



# A voice from elsewhere: Latin American women in the Netherlands

## Experiences of migration, positionality and commonality

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## Introduction

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“They have opinions about your identity. It is like they are categorizing you (...), and you think: who are you to tell me who I am? Because sometimes, I also don’t know; you may have a little from there and a little from here. But what I do not understand is why do you have to open a drawer and put someone in it? (...) They see the differences between themselves, but the rest is the same; better said they are them and we are the rest. They don’t know much about us, they even ask: what does a Latina do in Holland?” (Irene<sup>1</sup>)

In our complex times of globalization and transnational mobility, lines between here and there are blurred, problematizing the formation of a homeland place and the construction of identity of those who migrate. Irene’s testimony is an example of this struggle. Being a Latin-American migrant who faces the challenges of living in a new culture, the Netherlands, while trying to establish a balanced positioning, upholding the past and survive in the present. This process is not an easy task, not only for the constant relation of movement and dislocation that migration implies, but for the contextual conditions such as global discourses that shape, and many times limit the possibilities for migrants to decide and act for themselves.

In the Netherlands, Dutch migrant discourses are embedded into a particular ethnocentric frame. This perspective establishes any process of identity formation marked by impermeable boundaries and radical divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’; ‘same’ and ‘different’. It is assumed then that non-western immigrants, especially women, are not only different, but passive victims in a position of social isolation and in need to be helped for the sake of their emancipation (Ghorashi, 2010). This situation reinforces the vulnerable and subordinate role imposed over migrant women like Irene, limiting the space they have to express themselves and to discursively construct their identities. Thus, it is necessary to

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<sup>1</sup> This opening citation is an extract of the interview text and renders the statement of one of the participants. Her name has been changed in prior agreement.

acknowledge the diversity of “otherness” and the different ways these women, individually and collectively, relate to the environment they live in. That is to consider, as the title of this study says: a voice from *elsewhere*, which can illustrate dynamic ways of yielding both social structure and personal agency at the same time.

Therefore, this study intends to be a voice from *elsewhere* that aims:

- To be an alternative answer to studies about experiences, and identities embedded in an ethnocentricity perspective.
- To think beyond ideas of assumed identity that place the self in problematic dichotomies here/there, same/different, ‘us’/‘them’; to consider the processes at work and the multiple positionings the migrant can inhabit.
- To think about these positioning as strategic locations where, especially for migrant women, the experience of transnational migration opens up the possibility to imagine new ways of being and acting, both individually and collectively, beyond the global and hegemonic discourses imposed over them.
- And finally, to provide opportunities for reflection and revision of what is known and thinkable about Latin-Americans living in the Netherlands, most of the time limited or stereotyped; contributing to a more comprehensive picture of Latin-American gendered migration.

The focus on women of Latin-American origin is based on a number of reasons: a) in the last decade, Latin America has become the fastest growing region of origin in migration rates, Europe currently being the principle destination<sup>2</sup>. b) Paradoxically to this upward trend, there is a dearth of qualitative-oriented studies about Latin-American migration in Europe, even less with a gender approach<sup>3</sup>, as Irene says: “they don’t know much about us.” And c) a significant part of my sensibilities and political believes are intricately shaped

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<sup>2</sup> This trend has determined by some important causes: 1) between the 1970’s and 1980’s, dictatorial regimes in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil produced the migration of political refugees. 2) Between 1980 and 2000, poor socio-economic conditions in the region pushed people to migrate, mainly for labor reasons and others for study. 3) The events of 9/11 in 2001 made the immigration of Latin Americans to the United States of America more difficult. All these reasons intensified the Latin-American migration to Europe (Costa, 2006 in Barajas, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> An extended revision about this regard will be developed in Chapter 2.

by my Latin-American background. With this engagement I assume a responsible and committed position, as speaker and thinker, in relation to my origin; instead of following the idea of being the researcher who sympathetic, but not emphatic, simply represents others' experiences.

Taking into consideration all the above, the research question states as follows:

*How are migrant women of Latin-American origin positioned in the Netherlands, individually and collectively?*

In order to answer the aforementioned question, the conceptual framework of “translocational positionality” developed by Floya Anthias (2002) will be used. This perspective balances notions between social sciences, humanities and feminism and it is useful in that it centers process of location and positionality as the way to investigate identity formation. In the light of studying positionality in migrants' lives, it is necessary to consider the meanings of the experiences of actual and/or imagined (transnational) social and cultural locations and practices that migrants have. Methodologically, this means that it is not useful to ask directly about positionality, but to question about how that positionality is performed. Thereupon, the following sub questions are posed.

- Regarding individual positioning: *How do the participants experience and practice positionality? And how do they experience and practice a sense of belonging?*
- Regarding collective positioning: *How can social and cultural practices unite the group? How do they experience a sense of acceptance and commonality? And how, if so, are practices of solidarity exercised?*

The use of narratives and narrative analysis play an important role in this study. Attention to personal narratives gives the opportunity to look at “the ways individuals understand and interpret their place in the world and are of particular interest to consider collective imaginings around belonging” (Anthias, 2002, p. 498). So letting the participants talk about themselves, their lives, their experiences and practices; will allow to understand the way they are positioned in the transnational migratory setting. The narrative can therefore tell

the story of the participants' diverse experiences and different positionings in the social world; while in combination to the use of focus group, it can account for collective stories of experiences organized in similar locations with significant others as a way of collective identification, answering the research questions.

The reminder of this paper is organized as follows. The first chapter will review the literature including perspectives from the field of feminist transnational research, which will discuss the choice for the framework of “translocational positionality” as the conceptual lenses to explore migrant women’s realities in the Netherlands. Subsequently, I will reflect upon some of the historical and political events related to immigration in the Netherlands which have significant influence on the experiences of migrant’s minorities, as well as to explore what is known about the position and the characterization of Latin-Americans in this country, particularly migrant women (chapter 2). The methodology section will explore how the analysis of (personal and collective) narratives is the most suitable way to understand migrants’ actual or imagined transnational positioning, as well as the relevant use of focus group in this process (chapter 3). Finally, the last two sections will be dedicated to the analysis of the interviewed women’s narratives to illustrate: a) how the participants’ experiences of migration explain a transnational and multilayered positioning (chapter 4); and b) how a collective positioning/identification among the participants is experienced with opportunities to develop cross-border relationships of solidarity (chapter 5).

# Chapter 1

## Theoretical framework

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Postmodernism thinking challenges the existence of essential and objective truth in relation to personal construction. Instead, it opens up possibilities for experiences and behavior to be studied in relation to the context and time in which they are taking place; it also recognizes multiple axes of difference in shaping multiplicity of realities (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p.42). Regarding the reality of migrants' lives, this approach seeks to pay attention to spatial and contextual dimensions of differential processes and experiences instead of focusing on assumed identity or possessive properties of the migrants. That is, how questions about human experience and behavior, contextualized in our complex times of globalization and transnational mobility, moves forward from asking 'who are you' as a migrant, to consider 'what and how have you experience the process of migration'. This perspective displaces the concern of identity, and its problematic notion of essentialist ownership, to focus on location and positionality. It is for this reason I pose my research considering the experiences and practices of positionings (both individually and collectively) of migrant women of Latin-American origin in relation to the transnational migratory setting.

I will follow the conceptual framework of "translocational positionality" developed by Floya Anthias (2002). This framework is suitable for the present study given that, it is a response to the refusal of the homogenizing and essentializing elements of identity I want to avoid; and second, the notion of location and positionality in relation to practices and experiences are central to its structure. From this perspective, the notion of location "recognizes the importance of context, the situated nature of claims and attributions and their production in complex and shifting locales" (Anthias, 2002, p. 502). The notion of positionality relates to "the space at the intersection of structure (as social effects: *context*) and agency (as social positioning/ set of practices, actions and meanings: *process*)." (p. 502). Positionality encompasses processes of identification, but is not reducible to identity. It is about "the lived practices in which identification is practiced/performed" (p. 502).

