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Citation for published version:
Boussalem, A 2020, 'In, out, or somewhere else entirely: Going beyond binary constructions of the closet in the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12422

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1111/tran.12422

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers

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Download date: 15. Mar. 2025

In, out, or somewhere else entirely

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1. INTRODUCTION

On the 13th of April, 2020, an LGBTQ Moroccan influencer based in Istanbul, Turkey, made an Instagram live intervention that would have long-lasting consequences for Moroccan LGBTQ people. In their stream, they instructed followers on how to build a fake profile on same-sex dating apps for men. The influencer's intention was to unveil the hypocrisy surrounding the presence of LGBTQ people in the country, as they invited Moroccan girls and women in particular to create fake profiles and see for themselves how many of their relatives, friends, or acquaintances used these apps (Parsons, 2020). The live stream was allegedly a response to the homo/bi/transphobia experienced by the Instagrammer (Alami, 2020). The invitation was well received by the audience, and in the space of a few days, Facebook pages posting pictures of Grindr, PlanetRomeo, and Hornet users sprouted on the web, publicly disclosing the sexualities of the dating apps users (Alami, 2020; Rannard, 2020). The consequences were immediately felt by gay and bisexual men in the country, as many were locked in their family homes as a result of COVID-19 emergency measures, and thus particularly exposed to homo/bi/transphobic violence from family members (Sbiti, 2020). At least one suicide has been reported by LGBTQ Moroccan organisations as a direct consequence of the "outing campaign", while a number of men were kicked out of their homes and left without accommodation

(Radi, 2020). In this complicated situation, the Moroccan LGBTQ movement was able to mobilise its resources, and to produce and circulate a petition asking for the decriminalisation of same-sex practices and sex work, the recognition of the rights of trans people, and the official institutional opposition to all kinds of discrimination towards LGBTQ people (Mala Badi, 2020).

At the moment of writing, the petition is circulating internationally through the online petition platform on the website AllOut.org, under the title "Time for the trans queer revolution in Morocco" (Mala Badi, 2020). When reading the text of the petition, I could not help but notice the somewhat ironic discrepancy between the episode that sparked a national mobilisation for the production of the text itself – the "outing campaign" – and its circulation through a platform called All Out. While "being out" as "being visible" is certainly an important aim of the Moroccan LGBTQ movement, in this moment it seems that, at least for some gay and bisexual men, the priority is on a right to "be in" – both "in the closet", as "not being outed", and "in the home", with a roof over their head in the midst of a pandemic.

The central topic of this paper is not the discrepancy between the needs of some LGBTQ people in Morocco, and global LGBTQ rights discourses. However, this dissonance is a useful starting point for a critical reflection on the prescriptive insistence of LGBTQ discourses on a trajectory that brings LGBTQ subjects from the "in" of the closet, to an "out" of it marked by freedom and safety. As such, it sheds light on the existence of experiences of LGBTQ people across various cultural/national contexts that do not necessarily reflect such linearity. This article illuminates this discrepancy, and explores what is in-between (or rather, beyond) the strict binarisation of LGBTQ lives as proceeding from "in" to "out" of the

closet. It does so through the analysis of data on the narratives of sexuality disclosure and concealment produced by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels, Belgium.

The context where the episode that opened this article took place, and the one where data for it was collected from, are linked in relevant ways. Discourses of civilisational clash between the West and the Arab/Muslim East are at work in both sites. Morocco is imaginatively included in that Muslim North African/Middle Eastern region that is often framed as being in tension on moral/cultural grounds with its western counterpart. Such global discourse is reflected in the ways Muslim communities in Western Europe are portrayed, in a mirroring of global discourses of civilisational clash at different scales (Hancock, 2008, 2017; Stehle, 2006). Assumption of different attitudes towards sexual diversity and gender equality are fundamental elements of civilisational clash discourses (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Bracke, 2012; Razack, 2004), as Western civilisation, modernity, and the support of LGBTQ rights are conflated in a discourse that imagines and constructs Muslim populations as stuck in a pre-modern homo/bi/transphobic space-time (Rahman, 2014).The experiences of LGBTQ people at these two different scales become linked in the frames that are applied to them in discourses of East/West difference.

As a result of Belgian bilateral agreements with Morocco in the 1960s, people of Moroccan descent make up the biggest portion of the Muslim community of Brussels (Bousetta & Martiniello, 2003). The data discussed in this article is bound to the specific location where it was collected: a Western European city with its specific colonial/migratory history, and the racialised dynamics that result from it. Nonetheless, the Muslim individuals and groups that inhabit it often feel

part of transnational diasporic communities and networks that link them to the countries of origin of their families (Peumans, 2017). Contacts between some research participants and LGBTQ individuals, groups, and movements in Morocco are close. Some were born in Morocco and/or spent there a significant time of their childhood and youth. Many have frequent contacts with family members and friends in the country of origin of their parents, and they go and visit when they can. Some see the struggles of the LGBTQ movement in Morocco as very relevant to their life in Belgium, as their Belgian families are influenced by the frameworks applied to sexualities and LGBTQ rights in their countries of origin. This is the case of Salah, the participant thanks to whom I heard about the April 2020 episodes in Morocco for the first time.

