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Properly Gay?
The Construction of Ethnosexual Subjectivity in Sexual Counter-Narratives of Civil Society Agents

SAMMANFATTNING

Att skapa möjligheter att tydliggöra och beskriva skillnader är själva kärnan i diskussioner om sexuell mångfald. Men stundtals innehåller själva diskurserna runt sexuell mångfald, normativa och exkluderande mekanismer. Med hjälp av begreppet disidentifikation belyser artikeln motberättelser hos samhällsaktörer som stöder sexuell och etnisk mångfald i Nederländerna och Flandern och som är kritiska till den dominerande konstruktionen av "rätt sätt att vara homosexuell". Denna konstruktion innefattar en självcentrerad komma ut-logik som negerar och förhindrar subjektiviteter som på en gång omfattar religiositet, lojalitet till etniska grupper samt queerhet. Vi myntar uttrycket *etnosexuell subjektivitet* för att analysera dessa samhällsaktörers kritiska, kreativa och ibland bekräftande beskrivningar av queerhet, baserade på komplexa positioner och användning av föreställningar om rum, specificitet och mångfald. Som medskapare av kunskap om sexuell mångfald, använder dessa aktörer föreställningar om att "komma in", "multipelidentifikation" och "självacceptans" som sätt att vidga utrymmet för sexuell mångfald, samtidigt som de delvis medverkar i stigmatiserande politik kring kulturell och etnisk skillnad.

Keywords: proper gayness, disidentification, ethnosexual subjectivity, civil society actors

I want to suggest, then, an important imaginary of society that is made up of micro worlds in which sexual lives are conducted at a distance from the dominant hegemonic order. [...] There are multiple differences in practice, in legitimacies, in visibilities. (Plummer 2015, 117–8)

THE ABOVE QUOTE conveys what is at stake for many critical academics and/or civil society agents in the field of sexual diversity; sexual diversity as difference, visibility, legitimacy and (in)equality. In this article, we aim to unravel and analyse sexual counter-narratives in two West-European contexts, namely the Netherlands and Flanders. We specifically look at how two organisations aiming at supporting sexual and ethnic diversity construct discourses that are critical of existing ideas about what constitutes "normal" non-heterosexual subjectivity, but at the same time cannot entirely escape the dominant discursive context they are part of. We argue that sexual counter-narratives are constructed through an emphasis on differences in the encounter with dominant assumptions about non-heterosexual identities and lives.

We underline the importance of taking the postcolonial context seriously, in which power differentials shape which sexual identities and lives are socially and culturally (more) legible and considered to be in need of official support. A postcolonial perspective, for us, comes down to an epistemological standpoint that takes voices of ethnicised (Krebbekx et al. 2016) or migrant communities as a starting point for rethinking questions of gender, sexuality and queerness. Stacy Douglas et al. (2011, 108) point at the necessity in the contemporary political landscape of "queer anti-racist critique," which the authors characterise as a "form of intersectional critique" that "serves as a tool for building spaces and movements that are committed to interrogating gender and sexuality norms." The queer anti-racist critique that we adopt in this article not only engages in analytical critical deconstruction, but also simultaneously commits itself to creating space for claiming and articulating differences.

In what follows, our article first briefly discusses the Netherlands and Flanders as locations characterised by ethnosexual boundary processes. Ethnosexual boundaries are engendered through the formulation of normative ideas about non-heterosexuality, in combination with assumptions about diverging possibilities for the unfolding of "proper" gay identities and lives among ethnic majority and minoritised communities. Next, we coin "ethnosexual subjectivity" as a conceptual frame-

work to approach sexual counter-narratives articulated by voices emerging from ethnicised postcolonial and/or migrant communities. In the second part, we analyse interviews with representatives of two civil society organisations supporting sexual and ethnic diversity as exemplary sexual counter-narratives. We scrutinise how their alternative accounts of non-heterosexuality come into being critically and creatively through inhabiting complex positions, and utilising notions of space, specificity, and diversity. We consider these organisations as necessarily remaining dependent on hegemonic discourses to mark their difference.