Thereupon, framing this conceptualization in a transnational migration setting makes the concepts of location and positionality more suitable for studying processes and experiences in migrants' realities. That is, it takes into account the claims and attributions migrants make about their position in the social and cultural context of migration, their views and different ways of identification (where and what they do or do not belong to). As well as understanding the broader context in which they live. Taking this in consideration, I will explain how each one of these relations is important to study the effect of transnational migration in migrant's lives, specifically women. I will first reflect upon the transnational migration process, the way it (re)constructs limited spaces and borders and the effect of this new "spatialization" on how migrants give meaning to their experiences.

### **1.1. Transnational migration and new spatialization. Gendered experiences**

Transnational migration refers primarily to the cross-border activities of people, but also refers to the challenging of traditionally delimited borders (Pessar & Mahler, 2003). It examines the spatialization between these borders, going beyond appropriations and fixations of enclosed spaces. Transnational migration creates a destabilization which demands an accommodation and a reevaluation of the subject itself and in relation to its environment. This relation is highly gendered as illustrated in the work of Patricia Pessar (2003; 2005) and Helma Lutz (2010). They assert that undergoing a transnational mobility implies a differential positionality regarding the gender of the migrant –as a social effect. Sometimes this positionality might have negative or positive outcomes for women. In the first case, migration can produce gender inequalities and reinforces traditional gender roles; for example, it might cause emotional, economical and material dependency (Pessar, 2005); which results in disadvantages on the labor market such as poor labour conditions, considerably lower activity rates and salaries (Ayres *et al.*, 2013); and in extreme cases it enables the risk of gendered-based violence and exploitation (Martin, 2007). On the other hand, there are some countervailing trends wherein transnational migration can contribute to women's empowerment within scenarios such as households, communities and even transnational relationships (Pessar, 2005; Martin, 2007 and Lutz, 2010). In these cases, women often have been able to use resources acquired through migration (higher wages, increased access to state services, political participation and higher education for example)

to accomplish personal goals, attain more control over their lives, improved their status and even contribute in developing coalitions with their home countries.

However, it cannot be said that the relation between transnational migration and gender is only a social effect, it is also necessary to take into account the social positioning of the migrant woman. This would correspond to a feminist perspective of the transnational discourse which, according to Barbara Burton (2004), is about the diverse strategies employed by subjects in the migratory processes, the strategic use of global (and hegemonic) discourses in the creation of borders and the significant attempt to resist them. As she suggests, the process of transnational migration or “transmigration” entails “what can be imagined by individuals and groups apart from or beyond a place” (Burton, 2004, p. 774). For the “transmigrants”, transnational processes and experiences become sites where they can “envision, negotiate and nurture a dream about what is *elsewhere* and then learn to live it, respond to it, and create it” (p. 774, emphasis added). This is illustrated in her analysis of three case studies (women refugees in el Salvador, rural Brazilian women’s organization, and the Haitian democracy movement) which demonstrate how the displacement of these women can enable opportunities to shift roles not previously held, to develop awareness of their abilities previously hidden, and to provide spaces (unusual or independent) for women to be together, transcending the limitations and boundaries imposed over them by hegemonic discourses.

Patricia Pessar and Sarah Mahler (2003) also consider this “new” spatialization throughout their five years investigations and their attempt to “bringing gender into” the study of transnational migration. They describe the importance of what they call the “transnational cognitive space” (Pessar & Mahler, 2003, p. 818) from where particular circumstances of individual or group agency, the imaginary, and the thoughts which underlines and shapes the transnational locality, can be seen. Illustrating with various cases of migrant and refugee women, they conclude that the “cognitive space” enables a gendered social agency drawn from the women’s initiative as well as the conscious and meaningful position they decided to adopt within and across many terrains (p. 818). One example of Mexican immigrants in the Unites States (U.S.) shows how the exclusion of women traditionally deprives access to social participation and therefore to power positions abroad, reinforces the desire of some of these women to pursue political and social rights within

institutions in the U.S. As result, Mexican migrant women play nowadays essential roles in fundraising and development projects linked to their hometowns.

Consequently, the associations of people and places in transmigratory processes have to be understood as contested and uncertain (Pessar & Mahler, 2003). It leads to a complex set of “strategies” of location from which migrants are positioned within interconnected spaces, i.e. social locations. Although this positioning is highly gendered, it is important to reflect that gender does not operate in isolation from other social categories. Gender has to be considered between intersections of race, ethnicity, religion and others which can generate differential positionings also among women (p. 823). This social positioning allows understanding the different set of meanings, actions and experiences performed by the migrants in the transnational scenario and how in relation to the social effects of the context, this positioning might generate spaces for additional discriminations, but more importantly, spaces for empowerment and agency for the migrant women.

## **1.2. Boundaries and sense of belonging**

Transnational migration implicates unsteady journeys between here and there, home and host land. It refers not only to mobility across spaces, but also to identity shifts and reconfigurations of the self (Burton, 2004). In this situation, the subject feels the necessity of finding a social place to belong to, a known and safe place to inhabit where it can position itself, namely home, family, collective, community, etc. But the consideration of such places is one of the difficult tasks in the study of migrants’ positioning and identification. The challenge is to avoid the essentialist notion of identity embedded in the possessive properties of the individual and focusing instead on strategies, positions and context-reliance process of identification. This challenge is accompanied by the also problematic construction of collectivity boundaries and territorial borders in delimiting such spaces and in relation to the process of inclusion and exclusion based on ideas of affiliation, membership and belonging (Anthias, 2006). I will then explain briefly how these limits are constructed and how they influence the positionality of migrants, especially their identification process.

When the boundaries between societies, communities and nations, among others, are established as impermeable barriers, the categorization over what is the “same” and

what is “different” is no more than a reaffirmation of exclusionary dichotomies. They build symbolic walls between irreconcilable poles of “one” and “other”, “West” and “East”, “us” and “them”. The construction of these boundaries is often a product of external restraints such as forms of political practice related to membership. An example is the politics of identity, being a system that tends to homogenized and naturalized social categories and groupings as well as the members within them (Yuval-Davis, 1994). The author states that differences within society and within groups are assumed to be “normalized”; that is to conceive, in the first place, the society as a hegemonic majority with harmonious relation between different groups or homogenous units (respected but excluded). And in the second place, any form of individuality or exposure to differences as a threat to the cultural and political identity project pursued in the name of collectivity; therefore individual differences, interests or agency within groups or collectives are homogenized or omitted.

This construction is exemplified by the hegemonic discourses on integration and belonging in Europe as Halleh Ghorashi and Ulrike Vieten (2012) assert. They suggest that these dominant discourses are informed by a belief of a singular and natural rooting of belonging directly related to a culture or a geographical territory, which entails a sedentary perspective that attaches migrants’ practices and identifications to fixed spaces. In opposition, Ghorashi and Vieten set their point of view based on ideas of positionality and de-/re-territorialized spaces from which “the meanings attributed to everyday practices and to a sense of belonging are diverse, multilayered and dynamic because they are contextual and situational” (Ghorashi & Vieten 2012, p. 727). This fluid conceptualization is extremely relevant in the journeys of migrants, given that it involves a continuous reconfiguration of significant spaces (e.g. home) no longer related to a physical setting, but to a domain where “choices, chances and networks” (p. 727) mediate experiences and practices. This “new” space is a site of negotiations and locations in which one is able to express oneself at will and to find complacency of everyday lived-experiences. In their research they analyze the narratives of a number of Dutch female citizens with a non-western background (Surinam, Turkey, Morocco, Iran and Iraq). These women resist a singular notion of (Dutch) identity, and show how they make individual choices having a sense of multiple belongings folded in many overlying and interconnected spaces, namely within and across different ethnic communities (e.g. Moroccan-Dutch at the same time) and

different social axes of generation, class and others (e.g. young, female, successful entrepreneur). The interviewees demonstrate a complex set of “strategies” of identification within and across differences contradicting hegemonic perspectives and stereotypes on migrant/minority women, which illustrate dynamic ways of individual positioning/agency as well as not determined social structures. Such identifications might cross-cut each other, in other words, as the authors state, these women decided to simultaneously position themselves in different social locations (intersectional positioning), and therefore belong to different “categorizations” depending on situation, meaning and context.

