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INTERSECTIONAL IDENTIFICATIONS

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Over the past decades, intersectionality has inspired a lot of theorization, research and debate. For all its shortcomings, the concept manages to express a number of crucial concerns in contemporary thinking about social positions, discriminations and identifications. This paper does not aim to review this literature, but to build upon its legacy to theoretically and empirically explore multiple intersections in diasporic queer women's lives, focusing in particular on the intersection between ethno-cultural and sexual identifications. With notable exceptions, research on migration and diasporas tends to be heteronormative while research on sexual minorities tends to ignore migrants and ethnic minorities. The current paper problematizes both tendencies by taking a queer perspective on migration and a diasporic perspective on sexuality, thus contributing to the emerging field of queer diaspora studies.

As part of a larger project on diasporic LGBTQs¹ living in Belgium, this paper explores the social position and experiences of six queer women with a migration background, as narrated in individual in-depth interviews. Drawing on intersectionality theory, the relative importance and mutual interplay between their sexual and ethno-cultural identifications is explored and situated in relation to other social markers such as race and religion. How do they position themselves, socially and geographically, in relation to the different communities they (are supposed to) belong to? Which tensions do they experience at the intersection of their different social positions, and in which spaces do they most experience those?

Diaspora, Identity and Intersectionality

Contemporary research on migration emphasizes the importance of transnational connections, often conceptualized as ‘diaspora’. Brah (1996) states that this concept helps to think about the transnational spatial movement not only of people but also of capital, goods, technologies, information and cultural forms. In his view, people are not determined by fixed ethnic boundaries, but situated on different axes: ‘individuals and collectivities are simultaneously positioned in social relations constituted and performed across multiple dimensions of differentiation’ (Brah, 1996: 242). To Georgiou (2006), ‘diaspora’ helps to think about multiple senses of belonging, illustrating the hybrid and ever-changing nature of identities that are not inescapably dependent on homogeneity, purity and stable localization, thus challenging old understandings of identity and race as stable and geographically rooted categories: ‘Diasporic identities are always positioned and dialectically shaped in relation to other identities, such as gender, age, class, generation and sexuality.’ (Georgiou, 2006: 58)

The key identity at stake in diasporic research is ethnicity, which is based on boundary-making between groups on the basis of cultural difference (Brah, 1996). Increasingly, the fixed nature of such groups and the ensuing ethno-cultural identities has been questioned. For instance, Brubaker (2003) criticizes ‘groupism’, the tendency to reify ethnic and other groups and to treat them as real, substantial things-in-the-world. Instead, he suggests to think of them in relational and processual terms, using them as practical categories or contextually fluctuating conceptual variables. Parallel to that, he suggests the concept of ‘identification’ (as a process) rather than ‘identity’. In the same line of reasoning, Anthias (2012) questions the conception of migrants as belonging to homogenous ethnic groups, instead drawing attention to the crosscutting and interconnectedness of ethnicity with other dimensions, identities and structures. Like many

others, she uses the concept of ‘intersectionality’ in this context, referring to the intertwining of multiple social structures.²

As originally developed by Crenshaw (1989) in the context of legal studies, intersectionality draws attention to the fact that axes of social division do not operate separately but mutually influence each other. As Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) indicate, intersectionality offers an analytical tool to study social inequality as well as a theory of identity. While some criticize intersectionality theory for relying on essentialist notions of identity, Hill Collins and Bilge emphasize its core idea of multiple context-dependent subjectivities: ‘individuals typically express varying combinations of their multiple identities of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religion across different situations.’ (p. 125) While the model is sometimes interpreted as an additive one, adding up independent sources of discrimination, Yuval-Davis (2007) and many others highlight the mutually constitutive nature of intersecting vectors of oppression. Intersectionality provides useful theoretical and analytical tools to deal with the multidimensionality and complexity of social divisions and identities, which leads Anthias (2016), among others, to use it as a heuristic device.

Even defenders of the concept admit that it is used in many, often contradictory ways (e.g. Choo & Ferree, 2010), and that it is hard to operationalize because of the seemingly unsurmountable complexity it addresses as well as its fixed notion of differences (Ludvig, 2006). To bypass these problems, Ludvig (2006) suggests to focus on the intersection of particular dimensions, and to do so in selected personal narratives, in order to explore how categories of difference and identity intersect in narratives. Cole (2009) also pleads for the use of narrative methodologies in research on intersectionality, stating: ‘narrative can illuminate often hidden complexities while seeking to avoid simplistic generalisations and essentialisms.’ (p. 563) In a

similar spirit, Anthias (2002) proposes to study narratives of location and positionality: ‘The narrative enables the researcher to understand the ways in which the narrator, at a specific point in time and space, is able to make sense of and articulate their placement in the social order of things.’ (p. 501) Following these leads, this paper zooms in on a single intersection, the one between ethno-cultural and sexual identity, as a prism to discuss the complex interplay of these and other social positionings; and it does so through the analysis of individual narratives.