Setting the Scene: Ethnosexual Boundaries in the Netherlands and Flanders

Ethnosexual boundaries in the Dutch and Flemish context are posited, we suggest, through formulating implicit and explicit normative ideas about non-heterosexuality, and assumptions about "ethnic differences" in tolerance for non-heterosexual identities and lives. Sociologist Joane Nagel (2000) coined the phrase "ethnosexual boundaries" to convey the insight that racial, ethnic, and national boundaries are also sexual boundaries, and to analyse instances of "ethnosexual boundary processes." She looks into various historical and contemporary cases of defying the "ethnosexual frontiers" (Nagel 2000, 113) that are constructed in society, and argues that such cases best expose "the sexualized foundations of ethnicity" (118). The author therefore analyses cases of "rule breaking, policing, and punishment of sexual deviants" as episodes that challenge as well as reinforce "racial, ethnic and nationalist boundaries and hegemonies and […] ethnosexual regimes" (Nagel 2000, 118). Nagel's cases are the sexual policing of nationalism in the aftermath of World War II in Europe, the sexual aspects of Native American Indian-white relations, and the sexualisation of the colour line dividing blacks and whites in US society. She draws upon the feminist insight that the construction of ethnic boundaries often relies on heteronormative ethnosexual stereotypes about "our/their men" and "our/their women." In her final interrogation of black-white ethnosexual boundaries, however, she refers to the necessity of "queering the heteronormative assumptions"

(Nagel 2000, 123) and points at existing notions about an incompatibility of blackness and homosexuality.

In the Dutch and Flemish context, we can speak about similar current constructions of ethnic boundaries through formulating normative understandings about sexuality – homosexuality in particular. The Netherlands has been described as a guiding country when it comes to sexual progressiveness, that is, specifically sexual education, teenage sexuality, and the sexual freedom and equality of women and gays. In this socio-political narrative about the Netherlands, the idea of sexual progressiveness has increasingly been considered a defining characteristic of the Dutch nation (Mepschen et al. 2010; Krebbekx et al. 2016). As such, the meaning and boundaries of whiteness, the dominant ethnic category constructed through myths of cultural homogeneity (Griffin and Braidotti 2002), have become reformulated through assumptions about sexual progressiveness (Dudink 2011). Ethnosexual boundaries come into being through dominant assumptions about sexual conservativeness and homophobia as characteristic for ethnicised minority communities (van der Veer 2006; Butler 2008; Scott 2012). In this boundary process, women belonging to ethnicised minority groups are imagined as "in need of being saved"; while gays belonging to ethnicised minority communities who do not live up to dominant expectations about gay identity and life are silenced (Wekker 2009; Jivraj and de Jong 2011; Bracke 2012).

In Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking region of Belgium,[1] similar ethnic boundary processes through assumptions about sexuality appear to exist. As the connections between homosexuality and forms of nationalism in Flanders have not been put extensively on scholarly agendas so far, we suggest that they are long overdue for a critical analysis regarding their (shifting) modes of production. Ethnosexual frontiers seem to be constructed in, and reinforced by and through, the relations between nationalist discourse, LGBT civil society, and public debates about citizenship, sexuality, religion, and culture (Bracke 2009; van den Brandt 2017). While some recent initiatives in (collaboration with) "mainstream" LGBT civil society could point at an increasing critical

awareness and attempts to subvert ethnosexual stereotypes,[2] the current right-wing Flemish cabinet (a coalition of liberals, nationalists and Christian Democrats), in combination with the "refugee crisis," may not bode well for future political rhetoric and policy-making. By way of an illustration, we provide the following anecdote: Çavaria, the Flemish umbrella LGBT organisation, invited Gwendolyn Rutte (chairwomen of the liberal coalition partner Open-VLD) at its latest yearly award ceremony, on 22 January 2016, in Gent, to be one of their award presenters. When given the floor, Rutte called for the need to protect the freedoms of women and *holebis* (LGBs) by keeping a close eye on those who harass and "might end up stoning" women and *holebis*.[3] This call refers to current public debates across European contexts about violence towards women, debates which erupted after the harassment and robbing of hundreds of women in German and Swedish metropolises during New Year's Eve of 2016. As feminist commentators in both the Netherlands and Flanders have argued, these debates tend to rely on problematic stereotypes of North African and Arab men as sexual predators, and of "their" cultures as sexually oppressive.[4]

What, then, exactly are the current dominant expectations about non-heterosexual identity and life in the Netherlands and Flanders? Fatima El-Tayeb (2011; 2012) scrutinised underlying expectations attached to gayness in the European postcolonial context. She draws upon Lisa Duggan's concept of homonormativity to be able to capture what she calls "proper gayness." For Duggan (quoted in Puar 2007, 38–9), "homo-normativity" serves as the conceptual means to understand the partial inclusion of gays and lesbians in existing legal, economic and kinship frameworks, policy making, and mainstream cultural production, and to critique gay subjects embedded in a "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative forms but upholds and sustains them." According to El-Tayeb's analysis, dominant perceptions of healthy and desirable non-heterosexuality are partly established through positing ideas about what is *outside* of this normative identity. The focus on "coming out" is attached to the Western white gay subject, and this expectation constructs a complementary understanding of the "under-

developed Other," embodied by "racialized queers," especially Muslim non-heterosexual subjects (El-Tayeb 2012, 86). In this logic, we suggest, ethnicised communities come to represent underdeveloped, hampered sexual subjectivities, falling outside of expected models of teleological time and progress (Bracke 2012, 244; El-Tayeb 2012, 85; Colpani and Habed 2014). Non-heterosexual subjects are supposedly "held back" by their homophobic ethnic-cultural origins. Normative assumptions about white non-heterosexual subjectivity, and assumptions about ethnic minority non-heterosexual subjectivities, are according to El-Tayeb's thinking, then, two sides of the same coin – or in other words, the flipsides of binary-constructed ethnosexual boundaries, foregrounding the first as culturally superior and liberated. In this framework, emancipation can only be thought of as assimilation to the dominant sexual culture (El-Tayeb 2012, 86).

