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Countering illegibility: Religion, ethnicity and sexuality in public debates and lived experience in Belgium

Nella van den Brandt

Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In this article, I set out to explore various intersectional social constructions of ethnicity, religion and sexuality. First, I conduct an analysis of recent public controversies in Flanders (Belgium) about women's and (homo)sexual equality as set against religious authorities and religious-ethnic minorities. It reveals how dominant understandings of ethnicity, sexuality and religion are constructed, reinforced and, if needed, defended. Second, I foreground a critical counter-voice negotiating these what I call 'ethno-sexular' boundary constructions. I analyse the lived experiences of Hajar, a volunteer of an antiracist LGBTQI organisation located in Brussels, and argue that because of a dominant ethno-sexular discourse, Hajar's hybrid identifications and critical voice is made illegible in much of her social environment.

KEYWORDS Religion-secularity; ethnicity; sexuality; public discourse; counter-voice

Whom we love is a completely different issue than in which god we believe, isn't it? (liberal politician of the Flemish parliament, Belgium, 2013)

I really feel I am in-between. And I am a product of in-between. So I will never choose one side over the other. (Hajar, interviewee)

In public debates and everyday life across West European contexts, such as the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium, categories such as religion, ethnicity and sexuality are often understood – and experienced – as referring to stable, or even fixed, majority and minority positions and identities. Societies are regarded as populated by a majority population and various minorities, by which the latter are defined, among other characteristics, through religious, ethnic and sexual differences. This article starts from the combined insights that differences are always in the making in contexts of power, and that such discursive differences have real material and

CONTACT Nella van den Brandt  h.p.vandenbrandt@uu.nl

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experiential effects (Manyard [1994] 2001 M'Charek 2010). As feminist anthropologist Henrietta Moore emphasised, '[d]ifference(s) from others are frequently about forming and maintaining group boundaries. The brutal and bloody nature of this maintenance work is everywhere in evidence' (1994, 1). Critical insights into the dynamics of structural inequalities, disadvantages and privileges have spurred antiracist, anti-Islamophobic, anti-fundamentalist, feminist and LGBTQI critique and social movements (Bracke 2004; Coene and Longman 2008; Midden 2010; Tauqir et al. 2011; Aune 2015; Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis 2015; Roodsaz and van den Brandt 2017). In these critiques and movements, 'difference' is often criticised in terms of processes of marginalisation/minoritisation, and simultaneously affirmed in terms of the specificity of religious, ethnic, sexual or gendered viewpoints and experiences as the ground upon which society might be envisioned 'differently' (Van den Brandt and Longman 2017).¹ Religion, ethnicity and sexuality therefore refer across academia, politics, culture and policy-making to majority/minority positions, identities and experiences and are similarly framed in terms of privilege/discrimination.

However, the terms are understood to refer to different kinds of differences. Overwhelmingly, ethnicity seems to be about cultural upbringing and identity, and is therefore a social construct, albeit a 'sticky' one (Ahmed 2004²); cultural difference is presumed to 'stick' more to minoritised bodies, an assumption that leads to two related expectations. These expectations hold that minoritised subjects are collectively and individually more susceptible to the influence of cultural values and practices than majority subjects (i.e. the notion that ethnic minority members are 'duped' by or 'victims' of their culture, which finds for example expression in policy-making and public discussions about 'honour-related violence', Withaecx and Coene 2014); and second, that majority subjects have either no culture/ethnicity worth mentioning or analysing (as it is not 'different-from' a cultural mainstream and therefore rendered invisible) or *if* considered worth mentioning, it is often in a context in which majority culture is understood as in need of protection from cultural minorities (as it is superior to and in need of defence from those who are 'different-from'). Religion is about belief and unbelief: it refers to the religious tradition one is brought up in, but in Dutch-speaking contexts also to life stance that may be informed by, not only religious worldviews, but also by for example humanist and socialist ones. Across Dutch and Belgian secularised contexts, commitment to a religious tradition, community or worldview is often considered to be a matter of individual choice and faith or conviction, and as an option among others (Taylor 2007). Religion is regarded to be less sticky, especially for secularised majority populations. Similar to understandings of ethnicity, also minority religious traditions, especially Islam, are assumed to stick more to religious minoritised bodies (i.e. the notion that Muslims are 'victims' of or 'brainwashed by' Islam finds expression, for example, in public debates that posit Islam and therefore Muslims as oppressive to Muslim women and Muslim queers (El Tayeb 2011). It moreover

finds expression in rising public concerns about radicalisation/terrorism and the 'susceptibility' of young people to respond to calls to commit violence in the name of Islam (Van den Brandt 2017). Sexuality, finally, often refers to identity, not in terms of upbringing, but rather, in terms of an innate characteristic of the self.³ This means that individuals are in public discourse considered to be born as heterosexuals or homosexuals, although the latter can be socialised into heterosexuality, which means that the non-heterosexual often has to 'find out' during her/his life-course her/his 'true' sexuality, and 'confess' this sexuality in order to live a non-constrained and free life.⁴ While ethnicity and religion are assumed to stick more to minoritised bodies, this is not the case for sexuality as an innate characteristic of *any* self. However, what *does* stick to certain bodies are understandings about a liberated sexual self and freely chosen sexual life, as well as its opposite, i.e. understandings about a constrained sexual self and an oppressed sexual life (this finds expression, for example, in policy-making and political-public discussions that assume that ethnic and religious minoritised communities, notably Muslims, are constraining and oppressive of LGBTQI selves and lives, El Tayeb 2011; Wekker 2016).

Thinking through these terms and their dominant definitions explains part of the story of the 'rise' of homosexuality set against religious and ethnic majority and minority traditions: as social constructs and matters of choice, the latter could/should adapt or 'develop' towards the acceptance and inclusion of non-heterosexual identities and practices. Academic and/or activist discussions exist about all the above-outlined dominant terms, as also the references suggest. These discussions are based on questions such as 'do neat distinctions between ethnic communities or identities exist?', 'is religion just individual choice?', 'is sexuality really a matter of born-this-way?' and 'who has power (and who does not) to define these issues?' and are foremost articulated and discussed within antiracist, progressive religious, feminist and queer communities and movements. An overarching concern is with diversity and power: how to account for various forms of (intersecting) differences, the ways in which they come into being through law, policy-making, education and every-day life, and how to build progressive politics? Such discussions, however, remain somewhat at the margins of dominant popular understandings.

In this article, I critically explore various contemporary intersectional social constructions of religion, ethnicity and sexuality in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium. First, I analyse recent public controversies about women's and (homo)sexual equality as set against religious authorities and religious-ethnic minorities. This analysis reveals how dominant understandings of sexuality and religion are constructed, reinforced and, if needed, defended. To understand the discursive construction of boundaries between groups based on the intersections of ethnicity, religion and sexuality, I bring the conceptual framework of sociologist Joan Nagel (2003, 2000) and feminist historian Scott (2009) into conversation with one another in order to conceptualise and think through, what I call, the discursive construction of ethno-sexular boundaries. I

coin ‘ethno-sexuality’ as a concept that aims at tracing the intertwinements of ethnicity, religion-secularity and sexuality.