Sexuality and Intersectionality

Recent scholarship about sexuality offers interesting parallels to that about ethnicity, as both are anti-essentialist in questioning fixed categories and stressing the constructed and changeable nature of categories and identities. In relation to sexuality, this is mostly linked to queer theory, which eschews the foundational solidity of identity categories grounding progressive social movements (Hall & Jagose, 2013). Instead, sexuality is considered as discursively constructed in culturally and historically specific ways, hence contingent, unstable and heterogeneous (Sullivan, 2003). One of the endeavors of queer theory is to explore the intersections of sexuality: ‘Rather than separating sexuality from other axes of social difference – race, ethnicity, class, gender, nationality and so on – queer studies has increasingly attended to the ways in which various categories of difference inflect and transform each other.’ (Hall & Jagose, 2013: xvi) For instance, the whiteness of sexuality studies is questioned by exploring the intersections between race and sexuality, not considering them separately but in their complex interactions (Sullivan, 2013). Thus, Catungal (2013) criticizes the whiteness and race-blindness of LGBTQ institutions, presenting them instead as ‘contact zones’ where various differences

intersect. Similarly, Held (2015) draws attention to the whiteness of lesbian and gay leisure spaces by using an intersectional, ethnographic research approach.

Such intersections are particularly relevant in a diasporic context, as studied in queer diaspora studies. According to Fortier (2002), this line of research aims to both queer the diaspora, reconsidering the heterosexist norms supporting definitions of ethnic diasporas, and to diasporize the queer, by studying the transnational networks of queer cultures and communities. Indeed, diaspora research tends to work under the implicit assumption that migrants are heterosexual, while queer research tends to overwhelmingly focus on white, ethnic majority and non-migrant sexual minorities. Queer migrants occupy a particular position in the diaspora, as they are often ‘forced to get out in order to come out’ (Fortier, 2002: 190). Spatial displacement in the form of migration, for these individuals, is often part of a process of emancipation, away from the (assumedly) heterosexual family and nation. This is particularly the case for forced migrants, who may apply for refugee status by invoking persecution because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI). An emerging body of research explores the particular pressures this process involves, in particular to prove one’s sexual orientation by telling credible, coherent stories about sexual self-discovery, exploration and coming out (Berg and Millbank, 2009; Jordan, 2011), conforming to Euro-American models of sexual identity (Murray, 2011; Dustin & Held, 2018).

Sexuality may be a pivotal factor for migration, but this does not imply the straightforward adoption of Western sexual identity categories. As Manalansan (2006) points out, it is important to study how migration may be important in creating a ‘variety of sexual identity categories and practices that do not depend on Western conceptions of selfhood and community’ (p. 229). Queer migrants may experience discrimination and stigma from both their own

communities and mainstream culture, but they may also create new identities and social networks.

Although a lot of research mostly or exclusively talks about male diasporic queers, some scholars focus on women. For instance, Abdi and Van Gilder (2016) confirm the overarching focus on white gay men in sexuality studies and the need for a more diverse and intersectional approach. In their research on queer Iranian-American women, they observe an incompatibility and conflict between ethno-cultural and sexual identities, which leads to cultural isolation as well as physical and emotional distancing. Fisher (2003), in her research on Russian LGBTQs in Los Angeles, observes tactical uses of the closet to avoid open conflict, as conformity and secrecy are key values in Russian communities. Opposing the Western ideal of 'outness', Fisher defends the tactical use of the closet as a tool of agency. Similarly, Chikwendu (2013) questions the Western preoccupation with the closet, which sets up a divisive binary between the privileged ones who are 'out' and the pitiable ones who are 'in'. Studying the lived experiences of intersectionality among queer Nigerian diasporic women in the US, she explores their different degrees of outness in different spaces, which they use to reconcile the importance of the family within Nigerian (and more broadly Black) American culture with an engagement in queer cultures and communities.

Gender and sexuality are socially and culturally constructed in relational and contextually specific ways, leading to messy, layered subjectivities and multi-dimensional relations in specific localities (Hopkins & Noble, 2009). Rodó-de-Zarató (2015), in her intersectional analysis of the way lesbians negotiate public space, distinguishes four kinds of places:

places of oppression (where one has an important experience of discomfort even if only caused by one identity), places of controversial intersections (where one feels discomfort

due to one specific identity but that is a source of comfort or relief to another identity), neutral places (where no identity is accentuated) and places of relief (places that are sought or created because they provide release from some identity that is oppressed elsewhere or because they generate significant comfort). (p. 417-418)

Importantly, spaces can be experienced in different ways. For instance, public space is generally considered as heterosexual and heteronormative, so it could be perceived as a place of oppression for lesbians, but it may also act as a safe ‘place of relief’ because of its anonymity, particularly in an urban context. Oppositely, domestic spaces which are usually perceived as places of relief, particularly in the privacy of one’s own home, may also be places of controversial intersection or even oppression, if for instance one’s sexual identity is not accepted in one’s (parents’) home (Rodó-de-Zarató, 2015). Transnational movement, then, may be a spatial strategy to relieve such tensions and to achieve better living conditions, as illustrated by Silva and Ornat’s (2015) study on Brazilian ‘travestis’ moving to Spain to resist oppression.

