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Who is the sexually progressive subject? Sexual, cultural and ethnic (un)belonging among younger Iranian-Dutch

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, issues of sexuality and gender have increasingly become instrumentalized in us/them demarcations in public debates on the position of ethnic and religious minority groups living in Western countries. In these debates, a sexually progressive West is imagined as opposed to a sexually progressive Rest, policing exclusionary and inclusionary regimes of power. This article presents a diasporic account of sexual progressiveness, focusing on the narratives of younger Iranian-Dutch. I argue that, through an imaginative state of sexual, cultural and ethnic (un)belonging, these highly educated interlocutors trouble not only the implied whiteness and universality of the sexually progressive subject, but also heteropatriarchal underpinnings of dominant nationalist and diasporic understandings of culture, home and nation.

Keywords

diasporic narratives, Iranian-Dutch, late modernity, sexual progressiveness, (un)belonging

In the light of growing globalization and multiculturalism in contemporary societies, issues of belonging and sexuality have become pertinent, especially in relation to migration and the position of ethnic and religious minority groups. Especially in the Netherlands, the constructions of the nation strongly rely on an image of Dutch tolerance regarding issues of sexuality and gender. While specific Dutch minority groups, such as

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the Moroccan Dutch and the Turkish Dutch communities, are often targeted as belonging to the 'wrong' side of the 'progressive us' versus 'backward other' demarcation, the Iranian-Dutch are either positioned on the 'safe' side or are entirely absent from these discussions. This differentiation is based on public and everyday performances of non-religiosity by some Iranian-Dutch, through which they dissociate themselves from other Islamic communities in the Netherlands (Roodsaz and Jansen, 2018) as well as their relatively high ranking on the 'integration' scale measured by the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS, 2012–16). This has led to the Iranian-Dutch having a reputation as 'exceptional', a celebratory representation that in fact reproduces exclusionary discourses of the sexually progressive West versus the sexually backward Rest. In this article, I will present an Iranian-Dutch account of sexuality, gender and belonging, focusing on a small group of younger interlocutors. I will argue that through their implicit and explicit self-positioning as progressive in relation to sexuality, gender and belonging, they challenge dominant heteropatriarchal nationalist and diasporic discourses.

In 2011, while doing fieldwork on notions of sexuality and identity among the Iranian-Dutch, I met with the four main interlocutors whose narratives are analyzed in this paper: Shadi, Nasser, Neda and Hamed.¹ The four of them, all in their twenties or early thirties at the time, spoke with me at a cultural centre in Amsterdam run by an Iranian-Dutch young man. Unlike the majority of the interlocutors in that fieldwork, these young people articulately expressed progressive views on sexuality and belonging, using words such as 'queerness', 'heteronormativity' and 'gender fluidity'. Most of the other research participants, in contrast, assumed fixed gender identities; idealized romantic love as the only legitimate context to have sex, either within or outside marriage; saw the nuclear family as the 'healthiest' environment to have children; and negatively appraised fluid sexual orientations as morally questionable, as opposed to 'authentic' homosexuality (Roodsaz and Jansen, 2018). The often all too readily self-projected image of the Netherlands as a tolerant country notwithstanding, fluidity of gender and sexual identity remain at the centre of heated public discourse, especially in light of the growing popularity of conservative right-wing political movements. This renders the position of the four younger Iranian-Dutch interlocutors 'progressive' in relation to both the Iranian-Dutch community and larger Dutch society. However, measuring the sexual progressiveness of the interlocutors is not the goal of this article. Rather, I am interested in how this progressiveness is (re)constructed in the specific contexts and narratives provided by the research participants.

These four interlocutors belong to a small network of younger Iranian-Dutch, consisting of highly educated people in their twenties and thirties with shared cultural and political interests. As such, they are not representative of the larger population of Iranian-Dutch, but form a relatively homogeneous group. All of them were born in Iran, but had left the country at a young age, varying from 4 to 14. And although they all said they felt at home in the Netherlands, they also emphasized that this sense was mostly limited to living in highly urbanized and multicultural spaces in the Randstad.² From time to time they organize movie nights, debates, book presentations, story-telling events or dance parties, and invite a group of friends, artists, researchers and authors.

What distinguished the ideas about sexuality and love among this group of younger Iranian-Dutch is that they explicitly rejected any kind of fixed ethnic, cultural, gender or

sexual identity categories. Notably, they criticized monogamous romantic love for being 'unrealistic' and 'heteronormative'. They also questioned the self-evidence of parenthood within a nuclear family arrangement and discussed alternative forms of family formation. Further, they understood gender to be a social construct, and thus changeable and context dependent. Doing so, they claimed a 'progressive' position through decoupling romance from sex, imagining alternative household formations, and claiming fluid gender and sexual identities.