Second, I explore a critical counter-voice negotiating ethno-sexular boundary constructions. I foreground the lived experiences of Hajar, a volunteer of Merhaba, an antiracist LGBTQI organisation located in Brussels. Identifying as half-Belgian and half-Algerian, non-religious and pansexual, her story provides rich insights into the daily-life juggling of dominant expectations and language in order to carve out space for an individual self-understanding and life trajectory in-between categories. Interventions into ethno-sexuality take place, I argue, through claiming ethnic hybridity; the development of a post-secular perspective; and a queer critique and self-identification. I emphasise the creativity and endurance of subjects who understand themselves in-between various categories, develop strategies to move in-between, and consciously contribute to new collective/individual languages and spaces. While Hajar’s counter-narrative is made (almost) illegible in a context of dominant ethno-sexuality, stories as hers are crucial for the further development of ‘queer antiracist critique’ (Douglas, Jivraj, and Lambie 2011; Tauqir et al. 2011; see also Muñoz 1999; El Tayeb 2011; Haritaworn 2015) that aims at creating space for claiming and articulating differences.

Part I – the emergence of ethno-sexuality in Flemish public debates

Sociologist Joan Nagel coined the phrase ‘ethnosexual boundaries’ to convey the insight that racial, ethnic and national boundaries are also often sexual boundaries, and to analyse instances of ‘ethnosexual boundary processes’ (Nagel 2000). She looks into various historical and contemporary cases of defying the ‘ethnosexual frontiers’ (2000, 113) that are constructed in society, and argues that such cases best expose ‘the sexualized foundations of ethnicity’ (2000, 118). The author 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’ (2000, 118). Nagel’s cases are the sexual policing of nationalism in the aftermath of the Second World War in Europe, the sexual aspects of Native American Indian–white relations, and the sexualisation of the colour line dividing African-Americans 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’ (2000, 123) and points at existing notions about an incompatibility of blackness and homosexuality.

I suggest to connect Nagel’s insights into the intersecting constructions of ethnicity and sexuality in order to draw boundaries between different

communities to the work of feminist historian Scott (2011, 2009) about religion, gender and secularism. In a 2009 essay, Scott coined the term 'sexularism' to convey her understanding of the intersecting constructions of sex, gender and secularism in the framing of differences between the secular(ised) majority population and Muslims in West European contexts. While the historical emergence of secularism (in terms of philosophical-political redefinitions of church–state relations) is often thought of as a sufficient explanation for the increased institutionalisation of gender equality and sexual freedom across European contexts, Scott takes up a historiographical approach to investigate the French revolution. Scott complicates Talal Asad's call for a critique of an idealised secular (2003) by turning attention to the opposition between reason and sex, arguing that '[i]n the idealized version of secularism, the consignment of the passions [and thereby female bodies] to a private sphere makes possible reasonable conversation in the realms of the public and the political' (2009, 3). She questions the line of reasoning that draws sharp oppositions between secularism and gender equality vs. religion and women's oppression, and argues for the need to expose as of very recent origin the narrative that assumes gender and sexual emancipation to be the product of secularism. This narrative needs to be considered as located in a contemporary context of heated discussions about the relationships between 'Islam' and 'the West' (2009, 6). Discourses based on rigid and hierarchical distinctions between religion and the secular emerge from and have furthered the discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation of Islam and Muslim communities (Scott 2007; Braidotti 2008; Butler 2008).

Bringing the concepts 'ethnosexual' and 'sexularism' together as both referring to forms of discursive boundary drawing between communities in society leads me to coin the term *ethno-sexularity* to convey the insight that constructions of ethnicity, religion-secularity and gender/sexuality are in contemporary West European societies intrinsically connected in the majoritisation/normalisation and minoritisation/marginalisation of specific ethnic, religious and sexual identifications and subjectivities. In what follows, I illustrate the emergence of ethno-sexularity through looking at various recent moments in public debates in Flanders. This exploration is not meant to provide an exhaustive overview – instead, it aims at revealing the dominance of certain social constructions of ethnicity, religion-secularity and sexuality through setting up discursive boundaries. Following here a feminist poststructuralist perspective (Butler 1990, 1993; Armour and St. Ville 2006), I posit that this exploration reveals the context in which, and at times *against* which, differences are being made and individual subjects/bodies come into being.⁵

In 2012 and 2013, various controversies took place in Flanders about sexuality, religious authorities and religious-ethnic minoritised communities. These controversies created/reinforced existing popular understandings of religion and sexuality by problematising religious-ethnicised communities as sexist and homophobic and as potentially threatening the public sphere through

the 'intrusion' of religion. In this process, I argue, ethno-sexuality emerges as a discourse that constructs sexual identity, religion and ethnicity in specific ways. As a powerful discourse, ethno-sexuality produces the schemes of what can be known and understood, as well as what falls outside of the knowable (Butler 2009, 6).

Debate 1 – setting up ethnosexual boundaries: the ethnicisation of the problem of sexism and homophobia

In 2012, two documentaries were broadcasted at the Flemish public television VRT about sexism and homophobic intimidation that resulted in accusations towards ethnic minority men as perpetrators of sexism and homophobia. The public debates that emerged after the broadcasting of 'Femme de la Rue' and 'Homme de la Rue' illustrate the rise and/or reinforcement of understandings of Islam and Muslim men as oppressive and liberal-secular values as facilitating freedom and equality.

In the summer of 2012, the broadcasting of the 25 min documentary 'Femme de la Rue' by film student Sofie Peeters caused a stir across Dutch- and French-speaking media and political debate followed. The documentary was made with a hidden camera with the film-maker in the leading role, walking through the streets in a particular area of Brussels. The documentary shows how she is continuously called names (like slut and whore) and experiences harassment by men. A number of young women living in the same area are also interviewed. They testify to similarly suffer almost daily sexual insults and remarks and more serious harassment and get by avoiding certain streets or going out altogether, and carefully choosing their clothes. In the fall of 2012, two gay male journalists made a similar documentary 'Homme de la Rue' walking through an Antwerp neighbourhood where ethnic minorities live. With a hidden camera, they demonstrate the homophobic remarks and harassment they experience from – presumably Muslim – youths hanging around in the streets. Longman (2013) argues that the existence and unacceptability of both social problems – sexual harassment and sexism in the streets and homophobic intimidation in the streets – usually taboo subjects, were picked up. However, media and political debate that followed, did not refrain from problematising and essentialising the identities of the perpetrators. A main theme was the 'problem' ethnic minority, and in particular Muslim men, are presumed to have with issues of gender equality and public homosexuality.

In the above short excursion, ethnosexuality (Nagel 2000) emerges through the problematising of ethnic minority men (especially Muslim men) as threatening women's emancipation and sexual freedoms. Both reportages and the resulting discussions demonstrate this supposed threat as taking place in public realms of streets and neighbourhoods. The following exploration shows that

this problematisation of ethnic minority/Muslim men is partly dependent on certain constructions of the relationship between sexuality and religion.

Debate 2 – the emergence of secularism: the legibility of oppositional relations between religion and the equality/emancipation of women and sexual minorities

Early 2013, the Belgian branch of the originally Ukraine feminist movement Femen initiated several moments of feminist public protest, eagerly covered by all sorts of Flemish newspapers. In its activism, Femen demonstrates an understanding of a shared struggle by feminists and sexual minorities vice versa religion and religious authorities. At the end of April 2013, Femen activists were able to intrude a lecture about blasphemy, organised by ULB, the French-speaking university of Brussels, and harassed the speaker, the Belgian archbishop Joseph Léonard, with what they mockingly called ‘holy water’. Pouring water on the archbishop, and shouting slogans such as ‘Stop homophobia’ and ‘Anus Dei is coming’, the activists protested his point of view on homosexuality (De Morgen, 23 April, 2013a).⁶ One Femen member used afterwards in an interview with a journalist explicit religious terminology to explain their action: ‘We used holy water to help mgr. Léonard to take back his words. Maybe heaven will help him. At least he prayed for us.’ (VTM Nieuws, 24 April, 2013) (translation NvdB).