When the boundaries between groupings are not conceived as fixed and the subject’s identification to different locations is possible, as previously illustrated, we can talk about a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging in the translocational positionality model involves a number of dimensions (Anthias, 2006, p. 21): a) an important affective dimension related to the social bonds and ties or “how we feel about our location in the social world”; b) a dimension about “*practices and experiences*” of social inclusion related to a sense of acceptance and participation of a larger grouping (membership and forms of identifications); and c) a relational dimension as a combination of the previous two, relating social positions (constructed by such memberships and identifications), and the way in which these are valuable for the subject (on with the emotional, social and cultural bonds associated to such positionings). The notion of sense of belonging as a process of identification is then of importance for the present discussion. It allows seeing how migrants can position themselves dynamically in different social locations. And at the same time, it helps to consider this positioning influenced by feelings of acceptance, safety, and participation. Hence the author concludes that the migrants’ positioning not just follows an intentional decision, but also a noteworthy and ‘needed’ desire of being part of, or belonging to, somehow, a larger “whole”.

A distinction has to be made between belonging as the individual’s “active participatory element” (Anthias, 2002, p. 498) and a way of collective identification. In the second case, belonging is about “to be accepted as part of a community, to feel safe within it and to have a stake in the future of such a community (...) to belong is to share values, networks and practices as well as a question of identification with significant others” (Anthias, 2006, p. 21). The later consideration -belonging related to collective

identification, is useful in the analysis of the second part of the research question. It can give key elements about how and why migrants, women of Latin-American origin in this case, might have experiences of cohesion, sharing a common positionality and constructing cross-border relations of solidarity.

### **1.3. Cross-border solidarity. Towards a collective form of identification**

A collective form of identification among migrants in the transnational scenario could seem like an attempt to reinforcing the boundaries that strength differences among ethnic groups, pursuing an apparent totalizing and essentialist effort in classifying and separating different “cultures” (Anthias, 2002, p. 497). In this consideration it is useful to bring some feminist contributions from which the belief of collective solidarity, especially gender solidarity beyond borders is possible. This notion does not start from the tenet of assuming a pre-given universal grouping (i.e. sisterhood) but with a careful approach to diversity and unity at the same time. Chandra Tapalde Mohanty and Nira Yuval Davis have extensively studied different forms of feminist solidarity in cross-cultural and ethnic work. In Mohanty’s *politics of experience* (1995) she describes how the assumption of “sameness” have to be disrupt to understand the “unity of women” not as given or natural commonality, but as a “coalition”. This coalition can only be constructed having previously exposed and accepted the potential of the differences within the collective. Foregrounding the strategic location and positioning, Mohanty emphasizes the politics which define and inform the subject’s experiences and especially, she underscores, the meaning attached to those experiences as significant in the creation of that heterogeneous coalition. The author concludes that this leads to a politics of engagement in the way the subjects are deliberately in a constant process of positionality, mapping and transforming political, cultural and social locations both individually and collectively.

Similarly, Yuval-Davis developed the concept of “transversal politics” to address differences within and across collectivities. Based on the idea of “transversalism” as a dialogical perspective brought from a group meeting of feminists in Italy where:

“each participant brings with her the ‘rooting’ in her own membership and identity but at the same time tries to ‘shift’ in order to put herself in a

situation of exchange with women who have different membership and identity” (Yuval-Davis, 1994, p. 193).

This conceptualization recognizes the central role of dialogical process from which the different gaze and positioning of each participant is acknowledged, while the participants engaged with others positionings and belongings. Transversal politics allows flexible and permeable boundaries of the grouping instead of exclusionary or totalizing notions of difference (e.g. politics of identity). The “shifting” is a key in the construction of solidarity and collectivity because it moves away from the idea of homogenizing the ‘other’ while recognizing and respecting ‘other’s’ differences with its specific particularities. This results in a common value system as a situated gaze which comprehends the meaning of intersectional (individual and collective) differential positioning within a constructed context (Yuval-Davis & Stoetzler, 2002). That differential positioning is mostly in terms of social or political formations; however, transversalism might allow for the creation of solidarity and connectivity across differences and borders where migrants can organize their experiences in terms of certain cultural locations (cultural practices, events, beliefs and rituals) which are shared with similar others (Burton, 2004 and Ghorashi, 2004).

The social and cultural relation of collectivity can mobilized different individuals upon the need or desire to remark the commonalities in cultural locations and practices without claiming for a natural or pre-given cultural or ethnic formation neither for an attachment to a fixed place of origin or homeland. One example is the creation of an Asian migrant community in the UK analyzed by Sara Ahmed (1999). This collectivity was formed by Asian women who decided to ‘make a place’ for themselves and consider that place as a community. These were women with an absence of a collective past or a familiar terrain; “but the very desire to make a community, a community of Asian women who write” (Ahmed, 1999, p. 345) demonstrates how the common believe around the shared practice of writing reaches importance and is established across differential individual positionings. In this example, the important role of estrangement in the creation of migrants’ communities is underlined. As Ahmed asserts: “Estrangement is always an estrangement from a particular place and time: to universalize estrangement as that which bring us together is to conceal how estrangement marks out particular selves and

communities” (p. 344). It is of importance then to see how communities come to be constructed through a collective act of remembering and sharing in places where migrants feel unfamiliar. It is then the construction of commonality through estrangement.

In sum, the conceptual framework of translocational positionality is then a way to capture a number of diverse and relevant aspects in the study of migrant’s lived-experiences of positionality. As listed by Anthias (2006, p. 27-28), this model allows: 1) to addresses questions of experience and identity in terms of locations (not fixed but in context), meaning and time related, moving away from the essentialist notion of identity as possessive characteristics of the individual. 2) Experiences of migration are thought in terms of transformation, and involve shifts and contradictions. 3) It provides an intersectional framing for the understanding of belonging, which is the possibility of an “intersectional positioning” or the cross-cutting of social identifications of gender, ethnicity, class and others. 4) Migrant’s positionings are multiple and span a number of different –not fixed, not delimited terrains, moving away from the idea of given ‘groups’ or ‘categories’. And 5) to consider collective positionality/identification on the basis of struggles and solidarity rather than identities. In general, this conceptual framework helps to think of migrants’ lives and experiences as located, as always relational to agency (individual and collective) and context, and in terms of intersections of gender, ethnicity, class and others.

## Chapter 2

### Historicizing and contextualizing migration flows

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This chapter will characterize the Latin-American's migratory trajectories and current situation in the Netherlands. Particularly, by providing some previous researches, it will explore the position of Latin-American women to show what is and what is not known about this population which underlines the relevance of the present study in the field of transnational feminist research. In the second part, it will frame the migratory discourses in The Netherlands which influence the experiences migrant women, especially non-western or "third world" women have. This review is of utter importance because it will reveal some of the historical and contextual conditions in which migrants experiences are constructed and shaped.

#### 2.1. Latin American migration

In contrast to other widely studied and known ethnic minorities (Surinamese, Antillean, Turkish, Moroccan, etc.) in the Netherlands, Latin American immigrants have been virtually invisible by the social research in this country. They do not classify into the mainstream Dutch immigration flows, to which the above groups correspond, namely former colonies or guest-workers. Moreover, the fact that Latin-America is a variety of countries does not make the presence of the whole group as publicly noted as for the previous "minorities". The Latin-American migrant population is relatively small in comparison to the previous groups<sup>4</sup>; and also the information about them is limited. From the existing studies about Latin-Americans living in the Netherlands, most of them are limited to quantitative and exploratory approaches presenting a general profiling of the population, without providing an in-depth qualitative analysis. This trend differs

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<sup>4</sup> According to the "Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek" (CBS), the total Latin-American migrant population in the Netherlands is 64.721 people. In comparison to Surinamese (347.631), Antillean (145.499), Turkish (395.302), and Morocco (368.838). The data presented here are based on the category of "allochtonen" as previously defined StatLine. <http://statline.cbs.nl> [Last access 30/05/14 11:30 am].

considerably from other studies in which the general presence of Latin-Americans in Europe, especially in Spain, and in the U.S. has been studied extensively.

