominant discourses, creating a subversive zone of re-presentation that imagines and prefigures different queer futures (Muñoz, 2009).

Following feminist and queer work on racialized spaces, such as those by Lewis (2017) and Mompelat (2019), I apply the concept of disidentification to contexts where LGBTQ people from a Muslim background come together and collectively produce new ways of imagining and enacting their identities. My analysis of queer of color spaces is guided by the concept of ‘presence-in-relation’, articulated by Lewis (2017) as a specific, affective co-presence that allows minoritized subjects to recognize each other, opening up a space for decolonial disruptions of norms and discourses.

While recognizing the disruptive quality of queer racialized spaces and communities, it is important to avoid idealizing the representations that they produce. Gopinath (2005), working on queer South Asian representations, showed how some subjects – namely queer women – are excluded from them, and therefore from the ways in which queer diasporic communities are imagined. It is necessary to pay attention to the exclusions that these geographies of coming together might produce. Gieseking (2020), discussing the queer and lesbian geographies of New York City, shows the importance of focusing on the informal, fleeting and temporary spaces of queer community and resistance created by LGBTQ people, and the limits of focusing uniquely on queer territorialization through the establishment of visible and durable spaces marked as LGBTQ. For these reasons, I focus both on more structured and formalized queer of color spaces, groups, and communities, and the more informal and private networks and bonds of friendship that participants create in their lives.

Methods

Data for this article was collected over one year of ethnographic research in Brussels, Belgium (August 2017–August 2018). The wider project aimed to explore how LGBTQ people from a Muslim background experience and narrate the intersections of Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia in their lives. The methods of data collection for this project were participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I conducted participant observation in spaces linked to LGBTQ Muslim socializing and entertainment. These included queer and queer of color parties, cultural events, activities planned by community organizations, and private and informal gatherings to which I was invited by research participants. As the project was conducted in collaboration with Merhaba, a Belgian organization working with and for LGBTQ people from a migratory background, many of the events I had access to were linked to their work. My presence in the field and the recording of ethnographic data was informed by the need to respect the sense of safety that many of these spaces represent for participants. Activities that denote external observation (such as taking notes in public or taking photos) would have felt threatening. Therefore, I refrained from these, and all field notes were recorded after my observation, in the privacy of my accommodation. It was equally important to be transparent about my role as researcher. This was easier in events organised by Merhaba, where my role was clear from the way I was introduced to participants. In other spaces, I made sure to mention my research and the reason for my presence in the field at the beginning of every informal conversation I had in order to give the person in front of me full freedom in their decision to share their experiences. In our collaboration, Merhaba and I organized and conducted a weekend of participatory theatre activities for nine members of the organization who are LGBTQ and from a Muslim background. The activities were inspired by the technique of Image Theatre, articulated by Augusto Boal (1979, 1992) as a tool for the empowerment of disenfranchised groups through the liberation of bodies and their self-expressing potential. My notes from these activities were included in my ethnographic data. In addition to this, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels. The interviews varied in length (from 30 minutes to 5 hours over two sessions) and in scope, but they all revolved around participants' experiences of the different spaces they navigate, the impacts of

Islamophobia, racism and homo/bi/transphobia on their lives, and the strategies they enact to overcome the challenges that these produce. All data was collected and analysed by me, a mixed-race Italian/Moroccan gay geographer. Informed consent was sought from participants before each interview, and all data was anonymised. Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Newcastle University.

‘They ask me to educate them’: intersectional oppression as pressure to explain

When describing their lives in Brussels, participants often mentioned feeling a ‘pressure to explain’. This pressure could refer to a need to legitimize the possibility of their multiple identifications and explain that being LGBTQ and Muslim is possible, to educate their audience on topics related to sexualities and Islam, and/or to address the scripts along which their interlocutors imagined LGBTQ Muslim lives to unfold.