Conceptualising Ethnosexual Subjectivity As an Effect of Counter-Sexual Discourses

As anthropologists and scholars of gender and sexuality, we share the theoretical premises of "social construction" perspectives (Fassin and Salcedo 2015) and consider social, ethnic, gender, and sexual differences not as stable and pre-existing, but as always in the making (Moore 1994). Difference is about processes of identification and differentiation, based on the desire to be part of some community, even if provisional (Moore 1994, 2). When approaching concrete differences in everyday life as "the *effect* of interferences in specific practices" (Krebbekx et al. 2016, 3; emphasis in the original), differences can be understood as relational and fragile, and as made durable and solid at the same time (M'charek 2010; Krebbekx et al. 2016). With this perspective on difference, we explore how local movements construct sexual counter-narratives through reaching out to, as well as criticising, various audiences. As such, differences are not just "out there" to be "encountered," but they are approached as constructed through narratives. In the case of the civil society movements, we look at how these narratives are built on the basis of an investment in creating space for sexual and ethnic diversity.

In order to understand *how* exactly counter-narratives invested in diversity are shaped, we find it useful to bring in Fatima El-Tayeb's (2011) notion of "disidentification." As referred to in the former section, El-Tayeb reveals dominant assumptions tied to "proper gayness" in the European context. According to us, she also provides conceptual tools to critically explore what we call "ethnosexual subjectivity." Our assumption is that critical counter-discourses about sexual and ethnic diversity convey explicit ideas about minority sexual and ethnic positionings, perspectives and experiences, as well as implicit notions of subjectivity as ways of being and acting in the world based upon views, priorities and practices that might differ from mainstream society. These implicit notions about minority subjects can be captured by the phrase "ethno sexual subjectivity." In this concept, we include a perspective on difference as always in the making, and we utilise it as an umbrella concept to include many forms of potential differences, which allows us to pay attention to what differences are brought up in the narratives of our interlocutors. As Nagel (2000, 110) outlines, ethnicity may analytically function as an umbrella concept referring to "physical (racial) differences, but also differences in language, religion, region or culture," whereas sex can refer to gender as well as sexuality (Fassin and Salcedo 2015).

In the following sections, we will explore the narratives of Merhaba and Respect2Love (R2L) and analyse their concern with positing *difference* and claiming voice and space based upon this difference. The analysis will reveal, we argue, the critical and affirmative construction of "ethnosexual subjectivity" produced through discourse and practices of interference. To grasp this "difference as an effect of interference" (Krebbekx et al. 2016), we employ El-Tayeb's (2011, xxxiii–xxxiv) concept of disidentification. El-Tayeb builds upon the work of José Esteban Muñoz. He grounds his notion of disidentification in European continental psychoanalytic thinking and its feminist critiques, and frames disidentification as a political strategy aiming at creating discursive space for marginalised positionalities (Muñoz 1999, 4). El-Tayeb (2011) reformulates disidentification in terms of a narrative of engagement, tensions, and difference. Disidentification is characterised as less rigid

and exclusive than both dominant discourses and minority oppositional narratives, and these characteristics are the conditions of survival in contexts where both dominant and minority discourses may be hostile to marginalised sexual and ethnic positionalities. As El-Tayeb (2011) formulates it:

> [Disidentification] does not imply a clear break with the majority culture, but acknowledges the necessity of a continuous engagement with and negotiation of an often-hostile larger culture at the same time that it allows to explore tensions and differences within minority communities that also provide the means to survive the hostility of the dominant society. (El-Tayeb 2011, xxxiv)

Disidentification as a narrative of affirmation, critique, and in-betweenness is a productive conceptual approach to analyse and understand the creativity of Merhaba and R2L in producing ethnosexual subjectivity and space for difference. Disidentification is understood as a tool that enables to formulate, claim and practice sexual and ethnic diversity, and as such to discursively produce ethnosexual subjectivity. This means that ethnosexual subjectivity is considered to be the *effect* of practices of disidentification. The following sections will closely investigate how this narrative of in-betweenness is discursively constructed and practised as a form of "situated knowledges."