Diasporic Queer Women in Belgium

While growing, in particular in response to the increasing flow of sexual minority forced migrants, the literature on the queer diaspora remains small, certainly outside of the Anglo-American sphere. In Belgium, queer studies is a very small field, in which issues of ethnicity and migration are hardly addressed (for some exceptions, Peumans 2014 and 2018). The current paper is part of a broader project on diasporic LGBTQs in Belgium, aiming to bridge that gap. Belgium is a Western-European country where sexual minority rights are well-defended (Eeckhout & Paternotte, 2011), but only recently have ethnic minorities and migrants become

part of that agenda. While discrimination is forbidden by law, xenophobia and racism are endemic, which Mielants (2006) connects to Belgium's colonial history, the complex sub-national tensions between French- and Dutch-speaking populations, and the influx of immigrants from the 1960s onwards, all leading to exclusive forms of nationalism. From the early 1990s, this has led to the rise of populist and extreme right-wing parties in Flanders, the Northern, Dutch-language part of the country. At the same time, the defense of LGBTQ rights has been incorporated in political discourse across the political spectrum, a process that is strongly reminiscent of what Puar (2013) calls 'homonationalism', i.e. the inclusion of same-sex sexuality in notions of nationhood, to the exclusion of (assumedly) homophobic ethnic and religious 'others'.

Following the lead of queer studies and many of the researchers discussed above, in-depth qualitative interviews were used to explore the lived intersectional experiences of diasporic queer women in Belgium. As queer studies focus on contingent, multiple and unstable subject positions, constituted within historically, geographically and socially specific social relations, qualitative research seems most suited to understand these lived experiences (Browne & Nash, 2010; Gamson, 2000). Kong, Mahoney and Plummer (2002) address a number of issues in the queer interview, such as the problem of representation, or how to avoid Othering the interviewee. They stress the importance of researcher self-reflection in the interview process, as well as an ethical strategy to create trust and empathy, which guided the empirical work in this project. However, as Cole (2009) points out, reflection on one's own subjectivity may not be enough; researcher's stories may unwittingly contribute to the marginalization and Othering of research subjects, so it important to stay aware of the processes through which certain stories get told.

For this project, a wide call for participation was launched using the Facebook pages and other communication platforms of LGBTQ associations, in particular those oriented towards ethnic minority LGBTQs, inviting all LGBTQs of non-Western-European origin to participate. A total of 35 people responded and were interviewed, all of whom were cisgender and only six were female. In analyzing and publishing on these interviews, as an ethnic majority gay male researcher I was hesitant to speak for others; even if my aim was to go against their exclusion from most accounts on migration and sexuality in Belgium, I strongly felt the risk of Othering. As a consequence, my main concern was to give the narrators a voice, to respect their narratives and to be mindful of my own position. I mostly worked on the interviews with male narrators, who were more numerous and where our shared sexuality offered a common ground facilitating the interview process and evened out some of the power imbalances (reference to author). For a long time, I was more hesitant to publish on the interviews with the six female narrators, partly because of the low number of interviews which precludes any kind of generalization; and mostly because of the even higher risk of Othering. At the same time, however, these interviews tended to be richer, because of the interplay of sexual and ethnocultural identifications with other social positions, in particular gender and race, which further complicated straightforward notions of fixed social positions and identities. While the interviews and my analysis are inevitably tainted by my own position as a white gay man, I have tried as much as possible to respect the voice of my interviewees, which I call ‘narrators’ to emphasize the narrative process of identity construction.

The interviews were semi-structured, addressing a number of pre-determined topics but not following a pre-defined order and allowing ample room for digressions. The first part of the interview dealt with ethno-cultural and sexual identifications and their intersections, while the

second part dealt with the role of media in these identifications (which will not be discussed here). In order to do justice to the individuality of each narrator, I will first discuss them separately in relation to three distinct themes in the interview: ethno-cultural identifications, sexual identifications, and their intersections.³ Only in the discussion and conclusion will I discuss patterns across the interviews, keeping in mind that generalization is not possible because of the low number and specific profiles of the narrators. Compared to the male narrators in this project, the female narrators were highly educated and familiar with gender and/or sexuality studies, as well as being activists, which is not the case for all diasporic LGBTQ women in Belgium.