During our interview, Jalal (36, trans heterosexual man, Algerian descent) described this pressure when talking about his experience as the only trans artist, and the only one of Algerian descent, in the company he used to work at:

“If there are interviews or something, all the time I had to manage that part. [...] I have to educate people to ... how to talk to me respectfully. [...] So, you don’t have the space to just be yourself and breathe. [...] You don’t have the space to exist in other ways”.

Jalal framed the oppression he lived as a trans person from an Algerian background as marked by a constant pressure to manage communication with others, educating them on trans and racialized experiences. This results in the impossibility to find a ‘space to breathe’, ‘to exist in other ways’ – ways that exceed his gender identity and ethnicity as the only, or the central, topics of conversation.

Sarah’s (28, cis lesbian woman, Moroccan descent) experience of communication with heterosexual and/or white people echoes Jalal’s. In her experience, being lesbian and from a Muslim background entails being relegated to roles of mediation between two entities constructed as mutually exclusive and in opposition. These roles are marked by multiple interactions that include educating others on how to talk about certain issues and constantly feeling in danger of ‘being a traitor’ to one of the communities she belongs 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 [...]. I think I’ll always be between two seats [...]. People ask me things, like: ‘Oh, is it OK to say that?’, or ... ask me to educate them, or feel comfortable telling me not nice things [...].”

Sarah’s sexuality and her ethnicity interlock to produce a specific experience of feeling ‘between two seats’. As people from both sides of imagined civilizational divides recognize her as part of their community, and as having knowledge of the other, she is often asked to share her insights. This role of ‘weird ambassador’ is particularly uncomfortable when she is asked to discuss homo/bi/transphobic violence in Arab/Muslim communities by white peers. On these occasions, she feels that the conversation takes place on a slippery terrain, where any mention of homo/bi/transphobic violence from her part could be used to reinforce Islamophobic tropes.

Dominant discourses on Muslim and Arab communities, and on what it means to be LGBTQ in these, form the background of many daily conversations for participants. As in Sarah's experience, they mention the need to confront prejudices about Muslim communities, especially in relation to their assumed homo/bi/transphobia:

"They [white people] always assume that, you know, you were battered as a child. [...] 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!' [...] You make me sound like a survived Auschwitz, [...] calm down, you know? But yeah, there is always this assumption [...]" (Anwar, 25, cis gay man, Moroccan descent).

In Anwar's narrative, the assumptions of suffering that the interlocutors attached to LGBTQ Muslim lives produce uncomfortable conversations, where he feels pressured to contrast this narrative. This experience is shared by Salim (28, cis gay man, Moroccan descent), who talks about the images that non-Muslim people voice when he comes out to them:

"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'. [...] They have already created your story for you. They have already stoned you to death. [...]. They have hanged you. [...] They directly prejudge that ... it's inevitably violent, actually. But it's not necessarily violent in the sense that they imagine. Physical. [...] It's violent in silence, maybe. It's differently violent. Or maybe it's not violent at all".

The vocabulary used by both participants conveys the high levels of 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 is one that has 'stoned' and 'hanged' him. Salim judges these stories incapable of grasping the complexities of LGBTQ Muslim lives. He did not negate the possibility of homo/bi/transphobic violence in Muslim communities. Nonetheless, the discourses that produce those stories of pain are unable to understand and represent the types of violence that are perpetrated. By applying a western, white lens, and being constantly anxious of confirming and maintaining discourses of civilizational clash, they fail to see how these communities can be 'differently violent', as well as the possibility that they might not be violent at all.

These conversations show how a pressure to explain – educate, legitimize, contest – marks many of the interactions participants have with people who do not share their identifications. The intersecting of Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia in their lives produces a position where they feel a constant need to verbalize their identities and experiences in an attempt to be understood. This 'pressure to explain', and the discomfort that it produces, does not mark all interactions that participants navigate in their daily lives. In order to understand LGBTQ Muslim experiences, it is necessary to also look at the relationships, networks and spaces that empower participants and allow them to express their identities and narrate their lives in different ways. The next sections discuss how participants create spaces and communities where this need to explain is relinquished – where, to use Jalal's words, they can 'exist in other ways'.