Feminist science and technology scholar Donna Harraway (1988) famously coined the notion of situated knowledges, which critiqued understandings of science as objective and neutral. Transposing "situated knowledges" to a context of qualitative research, we view our knowledge as feminist researchers as partial and enabled through our socio-political situatedness, political-individual standpoints, and the dialogue with our conversation partners. Analysing the interview narratives, we similarly view our conversation partners as positioned agents who forge situated knowledge in order to act within their discursive/material circumstances (Lamphere et al. 1997, 5). We therefore embrace the call for shifting emphasis from considering members of ethnicised communi-

ties not only as objects of the dominant discourse, but also as subjects (Fassin and Salcedo 2015, 1118; Roodsaz 2015, 31, 53–4). However, we do not claim to have unmediated knowledge about the "reality" of the needs and experiences of those subjects. Instead, we analyse the way in which Merhaba and R2L present these realities to us as interviewers, and as such build sexual counter-narratives. We do not want to approach Merhaba and R2L as "unadulterated by politics and education" and therefore as "raw material" to be objectified and analysed (Haritaworn 2015, 14-23), nor do we desire to romanticise Merhaba and R2L knowing that even "subversive approaches" do not necessarily always translate into progressive politics (El-Tayeb 2011, xxxvi). Instead, we want to highlight our conversation partners as important knowledge producers in their own right with narratives that can be stories of "transformation as well as critique" (Haritaworn 2015, 23).

Ethnosexual Subjectivity: R2L and Merhaba

During the summer of 2015, we interviewed the coordinators of R2L and Merhaba in order to learn about how they envision emancipation at the intersection of non-heterosexuality and ethnic diversity. R2L[5] is part of the Dutch government funded LGBT umbrella organisation COC and was established in Amsterdam (partly) in response to the critique on mainstream LGBT civil society for its lack of inclusivity. Merhaba, which means, "welcome" in Arabic and Turkish, is located in Brussels and funded by the Flemish community.[6] Being part of a larger mainstream LGBT umbrella organisation, or directly funded by the Flemish government, means that R2L and Merhaba inhabit complex positions of material dependency in which they have to account for, and be legible to, different audiences at the same time (Tauqir et al. 2011, 175–7). R2L needs to position itself as specific and necessary as a separate project within the COC. Merhaba is an independent organisation. However, it inhabits a financially vulnerable position that is characteristic of civil society organisations in Belgium, especially for those self-organised groups emerging from minoritised contexts (Tauqir et al. 2011, 176). Since, 2011, Merhaba has been recognised by the

Flemish community as a *Beweging* [social movement] and granted funding at least until the year 2020. Both R2L and Merhaba are concerned with the emancipation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons belonging to what they call "ethnic" or "bicultural" minorities. Those minorities are specified through different adjectives in the Dutch and Flemish context: R2L defines itself as a "community" for "LGBT's of African, Caribbean, Moroccan, Surinam, Turkish or any other cultural background,"[7] while Merhaba presents itself as a "warm world for *all* LGBTQI* with a migration background."[8]

In the following paragraphs, we present our analysis of how R2L and Merhaba narrate their critical interventions and positions in relation to mainstream LGBT culture as well as their belonging to ethnicised minorities.

Creating an Alternative and Safe Space

Both Merhaba and R2L started as self-organisations, and remain up until today largely self-organised. According to the R2L spokesperson, "the need for coming together as bicultural LGBT individuals was the motor force behind the organisation." Merhaba was set up by "LGBT youth from North-African, Turkish and Middle-Eastern descent" at the end of the 1990s, and R2L was initiated by "bicultural LGBT youth" a decade later. At the present, however, the activities of both organisations are not restricted to any identity category and include all "LGBTQI people with a [recent] migration background." As pioneers, the initiators of Merhaba and R2L took up the task of claiming space for themselves in a LGBT civil society environment by which they did not feel represented. The interviewee from Merhaba explains, "[because] of exoticism and the emphasis on 'coming-out,' they [the initiators] didn't feel recognised." Following J. Halberstam's (2005, 4) approach that suggests imagining queerness as an outcome of particular time and space frameworks, which can be discerned by analysing LGBT subcultures and place-making practices (6), we start here by analysing how Merhaba and R2L understand and practice "safe space" specifically.

While the "coming-out" paradigm "reduces people to one single

identity," Merhaba tries to provide a space for, what they call, "coming-in," where individuals can enjoy "multiple identities." Merhaba's spokesperson states:

> Many people who rely on us are also religious, have strong family commitments, and find these aspects very important. They are looking for a cocktail in which they could maintain as many aspects [of their identity] as possible.