This paper interrogates the validity of the metaphor of the closet, and of the "coming out" model framed as an emancipatory path for LGBTQ people, in the case of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels, Belgium. The choice was to focus on participants' experiences of sexuality disclosure/concealment in their families. While there are a number of contexts where research participants navigate silence and verbalization around their sexualities, their families often are the only communities that are entirely (or predominantly) composed of Muslim people in their daily lives, therefore representing a privileged site to observe the workings of discourses that portray Muslim communities as homo/bi/transphobic, and LGBTQ people from such communities as "closeted". The data presented shows that a binarised understanding of processes of disclosure/concealment fails to represent and convey the multiplicity of research participants' experiences. To do justice to their complexities, while escaping the risks of dichotomic essentialisations of

"western" ways of "coming out" and "Oriental" silenced sexualities, it is necessary to accept Ross's (2005) invitation to move our analyses beyond the "closet" as the central metaphor in our understanding of LGBTQ lives and oppression. By illuminating the discrepancy between outness as "disclosure imperative" and the lived experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, I suggest the need to apply other ways of conceiving communication and self-expression around one's sexuality, more attuned to the nuances that characterise circulation of knowledge in absence of direct verbalisation (Decena, 2011; Provencher, 2017).

The first section of this paper focuses on the centrality of the image of the "closet" in western discourses around sexualities, on queer critiques to its prescriptiveness and linearity, and on queer of colour highlighting of the links between its wide use and processes of racialisation. After a short section on the methodological design of the research, the paper presents the empirical data collected in Brussels. I analyse the ways in which participants interpret and enact different degrees of concealment and disclosure in their families: some participants choose to verbalise their sexualities, others need to navigate situations in which they are "involuntarily out", while others still never open a direct conversation around their sexualities but manage to communicate important aspects of their romantic and sexual lives. The data leads me to conclude that an understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background requires an analysis of their experiences that goes beyond the normative prescriptions of "coming out" discourses. Such understanding, in turn, disrupts the rigid binarisation in/out that works as the foundation of such discourse.

2. IN/OUT OF THE CLOSET: QUEER OF COLOUR READINGS AND CRITIQUES

The metaphoric expression “to come out of the closet” is widely used in the English language to indicate the act of disclosing one’s sexuality, whether such act is conceived as a one-off event or as a communication process that extends in time (Orne, 2011). It travelled beyond the English-speaking world, as other languages have adopted the phrase, and the metaphor that undergirds it – “*faire son coming out*” in French, or “*fare coming out*” in Italian, literally “to do (one’s) coming out”, are commonly used sentences. In the English language, the expression extended beyond solely referring to sexuality disclosure, as it increasingly indicates the act of verbalising aspects of one’s body, identity, or experience that were previously hidden or unspoken (Saguy & Ward, 2011; Samuels, 2003).

Scholars working on spatial metaphors have argued for a rigorous interrogation of the fictional binaries that undergird them (Kaplan, 1996; Kirby, 1996) and a recognition of the political implications that their unproblematised use can produce (Smith & Katz, 1993). The metaphor of the closet links the image of an enclosed and dark space, materially separated from the wider space surrounding it, to the condition of concealment, hiding and secrecy of the LGBTQ person who has not disclosed with others information about their sexual and/or gender identification (Brown, 2000). As noted by Orne (2011), the use of the expression is so common across a variety of registers that it is rarely contested or interrogated, despite its multiplicity of meanings. Orne (2011) charts the different fields where the expression “to come out of the closet” gradually assumed its meanings. Firstly, the metaphor has gained circulatory currency as it was

theorised as a foundational stage of sexual identity development theories in the field of counselling and psychology (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). In this formulation, "coming out" is linked to a linear narrative of gradual increase in well-being for the LGBTQ person who discloses their sexuality. Secondly, the meaning of "coming out" has been shaped by its uses in the Gay Liberation Movement in the after-Stonewall era (Gamson, 1989; Jay & Young, 1992). Here, "coming out" not only refers to the individual choice of opening up about one's sexuality, but it becomes a social and political act. As the public visibility of LGBTQ people has been, and continues to be, a necessary starting point and condition for the recognition of rights, coming out is formulated as a responsibility one has towards the rest of the LGBTQ community (Shilts, 2009).

It is possible to discern some common elements across the different uses of the metaphor. The image of the "closet" is built on a linear, unidirectional, tautological narrative that directs the LGBTQ person from a condition of concealment to one of disclosure. Whether the final aim is framed as personal well-being and individual empowerment, or group liberation through visibility, the act of "coming out of the closet" becomes a prescription, a "disclosure imperative" (McLean, 2007), the only possible way of living an LGBTQ life (Perez, 2005).

This linear and prescriptive narrative is not only applied to LGBTQ individuals. The path from an "in" to an "out" of the closet is mirrored in the narratives about the trajectories of LGBTQ movements and communities in the West (Borgstrom, 2020). Some, in their analysis of sexualities in the US, observe how the significance of the closet as the main feature of LGBTQ oppression is declining in importance (Seidman et al., 1999) . The story is not simply one of progress and of

Western LGBTQ emancipation from the darkness of the closet. Seidman et al. (1999: 11) recognise the nuances that complicate such linearity and specify that it is not their intention "to narrate a one-dimensional story of the progressive social inclusion and equality of gay individuals", as they acknowledge that such process has been "incomplete". It is those areas of incompleteness that emerge here as fruitful sites of investigation – as showed by the discrepancy between the "All Out" campaign, and the "right to stay in" that opened this paper. Collective "outness" as visibility is an important aim for LGBTQ movements in a number of socio-political contexts, including the Moroccan one, as a public acknowledgment of the existence of LGBTQ people is a necessary first step in recognising them as subjects entitled to rights. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight the limits of the progressive developmental discourse that an insistence on "outness" often entails (Borgstrom, 2020).