Finding spaces to exist in other ways

Arriving in Brussels as a queer man from a Muslim background, one of the first things that I noticed with delightful surprise was the number of more or less formalized events created by and/or for the racialized LGBTQ population of the city. Some of these events take place in venues specifically created to be safe and free for LGBTQ racialized people. This is the case with the activities offered by the many organizations working with and for LGBTQ people of color and/or from a migratory background. Other spaces, while having wider functions, have increasingly centred their activities around LGBTQ racialized identities and experiences. This is the case with the RainbowHouse, the umbrella organization that includes all major LGBTQ associations in the city. At the time of this research, of more than 60 associations in the network, seven had a specific focus on the lives, well-being and leisure of LGBTQ people from a racialized/migratory background.

Many participants stressed the value of such an extended network of racialized LGBTQ spaces. Jalal compared the context in Brussels to the one that he experienced before moving to the city:

“To see lots of Black and Arab people, and some cultural and artistic events, and fashion, and design, and political . . . I really loved that. [. . .] 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”.

Before moving to Brussels, Jalal felt in-between two different communities. Each allowed him to express a part of his identity, but none provided a context in which he could feel ‘complete’. In contrast, he described Brussels as a place where he found such unity. 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 of spaces that present a variety of ethnicities, with ‘seeing lots of Arab and Black people’ the feature that is most important for his sense of recognition. This sense of belonging to a hybridized queer of color community echoes the articulation of ‘diaspora’ in its extended meaning by El-Tayeb (2011) and Soysal (2000).

Keyna (42, cis lesbian woman, Moroccan descent) spoke of the Massimadi Festival (Festival of LGBTQ movies of Africa and its diasporas) as one of the few events in the city where she got to meet new people. She had moved to Brussels only one year before our interview, and had some difficulties in finding friends. In her interview, she stressed how ‘it’s at this festival that [she] met most people, most acquaintances. Most friends, really’. She described the festival as an ‘emergency exit’, something she deeply needed. The reasons why the festival was so important were because it was at once LGBTQ and targeted at a racialized audience. When comparing it to other cultural events, she stressed how she did not feel the same sense of comfort when participating to them, as she described them as ‘too white’. The existence of queer of color spaces and events in the city is important for Jalal and Keyna. They allow Jalal to feel ‘complete’, and Keyna to have an ‘emergency exit’ and be able to build friendships in a new city.

'Something that we don't put into words': relieving the pressure to explain

What is it that makes these spaces different in participants' experiences? What dynamics make them feel 'complete', or having an 'emergency exit'? A recurring element across interviews is that interactions with other LGBTQ people of color allow participants to be understood in ways that are not possible with others:

"I'm always glad to find people of color 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 guess it was a hard, long road for you to come here too?' [laughs]. I don't know. Yeah, I feel like we have a lot in common" (Sarah).

In this extract, Sarah introduced various elements that distinguish the feelings of proximity and commonality that mark her interactions with other racialized LGBTQ people. First, she mentioned the mutual acknowledgement that underpins these interactions. This is relevant because of the specific erasure that certain queer of colour subjects face, and the zone of 'impossibility' to which they often are relegated (Gopinath, 2005). Being seen by the other, and seeing the other in return, is the first step in the process of deeper communication that Sarah described. Second, she highlighted the possibility of a communication that takes place without the need to 'put into words' certain experiences. This is in contrast with those contexts where participants feel pressured to explain outlined in the previous section of this article. As suggested by Lewis (2017), the collective presence of minoritized subjects facilitates the recognition of the other's position and identity. This recognition precedes the mutual verbalization of experiences, enabling a sense of comfort that is impossible in other settings. Thirdly, there is the recognition of similarity in each other's life path. The 'hard, long road' recognized in this instance is different from the one that the white person imagines. In this case, the common ground shared with the other leads to open communication, and Sarah feels relinquished from the need to always carefully choose her words because of their possible implications.