This action of Femen received wide media attention. It provoked some discussion about the usefulness of Femen’s strategy as well as about the appropriateness of newspapers’ editors’ decision to give ample attention to the event (VTM Nieuws, 24 April, 2013; El Azzouzi, 28 April, 2013; Nagels, 22 May, 2013). The action was fiercely denounced by the federation for Belgian bishops, which emphasised in a press announcement the value of open debate and freedom of speech (De Morgen, 24 April, 2013b). What interests me here is that Femen’s action provoked little discussion about its understanding of Catholicism as the enemy of sexual minorities.⁷ A different and somewhat more lively debate followed newspapers’ coverage of a Femen action that took place a little earlier – during the first week of April 2013 – at the Grand Mosque in Brussels. There Femen protested against the treatment of Tunisian Femen member Amina Sboui at the hands of the Tunisian Government as well as her family. They employed slogans such as ‘Fuck your morals’ and ‘Bear breasts against Islamism’. Femen announced that day, 4 April, to be the International Topless Jihad Day, and also in other European cities – such as Berlin, Paris, Milan and Stockholm – protests by Femen activists took place in front of embassies and mosques (De Morgen, 4 April, 2013c; The Atlantic, 4 April, 2013). Afterwards, this action was discussed, notably by feminist voices who aimed at denouncing Femen and taking critical distance from Femen’s version of feminism, in mainstream as well as leftist newspapers in terms of its notions of religion, feminism and women’s emancipation, and its links to racism and Islamophobia (Carlier, 25 April, 2013; Embrechts, 10

April, 2013; Purnelle, 24 April, 2013). As, for example, Purnelle put it in the well-known online leftist newspaper *De Wereld Morgen*:

Shevchenko & Co. appoint themselves as protectors of Muslim women. They do not take into account that culture and religion play an important role in the lives of many people, including women. Religion and expressing it is a fundamental right. It is true that women are oppressed by sharia, but generalising this injustice to all women in the Middle East and to Islam is short-sighted and not constructive. (Purnelle, 24 April, 2013) (translation NvdB)

Albeit few, the feminist responses to Femen's protest at the Grand Mosque of Brussels make the silence around Femen's protest against bishop Léonard concerning its construction of the relationship between religion and sexuality more striking. It seems that the journalistic responses to Femen either say nothing about religion (in the case of bishop Léonard), or they defend religion (in the case of the Grand Mosque), notably against Islamophobia. The difference might be based on a general reading that Femen attacked Catholic authorities particularly (which is then considered a valid attack), while it attacks Islam or Muslims generally (which is then considered an Islamophobic attack that needs to be denounced). Or, it may rather be based on the political-affective response that Catholicism is the majority religion in Belgium and maintains a position of institutionalised power (and can or should therefore be mocked and critiqued), while Islam is a minority religion and its adherents are often discriminated against (which means that critique should be articulated, if at all, very carefully). Last, understandings of Catholic lay believers as much more able to bear heavy critique levied against Catholic authorities (which means that an ability of critical distance is in that case implied) compared to Muslims being more easily hurt by their religious institutions/symbols being attacked, could also play a role. I would suggest that to some degree, all three elements play a constitutive role in how controversies about religion, gender and sexuality come into being (if at all) and how they are framed.⁸

Given that Femen's activism vis-à-vis religious authorities triggered only few reactions about how to understand the relationship between religion and the emancipation of women and non-heterosexuals, we may assume that Femen's oppositional framing of the relationship between Christianity and Islam on the one hand, and gender and sexual equality and freedom on the other, has been legible for many in Flanders. Sexularism (Scott 2009) emerges here through the problematising and attacking of Catholic and Islamic authorities and traditions as oppositional to the emancipation of women and sexual freedoms.

The journalistic coverage of an event involving the issue of the rights and equality of homosexuals in the public domain that took place two months earlier, however, did give rise to much more debate and commentary from various sides. In the following, I explore the controversy around this event to delve more into some of the assumptions tied to recent social constructions of religion, secularity and sexuality, as well as of public/private distinctions – assumptions without

which oppositional framings are not possible. I suggest that the difference in levels of controversy provides a leeway into rethinking which social constructions of religion/secularity and sexual orientation are legible and acceptable to many who participate in public debates, and which ones are not, and why this is the case. This does not mean that other notions of religion, secularity and sexuality do not exist, however, they most of the time remain at the margins or outside the public debates taking place between politicians, journalists and civil society actors.

Debate 3 – tracing ethno-sexuality: the defence of public expressions of homosexuality against religion as individual and private matter through problematising Islamic practice

In February 2013, Bart the Wever, the mayor of Antwerp and chairman of the Flemish nationalist party, spoke about restrictions homosexual city employees should abide to. He argued that for city desk officers forms of self-expression should be limited in order to protect the neutrality of the city and its public sphere. For homosexuals, this means that they cannot wear any clothing that expresses their sexual orientation, such as a T-shirt with a rainbow print on it.⁹ Unprecedented in Flemish public debates, De Wever drew parallels between expressions of sexual orientation and of religious identity, such as the Islamic headscarf. As a background, it is important to keep in mind that in 2003, the Belgian federal government legalised gay marriage, thereby publicly recognising and legally institutionalising two-coupled committed non-heterosexuality.¹⁰ Moreover, already since 2007, Antwerp city desk officers are forbidden to wear a headscarf in order to ensure the 'neutrality' of the city desk office.¹¹ De Wever put his argument as such: 'I do not want anyone at the city desks wearing a Rainbow T-shirt. Because a homosexual demonstrates through such symbols that he or she is committed to that *obedience*. And people do recognise that' (emphasis mine) (HLN, 2 February, 2013). Having built a nationalist Enlightenment rhetoric over the last couple of years that demonises both French-speaking Walloon people as well as ethnic and religious minoritised communities with recent migrant histories, and prioritises the economic needs of (entrepreneurial) Flemish people (Maly 2012), De Wever extends here a French Republican inspired *laïque* discourse about 'neutrality' from religion to homosexuality. In order to keep governmental jobs and practice 'neutral', not only visible symbols of religious identity (such as the Islamic headscarf) but also visible expressions of homosexuality (such as a Rainbow T-shirt) should be forbidden. Both religious identity and sexual identity, the argument seems to be, need to be kept private. This argument constructs both religion and sexuality as essentially a matter of internal faith and identity, separating this essence from practice and visible expressions, and thereby consigning what is considered to be non-essential to the private sphere.

The journalistic coverage of De Wever's remarks created an immediate stir among Flemish politicians, journalists and civil society actors and at media forums.¹² Many worried about the equal rights of individuals with a non-heterosexual orientation. Moreover, the parallel between expressions of religion and of sexual orientation evoked angry reactions. The notion of 'obedience' [the Dutch term is *obediëntie*] is part of Catholic religious terminology, and refers to monastics who made vows to obey their prior. This parallel was felt to be completely misplaced. Liberal politician Alexander de Croo (Open VLD), for example, responded: 'Is an expression of sexual orientation – even in official jobs – really an issue? Whom we love is a completely different issue than in which god we believe, isn't it?' (translation NvdB). De Croo's response reveals the often reiterated understanding of a fundamental distinction between religious identity and sexuality – an understanding that is dominant in particular among politicians and civil society actors that consider themselves to be liberal or progressive, but less so among those who are situated within Christian politics and civil society. In this understanding, religion is considered to be a conviction and world view, which is constructed through socialisation and can be as a 'chosen' identity and belonging either affirmed or renounced. Sexuality, however, is perceived to be an intrinsic part of the individual self, which cannot be repressed or renounced, but needs to be confessed and practiced without restrictions to enable individual flourishing and happiness. De Wever's suggestion to restrict city desk officers' non-heterosexual self-expressions clearly went against the grains of much of liberal-progressive common sense and understandings about the relationships between religious identity, sexual selfhood, secularity, neutrality and the public sphere. Non-heterosexual orientations are not perceived to be threatening the neutral public sphere, but are rather seen as in need of protection from discrimination in order to be enabled to flourish publicly. On the other hand, expressions of religious identity and belonging do continue to be perceived as threatening the dominant order of secular neutrality, and therefore need to be banned from official jobs and teaching in public education. The responses to De Wever's point of view need to be situated in a context of Flemish policy-making at the level of municipal politics, public education and the labour market that construct and ban the Islamic headscarf as *the* sartorial practice that opposes human flourishing, both of the female wearer – who must be oppressed by her community – as well as of her white, non-Muslim environment – who must be suffering its proselytising force.