In other words, in a society where the relevance of the closet in shaping LGBTQ lives is decreasing, whose lives are believed to be still influenced by it? Who is left out from this story of individual and community liberation? How are these groups and people framed in discourses regarding LGBTQ rights? If the story is one that leads "beyond the closet", who, if anyone, is left behind? Echoing Judith Butler (1993: 309), these are the questions that should frame a useful interrogation of the metaphor of the closet:

> "[…]so we are out of the closet, but into what? what new unbounded spatiality? the room, the den, the attic, the basement, the house, the bar, the university, some new enclosure whose door […] produced the expectation of a fresh air and a light of illumination that never arrives? […] For being 'out' always depends to some extent on being 'in'; it gains

its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being ‘out’ must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as ‘out’”.

Queer of colour scholars, or scholars inspired by queer of colour critique and theory, have noted and emphasised the ways in which discourses and practices employed or legitimised by mainstream LGBTQ movements in the West have had the effect of limiting the rights of racialised populations (Bracke, 2012; El-Tayeb, 2011; Haritaworn, 2012; Puar, 2007). The metaphor of the closet, foundational to most discourses around LGBTQ liberation, is often central in the production of the exclusion of racialised populations from a “beyond the closet” condition. In these analyses, the stress is on the ways in which the closet/coming out metaphor relies on ideas of openness, transparency, visibility, privacy and individualism that are deeply embedded in a white western world view (Perez, 2005). What is critiqued here, and in other problematisations of the uses of the images of the closet and of coming out (Fisher, 2003; Horton, 2017; Orne, 2011), is not the importance and value that processes of disclosure have in the lives of some LGBTQ people, white or racialised. Rather, what needs to be acknowledged is the inextricable link between uses of the metaphor, the normative effects it produces, and processes of racialisation at work in society.

These reflections are particularly poignant when talking about the experiences and lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. Topics of sexuality disclosure/concealment have been central in scholarship on LGBTQ Muslim identifications in the West. Some scholars have highlighted the difficulties that LGBTQ Muslim people face in communicating their sexualities to members of their Muslim families and communities, and their effects on their lives and well-being (Jaspal, 2012; Siraj, 2011, 2018). For others, the focus has been on the

strategies LGBTQ Muslims put in place to navigate their kin and social relationships in contexts where their sexuality and their sense of cultural/religious/ethnic belonging are often posited as incompatible with one another (Kugle, 2014; Yip, 2004). Scholars have increasingly recognised the role of developmental discourses in shaping the specific oppression directed at LGBTQ Muslim people, and the subsequent need to interrogate the validity of Western coming out models in their lives (Rahman & Chehaitly, 2020; Rahman & Valliani, 2016).

To better understand how sexualities are lived and narrated by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, it is necessary to go "beyond the closet" (Ross, 2005), and to observe and analyse processes of disclosure and concealment away from the binary workings of the closet/coming out pairing. Particularly relevant in the context of this research is the concept of "tacit subjects", formulated by Decena (2011) to explain how circulation of knowledge about participants' sexualities took place in their families in absence of a direct verbalisation. Elaborating on this idea of a tacit circulation of knowledge, Provencher (2017) coins the expression "coming out *à l'orientale*". He uses the expression to refer to the indirect communications around sexualities that queer Maghrebi men in France perform with their families and social circles. Such communication consists of statements that negate a desire, a willingness, or the possibility from the part of the LGBTQ person to follow a heteronormative path, rather than positive coming out statements such as "Mum, Dad, I am gay". Similarly, Amari (2013) explores how lesbian women of Maghrebi descent in France navigate silence when communicating their sexualities. She argues for the need to acknowledge silence as a space where important communications take place

between participants and their communities. In Belgium, Peumans (2017) highlights the complex ways in which LGBTQ Muslims navigate partial silences and disclosures around their sexualities to maintain kin relationships in the different communities they navigate.

3. METHODS

The data presented in this paper was collected during one year of ethnographic research – August 2017 to August 2018 – for a wider project on the intersectional social locations inhabited by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels. Participant observation was conducted in public, semi-public and private spaces linked to the racialised LGBTQ scene of the city, with a specific focus on those inhabited and crossed by LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. This allowed for the observation of their movements through different spaces, as well as their navigations, negotiations and contestations of the dynamics of power at work in the city. In addition to this, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background, which allowed for the collection of the narratives participants make about their lives and daily movements. The recorded data, in the form of field notes and interview transcriptions, was thematically coded and analysed during and after fieldwork. Ethical approval was sought and obtained prior to the beginning of fieldwork, and Newcastle University ethical guidelines were followed in all phases of the research. Participants were anonymised, and the names that appear in this paper are pseudonyms chosen with participants themselves.

While words and expressions that indicate identity categories always run the risk of fixing and essentialising people's experiences and narratives, I wrote this paper in the awareness that a certain degree of linguistic "fiction" is unavoidable when

writing about groups that are imagined, defined and oppressed as a result of identity categories being attached to them (Weeks, 1995). The words used to denote participants' identifications throughout this paper were chosen as the most reflective of the ways in which they described themselves in our interviews and informal conversations. The expressions inserted after each quote to indicate sexuality and national/ethnic background were chosen by participants themselves. The acronym LGBTQ is the one that best mirrors the variety of sexual identifications of participants, without claiming the presence of other forms of identifications (e.g. asexual, intersex) among those that emerge from the data. The expression "from a Muslim background" reflects the choice of focussing the research on the processes of racialisation lived by people who are read (and thus racialised) as Muslim in Brussels, irrespective of their faith and/or sense of religious/cultural belonging.