Later in the interview, signaling her recognition of me as a queer person of color, Sarah said that she could 'talk about Arab homophobia without feeling the need to give much information or to justify [herself]'. She felt comfortable talking about topics that she would not delve into with a white person because she felt that I would be less inclined to interpret her words as grounds to legitimize Islamophobic discourses. When talking to LGBTQ people of color, she can use less words, as there is less need 'to give much information', or to 'justify' her experiences. The absence of a pressure to explain gives her room to talk about important topics, such as her experiences of homophobia in Arab communities, that she would otherwise be silent about.

Forming communities where 'we understand each other'

During my fieldwork, I met various LGBTQ people from a Muslim background who do not participate in events formally targeted at LGBTQ racialized people, either because they do not feel the need, or because they do not feel a sense of belonging to the community that those spaces represent. When talking with these participants, I tried to understand the

kind of communities they were building. In this section, I discuss the experiences of two participants, Youness (27, cis gay/bisexual man, Moroccan descent) and Amine (32, cis gay/bisexual man, Moroccan) and the queer of color communities they found in Brussels.

During our interview, Youness talked about his community of friends and family as an important support network. At the time, Youness was in a difficult stage of his life, having recently left his job after he experienced discrimination in the workplace. When he was younger, he worked in the sex industry for a time, offering erotic massages and sexual services to men and women. His choice to become a sex worker was motivated by the need to pay for his studies after being kicked out of his family home after his father learned that Youness's girlfriend was pregnant. 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. Youness's cousin also works in the sex industry, adding another layer of similarity in their experiences. At the end of the interview, I asked Youness if he would be interested in participating in the theatre workshop that I was organizing with Merhaba. He replied that he would participate only if his friends could come as well. By 'his friends' he meant his brother and his cousin, showing the importance that his 'group' had 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 them. In the following weeks, Youness invited me twice for dinner at his flat with his friends. On the first occasion I could not stay long, 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. Apart from her, all the other guests were non-heterosexual men. Four of the men in the room were of North African descent, all of them in their 20s and early 30s: Youness, his younger brother, their cousin, and a common friend visiting from France. The other four were white Belgian men in their late 40s and 50s.

While I had some background information on the younger men, as Youness talked extensively about them during the interview, the only information I had about the older men was that one of them was Youness's partner, and that Youness had first met him as a client when he worked as an erotic masseur. As a queer man of North African descent of the same generation of the younger men in the room, I intuitively felt closer to them than to the older men. In addition to this, my socialization in activist queer and antiracist circles made me hyperaware of the power dynamics possibly at play in the room. When Moroccan pop music started playing, the younger men started dancing to it while the older men were watching with a gaze that I certainly could have interpreted, in other contexts, as exoticizing and sexualizing.

It took a while to shake off the feeling that the white gaze of the men in the room was the one in control. I knew that this was Youness's 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 realized that 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 on in the night, I had the impression that Youness's partner was not the only one that was introduced to the group by being a client of one of the younger men. It became increasingly clear that, in this setting and with these people, Youness would not have to explain and legitimize

parts of his past that he finds difficult to verbalize. When he opened up about his experiences as a sex worker during our interview, he said that it was not easy for him to talk about this. He asked me not to judge him, and he felt the need to prove to me that his choices were legitimate, by stating that he started giving massages to pay his studies. During our dinner, I found myself thinking of the group as a very supportive and close-knit community, where Youness felt understood and not judged for the ways he identifies or his life and work choices. During the evening, the conversation in the group moved smoothly from talks (and jokes) about sex, 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 materializes in the group.

My access to Amine's group of friends was very different as my knowledge of it is limited to what he told me during our interview. 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 realized 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 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. 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.

When we started talking about the people he spends time with, 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. 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 have a certain background, I am Moroccan, and I can meet another [non-Muslim] person, we can be friends, but this friendship will be limited".

He reiterates at multiple points that, while a friendly acquaintance is possible with anyone, having deeper relations and sharing intimate information is possible only with people who share a similar cultural background:

"I cannot imagine being a good friend with someone if we don't share some convictions, we don't share some background [. . .]. The Turkish [friend] is not religious. [. . .] I like this person because he 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".