According to some researches (Barajas, 2008 and De Valk *et al.*, 2011), the profile of Latin-Americans in the Netherlands illustrates consistent characteristics with the overall group of Latin-Americans in Europe (IOM, 2004 and Peixoto, 2005). The pattern reveals that the majority of immigrants are women (37.608, 59%)<sup>5</sup>, concentrated in the ages between 20 and 30 years, with high rates of labour force participation and strong remitting behavior. They also have a tendency of settling in the bigger cities in the western part of the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague).

De Valk *et al.* (2011) made a comparative analysis in relation to the African population, finding that Latin-American immigrants have “much higher levels of participation particularly for women.” (p. 99). Many of them have an increasing higher educational degree, and it is expected that youngest women in this group will participate more competitively on the labor market. In fact, women of Latin-American origin acquire more often work related residence than women of other origins. For example in case of African women, to seek asylum is far more likely. However, it has also been demonstrated that for the non-higher educated part of this population, the work conditions differ drastically. Eleonore Kofman (2006) points out that the lower activity rates of this subgroup is consistent with discrimination against minorities within the European labor market. She also found that migrant women of Latin-American origin are more concentrated in specific sectors such as domestic work (cleaning and care), catering, and prostitution; which is comparable with the general position of third world country migrant women in Western Europe as examined by Ron Ayres *et al.* (2013). Some of the causes for this trend can be the result of lack of network connections, employers and institutional stereotyped gaze, and limited or unregulated opportunities (Ayres *et al.*, 2013, p. 25). These circumstances leave them exposed and vulnerable to restricted rights and work conditions (low paid, overworking hours, few benefits, etc.), entailing a possible cause of marginalization, discrimination and exploitation.

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<sup>5</sup> “Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek” (CBS). StatLine. <http://statline.cbs.nl> [Last access 30/05/14 12:30 am]

Independent migration for work appears to be the most common motive for women of Latin-American origin to migrate to the Netherlands. Kofman (2006) explains that this pattern has noticeably increased since the 1990s “both at the low end of the service sector as well as for more skilled and professional employment.” (p. 2). However, some recent researches show how in gendered migrations from Latin-America to the Netherlands, family reunification and primarily, family formation has been recognized as the main motive to migrate (Barajas, 2008 and De Valk *et al.*, 2011), documenting a high level of intermarriages between Latin-American women and native-Dutch partners. Other qualitative and anecdotal evidence (e.g. online blogs, comics, Facebook pages and books)<sup>6</sup> also suggest this trend expressed as “relationships *por amor* and/or *por residencia*” (Sorensen, 2005 in Kofman, 2006). This common trend might represent both positive and negative consequences in the way these women experience their migration. In the first case, the achievement of an European citizenship through the intermarriage (wanted or arranged) entails social, political and labor welfares enabling a participative inclusion in terms of rights and institutional benefits (such as subsidies, easily or unrestricted access to Schengen area -possibly before restricted, and political participation among others). In the second case, they are willing to resign various stable situations as the profession and independence they used to have before they migrated for the sake of the love relationship, which results in, to a great extent, a forced dependency (economical and emotional) on their partners and in-laws accompanied by feelings of isolation and frustration. This situation is harder when the opportunities for labor inclusion in the Dutch market are limited, and for difficulties with the local language (Nuestra Casa, 2012; 2013). Moreover, the migratory discourses in the Netherlands also influence the experiences migrant women, especially non-western, have. A revision on this respect is then warranted accompanied by a brief historical review.

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<sup>6</sup> A significant number of online blogs and Facebook pages were found and revised, there is also a publication named “Adiós Tercer Mundo: El precio por enamorarse de un ‘Príncipe Azul’ del ‘Primer Mundo’” (Andrea Viveros, 2013). These sources present biographical and anecdotal experiences of Latin-American women living in the Netherlands from which most of them, migration was related to family formation with a Dutch partner.

## 2.2. Migration in the Netherlands. A gendered gaze

The Netherlands, as other Western European countries, has changed from being an emigration to an immigration country, and has experienced a considerable increase in immigration flows over the past few decades. This event follows a communal European sequence of post-World War II and post-colonial restructuring; recruitment of low-skilled, hence cheap, guest workers; and arrival of refugees in large numbers (Bijwaard, 2010). Together with migration dynamics, most of the studies in this field take into account the migration motives based on the distinctions made by The Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (“*Centrale Bureau van Statistics*” CBS). According to this categorization six types of migrants are considered in relation to the reason for migration (labor, family reunification, family formation, student, asylum seekers and refugees, and others). Migration motives and migration dynamics are permanently influenced by each other and their changes have had relevant implications on the migration policy in the Netherlands. Govert Bijwaard (2010) explains how the Dutch government has regulated migrations flows as the changes occur; in the 1960’s, labor migration increased with mainly Turkish and Moroccan precedents, thus recruitment practices and bilateral agreements were established. Later in 1980’s immigration was characterized by motives of reunification and formation of the previous guest workers’ families, thereby increasing the number of people from “ethnic minorities” arriving to the Netherlands. As a consequence, migration policies started to aim a cultural balance between “visitors” and the larger society, encouraging cultural retention and promoting adaptation and integration of the newcomers.

The population is classified as either *autochtonen* or *allochtonen*. The term “autochtonen” means ‘native’, referring to Dutch people “with origins from the same country” (Roggeband & Verloo, 2007: 275); while the term “allochtonen” means “different in relation to” or “originating from another country” (p. 275), referring to people who have at least one parent who was born outside the Netherlands. A further distinction is made between western and non-western “allochtonen”. These ethnic divisions led to develop migrant policies of anti-discrimination and multicultural laws, which at first sight seem to have purposes of inclusion. It understands that “allochtonen” are immersed in their cultural traditions, offering a sense of respect for their difference and recognition of the value of diversity within the society.

But a closer and critical revision of this policy shows how the multiculturalist approach, is still tainted by colonialist structural interpretation preserving a stigmatized view of “allochtonen” as “others” and maintaining an essentialist and static view of identity that harm the diversity and emancipation process of the migrant’s life. This is what Halleh Ghorashi considers in her extended policy reviews (2010, 2012) asserting that the culturalist approach establishes an ethnic categorization which reinforces the irreconcilable division “between the Dutch as ‘emancipated self’ and immigrants as ‘unemancipated other’” (Ghorashi, 2010, p. 76). The concept of identity politics can explain how the multiculturalist perspective ignores the complexity embedded in cultural identifications, coercing and limiting the migrants’ sense of belonging to another, different and rooted space; namely, their country of origin as the normal feature of their “natural” positioning which cannot be “real Dutch” (Ghorashi & Vieten, 2012). Therefore, non-western immigrants’ cultural differences differ completely from Dutch culture while at the same time the pattern of “Dutchness” (p. 128) is set as the reference to the majority ethnicity, relegating the rest to “absolute others”.

During the 1990’s the policies shifted from “diversity” to emancipation. This is justified by the “deficit approach” which refers to the different but also disadvantaged immigrants’ position in relation to the well-conceived “Dutchness” (Ghorashi, 2010). “Allochtonen” are considered under-skilled to become active participants in the Dutch society due to their radical cultural difference. This coding of “others”, or “othering”, reproduces the imperialistic and colonial view of Western Europe to the “not-progressive”, “traditional”, “ignorant, “backward” non-West, or what Mohanty (1988) calls the “third world difference”. Recalling for the clearly gendered framing of this representational and exclusionary discourse, she asserts how the European ethnocentrism produces the image of an “average third world women” who is seen as oppressed, powerless and victim (Mohanty, 1988, p. 338), even more than the generalized notion of subordination assigned to the “women” category. The Dutch dominant discourse follows this image, assuming that non-western immigrants, especially women, are passive victims in a position of social isolation (Ghorashi, 2010); as a consequence, the urge for equality of the welfare state arose and resulted in governmental efforts to represent immigrants’ needs, and provide solutions by freeing them from their disadvantaged position. This is what Conny Roggeband and Mieke

Verloo (2007) point out, in their thorough examination of policy frame on gender and migration in the Netherlands, as an explicit and extensive focus on the emancipation of migrant women. They assert that since 2003 onwards, Dutch political approach to migration changed towards a neo-liberal master frame in which migrant women, particularly Muslim women, became the central subject of gender equality policy while at the same time they are seen as the key to the integration of minorities. The result is that “minority policies become gendered, whereas emancipation policies become ‘ethnicized’” (Roggeband & Verloo, 2007, p. 280), which reinforces the gap between cultural differences even more. Dutch women are seen as already liberated and emancipated, while migrant women, particularly Muslim, are seen in need to be helped for the sake of their emancipation. It is clearly seen how in this intersectional analysis, the convergence of religion, ethnicity and gender strength boundaries of otherness, where the migrant culture besides of being different is also inferior.