Although previously used by Linda Goldman (2007), the term "coming-in" seems to be independently constructed by Merhaba as a key concept in their effort to provide an alternative framework for thinking about subjectivities at the intersection of sexual and ethnic diversity. "Coming-in" allows for multiplicity in terms of identity and carries a positive connotation; it invites to include diversity instead of offering the promise of getting released from confinement as implied by "coming-out."

Neither has R2L the coming-out ideal high up in the agenda: "[Coming-out] is not our goal. […] It would be perfectly fine if someone decides to come out, but our goal is self-acceptance and our activities aim at bringing people together." Here self-acceptance appears to be put forward as a discursive strategy to allow diversity in the construction of the self; it could entail authenticity as implied by the notion of "coming-out," but it could also encompass a multilayered understanding of identity, including sexual, ethnic, and religious dimensions. The subject in question is given the space to fill in the meaning of the self, according to its own needs, with a process of acceptance as the ultimate goal. "Be all you can be," is R2L's slogan, on their website. Their task is to facilitate the process of becoming "all that one can be," among their target group.

Both approaches – "coming-in" and "multiple identification" (Merhaba), as well as "self-acceptance" (R2L) – assume a positive notion of liberty in terms of "freedom for," which is entangled with the necessity to create new possibilities, as opposed to a negative sense of liberty understood as "freedom from" associated with the need to remove obstacles or constraints (Najmabadi 2006, 251). Instead of fighting against oppres-

sion, Merhaba and R2L are far more concerned with creating space for diversity and new or previously non-recognised modes of ethnosexual subjectivity. Criticising the "coming-out" discourse, taking a position of in-betweenness by offering instead "coming-in" as an alternative that allows multiple identities to exist simultaneously, and seeking affirmation through a specific notion of self-acceptance, are practices by means of which ethnosexual subjectivities are enabled.

Both Merhaba and R2L underline that within this space, the opportunity arises for "coming together and finding strength through one another." Their knowledge about the situation and the concerns of the groups they represent has gradually developed "through trial and error and working together" (Merhaba) and "creating a warm family sphere and a feeling of being recognised" (R2L) in which various experiences are shared. In a process of intensive interaction with the target group, an understanding of the specific needs and concerns is actively sought and negotiated. To decide upon the sort of activities and the specific approach, Merhaba draws inspiration from "what the group brings in regarding their problems and possible solutions" and R2L has constructed a multi-layered knowledge generating infrastructure, involving collective dining, sharing personal stories and empowering programs. Both Merhaba and R2L invite people to participate in such activities, to simply be together and talk to each other, a slow process through which participants can develop their own way of dealing with their ethnic, sexual and gender subjectivity.

Besides continuous interactive investment in the alternative space constructed by Merhaba and R2L, issues of safety and privacy form a main concern for both organisations. They avoid visible association with non-heterosexuality and gender non-normativity by the explicit decision to not put the rainbow flag outside their building, newcomers are given the opportunity to decide where to have their first appointments and are promised anonymity if needed, the location of the building is not mentioned on the website and parties are never held in places where people might feel exposed to the public eye. Moreover, as R2L mentions, being disowned and threatened by the family has occurred in a

few cases. Both organisations are aware of the sensitivity of the situation of their target groups and have come up with strategies to ensure their privacy and safety as much as possible. In the "space-making practices" (Halberstam 2005) of Merhaba and R2L, space has to be claimed and protected simultaneously.

Maintaining Diversity: Talking About Class, Citizenship, Religion, Gender

Except for cultural and sexual diversity, Merhaba and R2L are concerned with other axes of difference. "Everyone is welcome," as the interviewees from both organisations emphasise several times. The socio-economic position is one of the issues Merhaba refers to in this regard. "We try to help everyone. People without a [residence] document won't be abandoned by us." To illustrate the need for this inclusivity, the following anecdote is given:

> Recently a man visited us who was refused by one of the rainbow houses. He was caught shaving his body in the bathroom. The rainbow house in question was clearly not happy with that. In the past things have been said like "those belonging to Merhaba smell and aren't very clean." This shows how much work still needs to be done concerning socio-economic issues. Many *holebi* bars are exclusively a place for white, middle-class male homosexuals.

This example is brought in to illustrate the boundaries of what is considered "proper gayness" (El-Tayeb 2012) in the mainstream LGBT scene, from which "those belonging to Merhaba [who] smell and aren't very clean" are excluded. By taking both the socio-economic and the ethnic dimensions into account, Merhaba exposes class, citizenship, and ethnicity as interlocking forms of oppression. "We fight against multiple discrimination from an intersectionality perspective." The intersectionality perspective (Chun et al. 2013) is here utilised to reveal the uneven and differentiated ways in which power works: *holebi* refugees and migrants are discriminated by both broader society and the dominant *holebi*

organisations based on their ethnic and socio-economic background.