4. OUT OF THE CLOSET

4.1. The need to come out

The data presented in this paper calls for the unpacking and disruption of the assumptions that underlie the "in/out of the closet" binary. This deconstructive endeavour does not imply a denial of the validity of the closet metaphor in the experiences of all LGBTQ people from a Muslim background. Denying the relevance of the "closet", both as a linguistic expression and as the condition of non-verbalisation of one's sexuality that it denotes, is a pointless activity, as it clearly plays a role in the lives of many LGBTQ people, from a Muslim background or not. What is necessary is to highlight an area of knowledge production and exchange situated "beyond the closet", whereby the metaphor is

not viewed as the all-explanatory linear system where all tensions around sexualities are contested and resolved (Ross, 2005).

To do justice to the complexities of research participants' experiences, it is necessary to acknowledge and address how these do, in some cases, reflect the common-held dichotomic construction of the closet as a secretive and dark place, and "outness" as a condition for LGBTQ liberation and well-being. Some participants decided to verbalise their sexualities to family members, who were chosen because they were perceived as more open to non-heteronormative paths. The reasons for choosing to verbalise their sexualities often mirrored the image of "coming out" as the ultimate, and possibly the only, act that would be honest and conducive to personal well-being. Ryzlan, for example, recounts an episode in which a family member started spreading rumours about her sexuality, which led to her decision to come out:

> "|It was the moment, a key moment of my existence, and I had the choice. I had five seconds, in front of me, to decide on the rest of my existence at the relational level, and at the sexual, and sentimental. In relation to my family, actually. Either I denied… Well, I dismissed the information, actually. And this means that… well, I would get out of it ok in the moment, I would re-enter in the norm… well, I would re-enter in the norm, even though I had poked out of it. But this means that I would lose my credibility, the day when I would really… when I want… when I want to accept and own up to it. Or well, I accepted my difference and I took a small tsunami of violence in that moment, but well, I stayed… I stayed... ahm… coherent. And I chose this second option" (Ryzlan, 29, genderfluid lesbian, Moroccan background).

For Ryzlan, disclosing her sexuality was the only way to maintain a “coherence” between her life and the image her family had of her, and thus preserve her “credibility”.

Other participants, including some who have not opened a direct conversation about their sexualities in their families, talk about “coming out” in similar terms. Salim has not verbalised his sexuality with his parents, and he expressed a certain dissatisfaction with this. When asked if “coming out” was necessary, he replied:

> “I think so. Or, anyway, it’s very selfish from our part to not do it, anyway. So, it’s not socially engaging, it’s not engaging in a fight that is bigger than… than yourself” (Salim, 28, cis gay man, Moroccan background).

Another constitutive element of coming out discourses emerges in Salim’s words: the political/moral necessity of coming out. In this narrative, coming out not only represents a path to self-development and well-being. Sexuality disclosure works as the fulfilling act of a socio-political responsibility towards the LGBTQ community, as collective visibility is stressed as the necessary step towards a recognition of LGBTQ rights. The LGBTQ subject who stays in the closet, failing to “engage in a fight that is bigger than themselves”, is in this narrative complicit with systemic homo/bi/transphobia. Non-verbalisation becomes a “selfish” omission, a failure to engage in one’s responsibility towards social change.

Narratives such as those offered by Ryzlan and Salim mirror linear trajectories of sexuality disclosure. Whether this process took place in their lives, as in the case of Ryzlan, or is still to happen in the future, as for Salim, both participants view “coming out” as leading the LGBTQ subject out of secrecy, incoherence, and

hiding, and into a field marked by honesty and engagement in social change through one's visibility as an LGBTQ person. These narratives offer a partial representation of the ways in which participants narrated their negotiations around sexuality concealment and disclosure. In the following sections, I will present other narratives that radically nuance and disrupt the rigidities that surround the binary trajectory from "in" to "out" of the closet.

4.2. Involuntarily out

Ryzlan's coming out was accelerated by the spreading of rumours about her sexuality by a family member who had accessed her laptop. This dynamic – being found out and then "outed" – was common among participants. A third of them reported a family member finding out about their sexuality by chance. The most common way was the discovery of "compromising" material on their computer:

> "[…] my sister was the first one to find out. I don't even remember what I had on my laptop. I think I was in like some dating app or whatever. And she became all dramatic and started to cry about it. I was like 'Fuck, I have to deal with this'" (Anwar, 26, cis gay man, Moroccan background).

In a few cases, the discovery was not accidental, but brought about by someone who actively "outed" the participant. Rachid, for example, said:

> "I was 19? […] I used to go out, I fell in love for the first time. […] And he had a best friend. And this man was very much in love with me. Well, he wanted me to start having sexual relations, or something, and I rejected him. And he sent a letter to my place. Which he carefully didn't… didn't envelop. […] It spoke of the relation with the other guy, etcetera. I couldn't see the reason, there were mobile phones already, he could have

> sent a text like this. So, it was voluntarily meant to damage. So, obviously, the letter was read, and my mother cried for the shock" (Rachid, 37, cis gay man, Moroccan background).