Despite all the shifts migration policies have undergone and its disguised effort towards the integration of migrants; it has barely transformed from culturalist and deficit approaches. Rather, an imperialistic and colonial view is still present, homogenizing and marginalizing the “other” immigrant women -mainly Muslim. This categorical thinking has damaging effects on this population, principally when those non-western cultural traditions – frequently represented and stereotyped – are used to strengthen ethnic, political and cultural boundaries. This situation reinforces the vulnerable and subordinate role imposed over these women within own and host society, which limiting the space they have to express, to participate and to construct discursively their identities. In response, Roggeband and Verloo (2007), and Ghorashi (2010) claim that more attention has to be paid to the acknowledgement of ‘otherness’ and the different ways in which non-western immigrant women relate to their environment. To do so, it is necessary to problematize the representations of passive-victim; to recognize diversity and differences among them; to create safe spaces based on communication and interaction where they can have positive and meaningful experiences; and to recognize them as knowledgeable and capable agents (Ghorashi, 2010). All this with the purpose to reach beyond stereotypes and also to give account of the complex situations, singular realities and multilayered positionings of non-western immigrant women in the Dutch society.

In sum, from the previous characterization can be said that the situation of migrant women of Latin-American origin in the Netherlands reveals that some aspects result in a positive social effect and may represent “emancipating” conditions, such as high rates of labor force participation, strong remitting behavior and institutional welfares (Barajas, 2008; De Valk *et al.*, 2011 and Nuestra Casa 2012; 2013). On the other hand, some asymmetries or unfavorable conditions perpetuate, such as restricted rights and poor working conditions, cultural isolation and stereotyped gaze (uneducated, erotized and sexualized) (Zaitch, 2003; Kofman, 2006; Nuestra Casa, 2012; 2013 and Ayres *et al.*, 2013). This is comparable with the general position of migrant women from third world countries in the Netherlands and how the subordination structures of the migratory Dutch discourses still have a strong effect on migrant/minority women. It is shown how different factors shape the way migrant women of Latin-American origin can position themselves in the Netherlands. Linking this to what was expressed in the theoretical chapter, explains how spaces of potential discriminations, but also spaces for empowerment can be generated. However, some of the previous studies seem to present a general descriptive picture of Latin-American migration or in other cases to consider only the social effects of external factors such as the labor market. As mentioned, it is also necessary to take into account the social positioning of migrant women, that is, to pay attention to the different ways these women relate to the environment they live in (different cultures, place of residence, homeland, and others). Or according to Anthias (2002) to consider how the migrant is positioned dynamically in different locales. And more importantly, how these relationships inform migrants’ choices and shape their actions in ways that can be meaningful and positive for them. In this consideration it is fundamental to contemplate the time-spatial as well as contextual dimensions, while providing opportunities to include migrants’ narratives about their experiences and visions. This would be a qualitative perspective with a relational, postmodern and feminist approach that none of the reviewed studies fully included.

Despite the various contributions these studies offer, mainly addressing quantitative profiling of the population, an emphasis on the study of the experiences of positioning of migrant women and forms of collective identification is still pending. For this reason, the present study entails social and academic relevance in the field of migration from a

transnational feminist perspective that intends to include a relational analysis of Latin-American gendered migration in the Netherlands<sup>7</sup>. As well as broaden the existing literature beyond the most thoroughly researched populations (e.g. Muslims) to other minority groups.

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting here that a significant and diverse body of researches with a similar focus to the present study was found but in different contexts. These researches address sometimes the experiences of positioning of migrant women and in other cases the forms of collective identification of population of Latin-American origin residing in Spain or the U.S. There are studies about transatlantic construction of 'latinoamericanidad' in the media (Retis, 2008); and transnational identity and Uruguayan diaspora (Moraes, 2007) in Spain. Other studies situated in the U.S. were focused on spaces and sceneries of Colombian identity construction in New York (Gómez, 2008); the phenomenon of Latino immigration (Flores, 2003); transnational Latin identities (Mato, 1998); and the case of the "Latino Threat" (Chavez, 2008). But as stated, there was not a similar study located in the Netherlands.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

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My research aims to explore two aspects of the lives of migrant women of Latin-American origin in relation to their positionality: 1) how they make sense of the experiences and practices they have individually in their migration process and the different cultural environment they live in, what causes them to be positioned differently and 2) how some cultural and social practices are shared, experiencing a sense of commonality around a collective positioning/identification with opportunities to develop cross-border relationships of solidarity. As explained in the previous theoretical chapter informed by a postmodernism approach, I center the importance of acknowledging differences among women, the variations of their lives and to see how they are perceived and shaped by themselves, others and their context. In order to answer the research questions the use of qualitative methodology is central. In studying personal experiences and behaviors, a variety of methods and analysis can be used in this type of research, especially narratives gathered through interviewing and oral histories as the most popular ones (Hesse-Biber, 2014). In the present study I have decided to use focus group interviews as the method to get information from the participants and narrative analysis as the way to study their accounts. In this chapter it will explain how this methodology fits together with the research material which will help to answer the research questions. Additionally it will be briefly explained the procedure of the research process including a description of the environment, the participants, the data collection and a final reflection on my own positionality.

#### **3.1. Method: focus group interview**

In feminist research, focus group interviews represent an inherent attribute where “power relations are minimized, exploitation is avoided and empowerment might be achieved” (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004, p. 223). For the present study, this method offers special benefits regarding the research objectives:

- To explore how the participants envision are conscious and make sense of their experiences and practices of positionings. The focus group can yield descriptive data such as attitudes, thoughts and attributions of personal experiences (Munday in Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 233) in dialogical and non-hierarchical relationships with and among the participants<sup>8</sup>.
- To observe and consider a possible collective positioning/identification among the participants. Focus group especially enables this study. Jennie Munday (2006) has extensively investigated the use of focus groups to study the construction of collective identities. She has demonstrated that focus group is an ideal tool through which it is able to “observe interaction as it occurs within the group that is crucial in highlighting issues around how such a collective identity is produced, negotiated, affirmed and reinforced” (Munday, 2006, p. 103).

Additionally, in relation to the research objective (informed by the translocational positionality conceptual framework) to think beyond ideas of assumed identity, exploring experiences of positioning as contextually constructed rather than consider them as pre-given. Focus group has a special emphasis on situation and context. It provides the conditions to analyze not just what is said (content), but also the context and processes (form) of interactions through which the conversation is elaborated. This method takes into consideration the interactive nature of personal experiences and how they are expressed. That is a focus on processes, enabling a dialogical interaction among participants, through which they come to construct and negotiate understanding and meaning of their reality in relation to others and the context (Munday in Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 237). This highlights the locational, relational and situational nature of experiences and practices of positioning that is intended to be demonstrated in this research.

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<sup>8</sup> These characteristics accentuate the collaborative and participatory goal of the research project. Moreover, it is a mean by which social research may empower participants when the research interaction shifts power relations inevitably reducing the researcher’s control (Hesse-Biber, 2004). It provides a space for participation and inclusion that feminist praxis has always aimed to address and that sometimes seems to receive less attention than the analytic frameworks (Opie, 1992).

### **3.2. Narratives and narrative analysis**

Various studies have demonstrated that lived-experience narratives are hugely fruitful to explore, represent and analyze the construction of identity in terms of location, context and time related (Ahmed, 1999; Riessman, 2001; Burton, 2004 and Ghorashi & Vieten, 2012). For example, Catherine Riessman has extensively studied this relation; she asserts that the narrative itself is understood as an identity expression, since it involves a work of construction and reflection on the self in relation to its environment. The author says that attention to personal narratives deliver the opportunity to look at the dual relationship of individual(s) with their history, environment and self, as determined by them; and also in terms of their ability to act with them (Riessman, 2005). From this perspective the use of narratives is suitable in that it allows seeing the articulation of the diverse experiences of the participants in relation to the context, to the actions and meanings they attribute to those experiences and to the social positionings the participants adopt, which are specifically the research interests. This can occur as Burton (2004, p. 793) asserts: “by working to expose and unveil the individual choices and focusing carefully upon the empirical voices and narratives of translocal individuals”.