Ethno-cultural identifications

In line with the literature discussed above about the multiplicity and hybridity of ethno-cultural identifications in a diasporic context, all six women interviewed for this project have complex national and ethno-cultural allegiances. Three belong to the ‘second generation’, as they were born from parents who moved to Belgium, while three others have moved to Belgium themselves. While generations of migration do not constitute homogeneous groups (Anthias, 2012), generational cohorts and their social contexts do matter in processes of cultural identification (Rumbaut, 2004). Generally speaking, first generation migrants tend to be more strongly oriented towards their country of origin, while later generations tend to gradually distance themselves culturally (Elias & Lemish, 2008). However, among the queer women interviewed for this project sexuality complicated this picture, which explains why the first-generation women also took a cultural distance from their country of origin.

Aliz has roots in Chile and Hungary. Before moving to Belgium, she lived in different countries and studied at university, including gender studies. As a consequence of this cultural and educational capital, she has a cosmopolitan outlook, not identifying with a single country and having a lot of international friends. In terms of ethno-cultural and national identity, she does not strongly identify with a single country: 'For me when it comes to nationality, it's just so... a big melting pot, that I don't ask myself that.' Moreover, she is always seen as a foreigner, in part because as a Latin-American she is perceived as non-white – which illustrates how race intersects with cultural identity: 'Right away they know that I'm not Belgian, without me saying anything. I don't know why, but I'm always the international girl.'

Natalia is a first-generation migrant from Uzbekistan and like Aliz, she is highly educated, familiar with gender studies and an activist. As to national and ethno-cultural identification, she does not feel particularly Belgian but she actively distances herself from Uzbekistan and Russia: 'In terms of mentality, culturally speaking, I feel much more Belgian and European. (...) For me, the question of belonging, of borders, of nationality does not seem very coherent nowadays... But anyway, I don't feel Uzbek or Russian.' She moved to Belgium with her mother and sister, and while her connection with her siblings in Belgium is strong, she mostly lost contact with people in Uzbekistan. She is continuously reminded of her otherness as, like Aliz, she looks slightly different and experiences exoticization:

I made efforts not to have a Russian accent, I didn't want to be continuously identified as an immigrant. There's this thing where, if you come from elsewhere, people have a tendency to exoticize you. (...) I'm white, but people see that I have Asian traits. (...)

Immediately, it becomes important for them to know where I come from. And when I say ‘I’m Belgian’, they say ‘But really, where do you come from?’

Like Aliz, Natalia experiences subtle processes of othering as both are not read as ‘white’, indicating that they fall outside of an implicit Belgian norm of acceptable whiteness, creating a tension between the way they see themselves (as white) and how they are seen.

Marie was born in Cameroon but travelled to Belgium for studies and has been in the country for many years. Like Aliz and Natalia, she is a highly educated and activist woman living in Brussels. She has strong ties with Cameroon and keeps contact with her relatives, but not very regularly. Marie is a Belgian national but does not feel very Belgian, nor Cameroonian for that matter: ‘The people there don’t consider me as from there anymore, but at the same time, here I’m not recognized either. (...) Me, I’m really neither of the two.’ Like Aliz and Natalia, but much more strongly, as a black woman she is confronted with her ‘otherness’ on a daily basis: ‘It’s the looks of others, they always assign you a supposed nationality or origin.’ Everyday racism is an experience she shares with most other narrators: ‘When you meet people, they say: “Where do you come from?” I say: “From Brussels.” “But no, from which country?”’ These experiences highlight the intersectional nature of her position in Belgian society: as a black non-heterosexual woman, she combines three intersecting social positions of marginalization.

While none of the first-generation narrators feel very Belgian, in part because of experiences of Othering and racism, ties to their home county are also rather loose, which they partly attribute to the way their sexuality is perceived there. The three second generation narrators are more clearly rooted in Belgium. Justine was born in Belgium but her parents were born in Congo, the former Belgian colony. Like Marie, she has an African heritage, but unlike

her, she grew up with her nuclear family in Belgium. Her parents are part of a tight Congolese community in French-language Belgium: ‘You had to be careful what you did, because everybody knows who you are. It was a big community, but everybody knew everybody.’ Unlike the three first generations narrators, Justine does feel very Belgian, but like them (especially Marie), she is continuously reminded of her otherness. Particularly as an adolescent, she had to find her place in society:

What was my place in society? Because I couldn’t say I was Congolese, people always say I’m a Belgian of Congolese origin. My parents are of Congolese origin, but I have nothing to see with Congo, nothing at all: I didn’t know anything, I didn’t speak anything, apart from the food. At the same time, I understood that people didn’t give me the same place as others.