Rachid's sexuality was used "to damage" him, as the person doing the damaging knew – or assumed – that his family would have a hard time accepting it. In Rachid's case the damage was temporally limited, as his family learned, with time, to accept and support his homosexuality.

For others, the involuntary "outness" led to tragic consequences. Barwaqo is a 28 years old cis lesbian woman who was born in Somalia. During my fieldwork, rumours about Barwaqo's sexuality were spread in her family of origin, back in Somalia, by a relative living in Brussels. This marked the beginning of a period of severe anxiety for Barwaqo. She started being more self-conscious of her movements around the city, especially when accessing areas marked as LGBTQ. Moreover, she worried about her younger sister, unmarried and still living in their parental house. Barwaqo's fear was that her family would react to her homosexuality by forcing their other daughter to a non-consensual marriage.

A non-voluntary condition of "outness" did not represent the entry into a free and safe life for Medhi (34, cis gay man, Guinea Conakry) either. His story is complicated by his uncertainty around his "outness", demonstrating how the borders of the closet are more porous and blurred than linear prescriptive coming out narratives would let us think. Medhi realised he was attracted to other men as a teenager, when he was living in Guinea Conakry. He applied for university abroad, and he arrived in Belgium for his studies. He moved in with his older brother and his wife, who had already been in Belgium for a while. It is at this

time that he began to engage more in sexual and romantic relations with men. When asked whether anyone in his family knows about his sexuality, Medhi did not feel in the position to give a certain answer:

> "About who knows, I don't know anything. Anyway, I haven't said anything to anyone. But I know that they… since… this is since childhood, I've always… I've always had a feminine side, so… [..] Has this got them thinking?" (Medhi).

From his part, every effort has been mobilised to keep the information from circulating. Nevertheless, he cannot be completely sure that his femininity did not "get them thinking". This uncertainty marked his adult relationship with his brother. One day, the two had a discussion about Medhi's smoking on the balcony. The following day, his brother asked him to leave the flat as soon as possible. One day later, Medhi was kicked out of the house, in an episode that he felt as disproportionately violent, and in stark contrast with the mutual trust that had characterised their relationship until then:

> "We had never had any problem. […] He said 'I'll give you five minutes to take what you need to get out'. […] After five minutes he came back. He beat me. He pulled me from the bed. I was… I wanted to protect myself, because I was naked. He threw me on the floor. He hit me, he kicked me. […] He was in such a state. I've never understood. Never understood. Everything he said, was out of proportion. It's not for the cigarettes, this" (Medhi).

A few days later, he started thinking that his brother might have found out about his sexuality, and that this might have been the reason for the violence:

> "One day he told me that he was looking for me, that I had left my PC open with the volume on, and he went to my room to lower the volume. I was terrified at the idea that he had touched my PC. Because I have everything. I have everything on my PC. [..] My Romeo account was always open. I mean, I went on many websites. Yeah, I watched lots of porn. […] In retrospect, I tell myself 'Did he find out?' I know nothing" (Medhi).

My interview with Medhi took place four years after these episodes, and he was still unsure about what caused the conflict. What is certain is that, from one day to the other, he found himself without a home. The more he thought about the episode, the more he linked his being kicked "out" of his brother's house to his being accidentally "outed".

This episode, and Medhi's experience of it, blurs the borders between "knowing" and "not knowing", between "being in" and "being out". What is difficult to discern is not just what Medhi's brother knows about Medhi's sexuality, but also what Medhi knows about his brother's knowledge. According to Sedgwick (1990), verbal disclosure works to enable the emergence of ignorance (as the not knowing, or the not knowing for certain) as ignorance. In a field where interactions happen in the absence of verbal clarification what is ignored and what is known never completely emerge as distinct categories. Between Medhi and his brother, communication unravelled in a terrain that is not one in which words come to clarify, specify and construct realities. In this back and forth play of assumptions, and reactions based on those assumptions, sexuality is never spoken, and therefore, never certainly present. At the same time, exactly because unspoken, it is always at least partially present in Medhi's account of the episode.

A linear and prescriptive "from in to out" trajectory does not do justice to stories such as those of Medhi and Barwaqo. The narratives of participants whose sexuality was discovered, or made public, present the image of a closet with porous and blurred confines. These confines emerge as fluctuating in processes of constant dismantling, reconstruction and reconfiguration of the "closet" itself. Acknowledging the flows of information through the confines of the closet does not mean that the person who is "in it" is always in control of the process. While some participants succeed in maintaining control over how indirect communication shapes their relationships with family, Medhi's and Barwaqo's stories show us how this is not always the case. Another element that emerges from their accounts is the crumbling of "outness" as the final positive outcome of LGBTQ self-development. Mainstream discourses on disclosure and concealment depict the stepping out of the closet as conducive to personal well-being and a sense of relief from the suffering caused by the hiding that precedes it. Researchers have often confirmed this, by either correlating open verbalisation with an increase in personal well-being (Herek, 2003; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010), or concealment as detrimental to it (Sedlovskaya et al., 2013). This story about coming out does not reflect the emotional experience of all participants. While some certainly benefitted from a more or less open communication about their sexuality, others report feelings of distress and discomfort as a consequence of their family knowing about it. Barwaqo's telling of her reaction to her family knowing that she might be lesbian is charged with feelings of stress and anxiety. At no point in our many conversations did she consider coming out with her family as a possible way out of her suffering. In her words, the more knowledge her family had about her sexual orientation, the worse the situation would be for

herself, and for her sister back home. This view of coming out in the family as a negative experience was shared by many participants. For some, being "out" is not conducive to freedom and well-being, but is linked to experiences of anxiety, confusion, danger, and violence. In this sense, it is possible to draw a line between Medhi's experience and that dissonance between the discursive imperative to be "All Out" of international LGTBQ movements, and the need to be "in" – "in" (porous) closets, "in" families, "in" homes – of some LGBTQ subjects.