A few years later, following a wave of Dutch public debates on monogamy and alternative sexual and intimate arrangements,³ I was reminded of my conversations with these Iranian-Dutch interlocutors. While monogamous relationships remain the standard for the majority of the Dutch (Latten and Mulder, 2013), recent discussions about alternative arrangements have reduced the self-evidence of monogamy as an ideal. Having attended several Dutch public events on the issue, moreover, I was surprised by their predominantly white audiences. I wondered: how would my Iranian-Dutch interlocutors – as self-acclaimed sexual progressives – relate to these discussions? Would they consider the issues raised at these events as their own? These questions as well as a curiosity about how the interlocutors would look back on our conversations led me to re-establish contact with them, and four agreed to take part in a follow-up interview.

One of the peculiarities of the Iranian diasporic communities, including the Iranian-Dutch, is their complicated and ambiguous relation with whiteness (Dabashi, 2011; Farahani, 2013; Maghbouleh, 2017). For example, Dabashi (2011: 20) illustrates the role of (Iranian) immigrant 'comprador intellectuals' as native informers who have immersed themselves into 'the white-identified culture' and serve the interests of the 'empire' by confirming racist and Islamophobic assumptions about their homelands. The desire to imagine oneself as culturally 'white' in Iranian diasporic contexts, despite experiences of racism and discrimination, is also discussed in another study (Farahani, 2013) about Iranian diasporic constructions of masculinity in Stockholm, Sydney and London. Focusing more comprehensively on race, Maghbouleh (2017) provides a multi-layered account of Iranian American experiences of belonging as a group that is legally considered white and yet informally treated as non-white. As I discuss elsewhere (Roodsaz, forthcoming), within the Iranian-Dutch community, whiteness is imagined and embraced as a mode of invisibility achieved through 'secular' and 'modern' sensibilities and performances. In all these diasporic contexts, regardless of various efforts for inclusion into the category of 'whiteness', Iranians are still subjected to a negative image of 'Muslim other', which points to a racialized master category in the post 9/11 era linking Arab, Middle Eastern and Muslim communities.

In this article, I analyze the narratives of four Iranian-Dutch younger people, and their common themes of sexuality, gender and belonging. In studies of sexual progressiveness, discussed in the next section, the subject is generally assumed to be universal, located outside the axes of difference, such as age, gender, class, race, ethnicity and religion. I will argue that their self-positioning as progressive in relation to issues of sexuality and gender as well as belonging enables these Iranian-Dutch younger interlocutors to complicate simplistic and exclusionary nationalist and diasporic discourses. Referring to their Iranian-Dutch background, they express a simultaneous sense of belonging and unbelonging, which allows them to identify, draw close to or distance

themselves from and transgress societal norms, and thereby claim a progressive position. This state of (un)belonging is characterized by the ability to reflect and draw from what they perceive as Iranian and Dutch norms, without feeling obligated to either. As will be explained in more detail in the next section, (un)belonging accommodates both multiple self-positionings and a critical response to essentializing categorizations of identity. Rather than deficit, (un)belonging is a potential resource through which social change and mobility is imagined and realized.

I use the term 'Iranian-Dutch' to emphasize the central role of both backgrounds in meaning-making processes among the interlocutors and to recognize their citizenship in both contexts. This is not, however, to reduce their social positioning to these two aspects, or to naturalize ethnic identity. In fact, their Iranian-Dutch background allows the interlocutors in this article to actively connect themselves to much more complex and constantly moving transnational networks and to claim a non-normative position. The relation between their Iranian-Dutch background and transnational networks is therefore seen as co-constitutive, rather than exclusive.

In order to argue that 'progressiveness' has diverse meanings and that this multiplicity should affect how we understand sexual subjectivity, I now briefly review relevant scholarship to situate the present research, which follows the urging of feminist scholars to attend to diverse and situated subjectivities rather than assuming universality.

Late-modern love and intimacy

This article is related to three strands of scholarly work on the transformation of love, sexuality and intimacy in the late-modern Western context: (1) a sociological perspective, providing an understanding of larger social and historical processes and structures against which everyday life practices of love, sexuality and intimacy take shape, (2) a multidisciplinary field concerned with the radical potential of those late-modern social and historical developments, focusing on non-normative and progressive family and household arrangements, and (3) a critical feminist, queer, decolonial and post-secular perspective that moves beyond the progressive-versus-normative divide by providing a more complex and diversity-sensitive account of late-modern sexual and romantic concerns and experiences. While the first and to a certain extent also the second strand take the late-modern subject to be universal and undifferentiated, the third strand, to which this article aims to contribute, tries to situate the subject by tracing the exclusionary mechanisms underlying dominant models of romantic love and sexuality.

In studies of the transformation of love and intimacy, the late-modern ideal of love in its contemporary Western form has been characterized as containing paradoxical values of autonomy and commitment. The ideal 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992) is seen as a matter of individual choice and is expected to be personally fulfilling, and characterized by continuous reflexivity and evaluation to monitor the quality of the relationship. Liberated from religion and patriarchy, relationships have become democratized and simultaneously turned into venues for chaos (Beck-Gernsheim and Beck, 1995). The skills required to negotiate the paradoxical values of autonomy and commitment within romantic relationships, coupled with the neoliberal responsibility of the individual to be

happy (Ahmed, 2010), put considerable pressure on the shoulders of the late-modern subject.