Given the purpose of exploring the situational and relational nature of migrants' experiences, an accurate analysis could not just rely on the content (content analysis); otherwise the data will be perceived as naturalistic, non-interactive, and formed independently of the research process; undesirable results for this study. Rather, by centering the analysis not only on what the narrative says (“told”), but as well as the way it is said (“telling” or “doing”) and the dynamics around it, a systematic study of personal experiences, meanings and understandings can be addressed. In the present study, both personal and group experiences of positioning informed the research question, and the use of narratives is suitable to tackle it. As Anthias (2002, p. 498) refers, narratives accounts enable study “the ways individuals understand and interpret their place in the world and are of particular interest to consider collective imaginings around belonging.” The narrative can therefore tell the story of the participants' practices and locations and how they experience them, which meanings, attributions and values they give. At the same time, the narrative can tell collective stories of experiences through the sharing of narratives and the interactions with other individuals as a process of co-construction of meanings.

I state that my approach to narrative analysis does not assume objectivity, but instead positionality and subjectivity. Thereby, the material of the participant's stories (narratives), do not illustrate a direct result, it is the analysis of the meaning contained in each narrative which allows, in this approach, to develop the results and conclusions of the investigation. Therefore an interactional narrative analysis is needed. According to Riessman (2005) this type of analysis considers nuances of speech, organization of responses, relationship between researcher and participant, social and historical contexts; which has a significant value for representing and analyzing experiences and which is aligned with the purpose of this research. A description follows below of how the relation between this methodology fits together with the research material which will help to answer the research question: *How are migrant women of Latin-American origin positioned in the Netherlands, individually and collectively?*

As explored in the theoretical framework, in studying positionality in migrants' lives it is necessary to consider the meanings of the experiences of actual and/or imagined (transnational) social and cultural locations and practices that migrants have. Methodologically, this means that it is not useful to ask directly about positionality, but to question about how that positionality is performed. Given that the idea is to explore individual and collective positioning the analysis will be divided as set out below.

In the first part of the analysis (chapter 4) the discussion will focus on how the participants individually experience their positioning in the migratory process. This means to explore how the participants construct their reality in relation to others and the new place of residence, namely the relation of personal experiences and context. The evidence of this connection will be possible through the analysis of the participants' accounts, given that the construction of differences as well as individual's social positions "are produced and reproduced in interplay with the narrative structures around them" (Anthias, 2002, p. 500). Thus, assuming that any participant' narrative is innocent of social structure, it will be possible to reflect upon their most salient experiences (contextual related) and their social positionings. A close reading of some fragments of the group interviews (beforehand transcribed and translated) will illustrate the participants' understanding of their situations, and how they create meaning, are conscious, reflective and evaluative their experiences in

relation to different ways of identification in the transnational setting. It will demonstrate the participant's positionality as well as their sense of belonging. Additionally, attention will be paid to the process and dynamics that take place within the discussions. The emphasis here lies on the dialogic process including subtle types of interaction like paralinguistic features<sup>9</sup> such as emotion expressions (laugh, cry, etc.) and gestures. These elements, according to Riessman (2005), influence the reception and representation of the content and contribute to the interpretation of the meaning of the experiences made by the participants.

In the second part of the analysis (chapter 5) the discussion will focus on how the participants collectively experience their positioning in the migratory process. This means to explore the factors which unite the participants across differences and how they, if so, make sense of themselves as a cohesive group with a shared positioning/identification. To do so, I will use an interactional analysis of narratives as used in the previous section. This time with special attention to the way participants collectively frame and describe situations and experiences, and express commonality around them. This will be done through two variables: 1) shared cultural and social practices, and 2) sense of acceptance related to experiences of exclusion/inclusion. These conditions correspond, according to the translocational positionality framework (Anthias, 2002), to consider collective ways of identification on the basis of relations of solidarity or with the opportunities to develop those. Additionally, attention will be also paid to the interviewing process and paralinguistic features which are shared among the participants such as shared laughter, nodding and other signs that articulate or, in this case, embodied agreement and cohesion.

### **3.3. The research process**

#### *Environment*

The research process leading to the present document started during the internship period, which corresponded to the third block of the Master programme. I completed this internship

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<sup>9</sup> Signals and signs which are not normally oral and are being contextualized, may suggest particular interpretations of the actual linguistic information (Reissman, 2001).

at the non-profit organization “Stichting Nuestra Casa”<sup>10</sup>. This organization addresses and responds effectively and professionally to the needs of both documented and undocumented Spanish-speaking immigrants living in the Netherlands, particularly in Rotterdam and surroundings. It offers advocacy, counselling (social, legal and psychological), group activities, information sessions and training opportunities such as Dutch language courses<sup>11</sup>. Within “Nuestra Casa”, I was involved in the workgroup “Apoyo a la Mujer”, which deals with gender-specific problems related to migration. During my internship, I started to develop the present research project which inquires about how migrant women of Latin-American origin experience the process of transnational migration and how these experiences shape and influence their social positioning and cross-border relation of solidarity. In order to answer this research question I carried out three group interviews during the meetings of “Moeder en Kind”<sup>12</sup> sessions. Given that this was an already existing women group meeting, it facilitated the contact with the participants and the conduction of the group interviews.

### *Participants*

The group I worked with consisted of ten women of Latin-American origin who attend to the organization regularly, in particular to attend the “Moeder en Kind” sessions. They are between the ages of 30 and 41 years and they have lived in the Netherlands for a period of 6 months to 15 years. Five out of the ten are working and the other five are unemployed. All of them are mothers with no more than 2 children. All of them have completed higher education, two of them on applied level and the other eight on academic level. Their countries of origin are: Argentina (2), Chile (2), Colombia (1), Guatemala (1), México (2), Peru (1) and Dominican Republic (1).

Given the purpose of exploring the situational and relational nature of migrants’ experiences I center the importance of acknowledging differences among women and the

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<sup>10</sup> Note that the official name of the organization is “Stichting Nuestra Casa”. But given that the Dutch word “stichting” means organization, it will be referred hereafter just as “Nuestra Casa” in order to avoid confusion and repetition.

<sup>11</sup> For further information see [www.nuestracasarotterdam.nl](http://www.nuestracasarotterdam.nl).

<sup>12</sup> This is a programme developed by the workgroup “Apoyo a la Mujer”. It consists of monthly meetings which provide mothers and their children with a space to interact with their peers (other Spanish-speaking mothers and their children) in Spanish and to share concerns and experiences about different aspects, mainly motherhood.

variations of their lives. Therefore, I consider that the number of participants was appropriate in order to make a feasible study in depth, but at the same time a sufficient number of cases to ensure a certain variety of migratory experiences<sup>13</sup>. This consideration is also supported by empirical evidence in researching with focus group, from which it has been established that 10 participants or less is a suitable number to study, provided that there is a diverse range of responses and experiences at once (Munday in Hesse-Biber, 2014). Cases of smaller focus groups, between 4 and 6 participants, have also the advantages of greater participation of each attendant, and easier moderation and analysis of the group (Krueger & Casey, 2000 in Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Thereupon, I consider the group conformation suitable for the present research, given that the diversity of its members represent a varied sample of Latin-American women living in the Netherlands of whom the variation and intersection between their distinct social positionalities (ages, nationalities, length of stay and working status among others) might shape their experiences of migration differently. At the same time, given that the group also grasps common factors among the participants such as their language, their higher level of education and being mothers in the Netherlands; these last characteristics are a relevant ground that unite the group in its diversity, and that might allow observing and analyzing a cross-border relation of solidarity among the participants.