5. "I KIND OF CAME OUT ALREADY" – TACIT CIRCULATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

In this section, I present my analysis of narratives that do not mirror the strict binarisation of disclosure and concealment that the metaphor of the closet entails. The communications analysed here present elements of both disclosure and concealment, and they render the image of "coming out" too simplistic to allow for an understanding of their complexity. Other concepts, such as that of tacit knowledge as framed by Decena (2011), or that of "coming out *à l'orientale*", articulated by Provencher (2017), are more useful when analysing how LGBTQ people from a Muslim background express, communicate and manage information regarding their sexuality.

Tacit knowledge refers to those contexts and situations where information about one's sexuality and/or gender identity circulates without the topic being directly verbalised. The closet loses its connotations of negativity and oppression, and it becomes the result of a collaborative effort between the LGBTQ subject and their community. Both parts work to maintain the topic apparently unaddressed, while knowledge circulates and mutual expectations are influenced by such circulation (Decena, 2011). Most research participants mentioned being certain that their

parents were aware of their sexuality without anyone approaching the topic. Exemplary cases of "tacit knowledge" at work are situations where participants' living with their long-term partners, sharing a double room with them, and building a family are accepted by their relatives without ever being openly discussed as markers of their sexualities:

> "Well, we never talked about the topic, but they met my boyfriend three times. They know we share the bed. […] But, yeah, it's a topic that we don't talk about. But my mother, for example, last Christmas, she sent some gifts for my boyfriend. So, she was doing scarves… knitting scarves for him, and… So, I think they're ok, as long as we're not talking about it" (Sherif, 30, cis gay man, born in Egypt).

> "It's a bit weird, because they've always known that I lived with women. […] My family met two exes. The… The previous one, and the one with whom I currently live. The one with whom I live, she's also Moroccan. And has even… They have even met her parents. […] It was even some sort of… a meeting, almost a sort of… celebration. We did a party when the child was born [the son she had with her partner]" (Keyna, 42, cis lesbian woman, born in France from a Moroccan family).

Sherif and Keyna describe a situation where their families play an active role in their romantic life. Not only they accept their sharing a house with their partner, but they meet them, send gifts to them, and celebrate their union and the birth of their children. These interactions take place without participants' sexuality being discussed, and therefore in the lack of a verbalised acceptance of their sexual identification.

According to Provencher's (2017) analysis of the lives and representations of gay Maghrebi men living in France, their processes of sexuality disclosure differ in important ways from the "coming out" strategies of white French men (Provencher, 2016). Such differences lead him to elaborate the concept of "coming out *à l'orientale*". With the expression, he refers to the specific ways in which some gay men of North African descent express their sexuality to their families through suggestions and innuendos. Rather than employing "I" statements that would affirmatively state their homosexuality – e.g. "Mum, dad, I am gay", or "Mum, dad, I love a man" – their coming out is constituted by a constellation of negative statements aimed at denying a desire/wish/potential for a heteronormative life. Statements such as "I will not marry", or "I will not have kids", thus work to shape and attune family expectations, creating a specific form of tacit knowledge circulation. Some participants' descriptions of their communications with their parents mirror this process, as Salah's words show:

> "I kind of came out already. Telling her [my mother] that I will not live this straight life. But I didn't tell her which life I will lead. And that kind of was the most right coming out. It's not the total package, but it's the one that is the most honest. Telling her "I'm gay, mama", that feels less honest, less right, than… Because the gayness that she would take in her head is the one that I'm not living. You know? So, it's like I kind of gave her more images of what I'm living, instead of like a word that everybody uses and that everybody kind of has in their own head" (Salah, 28, cis gay man, born in Belgium from a Moroccan family).

Salah's words here reverse the normative trajectory towards "honesty" prescribed by "coming out" narratives. He suggests that, in his case, an indirect coming out,

which negates a desire to live “this straight life”, is the “most right”, the “most honest”. If the listener – his mother – does not share an understanding of the word “homosexual” with the speaker – Salah – what is the use of a statement such as “Mum, I am homosexual”? In Salah’s view, it is more important, and more “honest”, to “give more images” that can convey an idea of what his life looks like, instead of uttering that “word” – gay, homosexual – “that everybody uses and that everybody kind of has in their own head”.

6. SOMETIMES SILENCE IS JUST FINE: BREAKING THE IN/OUT BINARY

The data presented above suggests that what is often depicted as silence regarding one’s sexuality is not always an oppressive site for those who choose to avoid verbally disclosing their sexuality. Rather than a space characterised by a lack – e.g. of clarity, of transparency, of (self-)acceptance, of courage, of well-being – the “closet”, if one needs to stay in the binary configuration of the metaphor, can be reconceptualised as a space filled with intention and motivation. The absence of verbalisation can be reframed as a communicative choice, and the “closet” as a chosen strategy that serves a purpose in the lives of those who opt for it (Fisher, 2003). The choice to not open a conversation on the topic often allows the LGBTQ person to live their sexuality freely while keeping the strength of their kinship relations (Horton, 2017). Different ways of navigating fields of concealment and disclosure appear as rational choices with specific aims (Orne, 2011).