At the same time, despite the dominance of the nuclear family as a norm, a growing diversity of family arrangements and bonding in different parts of the world, such as non-monogamy, open relationships, and 'living apart together' (LAT) arrangements, has been observed (Szachowicz-Sempruch 2016). In particular, scholars have analyzed this growing diversity as a potentially liberatory aspect of love in late modernity (e.g. Haritaworn et al., 2006; Jamieson, 2005; Roseneil, 2010), which could lead to re-evaluating and broadening the realm of 'sexual citizenship' (Evans, 1993). The late-modern 'precariousness' (Szachowicz-Sempruch, 2016) of intimacy is thus seen as an opportunity to re-define normative understandings of family and bonding at the social and political level.

Critically engaging with the sociological scholarship on love and intimacy discussed above, various feminist scholars question the implied notion of free negotiation between autonomous subjects, disputing the unifying approach that suggests that all individuals and groups are more or less affected in the same way by the diversification of love and intimacy (e.g. Ferguson and Toye, 2017; Hochschild, 2003; Illouz, 2007). For instance, gender as an axis of difference has proven to be crucial in negotiations of love (e.g. Illouz, 2012; Willey, 2015). A second critique points out the lack of attention to other structural inequalities, notably class, religion and race (e.g. Noël, 2006; Wekker, 2006; Willey, 2006). Third, the mutual constructions of sexuality and gender on the one hand, and ethnic, racial and religious us-versus-them demarcations in multicultural Western societies on the other hand, have been scrutinized in the interdisciplinary field of critical theory (e.g. El-Tayeb, 2011; Nagel, 2000; Puar, 2007).

More specifically, a simultaneous critique of dominant ideologies of gender, sex and nation has been offered in the growing field of queer diasporic studies where heteropatriarchal imperatives of both widespread nationalist and diasporic discourses are unpacked and problematized (Gopinath, 2011; Parker, 2011). This critique concerns heterocentrism and an assumed quest for return in dominant conceptions of diaspora, as well as the homonormativity of global and national queer movements that fail to account for racial, ethnic and religious difference.

My aim is to contribute to this latter project by presenting an Iranian-Dutch perspective. First, through the concept of (un)belonging (Garvey, 2011), I will examine spaces in which younger Iranian-Dutch subjects undo nationalist and diasporic normative understandings of belonging and sexuality, while rejecting 'the destructive erasure of not-belonging' (Garvey, 2011: 757). I will illustrate how combining a non-normative self-positioning with respect to both sexuality and belonging enables the interlocutors to construct alternative modes of connection, leading to a productive disorientation of dominant notions of nation and home. Second, the liminal potential of (un)belonging will be explored empirically by focusing on four narratives of love, sex and intimacy in the Iranian-Dutch context. While the concern of this article is the subjective experiences of the interlocutors to explore the specific positionality of the self-claimed sexually progressive subject, these micro-level analyses are understood as positioned in larger national, diasporic and transnational discourses of belonging and citizenship. Third, due to its longitudinal dimension, this article will shed light on ongoing processes of identity construction as well as the contextuality and fluidity of queer diasporic positionality. In

short, this article will investigate how younger Iranian-Dutch self-positioning as progressive is (re)constructed in their narratives of sexuality and (un)belonging in different phases of their lives, and the extent to which these positionings undermine or endorse dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies of gender, sexuality and identity.

Methodology

The main body of the data analyzed in this article comes from in-depth interviews conducted in the summer of 2017. These interviews were follow-up conversations with four of the key informants who had already been involved in a previous research project, carried out between 2009 and 2014. This research project (Roodsaz, 2015) concerned Iranian-Dutch articulations of sexuality as processes of self-fashioning. The interlocutors in this article do not represent all of the younger Iranian-Dutch research participants from that earlier project. On the contrary, together with a few others, they formed a rather small cohort due to their explicit claims to sexual progressiveness. The aim of the article is not to provide totalizing explanations about Iranian-Dutch, but rather to capture a distinct discourse of sexuality, gender and (non-)belonging.

The Iranian-Dutch interlocutors in this article are now in their thirties, highly educated, and live or work in Amsterdam and Utrecht. All come from families with a history of political activism against the Iranian Islamic regime – the very reason they fled Iran and (eventually) came to the Netherlands. They all speak Farsi with their parents and other older family members and relatives. Born and raised in Iran and living in the Netherlands for two decades allowed me to conduct the interviews in either Farsi or Dutch, depending on the interlocutor's preference. Moreover, this 'insider' position proved beneficial in terms of identifying specific Dutch or Iranian cultural references which are crucial for understanding negotiations of (un)belonging. Interested in whether and how their notions of sexuality, gender and belonging had changed, I arranged for follow-up interviews in 2017, six to seven years after our first conversations. Having become more independent by starting a family, taking a job and cohabiting with a partner, my interlocutors revisited their previous attitudes and aspirations.