### *Instrument and data collection*

Conducting focus group interviews frequently involves the use of questioning routes or topic guides (Munday in Hesse-Biber, 2014). I used a flexible questioning route or semi-structured interview<sup>14</sup>, partially because of the experience I obtained in previous investigations conducted using the same format<sup>15</sup>. In those cases I gained knowledge in how to lead the conversation without forcing the answers while at the same time covering the topics under study; I could gather the relevant data as well as having a pleasant and very

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<sup>13</sup> However, throughout the sessions the attendance was not constant. A group of five women consistently attended while the other five fluctuated.

<sup>14</sup> Semi-structured interview is conducted with a *specific interview guide* –list of written questions that need to be covered without a particular order. In this type of interview the researcher has *some control*, but there are still open spaces to ask new questions throughout the session. (Hesse-Biber, 2014)

<sup>15</sup> The previous investigations were the thesis of my Bachelor degree in psychology and a research assignment (affect research) of the methodological course of the present Master programme.

interactive interview process. In the present investigation, I want to study how the participants are positioned in the transnational migratory setting, both individually and collectively, for which I followed the translocational positionality conceptual framework (Anthias, 2002). According to this framework in studying positionality, as said, it is important to question about the set of practices, actions and meanings the migrants have in relation to the different locales they can inhabit (receiving society, homeland and migrant groups –transnational environment). It is also fundamental to consider the sense of belonging as a process of identification with an intentional and an affective dimension. Therefore, I took these topics into consideration organizing the interview in relation to them as follows:

- Considering the participant's social positioning in relation to the transnational environment, I ask the participants how they relate to migration, motives, expectations, and affective relation with the new environment. I also asked about how they define this environment in relation to cultural practices and what their perceptions are (thoughts and given values) of those factors. As well as how they consider they are positioned in these interactions.
- The questions about their sense of belonging pointed to affective relations with the place of residence and the place of origin, for what I inquired about the perception and construction of home and its value as well as the importance of being part of a group or community in a transnational environment.

To address the previous topics and questions I organized three sessions where each one had a questioning route. The use of the questioning route allowed covering all the planned topics and the flexibility of this format left room for spontaneity and interaction of the participants avoiding forced-choice responses or strictly controlled interviewing process. This flexibility is convenient for the present study of relational and situational experiences, demonstrating which and how the participants debate, give more meaning and create understanding around certain themes which give evidence of their interest and relevance of making sense of their experiences and positionings as migrants.

Before conducting the interviews I had an introductory session in which I explained the nature of the research; I assured the confidentiality of the data to be collected and its exclusive use for academic purposes; and I asked for collaboration with voluntary participation, constant attendance to all sessions and permission for audio recording. Thereafter, I obtained informed consent of all the participants to the previous requests. Once the interview process started, I decided not to make written notes and just rely on the audio recordings, given the participatory and “conversational” dynamic I wanted to achieve. During the course of the focus groups I used a small digital voice recorder with which the participants seemed generally comfortable. I felt that being recorded did not significantly influence their behavior or answers, because on forehand they accepted the use, and during the interviews the device was not mentioned. Additionally I used a PowerPoint presentation to introduce the topics and display the questions, it was a great help to guide the interview and to maintain, or return, to the outline of the session when the discussion seemed to drift off topic.

### *Reflexivity*

The process of recognizing and reflecting upon my own situadness (reflexivity) within the practice of research can shape the insider/outsider dichotomy. “Problematizing these categories of being can make new spaces for work to be done and knowledge to be subverted and constructed.” (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004, p. 219). Throughout the research process I found the constant negotiation of the positionalities I faced challenging; on the one hand, being the ‘insider’ as the Latin-American migrant I am, and on the other hand, being the “outsider” as the academic researcher<sup>16</sup>. Regarding my social background, assumptions and location this double positioning was problematic but also useful. Problematic because by studying one’s own culture everything seems so clear and so evident that there is a risk to leave cultural notions implicit and the needed reflexive conscious apart (Ghorashi, 2005). But useful because by sharing a similar background with the participants, first of all, is what motivates and gives meaning to my research; and then,

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<sup>16</sup> Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004) reflect upon the academic role and the power relations within the research process. They consider that the researcher, having a “conceptual baggage”, might be positioned (intentionally or not) in a superior positions in relation to the research subjects, whom in turn may see the researcher as an outsider.

it enabled an easier access to the Spanish-speaking community and to the data. Moreover, I moved away from appropriations of the ‘other’ (studied subject) and instead, I positioned myself on the “same plane” with the participants, being able to join, search, see, talk, discuss and find together (even in the same language) how *we* experience the process of migration. My role was not only tied to observation and listening, it went beyond of being a passive receiver of information (traditional interviewer role) to be an active participant in the discussions. This was facilitated by active listening, empathy and “flow”<sup>17</sup> I achieved throughout the interviews, what results in a trust, collaborative, and an enjoyable space we build altogether with the participants (aided by the nature of the method). According to Hesse-Biber (2014) these elements can trigger (and actually did) a strong positive emotional component wherein participants are empowered and the researcher is fully committed.

In sum, the use of personal narratives will allow to understand “the ways in which the narrator, at a specific point in time and space, is able to make sense of and articulate their placement in the social order of things” (Anthias, 2002, p. 501). This means that through the analysis of the participants’ narratives, an understanding about the way they position themselves in the migration process will be possible, as well as their views on where and to what they belong. This will answer the first part of the research question. Additionally, the use of focus group interview will allow to observe the interactive nature of personal and collective experiences as it occurs within the group discussions. It enables a dialogical interaction among the participants, through which the evidence of practices of cohesion, solidarity and the construction of a collective identification among them can be addressed. This will answer the second part of the research question. Furthermore, including the participants’ voices is to render visibility to the needs, beliefs and desires of migrant woman of Latin-American origin, usually excluded or limited from mainstream transnational and migration research. That is to include and to listen to a voice from *elsewhere*.

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<sup>17</sup> This term refers to situations of optimal experience with a high sense of efficacy and a strong sense of social bonds. Those moments of “potent and powerful connections between interviewer and respondent are in part consequences of careful listening and an openness to feel during the interview” (Errante in Hesse-Biber, & Yaiser 2004, p. 217)

## Chapter 4

### Voicing women's experiences of positionality

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This chapter will focus on answering the first part of the research question, namely: how the participants individually experience their positioning in the migratory process. This means to explore how the participants construct their reality in relation to others and the different locales they inhabit, for example the receiving society, the homeland, and the migrant group (Anthias, 2000 in Anthias, 2002). That is the relation of personal experiences and context. Methodologically, it will be through the narration of these experiences in which the migrants express how they make sense of their social position, as well as showing the interaction of structure and self, given that the narrative produces and is reproduced by the interplay of personal and structural narratives (Anthias, 2002, p. 500). In this chapter, the analysis of some extracts of the narrative texts will allow the participants to “speak” throughout<sup>18</sup> and to consider their positioning in relation to the migration process. It will be done in two parts; first, by exploring how the participants are conscious about, make sense of, and inhabit different positionalities. And secondly, by exploring social and cultural practices that inform a sense of belonging which may reveal an individual's active participatory element, as well as a process of identification with a larger ‘whole’.

#### 4.1. Positionality

In this section I want to bring some reflections forward regarding the participants own positioning in the process of migration. The notion of positionality here encompasses processes of identification, but is not reducible to identity. It is about “the lived practices in which identification is practiced/performed (...) and relates to the space at the intersection of structure (as social effects: *context*) and agency (as social positioning/ set of practices, actions and meanings: *process*).” (Anthias, 2002, p. 502).

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<sup>18</sup> All participants' names have been change due to the prior confidentiality agreement of information.

### Narrative 1

Angela Solano (AS): So why do you say there is a tension when you are in the Netherlands for a long period?

Raquel: You're looking for something, as if you are looking for a new space, because you basically take a little from here and a little from there and in the end, after all the years, you are not like you were, or as the people here, I mean, you're like a mixture, a new person.

Adela: Yes, you're trying to find a balance, isn't it? Not too exaggerated or extreme of getting stuck with ideas and beliefs neither from there nor from here, but just trying to find a balance.

Raquel: It's a negotiation! It's like pull and push, but at which point do we stay?

Olga: I don't know but it's a tension.

Raquel: Don't you also seem to have a discussion with yourself? like: should I change to be like them or not?

Raquel: So I think it's like an internal struggle!