The topic of religious background came up when talking with co-ordinators of R2L about what a diversity oriented approach meant to them. One of their projects called Haardvuur [Open fire],[9] for example, revolves around the possibilities for LGBT Muslim youth to combine their religiosity with their sexual and gender non-normativity. It aims at opposing the popular idea that religion and sexual and gender diversity are mutually exclusive. Inspiration for such projects is, amongst others, found in the work of Islamic authorities focusing on alternative inter-pretations of Koranic texts and providing new readings that allow com-patibility between the religious and the non-heterosexual self. As Nella van den Brandt (2014, 233–4) discusses, one of the strategies used by civil society organisations engaged with sexual and ethnic diversity is to look for ways to reconcile faith and sexuality, for instance by conveying knowledge about liberal religious perspectives on non-heterosexuality. By looking for mutuality between (Islamic) religiosity and sexual diver-sity, R2L broadens the range of possible modes of "proper gayness" as well as religiosity.

According to Merhaba, in the mainstream LGBT scene, women tend to be left out. One of the reasons for this is the hegemonic masculinity of the LGBT movement more generally, but also women's "lack of free-dom of movement." "For instance, they don't easily come to a Merhaba Funky Parties." To deal with this issue, an intern has been hired to spe-cifically investigate "the reasons why (young) women are absent, how to reach them, what their needs are and what activities they would prefer in order to get together."[10] This active approach illustrates continuous effort put into maintaining diversity by noticing and understanding in-visibility and changing strategy accordingly to realise more inclusivity.

For both organisations, the goal remains identifying mechanisms of exclusion in the dominant LGBT discourses and practices, and provid-ing alternative spaces for diversity at the intersection of sexuality, gen-der, religion, class, citizenship, and ethnicity. As the interviewee from Merhaba states, "I prefer to see us as an organisation that stands for alternative paradigms. […] We are concerned with diversity, but we also

want it to remain intact." Likewise, R2L emphasises the importance of recognising rather than dissolving diversity:

> It is not easy to allow diversity. I had to think outside the box to be able to accept myself, otherwise, if I had obeyed the societal norms, I wouldn't be sitting here today. I struggled with my feelings. I know how it feels.

Diversity is not an outcome, but a process that needs constant maintenance and facilitation.

Complex Positionalities: Keeping Several Balls in the Air

Indicative of Merhaba and R2L's framing of their work is also their engagement with different, sometimes contradictory discourses. Part of their work is based on the assumed need for promoting a more tolerable attitude towards non-heterosexuality among religious and ethnic groups of their concern. "I know that work has to be done to change homo-negative notions from inside out. And that is part of what we do," the Merhaba interviewee says. The main step towards realising this change is initiating discussions about the topic of sexual diversity. While avoiding provocation, Merhaba "train[s] trainers to organise discussions among ethnic and cultural minority groups," where non-heterosexuality is considered a taboo. Comparably, in the interview with the R2L representatives, the absence of a *praatcultuur* – a culture that appreciates talking about, and thereby enhances understanding of, sensitive issues – is seen as an obstacle that the target group needs to deal with: "Our target group lacks a *praatcultuur*. That is often a problem. This was the case for me personally as well. […] I had to learn to speak." The lack of a *praatcultuur*, as such, becomes a specificity ascribed to the ethnosexual subject.

The reference to *praatcultuur* as a condition to create a tolerant atmosphere for sexual diversity resonates with what Suhraiya Jivraj and Anisa de Jong (2011) have identified as a "speaking out" policy on the emancipation of homosexuals in the Netherlands. According to this Dutch

policy, as for instance formulated in the document *Gewoon homo zijn* [*Just Being Gay*] (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap 2007, 15), the social acceptance of homosexuals depends substantially on the *bespreekbaarheid* [discussability] of homosexuality, especially within orthodox religious circles and ethnic minority groups. Paradoxically, Jivraj and de Jong (2011, 145) observe, the *bespreekbaarheid* imperative reproduces a homonormative model that only allows for those modes of sexual subjectivity that are outward and visible. This model implies a specific notion of what it means to be gay and excludes, for instance, sexualities that are better understood in terms of "doing" rather than "speaking." To speak of the importance of a *praatcultuur* by the R2L interviewee as part of the framework within which cultural differences are perceived attests to the dominance of the broader Dutch discourse on "homo-emancipation" through discussability. Here a narrative of affirmation (El-Tayeb 2011) emerges.

Both organisations need to be visible to their target groups. According to the Merhaba representative:

> The first biggest step is that they find us and realise that they are not alone. It is difficult for people who feel isolated, because of the taboos in their environment, to reach out.