What emerges here is a recurring theme in the narratives participants make of their communities. What draws Amine to these people is the fact that 'they understand'. In his case, 'understanding' entails a lack of judgment 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 or make the same choices. Rather, it is a common cultural background that allows his friends to understand and support him.

Similarly to Youness, Amine is reticent to share details of his life with people that are outside his close circle of friends, and he does not feel any connection to the queer racialized groups in the city. When asked whether he ever thought of being in touch with organizations that work with Muslim LGBTQ people, he replied:

"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. [...] I prefer to share my worries with friends like me [...]."

While Amine's experience and life choices are distant from mine, which at times rendered our interaction tense and difficult to negotiate, it is not difficult to imagine the pressure that he would feel to 'accept his sexuality' in most LGBTQ contexts of the city. While I knew of organizations that would have a much more sensitive stance on the topic, and would understand his choices as legitimate (one of them being Merhaba), I could also understand why Amine preferred to share certain information only within his group of friends. Similarly to Youness, Amine's need to be understood goes beyond the need to be recognized in the specific social location he inhabits as an LGBTQ Muslim person. He needs people around him to understand his choice to prioritize building a family with a woman. For Youness, being understood means being seen and accepted in his life story, which includes his past experiences as a sex worker. We can see, in these two narratives, similar needs to the ones that other participants fulfil through their participation to the queer racialized scene in the city: being in a place where constant explaining and educating is not necessary, with a sense of commonality of experiences and identifications with people around them, which translates into a sense of being understood and leads to a sense of empowerment.

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 at such intersections. A lens solely focused on the interlocking of Islam and sexuality would fail to see the ways in which the life choices and experiences that distinguish Youness's and Amine's stories have an impact on how they interpret and experience such intersection. As pointed out by Anthias (2002), intersectional locations can be viewed in terms of 'translocational positionalities'. Such reframing allows us 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. The need of participants is 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 lives. In this sense, Youness's 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 racialized 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.

'To have fun, the way we know it': culture, re-signification, disidentification

Many participants referred to 'culture' as something that brought them closer to other LGBTQ people who share their ethnic/national/religious background, as well as something that is constantly re-worked and re-signified when queer diasporic subjects come together. During his interview, Salim talked about the weekend of theatre activities. When describing how he felt at the workshop, he spoke of a common 'cultural background' he shared with others:

"[...] 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 also through culture, music, it's ... the ways of having fun, [...] which make us much closer than someone who doesn't share exactly the same background".

In the extract, it is not a common experience that determines an ease of communication, but a common cultural background. Ahmet's (33, cis gay man, Turkish-Bulgarian) view is similar, as he stressed the need to create a community for LGBTQ people from the Balkans. Upon his arrival in Brussels, he did not know any LGBTQ people from the Balkans, and he started looking for queer people who spoke Bulgarian or Turkish. When asked about the reasons for a need to create a community of LGBTQ people with a Balkan background, Ahmet mentioned elements that he defined as 'cultural':

"[...] 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. [...] And that's why I thought it important 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".

For Ahmet, the creation of an LGBTQ Balkan community 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'.

The importance of these elements emerges in many of the events and spaces targeted at a racialized LGBTQ audience. The regular party organized by Merhaba, 'Merhaba Funky Party', promises on its leaflets musical entertainment that includes 'belly dance, cha'abi, raï, Turkish pop, house oriental, RnB, disco funk, Balkan'. 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 overlapped, 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 merged, transforming the 'familiar' into something still to be understood. The music was, at certain points, reminiscent of a wedding party in Morocco, and at other times the one I would in a commercial gay club in a European city. The disruption of gender performances that is often characteristic of LGBTQ spaces took place on predominantly North-African scripts, with muscular men belly dancing, and a drag queen lip-syncing to North-African pop music.