Fatima was born in Belgium from parents born in Morocco, belonging to one of the biggest non-European ethnic minority communities in Belgium. As opposed to the three first-generation narrators whose parents were highly educated, she has a working-class background. Although she grew up in Belgium, Fatima does feel strong ties with Morocco, which she visits regularly during holidays: ‘When I’m there it’s like coming home, in one or the other bizarre way. (...) It’s confusing, because you are like: these are my roots.’ These ties make sense as she grew up in and is still surrounded by a tight Moroccan community in the city of Antwerp, where she lives. While perfectly fluent in Dutch, she only speaks Berber (also known as Amazigh) with her parents, and while more oriented to Belgium herself, her parents have a strong transnational network of relatives. Culturally speaking, she strongly identifies with Belgium but in certain

contexts she really feels Moroccan, particularly when people or media talk negatively about Muslims or Arabs (even if she is Berber, not Arab, herself).

Finally, like Fatima, Rania was born in Belgium from Moroccan parents, but as a child she also lived in Morocco for a number of years and she has Arab rather than Berber roots. Having grown up across countries in a complicated family situation, she has a conflicted relation to Morocco and her family, and she feels mostly Belgian. As will become clear further on, her sense of ethno-cultural identification is strongly influenced by her sexual identification, as it is (to different degrees) for the other narrators. While Rania does not talk about experiences of racism and Othering, the five other women do; indeed, their greatest barrier for identifying with Belgium is the way they are perceived and addressed, as racially different, which echoes the comments above about endemic xenophobia and racism in Belgian society.

Sexual identifications

The literature on the multiplicity and fluidity of ethno-cultural identifications in a migration context shows many parallels to recent theorizations of sexual identifications, which are seen to be equally complex. Particularly among women (Diamond, 2008), sexual identifications are changeable and often do not correspond to the fixed binary categories of 'lesbian' and 'straight'. The six female narrators in this research confirm this pattern, also reflecting on the key role of national and cultural contexts for the development of their sexual self-identifications.

Aliz is critical of identity categories although she doesn't entirely reject the label 'lesbian' nor clearly identifies as queer:

Having done studies on identity, for me, to be honest, I think everybody is bisexual, just to a different degree. I don't think that straight or gay, 100%, exists. I think sexuality is such a fluidity, but sometimes to dummmify a bit what you say, it's easier to put people in a box. (...) So you know, you have to be stereotypical, so it's easier for me to say: I'm a lesbian.

While not all-defining, her sexuality is an important part of her identity: 'I wouldn't say it's who I am as a person, I'm much more than a lesbian. It is part of my personality, part of my lifestyle, because it is a part of me that I'm discriminated against.' She has also been an LGBTQ activist in the past and she remains involved in LGBTQ associations. Compared to nationality, sexuality is clearly a more significant and salient source of identity for Aliz.

Natalia identifies as feminist, lesbian, queer and femme. Having done gender studies, she is very conscious about her identifications:

Queer, the deconstruction, the re-appropriation of the term... I also identify as femme, so there's also the performativity of gender. For me, these are not empty terms, they are politically important. Dyke also, more than lesbian. It's also a strong term, politically, because it's a re-appropriation.

These identifications are important to her, now, as she is also an activist, but she only realized she wasn't straight after moving to Belgium – which in her case was not a deliberate strategy to relieve oppression: 'It's funny because during the 25 first years of my life I thought I was straight, because I couldn't even conceive that I could be lesbian, because homosexuality didn't

really exist where I come from. There's a total omerta, it's very demonized.' Only in Belgium, when she went out and kissed a lesbian friend, she suddenly realized: 'It came like that, in a moment.'

Marie vehemently opposes all categorization:

I don't use any categories. I don't know what they mean, so I don't manage to understand them. And when I don't understand, I prefer not to put myself in a category. Lesbian, what does that mean? (...) I think these categories are imposed. Perhaps, at a certain moment, there was a need to protect rights, that I understand. But assigning people to boxes, cages, be it black, woman... all these categories, I would say: no.

Marie did realize she was different when growing up in Cameroon, but she lived in a context where this wasn't talked about: 'It wasn't conceptualized, it wasn't socialized, it was just something abstract.' Only much later, while living in Belgium as an adult, the issue returned when she fell in love with a woman. More than the other narrators, Marie is reflective about this process, talking about the way she constructed herself, partly individually but also in response to her social context and the Belgian society she lives in.

Like Marie, Justine questions gender and sexuality categories and labels, identifying as pansexual and queer. She only started to realize she was different at university, while watching *The L Word*, which felt transgressive as she came from a very religious Christian background: 'Gradually, I started to realize that perhaps certain questions were going to come up, and I thought: "No no no no no, I really don't need that! I'm already black, I'm already a woman, I really don't need that."' Having moved away to a bigger city for her studies, she had the liberty

to become active in a student LGBTQ association, but she wasn't out to her friends and family, which created a schizophrenic situation. Only a few years later, she indirectly came out through her open and activist communication on Facebook.