Similarly, R2L interviewees think that in order to provide "the necessary recognition and acceptance," their organisation should visibly "put an emphasis on biculturality." To ensure this visibility, Merhaba chooses "someone from the target group to be the public face" of the organisation, "someone the people from our target group can recognise themselves in." R2L's strategy is to highlight personal stories of the organisers, especially during the first meetings, in order to create a feeling of recognition and trust. "We [the organisers] are bicultural ourselves. This really helps creating a family environment." Ensuring visibility is a discursive and embodied interference through which cultural difference is produced.

At the same time, both Merhaba and R2L note that their emphasis on cultural differences might be employed in broader societal discus-

sions about the positions of ethnic minorities as another building block in the constructions of non-western (Muslim) ethnic minorities as less civilised than the western "host" society. In the interview with Merhaba an example is given about a policy-based governmental funding opportunity for research that illustrates this dilemma:

> There was this rather stigmatising call for research proposals on identifying the "determinants of homophobia among youth in ethnic and cultural minority groups." [The researchers] were supposed to work with youth from specific ethnic communities, which was ridiculous. [...] Internally, we did discuss the possibility of applying and then do whatever we wanted in case we would receive the money. At the end, however, we decided not to and ended up with no resources.

Doing research in this specific policy framework would underscore and reproduce the coupling between homophobic tendencies and certain ethnic minority groups. The problem, the Merhaba interviewee adds, should rather be connected to "different degrees of gender stereotypes regardless of specific ethnic backgrounds, which might be observed, for instance, among conservative Catholic elderly women as well." While gender stereotypes are often associated with ethnic minority groups in policy making, the interviewee argues that certain subsections of the majority group might be dealing with the same kind of problems as well. This reflection shows a critical engagement with a dominant anti-Muslim discourse of "homo-emancipation" within which Merhaba and R2L are necessarily operating.

For R2L, the very connotation of "the target group" causes a feeling of uneasiness because of its association with "victimhood": "We are not happy with the term 'target groups', but unfortunately we need it for communication purposes, that's why we keep using it." The term "target groups" assumes a special treatment, which has a stigmatising effect. However, without it, it becomes difficult to address issues that R2L regards important and necessary to tackle in relation to the specific communities of its interest, such as the lack of a *praatcultuur*, as mentioned previous-

ly. In order to be able to voice its concerns, R2L takes a position of in-betweenness in which elements of the dominant culture are employed, while being aware of and rejecting some of its problematic implications.

"Awareness raising"-policies and broader societal debates on issues of sexuality and gender in ethnic communities is one of the main goals of Merhaba. R2L, on the other hand, seems to focus more on personal experiences rather than trying to influence the political arena in which they are operating. Organisations working on sexual and ethnic diversity tend to use to various degrees a double critical approach, contesting both problematic dominant assumptions *about* ethnic minorities in broader society, and cultural issues *within* ethnic groups of their concern. This double critical perspective, advocated for by scholars such as Gloria Wekker (2006), which at times might entail contradictory discursive practices, is in fact crucial in making room for alternative voices, without falling into the paternalistic trap of romanticising them. This resonates with the notion of disidentification (El-Tayeb 2011) as a narrative of critique, in-betweenness, and affirmation. Critical considerations, careful commitments, and at times strategic complicity in relation to ethnic minorities and broader society inform the approach, decisions-making processes and activities of both organisations.

Part of these careful commitments is a gradual approach in how R2L and Merhaba relate themselves to the ethnic communities of their concern. For R2L, direct contact with these communities is of lesser importance. Its main goal is providing the opportunities for the LGBT "bicultural" youth to find the strength to first "accept themselves," to "make it discussable in their own environment" and "become visible."[11] The R2L spokespersons emphasise that "it might be even enough to just talk to your neighbour. Everybody should do that in their own way, but it starts with yourself."

Merhaba, however, perceives finding recognition among ethnic minority organisations as a crucial step in achieving effectiveness. In order to be seen as sensitive to issues of "racism" and "Islamophobia" and not to be mistaken for an "oversexed LGBT organisation," Merhaba has invested in partnership with other ethnic and Islamic minority organisations.

"Actually at first we collaborated on issues related to Islamophobia and through that gradually found our way into the hearts of these partner organisations." The extent of being taken seriously and respected due to this investment in partnership, reaches as far as receiving collaboration invitations from ethnic minority organisations working on issues other than sexuality and making sexual diversity a central theme of their work.

> They now want to be associated with us and take sexual diversity as a main topic rather than a side-project. These are small, but important steps. Many of our visitors have found us through these organisations and when they come to us and see, for example, a documentary about LGBT issues, they realise how religiously and culturally sensible our approach is. [...] We see this as one of our most important recent achievements. [...] However, it's not easy and often we find ourselves taking one step forward and two steps back.

This culturally and religiously sensible, long-term based approach has opened up possibilities for bridging differences and becoming more effective, albeit not without any setbacks.