Sexuality, gender and belonging

Shadi

During our first conversation six years ago, when she was 31 years old, Shadi told me, her mind was mainly occupied with becoming a mother. But, she hastened to add, 'not in a conventional way, though. I am looking for a [sperm] donor.' Having gone through a recent divorce, she was very much concerned with asserting and protecting her independence. By the summer of 2017, when we spoke again, Shadi had become mother of two girls, and the donor, a man she had a brief romantic encounter with, was now 'out of the picture'. Motherhood was still a dominant topic in our conversation. She and her daughters had recently moved out of Amsterdam to 'settle in a small quiet town'. The last few years, she elaborated:

We would constantly move from one place to another, but I think they [daughters] should be able to create and maintain bonds with other children.

To Shadi, moving from the vibrant Amsterdam, where she was still working, to a small town meant settling down and seeking stability and safety, particularly for her children.

The lack of stability in her previous life, she explained, had to do with a more general desire for change: 'I prefer temporary commitments in both jobs and relationships. I'm addicted to change [laughing].' While in the past she would avoid commitment and only agree to 'open relationships', she said she would now consider different kinds of arrangements. Reflecting on our first conversation, she said she was, at that time, trying to deliberately distance herself from what she thought was expected from her as a woman:

I did the opposite of what my parents and the whole Iranian culture had taught me to do. But actually, my behaviour wasn't particularly normal according to the Dutch culture either [laughing].

Shadi framed her previous non-normative sexual attitude and behaviour as an act of transgression against norms of monogamy and nuclear family. At that point, she experienced her divorce as an opportunity to rebuild her intimate and sexual life by explicitly rejecting monogamous relationships and experimenting with homosexual relationships: 'I had felt restrained for so long. I wanted something else. I didn't want to be the woman I was.' Within that specific context, she was concerned with transgressing norms of sexuality and gender to ensure her independence and freedom, particularly against what she perceived as Iranian norms and values. This way of conceptualizing the process of migration from 'constrained' to 'free' dominates both Iranian-Dutch and the broader Dutch understandings of migration.

Later, in 2017, as Shadi had become more familiar with Dutch society, she noted in retrospect how those previous transgressive acts in fact could also be qualified as progressive, according to Dutch standards of sexuality. She realized how the contingency of her sexual and intimate life was something that she had to explain repeatedly to others, regardless of their ethnic and cultural background. Her continuous quest for change characterized her attempts to liberate herself from the past and to insert a 'progressive' self and claim space in the now. In Shadi's narration of her sexual and intimate life, both the Iranian and the Dutch context had become the points of orientation in demarcating a self-understood sexually progressive position, which also applied to her perceptions of motherhood.

Discussing her new life as a mother, Shadi emphasized how important it was for her to be able to work full time as a matter of personal fulfilment, which was difficult for the school authorities and others around her to comprehend:

I think it is a Dutch thing. Being a single mom and working full time don't go together in this country. I think that is extremely traditional and sexist. Even my mother, who is in her late 60s and still lives in Iran, supports my decision.

Noticing that one of her daughters was having troubles in getting used to the new environment, school authorities had advised her to spend more time with her children:

Can you believe that? They actually said I should work less or work at home more often. I told them: 'no way I am going to do that.' And this has nothing to do with money. I earn more than enough. It's a matter of principle.

When assessing her progressive views on motherhood, Shadi referred to her mother, drawing on her Iranian cultural framework and employing it in order to point out the normativity of certain values in the Dutch context: in Shadi's perception, it is more acceptable in Iran for a mother to work long hours outside the home than it is in the Netherlands. To reassert her point, Shadi referred to the school's responsibility as co-provider of childcare:

They assume that as a mother I am the sole responsible person for my children's well-being. I think that is nonsense. Of course, I take care of them as I brought them to this world, but school and other institutions have their responsibilities as well.

With this reference Shadi points to a paradoxical aspect and the gendered politics of the neoliberal logic of privatized (child)care which stands in the way of her emancipation as a woman. Choosing to work full time as a matter of personal fulfilment and growth (rather than, for instance, financial necessity) put Shadi in a controversial position as a single mother in the Dutch (small town) context. It troubles gendered notions of parenthood: according to the widespread Dutch one-and-a-half income model,⁴ as a mother, she is supposed to prioritize and embrace her 'parental duty' above her personal interests and career by staying at home more often. By rejecting this role and exposing traditional norms of gender in relation to ideals of motherhood in a small town in the Netherlands, Shadi's self-positioning problematizes Dutch national fictions of progressiveness. Simultaneously, the very decision to conceive children via a donor (without medical necessity) allows her to claim a progressive position in relation to both Iranian and Dutch norms of parenthood and nuclear family. While in the past her progressiveness was constructed based on imagining motherhood outside the norms of nuclear family, in the present she reconstructs progressiveness by refusing to accept the all-encompassing role of care provider ascribed to mothers. Her familiarity with both contexts enables her to take distance, compare and dismantle Iranian and Dutch norms of gender and parenthood, and legitimize her decision by playing off those norms against one another. Without feeling completely committed or obligated to either of these normative frameworks, she uses them as strategic tools to substantiate her progressive positioning. This (un)belonging, being nowhere and everywhere at the same time, allows for dismantling and transgressing the heteropatriarchal notion of 'mother' as the main provider of childcare and a mononormative understanding of family prescribing heterosexuality and coupledness.