In contrast to the other four women, Fatima and Rania identify as lesbian and do not oppose the label. When she was quite young, Fatima became active in LGBTQ associations but she didn't come out at the time. Later, she came out to some of her siblings and friends, but she keeps a distance from the broader Moroccan community because sexuality is a taboo topic. Rania also states that sexuality was a taboo in Moroccan culture, certainly homosexuality. She only realized she was attracted to girls as an adult, after being kissed by a girl. When I asked if she hadn't considered it before, she said: 'But no, never! It was just a kiss, and I liked the taste.' Gradually, she also became involved in a LGBTQ association in Brussels, which became her central place of relief: 'And there I said: cool, I'm at my place. At least I knew where to be, and I stayed for ten years.'

Two main threads appear throughout these six stories. First, they confirm the fluidity and multiplicity of sexual identifications (ranging from lesbian to queer and pansexual), which should, however, also be understood in light of the activist background of many narrators who are all quite outspoken and reflective about their sexual identifications. Second, the interviews also disclose the close interrelation between shifting sexual identifications and shifting geographic and ethno-cultural contexts. To different degrees, the discovery and exploration of the narrators' sexuality coincided with spatial distancing (moving to another country or city) and cultural distancing, processes that will be further discussed below.

Intersections and places

The ethno-cultural and sexual identifications discussed separately above intersect and mutually influence each-other, in relation to specific geographic locations which, in line with Rodó-de-Zarató (2015), are conceptualized here as four kinds of places: places of oppression, places of controversial intersections, neutral places, and places of relief.

For Aliz, sexuality is a source of conflict: while she is in close contact with her mother and sister, she broke contact with her father who disapproves of her sexuality: ‘Actually I don’t speak to my dad because he thinks I have mental issues and that I will burn in hell.’ When she first came out to her parents in Chile, both were dismissive. Due to their negative response and the cultural taboo on same-sex sexuality, she actually re-entered the closet, echoing the ‘tactical use of the closet’ discussed by Fisher (2003) in response to the family home becoming a place of oppression: ‘I think their reaction and the breakup made me go back in. I had a lot of internalized homophobia.’ A few years later, she came out to her parents and sister again. At first her mother couldn’t accept it because she feared the response of her compatriots, expecting people to react negatively, a cultural pressure Aliz could distance herself from by moving to Belgium – using transnational movement as a spatial strategy to reduce intersectional tensions. While not identifying strongly with Belgium, she did deliberately choose it as her home:

So now, my home is here and I decided that Belgium is the place where I’m going to stay for a while. (...) Belgium is the first country where I can be who I am and not be afraid of kissing my girlfriend in the streets.

Contrary to Chile or Hungary, she feels safe in Belgium and particularly in the capital of Brussels where she lives and which, in Rodó-de-Zaraté's (2015) terms, operates as a place of relief for her.

For Natalia, coming out to her friends was easy, but her sister and particularly her mother reacted very badly. Echoing Aliz's narrative, her mother's home became a place of oppression, but Natalia had her own flat in Brussels, which provided her a place of relief. After this violent rejection, the issue was not discussed for a long time, as her mother mostly feared rejection by other people from the ex USSR, on whom she was dependent for social support. This is also why Natalia does not want to talk about it with her father, who still lives in Uzbekistan: 'He is a macho, a homophobe, a racist.' Homophobia is her key reason to take a distance from Uzbekistan: 'It doesn't exist there. As a consequence, homophobia is very present, as in "Homosexuals are sick".' While the attitudes towards her sexuality weren't Natalia's motivation for moving to Belgium, they are the key reason why she currently keeps a distance, socially and geographically, from the Uzbek and Russian communities in Belgium, which are places of oppression to her.

Echoing the tactical uses of the closet discussed above, Marie does not think coming out is important as a general principle:

For Africans and other non-western communities, where it remains difficult, I don't think it's a prerequisite. People know what they know, and I think it's enough in certain contexts, it's not necessary to name it, people know and it's OK.

Family relations are essential in Cameroonian culture, which explains Marie's views on coming out: 'What's best for you, not saying it and living happily with your family, or saying it and risking a familial break-up? Can you live without your family?' While she is critical about the criminalization of homosexuality in Cameroon, Marie stresses that things are not perfect in Belgium either, homophobia remaining present as well as double discriminations: 'When you're gay, black or Arab, it adds up and you're even more targeted.' LGBTQ life is also too white to her taste, and Arabs or black people are mostly seen as exotic sexual objects: 'You sleep with them, but you don't go out on the street with them.' Similarly, women, particularly non-white and non-straight women, are discriminated against: 'We live in a strongly macho society, it's male dominance. Women are relegated to... And when you're a black woman, and certainly a black lesbian, it's even worse.' More than any other narrator, and even if she didn't use the term herself, Marie drew attention to intersectionality in discussing the interplay between race, gender and sexuality in a migration context. While Belgium is a neutral place or even a place of relief for her in terms of sexuality, it is a place of controversial intersections in terms of race, because of the everyday racism she experiences.