One and a half year later, in August 2014, an opinion piece was published by philosopher and religion teacher Mathias Balcaen at the mainstream news website *Deredactie.be* (28 August, 2014). In this opinion piece, he questions the dominant assumption that sexual identity is *not* a personal choice and should therefore be expressed freely and publicly, while religious identity *is* a personal choice and should therefore be kept private. Balcaen expresses the hope that as the free expression of non-heterosexual orientation today seems to pose no

problem for neutrality, the same will count in the near future for headscarf-wearing Muslim women in public office and as teachers. At the forum, his text generated a number of responses. Of these 28 responses, most aim at setting things straight by arguing that Balcaen got it entirely wrong with his understanding of sexuality, religion and choice, and by reinforcing notions about what can be made public and what should remain or made private. Two notable exceptions are present among the responses. The first (Dennis) poses questions regarding the framing of religion as choice:

Forcing them [believers] [to accept the notion] that they choose their faith, makes no sense, in the same way as considering homosexuality to be a choice. Denying Muslims or Christians the space to be faithful, based upon the argument that it is their choice, is as repulsive as forcing gays to hide their sexual nature. [the Dutch terminology is *seksuele geaardheid*] (translation NvdB)

The second posits that any definition of neutrality is subjective, contrary to the assumption that these definitions are objective. However, these two responses remain marginal next to the many others (including those in the controversy of February 2013) whose main stake was reinforcing perceptions about clear-cut differences between the foundation of various kinds of identity/selfhood, and their subsequent belonging to public or private spheres.

The above exploration reveals that at least in this 2013 controversy De Wever's stood alone in considering sexual identity as a 'commitment' that threatens the normative neutrality of public office. To paraphrase Lynne Gerber and her research on US Evangelical 'queerish ex-gay experiments' (2008), De Wever's comments can be read as 'queerish' because he destabilises notions dominant among liberal-progressive politicians, civil society actors and commentators about sexual orientation as part of essential selfhood and 'nature' by putting forward the suggestion that sexual orientation is part of the realm of choice, commitment, conviction, performance and belonging. This is precisely where lies the controversiality of his construction of both religious and non-heterosexual identities and belonging as opposed to the status quo of the secular neutral public sphere. De Wever portrays non-heterosexuality in an ambiguous way – he may similarly hold on to the idea of sexuality as 'born this way', but even if this is the case, in the 2013 controversy, he represents sexuality as a conviction and loyalty by drawing on Catholic religious terminology, *obediëntie*, the monastics vow to obey their prior. This potentially chosen/vowed for radical difference of non-heterosexual orientation is immediately undone by the many responses who aim at domesticating sexuality as a subjective and individual issue that has nothing to do with an ideological/religious agenda or envisioning society differently.¹³

As Van den Berg et al. (2014) suggest, analysing present-day constructions of sexual orientation and religion in public arenas reveals the strategic and ideological assumptions, interests and effects informing them. Exploring the above different cases of controversy, I argue that ethno-sexuality emerges in

the simultaneous drawing of ethnosexual and sexularist boundaries between groups in society. In this process, ethno-sexuality emerges as a discourse based upon three leitmotifs. First, sexual identity is constructed as essential to the self and public expressions of homosexuality are considered to be a right that needs to be defended and protected. Second, religion is generally understood as authority and tradition, and religion/ethnicity as a form belonging that notably 'sticks' to minoritised communities. Both religion generally (Catholicism and Islam) and minority religion/ethnicity (notably Islamic tradition and culture) are considered to clash with the emancipation of women and sexual freedom. And finally, religion is constructed as part of the realm of individual choice and faith and especially visible expressions of Islam are deemed to violate 'neutrality'. Religion becomes therefore of secondary importance to women's right to access the public sphere and to homosexuals' right to express themselves publicly. This shifting of the 'proper' location of religion and sexuality across public-private divides has been captured in terms of the rise of visible homosexuality in the public domain and the related connected privatising of religion (Van den Berg et al. 2014). As such, gender/sexuality has become the 'natural and appropriate basis' for public discourses concerning religion and ethnicity.¹⁴ As a result of these constructs of religion, sexuality and ethnicity, the implicit or explicit 'solution' to the 'problem of sexism and homophobia' lies in the necessary change of religious authorities and traditions as well as ethnic minority communities towards acceptance of the public visibility and equality of women and of sexual freedom.

PART II – countering illegibility: lived experience in-between categories

In the second part of the article, I analyse the lived experience of Hajar.¹⁵ While the first part was built through a cultural studies and discursive approach, what follows below draws on ethnographic methods and the in-depth interview approach. Juxtaposing the above exploration of broad cultural tendencies in current understandings of ethnicity, religion-secularity and sexuality with Hajar's critical narrative demonstrates the ways in which subjects come into being as situated within *and* against dominant discourse. The analysis below draws especially attention to the difficulties Hajar experiences to get her story across to her various audiences. In other words, it reveals the *illegibility* of certain subjects as a result of dominant discourse (Butler 1990, 1993, 2009).¹⁶

I met Hajar while she was volunteering at Merhaba, an LGBTQI organisation that is concerned with the emancipation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex persons belonging to what it calls 'ethnic-cultural minorities' (ECM). Merhaba has been since 2011 recognised by the Flemish community as a *Beweging* ('social movement') and granted funding at least until the year 2020. It describes itself as a 'warm world for all LGBTQI with a migration background'.¹⁷ In

March 2016, Merhaba presented at a small in-crowd gathering its new brochure with short life stories of various LGBT persons belonging to ethnic minorities.¹⁸ This brochure, entitled 'Silent Voices' (*Stille Stemmen – Les Voix du Silence*), aimed at informing both ECM and a broader public about the diverse and complex struggles of LGBT persons belonging to ethnic-cultural minorities – struggles that are specific because of the social intersections of race, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality. Merhaba presents itself as a counter-voice, and argues that LGBT persons of ECM are put in a position of silence/silenced by own families/communities but also by dominant assumptions in a racist society. As dominant discourse assumes ethnic (especially Muslim) minority communities to be sexist and homophobic, LGBTQI subjects belonging to ethnic/Muslim communities are considered to be extremely vulnerable due to lacking recognition and family/communal support and 'internalised' hostile ethnic-religious beliefs and traditions. Merhaba therefore emphasises the need to claim voice vis-à-vis ethnic minority communities and society at large.¹⁹ In a short report of the launch of the brochure, Merhaba foregrounds not only the silence but also the agency of LGBT persons of ECM:

The stories were also brought together to provide a more **nuanced and complex** image than the usual portrayals in public discourse. It is not true that LGB's and transgender people (*holebi's en transgenders*) with a migration background are defenceless victims, and the assumption that they will certainly be outcast by the family, is wrong. Through bringing together different stories in one volume we want to correct that image. As such, we hope to give social outreach workers a more correct image of the life-world of people belonging to our target group, and of the ways in which they themselves deal with their challenges. (emphasis original, translation NvdB).²⁰

Hajar's story was one of the 16 narratives included in *Silent Voices*. At the launch of the volume, where I was present and met Hajar, short speeches alternated with the performance of music and poetry. At some point, Hajar came forward and spontaneously took the stage to announce how delighted she was to be involved with Merhaba and the *Silent Voices* project, and she emphasised the importance to meet people who are put in similar positions and face similar challenges, who are, as she put it, 'like me'. At home, I read the *Silent Voices* narratives and was struck by Hajar's story because it conveyed a highly socially critical and self-conscious perspective that embraced the explicit moving in-between taken for granted categories. For that reason, I contacted Hajar to ask if she would be interested in being interviewed by me. The interview conversation took place in July 2016. While set-up as a semi-structured conversation, Hajar took charge and the conversation developed into a 3-h long life story through which Hajar conveyed her difficulties, struggles and joys. Starting with her childhood, she told a story about crafting identifications and life in-between categories, as explicitly half Belgian, half Algerian, pansexual and non-religious.

In what follows, I look at the various intersecting *I-positions* (Buitelaar 2006) taken up by Hajar in her life story. In her writing about life stories, anthropologist

Marjo Buitelaar used the concept of ‘dialogical self’ to analyse how individuals speak from different I-positions within the self. Buitelaar conceptualises stories and identity as ‘dialogically constructed in both listening to discourses and using them to construct our own narratives’ (2006, 261). Buitelaars’ approach enables to analyse Hajar’s life story in terms of different identifications, or *I-positions*, present in the narrative. The three major themes present in Hajar’s story – ethnicity, religion and sexuality – can be understood as articulating different forms of self-understanding and identification. These *I-positions* claim ethnic hybridity; non-religiousness; and pansexuality. Below I demonstrate the co-constructing of these intersecting identifications. I read the *I-voices* present in Hajar’s narrative not only as ‘talking back’ (hooks [1989] 2015; Bracke 2011) to the leitmotifs part of ethno-sexular discourse, but also as insisting on ‘making a difference’ (Roodsaz and van den Brandt 2017) and ‘being different’.²¹

The orchestration of ethnic hybrid and queer voices

In her piece in the Merhaba volume *Silent Voices*, Hajar identified explicitly as half Belgian, half Algerian, bisexual and non-religious. The narrative is a positive embrace of identifying with, being and living in-between categories. Hajar’s piece in *Silent Voices* started with this introduction:

As a half-Algerian, half-Belgian daughter I often needed to search: for who I am, for what I was expected to be, but most of all for the golden road in-between (*gouden middenweg*). ‘In-between’ (*tussenin*) was often the answer: not entirely Belgian, nor Algerian, but instead half-Belgian, half-Algerian. Not Christian as my mother, nor Muslim as my father, but non-religious. Not heterosexual, nor homosexual, but instead bisexual. Although this felt for me very natural, I soon noticed that it was not so evident. Questions came from many corners: from my sister to my friends, from my partners to fellow students. Questions often asked were ‘How does that exactly work?’, ‘At which moment did you ‘know’ about that?’ and ‘How does your social environment respond to it?’ It seemed that I had to legitimise myself each time again. Not just for the fact that I am bisexual, but most of all as a bisexual daughter of a religious Algerian father. In the eyes of others I was a ‘curiosity’. (Hajar, *Stille Stemmen*, 2016, 10) (translation NvdB)

I was intrigued by this introduction. We therefore took the *Silent Voices* piece as a departure for conversation, and I asked Hajar to tell me more about what she meant by the ‘golden road in-between’. Hajar started by talking about her pansexuality (thereby replacing bisexuality with pansexuality), but shifted a few sentences ahead to talking about her half-Belgian, half Algerian-ness.²² The ‘golden road in-between’ was immediately about both in an interconnected way. From the beginning, Hajar made clear that identifications concerning ethnicity and sexuality needed to be considered as co-constructed through her experiences: they could hardly be disentangled. Hajar’s claims about sexual and ethnic identifications can therefore be read as an account of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Wekker and Lutz 2001; Buitelaar 2006), more specifically as

an account that can be understood according to McCall's typology as one of 'intra-categorical complexity' – that is a narration of 'the distinct and frequently conflicting dynamics that shaped [Hajar's] lived experience' (2005, 1780). Being pansexual is described by Hajar as based on attraction to a *person*, no matter if this person inhabits a male or female body. Hajar experienced that pansexuality as a relatively unknown term often needs to be explained – but also bisexuality, a more well-known term she often recurs to, needs to be accounted for. Many family members, friends and fellow students are appreciative of homosexuality, but seem to be confused about the instability of a not clearly defined sexual orientation towards *either* male bodies *or* female bodies.

Being half-Belgian, half-Algerian was in Hajar's narrative associated with living in a context of cultural-religious hybridity.²³ Hajar associated this identity claim with being versed in different habits and paradigms relating to food and hospitality. But she also associated being half-Belgian, half-Algerian with issues of belonging. Throughout her life she experienced the questioning of her looks and lifestyle (e.g. 'how can you be a Gothic street dancing Algerian teenager?'), her ambitions ('she is just unfit for study, so why does she need a dyslexia test?'), her religiosity ('how can you be non-religious while you have a Algerian Muslim father?') and her opinions ('pro or against headscarves?' and 'why don't you condemn terrorist violence committed by Muslims?'). These questions were articulated sometimes by individuals belonging to the ethnic-religious majority population and at other times by individuals belonging to ethnic and/or religious minorities. Such questions, Hajar critically observed, seem to be geared at reinforcing clear us versus them boundaries, and determining where she belongs most. They can be posed by anyone – also those who are most close to Hajar, such as family members, best friends and close colleagues.

Both the questioning of pan/bisexuality and ethnic belonging share a problematisation of instability, ambiguity and chaos, and seem geared towards establishing clear-cut answers and defending clarity, stability and legibility. Hajar is since many years experienced in countering such confusion by claiming and embracing ethnic and sexual in-betweenness. As Bracke (2011) puts it, 'refusing to be put in place' and 'talking back' (hooks [1989] 2015; Bracke 2011), Hajar constructs a subjectivity and agency already informed by the terms in which she is addressed. The below example illustrates how Hajar orchestrates these claims for ethnic hybridity and pansexuality in a complex critique of dominant intersecting assumptions. Recalling a conversation with a sister she is very close to, this vignette demonstrates Hajar's determination to create more space and understanding for her pansexuality through everyday life encounters:

My sister, for example. When I was in a relationship with a girl, for the first time officially announced, she said: 'ah yes, so from now on you are lesbian'. No, I might come home tomorrow with a guy. And she responded: 'I don't mind, whether you come home with a girl or a guy, but I would like to know what it is and that it will remain like that. That it will be stable from then on.' That is very weird. While my sister knows me very well, we get along very well, but for her this is too variable.

And when I ask her: 'But if you come home tomorrow with an Algerian guy, and the day after with a Belgian guy, that is also possible, isn't it?' And she said: 'Well no, that is not true'. And this makes me think: 'yes of course, that will bring along something different'. For her, it is not the same. And this is my sister. If it is already difficult for her [to understand], then I can imagine that it might be even more difficult for many others.