Nasser

Nasser and I met at a non-profit flexible work spot in Amsterdam. He was working on a non-fiction writing project in the field of critical social theory, which he was doing 'just for myself' without being paid or having a publishing goal in mind. While his economic situation sounded rather unstable, he seemed happy with the freedom to focus only on

topics that he felt passionate about. Since our first conversation in 2012, when he was 25 years old, he had received his Master's degree in cultural studies and had started a PhD project, which he had decided not to complete because he found the academic rules of writing and publication 'too restrictive'.

Another notable change in his life, he pointed out, was that for the past nine months, Nasser and his girlfriend had been living together, which was his first experience of cohabitation. This was in clear contrast with his previous attitude towards relationships. When we first met, he said he would avoid living together with a romantic partner as he thought that would inevitably lead to boredom. Alternatively, he suggested living with friends as a more realistic arrangement while dating romantic and sexual partners. By decoupling sexuality and intimacy, at that time, Nasser rejected the notion of 'pure' relationship that was idealized by other Iranian-Dutch interlocutors. This non-normative self-positioning vis-à-vis the Iranian-Dutch community was strengthened by his explicit reluctance to attend Iranian-Dutch gatherings. Instead, he said, he preferred to meet people who shared the same intellectual interests regardless of their ethnic background.

Talking enthusiastically about his current relationship, he said the level of intimacy was high, which to him meant many moments of 'true connection, not just physically, but also emotionally and intellectually'. While emphasizing the importance of non-physical intimacy, he said that he and his girlfriend allowed each other to seek intimate and sexual encounters with others. To explain how this openness was nevertheless accompanied by a sense of commitment, he said:

The fact that we cohabit is a clear sign of commitment, I would say, but we have an open relationship. This means that we can go and come back whenever we want.

Using a metaphor to further explain this arrangement, he said that a relationship 'should not have any fences'. He then rhetorically asked:

How can you ask your partner not to fall in love with someone else? We both think that love is everywhere. Why should you close the door to other intimate experiences?

At the same time, he continued, 'I always make sure that she is okay. We really take care of each other. She is my home.' To Nasser, cohabitation and putting each other first emotionally guaranteed and reflected commitment, while being open to other intimate relationships and perceiving love as being everywhere allowed freedom and exploration. Compared to our first conversation, his attitude towards cohabitation had changed from scepticism to a positively valued 'sign of commitment'. Rejecting the strict rules of monogamy enabled him to reconstruct his sexually non-normative self-positioning.

This notion of love being everywhere, he said, had emerged from his recent interest in and intensive engagement with classical Persian poetry. In our first conversation he had emphasized that, unlike other Iranian-Dutch, he felt no deep connection to Iranian culture and spoke about Iranian cultural activities and events as 'superficial'. But now, years later, he said he deliberately sought inspiration from certain Iranian literary sources, such as Khayyam's poetry. Through this deliberate appropriation of his Iranian background, Nasser wanted to reject a sense of 'cultural relativism', saying:

Cultural relativism leaves you with nothing. Cultures and traditions are important. In the end, relativism denies culture, it denies everything. Life becomes meaningless. [. . .] We should learn to deal with things like culture, tradition, rituals and religion and incorporate them in our lives.

He explained how he had also started to attend and celebrate cultural festivities, such as the Iranian new year and Christmas. However, he immediately added: 'As we cannot really believe in culture, which is a problem of modernity, complete immersion is not possible.' Going to cultural events, either Iranian or Dutch, entailed a mode of simultaneous alienation and connection. Whereas he previously experienced resistance towards cultural belonging, focusing on his Iranian background, his current position as an individual in relation to culture and rituals has become much more ambiguous.

Explaining his decisions regarding his work situation and relationship, Nasser articulated a strong sense of freedom. To move away from 'fences', he chose an unemployed yet dedicated work life outside academia and allowed himself and his partner to experience intimacy with others beyond monogamous structures. Instead of moving away from the confinements of culture, his sexually non-normative self-positioning goes hand in hand with embracing a specific interpretation of certain elements of Iranian classical poetry. Through (re)constructions of a sexually non-normative self and articulations of (un)belonging, Nasser problematizes the dominant diasporic and nationalist assumptions of a fixed 'home'. By being simultaneously embraced and refused, home is powerfully remade beyond diasporic fantasies of return and nationalist myths of identity represented by oppositional us/them binaries, while allowing for alternative forms of connection and pleasure to be imagined and experienced.

Neda

Describing her current situation, Neda explained that 'things are kind of uncertain': 'I have had several short-term jobs, but there is no permanent income to rely on'. Having received a Master's degree in interior design a few years ago, she was now studying for a second one in diversity studies. Her previous concern with individual autonomy had given way to a more realistic attitude: 'Although in the past I was very protective of my autonomy, I now realize how luxurious that was and how life forces you to compromise.' About her job preferences, she said:

I don't have a specific position in mind, I just have certain interests. I love to work on topics related to cultural and ethnic diversity, societal norms, exclusion and inclusion.