What was happening around me could be described in terms of a set of collective 'disidentificatory practices' (Muñoz, 1999). Participants' performances at the Funky Party were resignifying LGBTQ codes and scripts, re-contextualizing them in that discursively impossible location that is Arab culture, as well as Arab/North-African/South-West-Asian' cultural elements, now charged with queer and gender-subverting meanings.

For some participants, the study of traditions and codes of their North-African or South-West-Asian cultural heritage was in itself an important step in a process of re-discovery and re-signification of cultural elements that western discourses around them paint as anti-queer. For Hamid (25, cis gay man, Tunisian descent), the exploration of his cultural heritage has been a fundamental passage. As a young adult, he embarked on a journey through North Africa and South West Asia with his mother. As an artist, this proved to be a great occasion for him to study and experience different performing traditions across the regions. He actively used this knowledge to claim ownership of a cultural heritage that he often feels stripped away from him:

“I’m an Arab with piercings, and tattoos, and for this guy that’s a symbol of whiteness. That’s not true actually. [...] I mean, tattoos, our grandmothers still got them. And jewels ... I mean, nose-rings, and earrings, I can give you historical sources of ... [...].”

Hamid mobilized his historical knowledge to subvert the ways in which Arab cultures are imagined and represented. This allows him to claim a connection to that history, confuting the claims of in-authenticity, of ‘whiteness’, linked to some of his performances (e.g., wearing piercings and tattoos). Hamid’s reclaiming of cultural elements from the Arab East also includes representations of homosexuality. ‘You can talk to me [...] even about homosexuality, [...] I will find historical sources’, he said during our interview. Such resignification of historical elements allows for the emergence of an LGBTQ history inside the region, reinforcing his sense of belonging to this world of cultural references. Towards the end of the interview, he expressed an appreciation of the already existing spaces that bring queer Arab people together. He said that his ‘dream’ would be to create an art collective of Arab artists, highlighting the interpersonal and communal nature of the work of cultural re-signification and re-appropriation he is invested in. The bringing together of Arab artists in the city is made difficult by the stigma that accompanies performances of Arabness/Muslimness:

“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”.

Hamid’s narratives show the complex navigations that his position as a queer Muslim artist entails. On the one hand, he stressed the need to re-appropriate Arab cultural heritage to legitimize his performances, in a way that echoes my previous discussion of a ‘pressure to explain’. On the other, the coming together of Arab/Muslim people, and the subsequent collective empowerment, is made difficult by a pervasive Islamophobia that views even the most basic performance of Arabness (speaking Arabic) as a dangerous act.

‘A desire to change things’: communities of empowerment and mobilization

The previous sections showed how the queer racialized communities formed by participants allow them to feel understood in ways that are impossible in other contexts. Through the resignification of codes pertaining both to LGBTQ and diasporic subcultures, these communities produce new worlds through processes of disidentification. When describing his participation to the theatre workshop, Jacob (21, cis gay man, Moroccan descent) said that he shared with his co-participants ‘[...] this desire to change things, and to fight to be able to change these things’. The communities explored in this article often

have an empowering effect on the LGBTQ people from a Muslim background who access them, motivating them to mobilize for social change. It is a sense of shared experience and mutual recognition that enables the emergence of this 'desire to change things'.

Assad (26, cis bisexual man, Moroccan descent) talked about an event organized by queer activists of color that was aimed at discussing sexualized representations of Arab men. He described the event as a surprisingly cathartic moment, where he felt his daily work to dismantle certain stereotypes linked to Islam, Arabness, and sexuality reflected in the words spoken by the people in the room. 'My feeling, when I left, was joy', he said. He felt 'joy' because he saw his struggles and his experience as a bisexual Muslim man reflected in the words of the speakers and the public. Listening to people that are on the same 'side' as him, a side he described as 'deconstructive', had an empowering effect, similarly to what a shared desire to 'change things' did for Jacob. Youness reported a similar sense of joy after participating for the first time in the Pride parade. When recounting this experience, he stressed the fact that 'the theme that year was that of migrants', and the presence of Arab bodies was an important element for him:

"I saw all this youth, 20 years old, who are there, with the LGBTQ colors, [...] who were there, dancing. [...] It did something to me, really. And my brother was there as well. [...] No, there was really a lot of emotion, I swear. [...] And there were even Arabs with rainbow flags".