At the time of the interview only Justine's her parents, who are not on social media, don't know about her sexuality, although they suspect. Once, her mother confronted her, asking if she was a lesbian: 'I said no, because I felt it wasn't the right time. She made me understand that it was all for the best, because things would get complicated. And then I realized I risked being thrown out of the house.' The family home, then, became a place of oppression, although her student flat provided a place of relief, first in a smaller city and then in Brussels, the capital where black gay (mostly male) people become increasingly visible (Gabiam, 2013). As for most of the other narrators, Justine's parents' key worry is: what will people say? If Justine comes out

that also affects her family and their relationship with other people in the Congolese community in Belgium as well as relatives in Congo. At the same time, Justine thinks it is important to be visible as a black woman in the LGBTQ community, because of the lack of representations and role models. Like Marie, she criticizes the marginalization of women, in particular black women and lesbians, and she feels the burden of representing all these communities in her activism. As for Marie, intersectionality – while not mentioned explicitly – is a strong underlying theme in Justine’s narrative, race and gender complicating the relationship between ethno-cultural and sexual identity.

Fatima came out to her sisters but not to her parents or other relatives. Her friends (including Moroccan ones) also know, but she keeps a distance from the broader Moroccan community because sexuality (including heterosexual sexuality) is a taboo topic that cannot be shown or discussed. As such, her family home and other Moroccan meeting places act as places of controversial intersection, where she feels discomfort because of her sexuality but also comfort in terms of ethnic community and support. For Fatima, as for many Moroccan and other Muslim Belgians, religion is an issue: ‘It’s a conflict, because you are like: “It’s actually not permitted and I’m doing it.” You have to find a balance.’ As for many other research narrators, media, and particularly the internet (including chat sites) helped her to explore and come to terms with her sexuality, offering a (virtual) place of relief. At the same time, she takes issue with the negative media representations of Arabs and Muslims. Like the three first-generation narrators, but even more so through media reports, Fatima is confronted with her ethnic otherness on an everyday basis, making her ethno-cultural identity more salient and a source of oppression in everyday life, while her sexuality is a source of oppression mostly in relation to her ethnic community.

Like Justine and Fatima, Rania was part of a tight ethnic community in Belgium, but unlike them, she couldn't tactically use the closet as she was outed. She anonymously testified on television but many people identified her, including people from her family: 'I got death threats at the time, and for more than five years, my family did not exist anymore, I didn't exist for them anymore.' Only later did she reestablish contact, but the consequences were enormous: 'Afterwards I understood that for Arabs, what's forbidden is to talk about it. It's not even doing it, it's talking about it. When you do things for yourself, hidden, and nobody knows about it: people don't care. But that other people know, that doesn't work.' While the other second-generation narrators managed to negotiate the intersection between their sexual and ethno-cultural identities, for Rania sexuality inadvertently took central stage and jeopardized her ethno-cultural ties, changing the family home and the Moroccan community at large into places of oppression.

Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on the insights of Ludvig (2006) and Cole (2009), the paper aimed to demonstrate that intersectionality theory offers a useful heuristic device to disentangle the multiple and changing positionings and identifications in narratives. While highly individual, the six narratives discussed in this paper all revolve around issues of ethno-cultural and sexual identifications and their intersections in particular contexts, as emphasized by Hill Collins and Bilge (2016). The analysis discloses the irreducible individuality of each narrative, where the balance and interaction between ethno-cultural and sexual identifications is part of an intricate interplay of social positions and contexts, which is why each narrator was discussed individually. Still, it is possible to deduce

some structuring elements from these accounts, keeping in mind that these patterns cannot be generalized beyond this small sample.

To start, and despite the varied national and cultural backgrounds of the narrators, they can be clustered in two groups, related to their generation of migration. The three first generation narrators moved away from their home country, taking a geographic distance from their family, only Natalia having moved together with siblings. While it was not the key motivator for their move, the distance from the home country and culture made it easier to explore and express their sexuality, only Natalia having to negotiate relations with her siblings on a daily basis. All three are cosmopolitans in a cultural sense, not strongly identifying with their home country nor with Belgium; and for all, sexuality takes up a prominent position in their self-identification, in particular through their activism. Belgium, and certainly Brussels where all three live, provides them with a place of relief (to use Rodó-de-Zaraté's terms), away from the places of oppression their home countries have become. While not intentionally used that way, migration turns out to be a strategy to relieve intersectional tensions as also discussed among others by Silva and Ornat (2015). Although first-generation migrants generally tend to keep strong ties to their home culture (Elias & Lemish, 2008), these sexual minority narrators deliberately distance themselves from some aspects of their home culture, particularly those related to sexuality.