This critique of the assumption of stable categories of sexual orientation builds upon the notion that ethnic differences and instable attractions also do not or should not matter. If ethnic hybridity is somehow acceptable, than why not sexual instability? Such a complex what I call *hybrid-queer* perspective²⁴ is in Hajar's experience often not or partly heard. However, it is important to formulate and orchestrate these voices, as for Hajar, this provides her with language to understand her trajectory and create more possibilities for agency and difference. This narratively and practically 'making a difference' is done through dis-identification with the dominant meanings of concepts, and sub/converting them into something new (Muñoz 1999; El Tayeb 2011; Roodsaz and van den Brandt 2017). Moving from Antwerp to Brussels, a large and ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse metropole, helped Hajar positively embracing her fluid self-understanding. When I asked her what the notion of 'in-between' does for her, Hajar exclaimed:

In-between (*tussenin*), for other people it's predominantly confusing. It is not one thing, nor the other. And that is for many very ambiguous and irritating. But for me: I find it supercool! (laughing). For me personally ... how should I say that ... it gives the privilege to taste from many things and to be able to feel empathy for many things. And I can often be the bridge between two opposites, or what people see as opposites. For me ... I do not mind. I think it's beneficial that I am less attached to categories.

Ethnic and sexual in-betweenness is for Hajar an identification and position that she considers to open up new possibilities, life trajectories and livable language and space.

Negotiating ethnicity and religion and the emergence of Hajar's post-secular voice

While Hajar explicitly claimed and embraced ethnic and sexual in-betweenness, concerning religion, Hajar is straightforwardly non-religious. However, she changed throughout the years her opinion on religion and her attitude towards Muslims. From being highly negative about religion as the source of social wrongs, she learned to appreciate various religious interpretations and their expressions. Sociologist Melissa Wilcox speaks of 'postsecular phenomena' as those that are neither traditionally secular nor traditionally religious, and of 'post-secularism' as the melding of the religious and the secular, until each becomes indistinguishable from the other (Wilcox 2013, 39–49). While Wilcox analyses the spiritual identifications, activism and practices of parody of the US Sisters

of Perpetual Indulgence as ‘betwixt and between, working in the post-secular grey area that is both secular and sacred, neither secular nor sacred’ (2013, 49), I extend her insights to analyse Hajar’s secular/religious position vis-à-vis Catholic and Islamic religious practices, and her shifting perspective from antireligiosity to an appreciation of religious diversity and a defence of marginalised religious practices. The notion of a ‘postsecular perspective’ captures where Hajar is currently positioned, and can be described as a perspective that moved beyond uncritical antireligiosity to a more politically critically informed and reflexive understanding of various non-religious and religious identities and practices.

As noted above, being half-Belgian, half-Algerian was in Hajar’s narrative associated with living in a context of cultural-religious hybridity. In her story about the difficulty during her childhood years with ‘knowing’ her own position, ethnicity (in terms of cultural and linguistic background) and religion (Catholicism and Islam) always intersect and can therefore not be understood separately. As a child, the issue was raised, for example, whether Hajar would be doing her Catholic communion, similar to all her classmates, or not. Her parents did not allow Hajar’s eldest sister to do her communion, but gave Hajar her own say in the matter. As a result, Hajar felt torn between her parents:

When my mother told me I could do my communion, my father looked at me as if saying ‘please don’t, because it would disappoint me’. So you won’t make the decision to do communion. While my entire class did it, so I was really abnormal.

Hajar continues by reflecting that it is difficult for a child to make this decision, especially in the context of contradictory expectations and the child’s inclination to not disappoint anyone. When as a child asked for an explanation of why she did not do her communion, she would always respond:

‘Because my father is Algerian.’ For me, this was how it was. Many things I wasn’t allowed to do were connected to him, and so I was different from other people, because at my primary school I was the only allochthon child.

Back then, Hajar reflects during our conversation, she wasn’t able to separate all these issues, but nowadays she is able to separate Algerian background and culture from religion. Growing up, getting a university degree and becoming versed in civil society movements and critical-activist thinking, she learned to separate the ‘individual’ from the ‘collective’, and ‘ethnicity’ from ‘religion’.

This conceptual distinction is not always made consistently throughout the narrative, which demonstrates a blurring of concepts and terminology (individual/collective, culture, ethnicity, religion) that also often takes place in society at large. However, the *ability* to discuss them separately (Jouili 2016) has proved important for Hajar to develop a new perspective on ‘religion’. First, growing up and meeting Muslims with different backgrounds, opinions and lifestyles enabled Hajar to deconstruct her notion of ‘Islam’. Instead of regarding her father, with whom she has a conflictual relationship, as representing Islam/Muslims, she started to consider him as an individual among many others, and Islam as comprising diversity, also regarding gender and sexuality. This critical

awareness then enabled Hajar to move from unreflexive antireligious affectivity, to an appreciation of diversity and a defence of Muslim individuals and communities, including Islamic practices, as belonging as much to Belgian society as non-Muslims do. She narrates as such:

I used to be very anti-Muslim. Just because I wasn't familiar with it, and you fear what you don't know (*onbekend maakt onbemind*). But the more I search for knowledge about it, and the more people I meet, who are religious and who experience that very differently compared to my father, the more I started to become aware that it [Islam] is just a faith among others. There are many gradations in how religious someone can be, but there are also many interpretations of the Qur'an. And I do see that women interpret the Qur'an often differently than men do, often much more feminist. Men often have a more traditional reading, while women think 'no, it was written during that time, and you should situate that. They don't mean it that way anymore'. So, there is not just one Islam. This means that I may have a problem with certain Muslims, but not with Islam per se. I do have a problem with certain interpretations. When men tell me that they are allowed to hit a woman because it is mentioned in the Qur'an, I become very angry. It's not because it is written in a book that you should also follow it. But that has to do with interpretations, not with belief. I learned that. I used to think 'it's all because of religion that we have problems'. Of course, this is not true. [...] I also defend it [Islam] more often. When people oppose Islam, I will defend it, while earlier I did not bother about it. So that definitely changed. Especially considering what is happening nowadays. So I need to prove that. People find it increasingly normal to be antireligious or anti-Islam, [and they say:] 'All terror is related to it'. So I increasingly need to position myself in terms of 'No, I am not religious, but this is not okay'.

To conclude, while Hajar claims ethnic hybridity and pansexuality through explicit 'in-betweenness', when it comes to religion she resolutely identifies as non-religious. Her reflexivity about her position as non-religious cannot be regarded as simply secular, or 'secular in a simple or self-evident sense' (Braidotti 2008, 4), but should instead be considered post-secular. Hajar's post-secular antiracist attitude, at the same time, does emphasise the need for progressive or feminist interpretations of Islam, and for these interpretations to gain more ground and acknowledgement.

Conclusions

In this article, I explored various intersectional social constructions of religion, ethnicity and sexuality. First, I revealed how recent public controversies in Flanders (Belgium) construct, reinforce and defend specific understandings of religion, ethnicity, and sexuality – and coined *ethno-sexularity* to speak about the entanglements of these concepts. I argued and demonstrated that ethno-sexularity emerges in the simultaneous drawing of ethnosexual and sexualist boundaries between groups in society. In this process, ethno-sexularity emerges as a discourse based upon three leitmotifs. First, sexual identity is constructed as essential to the self and public expressions of homosexuality are considered to be a right that needs to be defended and protected. Second,

religion is generally understood as authority and tradition, and religion/ethnicity as a form of belonging that notably 'sticks' to minoritised communities. Both religion generally (Catholicism and Islam) and minority religion/ethnicity (notably Islamic tradition and culture) are considered to clash with the emancipation of women and sexual freedom. And finally, religion is constructed as part of the realm of individual choice and faith and especially visible expressions of Islam are deemed to violate 'neutrality'. Religion becomes therefore of secondary importance to homosexuals' right to express themselves publicly. The underlying assumption becomes that religious authorities and traditions, as well as religious-ethnic minorities, should adapt towards the acceptance of the equality and public visibility and expressions of women and non-heterosexuals. I argued for understanding ethno-sexuality as the context in which, and at times against which, individual subjects come into being.