While these interests provided some sense of continuity in her life, the financial uncertainty forced her to be 'open to all kinds of job offers'.

Reflecting on her life in the past several years, and particularly her relationship with her mother, Neda noticed that she had naively been assuming that her situation 'was just like that of Lotte and Daan [typical Dutch names]'. Her mother, she explained, had to work very hard as an immigrant to provide a good life for her and her brother, and this led her to the position: 'I thought I could do and become anything I wanted.' This

'naivety', Neda thought, had to do with a denial of being different and wanting to be the same as her schoolmates and friends as a child and as a teenager. Her experiences in college, however, challenged this naivety, as her professors and fellow students repeatedly encouraged her to 'do something with your Iranian background' in her projects: 'I was constantly confronted with where I came from.' In her experience, as she became older, the discrepancy between how she viewed her own position in society and the way she was perceived by others increased.

However, her 'naive' sense of being the same as others had also been disputed at home:

No one understood why I chose to study interior design. My mother had worked so hard and wanted us to become something prestigious like a doctor or an engineer. [. . .] My mother risked everything by leaving Iran and I chose interior design [laughing]. What an ungrateful daughter I am.

Although Neda still felt committed to her choice of profession, she emphasized that her awareness of her specific position as the daughter of a migrant had increased:

Whether I like it or not, I am the child of an immigrant. This is something that I have just recently started to recognize and explore.

The theme of recognizing and exploring one's cultural and ethnic positionality arose several times as Neda talked about her two-year relationship with a Dutch-Lebanese man: 'Unlike me, he really had a bicultural upbringing.' While Neda said she had managed to deny her migrant background as a teenager, her partner 'always knew where he came from. He never assimilated.' During our first conversation, Neda spoke about how, as a teenager, she would avoid attending *mehmoonis* (Iranian social gatherings) because of the excessive focus on personal appearance, particularly among women: 'I would constantly receive comments about epilating my eyebrows, going to the gym, trying another dress, changing the colour of my hair, everything. So yeah, of course, I felt much more relaxed among Dutch people.' By socializing with 'Dutch people' instead of the Iranian-Dutch, Neda claimed space outside what she experienced as repressive Iranian gendered norms of beauty.

More recently, however, Neda's critical gaze had turned towards Dutch society more generally. According to Neda, while cultural diversity is celebrated in the Netherlands, this liberal attitude is in fact superficial and limited to 'enjoying Middle Eastern food'. In Neda's view, rather than true inclusion, the positive attitude towards cultural diversity in the Netherlands is mostly a matter of embracing 'exotic' Others. To counter this Dutch 'uneasiness' with cultural diversity and to celebrate *biculturaliteit* (Dutch for biculturality), Neda and her partner regularly organize multicultural events, including small dance parties with Iranian and Arabic music and informal discussions of books about multiculturalism. But, she immediately assured me, their events were nothing like typical Iranian parties:

It's not about showing off, wearing revealing dresses, arriving with ridiculously expensive German cars and fighting at the end because someone looked at their girlfriend [laughing]. Or like those events in which the great 'Persia' is mourned [laughing].

The Iranian festive events that Neda co-organizes, on the contrary, are *'bescheiden'* (modest), *'gezellig'* (cosy) and *'met een knipoog'* (a sense of humour). These Dutch expressions convey a sense of aversion towards the excessiveness of 'typical' Iranian parties as opposed to the Dutch values of moderation and ordinariness. This points to an imaginative third space: a space beyond diasporic nostalgia and Dutch 'uneasiness' with cultural diversity. The concept of biculturality allows a simultaneous and strategic appropriation of Iranian and Dutch cultural elements that leads to a more capacious mode of being.

The biculturality of Neda's partner and herself is a crucial aspect of their relationship:

We don't have to explain obvious things to each other. We both were born somewhere else and grew up here and have lots of shared experiences.

Elaborating on those shared experiences, Neda said:

Bicultural people lack this feeling of true belonging. This experience shapes us in a fundamental way and that is what I have in common with him as well as all my friends, really. Everyone that is truly close to me, is bicultural. Our bonds are very deep.

Neda explained how she and her friends had often been put in the position of correcting someone's superficial ideas about their background. To Neda, biculturality means a sense of (un)belonging to available cultural landscapes and a continuous state of reorientation and (self-)reflection.

Recalling our first conversation, Neda explained that while she had become less sexually adventurous, her awareness of norms of femininity has increased:

I have never been a perfect Persian princess, nor will I ever be the ideal 'huisje-boompje-beestje' [Dutch expression of conventionality] housewife. I would never behave according to what is expected from me as a woman.