When asked about their choice to opt against a verbal and direct communication about their sexuality, one of the reasons that participants mentioned is linked to a perceived western character of the concept of coming out. According to these

participants, “coming out” as such – i.e. an explicit and direct conversation with close family members about their sexuality – is not an option that retains the same value when applied to the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background:

> “The idea of being openly gay and… It’s very occidental. I mean, gay rights were born in… Gay rights as we know them today anyway, come from, you know, western cultures” (Anwar, 25, cis gay man, Moroccan background).

> “I would have come out the European way, and told them [my parents] about it, if they were harassing me, for example, to get married and have kids, or something […]. For a Muslim country, it’s very normal if you say ‘Ok, I’m gonna share the apartment with another guy, because it would be less expensive’, for example. Or ‘It would be easier for us to just share an apartment, rather than everyone buying, or sharing, or renting their own apartment’. And then you have the relationship that keeps going. For the European, undercover. However, for the Muslims, they see it as going fairly well. Because that’s what they’re used to. So, for us, it’s not something like we’re hiding, but it’s just something that normally no one is talking about” (Sherif, 30, cis gay man, Egyptian).

Anwar and Sherif describe linear “coming out” trajectories as external to their experience, and they both explain this externality through the attachment of a western/European character to it. “Coming out the European way” does not apply to them, or is not the best option, as it is entangled with western ways of understanding, living, and communicating sexualities. It is only when looking at non-disclosure with western eyes that LGBTQ lives emerge as “undercover”, or

"in hiding". For the person who does not do the disclosing, things might be going "fairly well". Interestingly, the geographical location where a verbalisation of their sexuality does not take place is not the same for the two. While Sherif is talking about Egypt, the country where he was born and raised, Anwar refers here to Molenbeek, the Brussels municipality where he spent most of his life. The discursive link between the North African/Middle Eastern region and Muslim communities in European cities clearly emerges here, as both are sites where "coming out" discourses can be felt as externally prescribed on LGBTQ people, and not necessarily reflective of their life choices and communicational strategies.

Some participants point out to differences in how communication is negotiated in Muslim families. In these accounts, non-heteronormative sexuality is but one of the topics that is not directly talked about. In their experience, sex and sexualities are never discussed, no matter the sexual orientation or gender identity of the person doing the talking:

> "In the Muslim world, you… normally, you don't talk about your sexual relationships. Like, parents don't talk about their sex life in front of their kids. Brothers and sisters, they don't share stories about sex and things like that. […] I don't ask my parents what they're doing in bed, they don't ask me what we're doing in bed, and that's it" (Sherif).

> "I never kind of followed this hype of 'mum needs to know'. Because my argument was, like, my brothers never say 'Mum, I've just had sex with this girl. Mum, I've just popped the cherry of that girl'. We don't have that type of conversation in the Arab world" (Salah).

Same-sex desire emerges as one among many topics that are not touched upon in the household. Salah adds that romantic/sexual relationships for his siblings turned into something speakable only when they expressed a desire to get married. Their pre-marital sex life was as "closeted" as Salah's, with the difference that he could not see marriage as a possible exit from his situation of unspeakability.

When considering statements about differences in degrees of "openness" across different cultural contexts, it is important to be aware of the political implications of a discourse that once again risks positing the West and the East as inherently different, and falling into the essentialist trap that binary thinking always entails. Rather than reinforcing such discursive dichotomies, the statements above can be helpful to understand how the spatial metaphor of being in/out of the closet, and the ideas of openness and hiding that it vehiculates, do not work to describe the experiences of people who are not already inscribed into a normative narrative of sexuality development, i.e. white western bodies.

7. "WITH OUR FAMILIES, WITH OUR FRIENDS": MULTIPLE SILENCES

A further element that contributes to a deconstruction of the rigidities of the closet metaphor is represented by research participants' mentions of silences they experience around topics unrelated to their sexualities. For some, this is but one of the topics that they avoid verbalising, and communications with their communities of origin are not the only ones constellated by concealments of information.

The interview with Ghalia illuminates some of the processes involved in the production of such silences. When I asked whether she had disclosed her sexuality

to her family, she offered a broader reflection on the difficulties, for racialised LGBTQ people, in verbalising their experiences of oppression. She started by recounting a series of conversations on the topic with other racialised LGBTQ people:

> "And we talked about this verbalisation and we realised that in those families that are quite traditional, the fact of verbalising would necessarily lead to an action. […] Imagine it in relation to an aggression… 'I got assaulted', or 'I got discriminated'. If I verbalise this, well… there is… What will happen, is 'But what do we do, then? Do we seek for revenge? Are we doing something?'. And we don't want this at all, we would just want to be able to put words to it, to be understood, and not… not for this to be perceived as a need to act, a duty of solidarity from the community behind […]. Let's imagine that we'd put into words a racist aggression. It's either 'Ah, but that's normal. You can't be so weak, it's better not to talk about it', or 'Ok, what do we do now, then? Shall we smash their face? Or are we going to report it?' But if it's just talking to be understood, it's complicated, because it isn't… there aren't spaces for it" (Ghalia, 35, genderqueer, pansexual, Algerian background).

In this quote, Ghalia moves from answering a question about "coming out", to expressing the difficulties that a racialised LGBTQ person might encounter when trying to communicate their experience of racism. The words used to "verbalise" the aggression can trigger a process leading to unintended consequences, such as acts of revenge or the reporting of the episode to the authorities. In this case, as in those where a tacit knowledge on sexuality was produced and maintained, refraining from a direct verbalisation can be a strategic choice.