The three second generation narrators identify more strongly with Belgium, where they were born, and to varying degrees distanced themselves from their parents' home culture which they all describe as less open to same-sex sexuality. For all three, sexuality is a central part of their self-identification, which necessitates an active negotiation of identities as all live in or near a tight ethnic community in Belgium. While the first-generation narrators tend to be out to most people in Belgium, the second-generation narrators more often rely on tactical uses of the closet as also

identified by Fisher (2003). Although one could expect them to be more ‘out’, as they are more strongly rooted in Belgium (which presents itself as very gay-friendly), the proximity of their ethnic community actually confronts them more acutely with differing cultural expectations than the first-generation narrators. Experiencing strong social control, particularly through their parents and their links to the community, both Fatima and Justine are only partially out to safeguard family relations, paralleling Chikwendu’s (2013) findings. Rania, who was inadvertently outed to her relatives, went through a brutal breakup and subsequent reconciliation with her family. For her, the intersection between sexuality and ethno-cultural identity caused a harsh clash, which first led to an absolute prioritization of sexuality and breaking all ties with family and the broader ethnic community, gradually moving back to a situation where she negotiates ties with her relatives and her sexuality. To all three, Belgium is not simply a place of relief: their family homes and ethnic communities mostly act as places of oppression or at least places of controversial intersections (in Rodó-de-Zaraté’s terms), while the big cities of Antwerp and Brussels and their own flats offer places of relief.

Clearly, the narrators’ generation of migration is a key structuring element, leading to a combination of geographic and/or social distance from their family and ethnic community in which religious, family and gender norms lead to a range of expectations and pressures. This is further modulated by race, which – more than nationality or ethnicity – is a salient category for all narrators. This leads to everyday racism for all (‘Where do you come from?’), and to a range of Othering experiences which are clearly connected to their skin color: exoticism for the lighter-skinned narrators (Natalia and Aliz, who feel white but are seen as non-White), Arabophobia and Islamophobia for the two Moroccan narrators (Rania and particularly Fatima, who feels continuously provoked by Islamophobic comments), and discrimination for the black narrators

(Marie and Justine, who feel multiply marginalized as black queer women). To different degrees, everyday life in Belgium does not provide them with a ‘neutral place’ (Rodó-de-Zaraté, 2015), where no identity is accentuated, as their racial identity is always accentuated. Particularly the two black narrators draw attention to the intersection of gender, sexuality and race, through which they feel multiply disadvantaged.

This being said, it is important not to present these women as victims; all the research narrators are strong individuals, using political activism as well as spatial strategies of mobility to fight oppression. And although all discuss the negative attitude to same-sex sexuality in their home countries and ethnic communities in Belgium, the situation in the broader Belgian society is not unproblematic either, as both homophobia and particularly racism are rampant. While all narrators appreciate Belgium’s legislative efforts for gay rights, none buy into the ‘homonationalist’ (Puar, 2013) discourse presenting Western nations as uniformly gay-friendly and ‘the rest’ as homophobic. Particularly nationalist parties and politicians like to present Belgium as a ‘safe haven’ for LGBTQs, but this inclusion in the national imagined community comes at the expense of the increasing exclusion of ethnic, racial and religious ‘others’, as testified by all narrators who do feel included in Belgium because of their sexuality but excluded because of their ethno-cultural identity, which also marginalizes them in the LGBTQ community. As non-white non-straight women, all felt marginalized to some degree in the different communities they supposedly belong to (Belgium, their ethnic community and the LGBTQ community). At the same time, they question the homogeneity of these communities and negotiate their borders, going against groupism (Brubaker, 2003) and instead highlighting the processual and contextual process of identification, thus clearly confirming the central tenets of intersectionality theory (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016).

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Notes

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans* and Queer. I use this broad and inclusive label to refer to the entirety of my research population, while I use ‘queer’ as a more accurate label to refer to the specific group of women discussed in this paper.

² Despite these critiques on ‘groupism’, for the sake of clarity in this article the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic community’ are used to refer to (perceived) objective membership of groups, and ‘ethno-cultural identity’ to the subjective sense of cultural belonging. While ‘ethnicity’ is used to refer to cultural difference, ‘race’ is used to refer to visible, physical difference, in line with the way the narrators used this term.

³ All quotes are literal transcriptions if the interview was conducted in English, or translations if the interview was conducted in Dutch or French, two of the official languages in Belgium (beside German). To safeguard confidentiality, the narrator names are replaced by aliases of their choice.