Here, again, Neda critically refers to Iranian and Dutch cultural codes, illustrating her efforts to claim a third space. Getting married and having children was not at all self-evident to Neda, neither was remaining in a relationship for a very long time: 'For now, we are okay, but there are no explicit commitments. I am not even sad to say that.' The third space that Neda is claiming here is an open space outside normative expectations, a space that is yet to be explored and filled.

Although this non-normative attitude also characterized the way she spoke about relationships during our first conversation several years ago, I noticed a change in the role Neda attributed to culture. Whereas previously she complained about 'the awful tendency to make so-called cultural references' by her romantic partners, who expected her to behave like a 'neat Iranian woman', she would now regard cultural background as an opportunity for creating intimacy, while still rejecting patriarchal role division: 'I really enjoy how my partner and I can discuss and laugh about normative expectations from our families and society as a whole'. Together with her partner, Neda inhabits a space of (un)

belonging in which culture is transformed from a source of alienation to a source of intimacy and connection.

In her articulations of sexuality, gender and belonging, Neda interchangeably and simultaneously drew on her experiences with Iranian and Dutch notions and values of diversity, assimilation, multiculturalism, cultural heritage and femininity. Her Dutch and Iranian background constantly informed her decision-making and facilitated her awareness of her position as bicultural or a second-generation migrant and as a woman. An increasing awareness of these positionalities, however, formed a vehicle to move beyond them and to nurture a critical attitude towards societal norms of gender and sexuality, including ideals of beauty, marriage and monogamy. Furthermore, her previous assumption of inclusion is now replaced by a critical sense of (un)belonging, which forms the political means to ethnic and cultural solidarity.

Hamed

A few weeks before we met in the summer of 2017, Hamed and his partner had separated. They had agreed on having a sexually open but emotionally exclusive relationship. However, she had fallen in love with an ex-boyfriend and thereby crossed the line of emotional exclusivity. Hamed had experienced different types of open and non-open relationships in the past, and explained, 'You know, it depends on the partner and the kind of connection you have.' Reflecting on those experiences, he said he had found out that, for him, having a 'main partner' is crucial and whether there might be others involved sexually was something to be negotiated. He had met many of his previous partners through his work as a multidisciplinary artist. In his early twenties, he had decided to quit his university education in biology and to pursue a career as an artist, a decision he spoke proudly about. Now, almost twenty years later, he is considered a well-established artist in Amsterdam.

Talking about an ideal partner, Hamed said: 'I have very high expectations, I realize that. I want my partner to be intellectually, emotionally, sexually and romantically the perfect match.' While previously his main concern in relationships was individual fulfilment, recently he had come to appreciate mutual growth as an open process: 'I am now more interested in how we can grow together and what we could mean to each other as the relationship proceeds.' When we had our first conversation in 2011, Hamed was in an open relationship with an Iranian-Dutch woman who, unlike himself, was relatively inexperienced in terms of romantic and sexual engagements. Determined to make the relationship more equal, he would encourage his partner to have sexual relationships with others whenever she felt the desire. This attitude corresponded with how he saw his own role as an artist in relation to the Iranian-Dutch community, namely a responsibility to break sexual taboos and to fight for gender equality. At that time, topics of sexuality and gender had become increasingly discussed in Iranian diasporic public spaces as part of a broader oppositional social movement against the Iranian regime that aimed to change the focus from political transformation to cultural emancipation. Hamed identified himself as a pioneer in this movement, a task that he took seriously both professionally and personally.

Despite engaging in non-monogamous practices, Hamed was determined that he would never become a member of the ‘poly’ groups, referring to organizations of self-identified polyamorous individuals in the Netherlands: ‘Polyamory has become a new identity category. I don’t understand this emphasis on personal identity and inclination.’ Despite their progressive agendas, Hamed regarded poly communities as too limited, saying:

It is good to make diversity visible, as these organizations do, but the focus on identity is really annoying and problematic. [They] forget about other important stuff in life beyond sexuality and relationships. I don’t want to be primarily associated with my sexuality.

To explore other parts of his identity, Hamed was actively involved in a cosmopolitan cyber network of writers with different national and ethnic backgrounds who are engaged with various controversial political, cultural and social issues. Compared to the limitations he associated with the poly community, namely its identitarian character and a weak political potential, this global network of writers provided Hamed a more satisfactory sense (un)belonging:

I feel like I belong to this group, without having met any of them. I feel at home. What connects us is a shared understanding of the world beyond our national, ethnic, religious or sexual identities.

The same sense of being connected yet free was reflected in the way Hamed talked about his interest in Iran and Iranians. For instance, he referred to organizing an Iranian event as part of the Amsterdam Gay Pride:

I did what I could as I am well-connected. [. . .] I was born in Iran, but Amsterdam is my home. I have a multi-layered identity and, frankly, I might as well have helped the Iraqi LGBTQIs instead of the Iranians.

Reducing his role to facilitating others’ goals, Hamed claims a cosmopolitan identity associated with living in the city of Amsterdam. This identity allows him to make himself useful and to become engaged in an important cause while refusing commitments based on national, sexual or ethnic identity. Although contributing to the cultural emancipation of the Iranian-Dutch community was crucial for the way Hamed positioned himself during our first conversation, in his current political engagements he seemed much more concerned with addressing a cosmopolitan audience. As a facilitator of emancipation, Hamed imagines a queer diasporic space in which certain modes of affiliation and belonging emerge beyond ethnocentric and heteronormative understandings of home.