Later in the interview, Ghalia extends verbalisation difficulties beyond the family and the community of origin:

> "I'd say that it's not only complicated in… well, anyway, complex, in our traditional families, but also with very modern people, with whom it's not always granted that you can be understood. Because of racism. Because when we talk about our difficulties in our traditional families, our discourses can be very very quickly taken and used in a… well, in a racist flow. So, it creates misunderstanding. 'Ah, I don't understand. Why don't you talk to them? It's your freedom'. But that's not the issue. It's not, that's it. 'But then, you're savages'. We don't have… When we talk about this to friends, basically white friends, we can say that our words are added to racist prejudice. And so, this makes it complicated to be able to talk about ourselves, about our existence, in an authentic way. With our families, with our friends" (Ghalia).

The verbalisation described here is in contrast with discourses that frame LGBTQ Muslim lives as unfolding in a closeted silence produced by their communities of origin. In Ghalia's experience, this silence represents only part of the story. An important role is played by the silencing that she lives in other contexts. While homo/bi/transphobia in the communities of origin might represent one side of the oppression, the racism and Islamophobia faced in other contexts, including when talking with white friends, can be as impactful on decisions to disclose or conceal information (Bing, 2004). The example that Ghalia offers here is of a conversation with a white friend not understanding how a person could not "have the freedom" to verbally come out to their family ("Why don't you talk to them? It's your freedom"). Such a statement clearly shows how the person does not realise the

silencing effect that their lack of understanding, and the racist judgements that follow – "you are savages, then" – have on the person they are addressed to. Ghalia's words allow for the emergence of multiple conditions of silence in her life, some of them unrelated to her sexuality and not produced nor experienced in Muslim communities. Her narrative once again points to the need of de-centring the image of the closet as *the* fundamental feature of LGBTQ oppression, and especially so in racialised contexts. It is more useful to consider concealment about one's sexuality as one of the multiple "closets" that intervene in shaping the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim backgound. These are partly chosen as strategic devices, partly created by external pressures, and those who inhabit them are partially in control of the flows of information and knowledge that cross their confines. Ghalia's words directly confute the unidirectionality that is assumed in discourses that link "closeted sexualities" and racialised communities, positing the homo/bi/transphobia of the second as the cause of the firsts. In addition to the collaborative construction and maintenance of the closet discussed in earlier sections, Ghalia highlights\ the existence of closets that result from the silencing processes of white racist and Islamophobic populations on the lives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper began by highlighting the discrepancy between international discourses on LGBTQ liberation that insist on "outness" as metonymy of LGBTQ individual *and* collective well-being, and the lives of gay and bisexual men in Morocco who were "outed" in April 2020. For some of them, the immediate needs were less about being "out", visible, open and proud and more about being "in" – "in" their home during a national lockdown, "in" the privacy of their

undisclosed sexuality. This episode allowed me to introduce my analysis of the discrepancies between "coming out" discourses and the experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background in Brussels.

The data presented above represents a point of entry into the experiences of sexuality disclosure and concealment of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels in their families. Aware of the importance of unpacking and deconstructing the image of the "closet" as the sole image employed to depict and prescribe the path towards well-being and liberation for LGBTQ subjects, the paper argues that it is necessary to go "beyond the closet" (Ross, 2005) when observing and analyzing the lives, experiences and narratives of LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in western countries. As it emerges from the narratives of many participants, a blurring of the confines of closet is necessary to observe the multiple interplays between partial concealments and disclosures that unfold in their daily lives, as well as the many ways in which communication takes place in lack of direct verbalisation of their sexualities. Specifically, a range of concepts and alternative ways of framing the "closet" articulated by queer of color scholars and researchers – e.g. "tacit knowledge", "coming out à l'orientale", "the closet as a collaborative effort", "the closet as a productive space" – allow for a deeper understanding of their lives. In addition to this, the article points to the existence of other conditions of silence that play an important role in the lives of research participants, and how these too need to be taken into account. Ultimately, the article argues for a detachment from a discursive inflation of the closet as *the* site of LGBTQ oppression, and stepping out of it as *the* only path towards well-being and liberation.

What this paper does not set to do is to fall in yet another essentialisation of difference between Muslim communities and the white majority in the West, or more broadly the western subject and its Oriental other. The whole point of an attempt to go "beyond the closet" rests on the disarticulation of the potency attributed to the metaphor, and the value given to its contents in articulating norms, directions and life-goals for all LGBTQ people, regardless of their race, ethnicity, and cultural/religious background. A reversal of the polarity that is the foundation of this metaphorical discourse, through an idealisation of the "closet" as a non-western, non-white way of navigating one's communication about their sexuality with their close communities, does not do justice to the complexities that emerge from an analysis of the data. Staying in the binary thinking that the image of the closet so powerfully conveys inevitably forces researchers, activists and support workers alike to utilise essentialised binaries to understand and talk about the experiences of the racialised LGBTQ individuals and groups they encounter. Only framing a discourse outside such binary makes it possible to observe, understand, and analyse LGBTQ Muslim experiences, lives and narratives with the nuances they deserve. The data presented in the paper, in all the complexities, and apparent contradictions that it expresses, suggests the need to nuance the discourse that posits coming out as *the* liberating and emancipatory act available to (white) LGBTQ people, and the exclusion from such liberation for people who live in racialised Muslim communities.

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