Second, I looked into the lived experiences of Hajar as a critical counter-voice negotiating and 'talking back' to dominant discourse and its ethno-sexual boundary constructions. Hajar's critical voice is not just about 'talking back' but is as much about ways of becoming. Insisting on 'making a difference' through an-other voice cannot be disentangled from insisting on and living 'being different'. Claiming ethnic and sexual hybridity and fluidity, Hajar speaks about being able to experience variety and become an emphatic human being. This hybridity does not extend to religion, as Hajar identifies as non-religious. However, fluidity and change can be seen in Hajar's transformed attitude from antireligious affect to a post-secular vision that appreciates diversity but is simultaneously critical of power inequalities through which (minorities within) minorities are (further) marginalised.

Having outlined larger discursive-cultural tendencies through a cultural studies perspective and foregrounding a counter-voice through ethnographic and interview methods, this article hopes to contribute to academic and/or activist postcolonial, anti-Islamophobic and feminist/queer critiques that deconstruct binary oppositions/contradiction in terms of race, ethnicity, religion-secularity, gender and sexuality. Discourses based on binary oppositions, or neat 'either or' categories, negate and/or assimilate every-body it first positioned outside of the realms of intelligibility. As the article focused on hybridity, fluidity and transformation, I hope to co-create, along other critical voices, language, space and sensitivity for articulating multiple differences.

Notes

1. The theorising of 'difference' in feminist thinking has a rich genealogy with multiple trajectories. This article does not aim at giving an overview of this genealogy, however, various strands of thought that have been influential in the conceptualisation of difference being used here need to be acknowledged. For one, in feminist European continental philosophy, critique has been articulated regarding the ways in which 'difference' has been throughout Western philosophy

and culture understood in pejorative terms (always as 'lack' or 'negativity'). See the oeuvre of Rosi Braidotti, particularly her 1993 article and the 1991 publication of *Patterns of Dissonance*. Another starting point for rethinking 'difference' can be found in the works of Black feminists/womanists and feminist theorists of colour. Putting racial/ethnic difference more centre-stage, this strand of thought criticises mechanisms of racialisation and marginalisation, but simultaneously always emphasises 'difference' as specific viewpoints and experiences (based on ethnic, religious, gendered and/or sexual particularity) and as necessary grounds from which society and theory can be radically rethought and transformed (Lorde [1984] 2007; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Walker 1983; Collins 1996; Mitchem 2002). Think, for example, of Surinamese-Dutch race and gender studies scholars Philomena Essed and Gloria Wekker, who argue for the need to become aware of and combat racism *in combination with* minoritised women proudly reclaiming their own cultural and spiritual heritages (Essed 1996; Wekker 2006), but also of Latina feminist philosopher Maria Lugones, who speaks in terms of pluralistic feminism, 'worlds' and 'world-travelling' (2003). This dynamic of criticising/affirming 'difference' is also present in women of colour popular/activist writings across various Western contexts (for example, Hernández and Rehman 2002; Bendadi 2008; Tahir 2015). This article's conceptualisation of 'difference' is more indebted to this second strand of the feminist rethinking of difference.

2. While feminist, race and queer theory scholar Sara Ahmed conceptualises 'sticky signs' in relation to racialised minorities, in this article I use the idea of 'stickiness' in relation to ethnicity, religion and sexuality.
3. French philosopher Michel Foucault has argued in *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1976) that the notion of sexuality as innate characteristic of the self is a specific construction of modern Western science and societies. This notion of sexuality is produced in discourse and power that regulate and enable the emergence of subjectivity and identity. His arguments about the social construction of sexuality and identity have been taken forward by feminist scholars (who also criticised the gender blindness of Foucault's writings, i.e. Bartky 1990; Ramazanoglu 1993; McNay 1994), lesbian and gay studies and queer theory (with the early works of Butler (1990, 1993) often considered to 'bridge the gap between feminism and queer theory', McLaughlin 2003, 137), and, more recently (with the incorporation of feminist and queer perspectives) also in religious studies (Carrette 1999).
4. Across Dutch-speaking contexts (the Netherlands and Flanders), both gender and sexuality seem to be increasingly understood in terms of 'natural' characteristics, i.e. differences between men and women are considered largely biologically (or even neurologically) determined (Geerts, van den Brandt, and Bracke 2014), and individuals are 'born' with a specific sexual orientation.
5. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler critically engaged with feminist theory, psychoanalytical theory and the works of Michel Foucault in order to argue that 'rather than *being* an expression of (immutable) sex, gender *produces* sex' (Armour and St. Ville 2006, 5). According to Butler (1993, 1990) the Western binary sex/gender system emerges from a social system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces masculinity and femininity and requires desire to channel itself via these subjectivities (the heterosexual matrix). The emergence of heterosexual sexed/gendered identities is dependent on a citational process. This citational (repetitional) process opens up the possibility for subversion and change. Butler's framework enables me here to understand 'ethno-sexuality' as the cultural and discursive system which currently emerges in the Flemish context, and is

repeated and thereby reinforced in public debates. However, following Butler in her emphasis on the contingency of this cultural and discursive system, I do not understand ethno-sexuality as absolutely deterrent of subjectivities and identities. Instead, the second part of the article moves to a ‘counter-voice’ contesting the schemes of ethno-sexuality.

6. Archbishop Joseph Léonard made ultra-conservative statements about gender and sexuality through issues such as abortion and homosexuality in a 2004 interview book that was updated, translated from French to Dutch and re-published in 2010 (Mathoux & Minten 2010). His argument that AIDS represents ‘immanent justice’ in a world that departed from what God intended for human relationships and love, was considered highly controversial and heartless in the context of the 2010 scandals about sexual abuse by Catholic authorities in Belgium (Heymans 2010, 50–57). As VRT Philip Heymans phrases it, these statements, published in a context of rising public awareness of and outcry about a history of abuse by Catholic authorities, represented the way in which the Church had become an ‘alienated Church’ (*de wereldvreemde Kerk*) (Heymans 2010, 50).
7. In the context of the sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church in Belgium at that time, and the controversial role played by archbishop Joseph Léonard (Heymans 2010), it may not be surprising that no responses emerged that ‘defended’ archbishop Joseph Léonard vis-à-vis Femen. At the same time, the event neither provoked responses thematising the actual and historical diversity of relationships between Catholic faith and tradition, religious authorities, and (non-normative expressions of) gender and sexuality.
8. These two actions, the first at the Grand Mosque in Brussels, and the second against bishop Léonard, are up until today the only actions of the Belgian branch of Femen. During the second week of September, the Belgian branch of Femen announced its own abolishment due to international internal disagreements about its future direction. See: De Morgen, ‘Belgische Tak van Femen Houdt het voor Bekeken’, De Morgen, September 10, 2013, <http://www.demorgen.be/binnenland/belgische-tak-van-femen-houdt-het-voor-bekeken-a1702228/>.
9. To my knowledge, this remained De Wever’s aspiration at the time, and was never turned into an official dictate.
10. See Eeckhout 2011 for a brief overview of the history leading to the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Belgium and the ‘velvet triangle’ collaboration of politicians, academics and civil society actors (Woodward 2004) that enabled this reform in law and policy-making.
11. In Belgium, headscarf debates and regulations have increased in number and intensity since 2004, when the French National Assembly and the Senate passed a law that bans obtrusive religious symbols, including headscarves, from the public domain. While the Belgian history of acknowledging, dealing with, and supporting various religious and nonconfessional communities could be described as a locally specific model of multiculturalism, the current debates on and regulations of the headscarf and the face veil draw upon Republican notions of neutrality and secularism that are much more typical of the history and self-definition of France (Coene and Longman 2008; Bracke and Fadil 2009). They can therefore be seen as signalling transformations in prevailing Belgian church–state relations (Fadil 2011, 87, 88). The recent situation in Flanders has been one of increasing headscarf regulation in the fields of public education and the public and private labour markets.