While the tendency to avoid fixed identity categories and openness to change can be traced in Hamed’s articulations of sexuality and belonging, he simultaneously expressed a strong sense of commitment to transnational initiatives. He mentioned his Iranian and Dutch background as two points of reference to relate his own ‘progressive’ position as someone who seeks and finds connections beyond national, ethnic or sexual identity

categories. The cosmopolitan online writers' network and the Iranian event at the Amsterdam gay pride are two sites where these transnational connections have taken shape for him. His social and intimate commitments towards others are deliberate, yet fluid, allowing for a constant state of (un)belonging.

Concluding remarks

The four Iranian-Dutch narratives presented in this article, illustrate situated and empirical accounts of sexual, ethnic and cultural (un)belonging, which problematize normative diasporic and nationalist assumptions about identity, nation and home. Drawing on their Iranian, Dutch and global positioning, the interlocutors took a distance from societal norms to indicate, dismantle and transgress heteropatriarchal understandings which intersect with exclusionary regimes of power and fictions of purity underlying us/them demarcations in contemporary multicultural and multi-ethnic societies. Rejecting dominant models of motherhood, femininity, monogamy and fixed sexual and ethnic identity categories enabled them to find commitment and engagement beyond nationality and ethnicity in their intimate and social relations with others. The concept of (un)belonging made it possible to identify and analyze everyday practices of non-normativity and progressiveness among the interlocutors in relation to sexuality, ethnicity and culture. Strategic and imaginative appropriations of ethnic and cultural background provided them with a third space in which alternative modes of being, intimacy and connection became possible and racialized and sexualized borders of the nation are disrupted.

Obtaining the four narratives through follow-up interviews, six to eight years after our first conversations, allowed for a time frame in which sexual progressiveness became constructed and reconstructed in different stages of the interlocutors' lives. Overall, the narratives revealed a broadening in the orientation of this progressive attitude: while previously references to oppressive Iranian norms of sexuality and gender dominated narratives of transgression by these younger Iranian-Dutch, in their current accounts their critical gaze explicitly included (homo)nationalist discourses in Dutch society more generally. This transformation is perhaps not surprising given the less than three decades history of Iranian-Dutch migration as well as the young age of the interlocutors. As they have become older and more socially engaged through education and work, their awareness of their positioning in structural power relations seems to have increased. Their previous radical yet idealized conceptions of gender and sexual progressiveness changed into more complex navigations of love and sexuality in the current everyday context of existing structures. This appears, for instance, from protests organized by younger Iranian-Dutch as a response to what they perceived as discriminatory and Islamophobic incidents following political anxieties around the possibility of a nuclear Islamic Iran. Due to their cosmopolitan sensibilities and living in vibrant urban settings in the global context of growing (anti-)racist movements, the younger Iranian-Dutch interlocutors have not unexpectedly become more sensitive to racist and discriminatory practices.

However, this very cosmopolitan positionality should simultaneously caution us against too celebratory representations of the queer diasporic subject. Although a precarious work situation was mentioned in all four narratives, Neda was the only interlocutor who acknowledged this as a problem. The freedom and opportunity to do the job they

like was mostly praised and the financial uncertainties were accepted as the inevitable price for following one's passion. Regardless of the financial situation, their educational background arguably provides them with the social capital to envision and cultivate mobility. Moreover, references to religion and religiosity were remarkably absent in the narratives of the interlocutors, which is a tendency in the Iranian-Dutch community more generally (Roodsaz, forthcoming). Given the strong interplay between racism and Islamophobia in the context of the Netherlands (Bracke, 2012; Van Nieuwkerk, 2004), the implicit secularity in these younger Iranian-Dutch accounts could function as a privilege. Such classed and secular implications point to the complexities and contradictions of queer diasporic subjectivity produced in and through the workings of late-modern capitalism (Gopinath, 2005).

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Notes

1. To protect the privacy of the interlocutors, their accounts of sexuality, gender and belonging are anonymized by changing the names and some of their personal characteristics.
2. The 'Randstad' is the Dutch term for the central-western metropolitan region of the Netherlands, including Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. Generally, better job opportunities and highly active and progressive cultural scenes are associated with this area.
3. For instance, discussions around the publication of *The Monogamous Drama* (2015) by Simone van Saarloos. For an overview of Dutch media attention to polyamory, see: <http://www.polyamorie.nl/in-de-media/> (accessed 20 November 2018).
4. See, for example, Plantenga (2002). The Netherlands is known for its unusually high rate of female part-time workers, particularly compared to other European countries. According to the Dutch Bureau for Statistics, more than two-thirds of all Dutch part-time workers are women: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/achtergrond/2017/06/werkzame-beroepsbevolking-deeltijd> (accessed 20 November 2018).

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