For Youness, the presence of people from a similar ethnic/national background, openly displaying celebratory signs of their sexualities, produced a sense of overwhelming emotion that is not easy to verbalize.

The concept of disidentification has mostly been applied to artistic representations and performances that disrupt mainstream codes and discourses by working simultaneously on and against normative scripts to imagine and create new and different worlds. Central to Muñoz's (1999) work on queer of color disidentification is the idea that such performances create counterpublics, 'communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public spheres' (p. 146). Applications of this to Arab/Muslim queer performances, writings, and art has been useful in showing the production of new discourses on what it means to be LGBTQ and Arab/Muslim (Provencher, 2017). Analyzing the queer of color art scene in London, Mompelat (2019) moves in the direction of recognizing how the creation of a counterpublic through disidentificatory practices is not a process that needs to depart from, or be mediated by, artistic creation and performance. It can be co-produced by the presence of queer of color bodies in a certain space, sharing a collective performative experience. It is therefore 'relevant to assess the ways in which (queer) people of colour can redress historical erasure by announcing their presence *to each other*' (Mompelat, 2019, p. 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.). 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, a community that detracts itself from certain social norms, at the same time envisioning and enacting new kinds of social relations. As observed by Lewis (2017), this kind of 'presence-in-relation' for minoritarian subjects, 'those always already excluded

from modernity's inscription as subjects', becomes a 'decolonising move' (p. 14). Almost echoing Jalal's words in the opening of this article, where he described his sense of 'completeness' in the LGBTQ racialized scene in Brussels, in Lewis's (2017) 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' (p. 14).

Conclusion

The intersectional social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background are not only marked by oppression. At these intersectional locations, ways of existing, living, and identifying outside (or beyond) the rigid norms that discipline social relations are imagined and enacted. Disidentification, as articulated by Muñoz (1999), is useful in highlighting the production of spaces that facilitate a resignification of the norms that shape gendered, sexual and cultural performances. The mutual recognitions that take place here 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 a political act, having in itself the potential to disrupt and subvert oppositional civilizational logics. In this article, this has meant showing how the people who inhabit it collectively reinterpret their identities and performances, creating spaces that disturb the underpinnings of dominant discourses in both white, LGBTQ or not, communities, and racialized diasporic ones.

Apart from the disruptive potential that such communities represent for wider society, or maybe *as part of* such potential, they serve important functions in the lives of participants. In these communities, participants feel recognized in their identities and life stories. This recognition allows them to feel the constriction of the roles they are relegated to in most spaces of their lives momentarily relinquished. A sense of being understood at a deeper and non-verbal level becomes possible. While participants describe the oppression they face as LGBTQ people from a Muslim background through the difficult conversations they feel pressured to have with others – a need to constantly explain, educate and legitimize – the feeling of understanding in their queer of color communities was described in terms of seeing and being seen. Experiences in these communities can be interpreted as 'presences-in-relation', ways of being together and recognizing one another as minoritized subjects that surpass verbalizations. As pointed out by Lewis (2017), this 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 in other contexts.

The article focused not only on those more formalized groups that make up the visible queer of color scene of Brussels. The inclusion of communities such as those created by Youness and Amine allows us to acknowledge the experiences of those LGBTQ people from a Muslim background who do not participate to the (more) institutionalized scene in the city, but nonetheless create communities that respond to similar needs of recognition and understanding. This is necessary to avoid essentializations of LGBTQ Muslim people as having the same needs. Rather than thinking of the intersectional location inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background as a rigidly bounded, enclosed space, encroached between infinitely extending social and cultural fields, it is useful to see it

as an area where different needs, desires, ways of identifying and of articulating narratives cross. Participants share a need to be seen, recognized, and understood. What needs to be seen, recognized and understood by their communities can differ greatly.

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