Merhaba and R2L both intend and endeavour to broaden the realm of "proper gayness" by opening up space for ethnosexual subjectivities. Notions of specific ethnosexual subjectivity emerge through narrative and material practices of disidentification. Crucial to the strategy of disidentification are notions such as "coming-in," "multiple-identification" and "self-acceptance"; putting various efforts into maintaining diversity; and engaging in different and sometimes contradictory discourses about sexual diversity and ethnicity. In the mediation of implicit and explicit ideas about ethnosexual subjectivities, we also witnessed, they sometimes become engaged in the same identity politics that they aim to deconstruct: stigmatising cultural particularities ascribed to certain ethnic and religious minority groups become reproduced in some of the Merhaba's and R2L's discourses and practices. However, this appears to be the price that has to be paid in order to reach out to and be legible for various audiences, and to justify working on their specific target groups.

Conclusion

This article has tried to productively intervene in public and academic discussion about ethnicity and sexuality in the European context in different ways. First, at the theoretical-conceptual level, this piece coined the concept ethnosexual subjectivity. We argued and demonstrated that ethnosexual subjectivity enables a conceptual approach to counter-narratives about sexual and ethnic diversity that reveals explicit and implicit ideas about the identities, lives and needs of non-heterosexual subjects belonging to ethnicised communities. While our material involved the narratives of civil society actors working with ethnicised non-heterosexual subjects in supportive ways, the concept may also be useful to scrutinise how ethnosexual subjectivity emerges in public debates, policy papers, and popular culture productions. As the concept includes a perspective on ethnicity and sexuality as always already constructed, it helps to shift the attention to the conditions in which differences are produced. Second, this article has explored voices of marginalised communities, which we consider an important political-empirical choice in postcolonial contexts of racism and Islamophobia. "Visibilising voices from the margin" is important of itself. However, taking marginalised subjects seriously involves considering them as knowledge producers embedded in local discursive and material settings that need critical evaluation as well. Such a critical/affirmative approach is, according to us, incredibly crucial to queer anti-racist critique committed to articulating and building spaces of difference.

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NOTES

1. Belgium is a federal state with a central government, yet it is divided into three linguistic communities with their own parliaments and governments: Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, and German-speaking, and three regions, also with their own legislative institutions and governments: the northern Flemish region, the Brussels Capital region, and the southern Walloon region (http://www.belgium.be/nl/over_belgie/overheid/). The Flemish cabinet governs *Gemeenschap*, the Dutch speaking community, and *Gewest*, the Flemish region. Its Ministry of Equal Opportunities (currently headed by NV-A minister Liesbeth Homans, (http://www.gelijkekansen.be/Hetbeleid/Gelijkekansenbeleid/Deministervangelijkekansen.aspx) funds women's and LGBT civil society organisations.

2. See for example the critical response of the Brussels Rainbow House early 2015 to the discriminatory remarks made by N-VA chairman and Antwerp major Bart de Wever about migrants of Berber Moroccan origin (*Knack* 2015); the special issue of *ZiZo-magazine* (2015), issued by Çavaria, about religion and sexuality; and the 2015

film-screening and discussion tour about the lives of gays and lesbians belonging to Moroccan migrant communities, entitled *Caravan*, which was organised by Merhaba in collaboration with local municipalities, LGBT-organisations and ethnic minority organisations (Merhaba 2015).

3. The commonly used term in Flanders since the 1990s is *holebi*, meaning homosexual, lesbian and bisexual (LGB), but often used as an umbrella term to capture a broad movement that supports the visibility, rights, and equality of non-heterosexuals. Today, at times, *holebitrans*, or *holebi & transgender*, or LGBT is used: more rare, but upcoming, is the acronym LGBTQI*.

4. See for critical voices in the Flemish context: Bracke et al. (2016), Dequeecker (2016), and Mangelschots (2016). For the Dutch context: *Trouw* (2016) and Römkens and Wiersma (2016).

5. www.respect2love.nl (accessed January 18, 2016).

6. www.merhaba.be (accessed January 18, 2016).

7. www.respect2love.nl/wat-wij-doen.html (accessed July 30, 2016).

8. www.merhaba.be/over-merhaba (accessed July 30, 2016).

9. A reference to a warm, trusting, intimate and cosy sphere that invites people to share their experiences.

10. While this article is being written, Merhaba has initiated a questionnaire called "Tell us about your ideal Merhaba party," inviting people, "including those who have never visited one of our parties" to share their expectations and wishes regarding such gatherings. http://www.merhaba.be/nieuws/hoe-ziet-jouw-ideale-merhaba-party-eruit (accessed January 18, 2016).

11. http://www.respect2love.nl/wat-wij-doen.html (accessed January 18, 2016).