12. See for reactions from politicians across the political spectrum: Knack, February 2, 2013a; See for the reaction of Çavaria, the Flemish LGBT umbrella organisation: Junes, February 2, 2013; Knack, February 2, 2013b; See for discussions in mainstream and alternative leftist media: Denolf, February 3, 2013; Desmet, February 4, 2013; Moens, February 2, 2013; Onkelinx, February 2, 2013; Verde, February 6, 2013.
13. The notion of queer identity as a radical political-ideological choice and belonging (albeit often assumed to negate religion), however marginal, certainly does exist among LGBTQI communities in Flanders (see for example the Ghentian collective Queerilla, <https://queerilla.wordpress.com/>). In recent years, the term 'queer' did gain some wider currency, especially in the context of larger cultural events, such as festivals (e.g. Antwerp Queer Arts Festival, <http://www.queerarts.be/en>; Strange Love, <http://www.strangelovefestival.be/>). So far, for established LGBT umbrella organisations, it seems to be a too dangerous route to abandon traditional identity politics. As De Wever shows, such a discourse can be easily utilised to condone expressions of non-heterosexuality in the public sphere and to oppose equal rights for LGBTQI persons.
14. I paraphrase and turn-around here Janet Jakobsen & Ann Pellegrini's questioning of religion as the 'natural and appropriate' foundation for public policies concerning sex, 2003, 5.
15. Hajar is a pseudonym agreed upon by the informant.
16. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler conceptualises 'intelligibility' as 'the general historical schema or schemas that establish domains of the knowable' (2009, 6). She theorises 'frames' as conveying, containing and determining what is seen (and therefore, also what is not seen, or not recognised), and as depending on the conditions of reproducibility. Frames are performed, which means that they are both efficacious *and* vulnerable to 'breaking apart', reversal and subversion (2009, 8–12). This notion of frames comes close to Butler's earlier theorisation of gender (1990), which is as a performance similarly caught in the dynamic of iterability and potential shifts and subversion. In *Bodies that Matter* (1994), Butler critiques Western philosophy and thinking as frameworks of (intel)legibility that produce subjects as intelligible and therefore as bodies that come to 'matter'. In the second part of this paper, I aim to show through Hajar's lived experiences how the coming into being of certain categories and their dominant meanings (religion, ethnicity and sexuality) make Hajar's story, which contests various categories, (almost) illegible, or appearantly falling outside of the domains of the knowable. This exploration also reveals Hajar's persistence and creativity in creating and living a counter-story in the face of a lack of understanding.
17. www.merhaba.be/over-merhaba (accessed July 30, 2016).
18. <http://www.merhaba.be/nieuws/merhaba-lanceert-verhalenbundel-stille-stemmen> (accessed 6 December, 2016).
19. See Roodzas and Van den Brandt (2017) for an analysis of the ways in which an 'ethnosexual subjectivity' emerges in the narratives of Dutch and Flemish organisations for LGBTQI's belonging to ethnic minorities, among them Merhaba.
20. <http://www.merhaba.be/activiteiten/projecten/stille-stemmen> (accessed 6 December 2016).
21. During the interview, Hajar told a narrative of struggle and overcoming, of both positive and negative experiences, of searching for language to identify with and for people and locations where she feels at home, and of finding liveability in unexpected new places. As such, her life story was a much more complex narrative than the Silent Voices story, which has partly to do with the fact that



Silent Voices only provided a 1–2 pages space to tell her story, but partly also with the audience Hajar had in mind for the Silent Voices volume compared to talking to me as a researcher (Buitelaar 2006, 261). When I mentioned the differences in terminology and narrated experiences in the Silent Voices text and the life story Hajar conveyed to me, she emphasised that she wanted me to have ‘the full story, which is important for a researcher’. Moreover, the fact that we met through a Merhaba activity made Hajar feel that she was talking to someone who is wary of stereotypes and ‘would understand’. The perception Hajar had of me as a scholar engaged in feminism, antiracism and queer thinking made her regard me as a peer and ally, and enabled her narration of a story full of complexities, different forms of in-betweenness, difficulties, sorrows but also transformations and victories. Our conversation and Hajar’s life story telling could therefore be captured as ‘intersubjective knowledge production’ (Stapele 2014) in which our perceptions of each other played a role in the narration of the life story.

22. During our conversation, Hajar reflected on the constructedness of her Silent Voices narrative based on the goal of putting forward a positive story that counters negative stereotypes about LGBT persons belonging to ethnic minorities. Also her goal to remain ‘legible’ to a broad public of readers of various backgrounds compelled Hajar to present her identity as bisexual instead of her own preferred identification with pansexuality. Through experience, she learned that identifying in-between ethnic, sexual and gender categories at the same time can be very confusing for many conversation partners. As pansexuality is a relatively unknown identification, Hajar therefore often sticks to bisexuality to remain in-between while at the same time using a term that is more well-known.
23. The concept of hybridity formulated in the work of Homi K. Bhabha in the 1980–90s (see the essays collected in his book *The Location of Culture*, 1994) was foundational in the development of Postcolonial Studies (McLeod 2000) and spurred the development of theoretical variegated vocabulary, such as diaspora, métissage, creolisation and transculturation. Hybridity has often been claimed as providing ‘a way out of binary thinking, allowing the inscription of the agency of the subaltern, and even permitting a restructuring of and destabilizing of power’ (Braphu 2007, 1), but has also been subject to some of the most stringent critique (McLeod 2001, 246–261). Prabhu, for example, argues that these assertions about hybridity should be tested, rather than taken for granted. Here, I define Hajar’s upbringing in terms of cultural-religious hybridity, and consider this hybridity, in intersection/interference with sexuality, as enabling Hajar to formulate certain ideas and understandings. However, while the formulation of critical non-binary thinking and practice by Hajar can be regarded as constitutive of her agency, it does not presuppose an ‘easy way out’. This will be demonstrated in the following sections.
24. Hybridity, if understood as a ‘way out of binary thinking’ (Braphu 2007, 1) or ‘a way of thinking beyond exclusionary, fixed, binary notions of identity based on ideas of rootedness and cultural, racial and national purity’ (McLeod 2001, 254) comes very close to the concept queer when the above definitions are formulated in terms of sexual identity. Queer has often been put forward as a critique of the production of dominant and normative identity categories and its related binary thinking in terms of heterosexuality-non-heterosexuality (Schipper 2005; Gerber 2008). Compare for example with feminist theologian Lisa Isherwood’s suggestion to understand queer as a verb destabilizing any claim to identity. It has come to symbolize the moving around or crossing of boundaries in order to gain another view of tradition. [...] The queer mind lives with opposites and indeed

embraces contradictions as a way of moving toward a deeper understanding of what may be real. (2013, 206, 207). Arguably similar to the function of hybridity in postcolonial thinking, queer as a concept and positionality 'gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal' (Warner 1993, XXVI).

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