Nadia: It is all about adaptation I think, isn't it? I mean, it's always like one has to adapt to the culture of the country one arrives, do you understand?

Irene: Yes, sure, it's a question of balance.

The previous narratives illustrates how most of the participants are experiencing a persistent “negotiation” between different locales in which they are constantly searching for a middle ground or balance, which is difficult to acquire. In the extract they speak about locales in a way not fully attached to a spatial place. As a matter of fact, they speak about locales such as “here”, “there” and “in-between”, which demonstrates how positionality is not fixed but fluid and how this creates contradictions. For example, Raquel calls attention to what you get from different locales: “you take a little from here and a little from there”, which results in a personal struggle to find a balance. Then it is likely that this balance can be found in a space “in-between” as Adela points out. In Homi Bhabha’s “The Location of Culture” (1994), the “in-between” position is an opportunity that allows elaborating personal or collective strategies of identity. In this light, the “in-between” might act as an advantaged position, as one is making choices about existing with and within ideological and cultural differences. From this perspective, the space “in-between” places and cultures, represents dynamism rather than fixity. Nevertheless, it might be problematic when the two extremes, Latin-America and the Netherlands in this case, are defined in opposition to one another (as the participants tend to differentiate between “us” and “them”); thus the “in-between” position might create a third, yet marginalized space where migrants can be

relegated once more. In this “in-between” as space of otherness, migrants cannot fully link with their backgrounds, neither be fully “integrated” with Dutch society, which can reinforced the perception of non-western migrant woman as absolute other (see chapter 2). Instead of only constructing and inhabiting a space (in-between or *elsewhere*), I consider it to be more about a constant process of transformation, that through the exposure to new situations and changes as well as through the situational relations with others (people, nations, ethnicities, ideologies, cultures and so on) creates a dynamic process of positioning one-self. It is indeed a process of personal struggle when these women try to find a balance between locales, but it is also a process which can transcend the limitations and boundaries imposed on them (or by themselves) offering room to create new ways of dealing with the imbalance.

The process of positionality which these women have to practice is neither completely imposed (contextual effect) nor completely deliberated (agency); it is constructed through the intersections of both. In this process, some of the participants’ decisions (as having migrated to form a family) impact drastically their positioning. First, most of them agreed that women are more flexible about their position because they were willing to “give up” independency (mainly economical) and professional achievements they had before migration. This decision is seen by them as a “sacrifice” for the sake of the relationship. Even though this was a conscious decision consistent with her wishes and will, consequently they experience imbalance in the new environment, constantly question their identity and have some undesirable feelings such as disorientation, isolation and frustration. For example, the dependency (economical and emotional) on their partners and in-laws, accompanied by limited opportunities for labor inclusion and difficulties with the local language do not allow these women to find a space to position themselves in a balance. “Giving up” for others (e.g. partner or children) entails contradictions when they consider this action affects their own happiness. As a result some of them feel divided as Adela expressed: “What is really difficult in the beginning is, when one feels that one's body is here and one’s heart is elsewhere.” However, for some other participants, the process of positioning represents an opportunity to act from and achieve happiness, where the personal can be negotiated with the collective, finding a balance. Two examples are Isabel and Olga:

### Narrative 2

Isabel: A lot can change through time. The mentality that you have as a person may be different in the future; but the first thing that one should be really clear about is what one wants. In our lives, in the present, children depend on you, but they eventually will grow up, and they will search their own destination. So one also has to be happy, otherwise what you will say: oh no I'm thinking about my children so I will stay here, and they are gone and what have I done? Then it has to be according to what you want, thinking of your children of course, but also thinking of yourself and your own welfare. I have it clear, after almost 2 years here, I'm here and I like it, but I don't want to live here. I'm fine with the pros and the good things about living here, but I return to where I like it the most, my country. Perhaps with the time that might change again, but for now I'm sure.

### Narrative 3

Olga: When you have been here for more than five years and you go back to your country, the question is: do you want to keep living there? For others might be easy to say: it's done, I'll go back to my country, my family, but really? After all those years? Things are not going to be the same there either, you have changed and once there, you think: What am I doing here?

AS: So, what do you think is the best way?

Olga: In the end, what happens is that you are no longer either in one site or in another, so you have to create your own space wherever you are. It is a process and it takes time. (...) All of us have suffered, and the first months are fatal, but then later you get used to it, you adapt, well, rather than adapt, it is more that in the end you do achieve tranquility, a balance; I did find happiness.

In the example of Isabel it is clear that personal agency can be negotiated with a collective one (family in this case) and still achieve a beneficial situation. Given her return plans, it seems that such a beneficial situation is related to her country of origin, as if the beneficial factors were provided by the conditions she could find in that place. But her return plans are informed by a personal decision to find a locale according to her opportunities and to find happiness, which are not necessarily attached to a spatial place. The return for Isabel is then one process of positioning herself (as a strategy) through which she will probably find a kind of balance; nonetheless she is also aware that realities can change through time. Similarly, Olga calls for a process of construction of one's own space through time, although for her the idea of return is not a certainty for equilibrium as Isabel believes it is. Olga, who has been living in the Netherlands for 11 years, expressed that after long difficult periods, she finally found a locale, neither there nor here, a new locale *-elsewhere*, and a balance. In this process, time enables the possibility to such purpose, and also

through time the contextual conditions change to be more favorable for these women. For example, an extensive immersion in the receiving society with high frequency of interaction with natives is portrayed as beneficial exchange for the women who have been living in the Netherlands for a longer period of time (more than five years).

The longer length of stay influences the perception of difficult situations, as it leads to “overcome” language barriers, to create better job opportunities and to build easier affective links. This results in more stable and pleasant experiences than for the participants who have stayed for shorter periods in the Netherlands. The majority of the short-stayers have experienced feelings such as depression and sadness. It does not mean either that the longer they live in the Netherlands, the better “integrated” they are or the easier it is to find a balance. Some cases illustrate that not only time influences positively the experience of migration; some personal traits as outgoing personality, sense of humor and ability of interaction with others (resilient characteristics) allow for a better experience. For example, Olga seems to be cheerful all the time and expresses, more than once, past adverse situations with humor. Therefore, both personal and external factors shape the way the participants experience migration and position themselves.

#### **4.2. Sense of belonging**

The translocational positionality conceptual framework describes the sense of belonging as a process of identification with an affective and an intentional dimension. To belong is about practices and experiences “of being part of the social fabric and with the emotional and social bonds that are related to such places” (Anthias, 2006, p. 21).

##### Narrative 4

Adela: I felt that there (referring her origin country) was my place of belonging and it was good to live near my family, but those are things that you can never put in a balance. Because when you see all the benefits, all the advantages to live here on one side and when you put the emotions on the other which are not necessary aligned with the advantages, how can you weigh that? So that was very hard.

Angela Solano (AS): Did you feel rootless?

Adela: Yes, like a plant in the desert.

The previous narrative shows the importance of the affective component in the life of the participant related to a sense of belonging to somewhere<sup>19</sup>. The affective dimension of belonging is related to “how we feel about our location in the social world” (p. 21). In the case of Adela it can be seen how she feels rootless in the Netherlands. Although she has tried to balance her feelings in the receiving country (by underlying the advantages she considers the Netherlands offers); this effort seems to be meaningless, and her feeling of rootlessness cannot be counterbalanced. Thus, her sense of belonging is still related to her homeland, not conceived as a fixed space attached to her country of origin, but in terms of representation, namely, what homeland means to her in the present time. This representation is accompanied by a feeling of longing and nostalgia, not exactly for what one was, but for what one has in terms of relations with the context of origin, for example with family and friends. The cases of Ema, Sonia and Nadia show a similar pattern:

#### Narrative 5

Ema: I obviously miss my family, but because I was born and raised on the countryside, I miss the most to go horseback riding, to see the animals, that is my life where I belong. There I feel free, and I love it, I ride horses and that's the best! And even when I was 9 years living in Spain, it is still really difficult for me, I miss that from my home that longing for what I had in the past.

AS: But would you like to go back then?

Ema: I don't know, I don't think so. I've been there for holidays and it's not the same and perhaps I can find something similar here.

Sonia: I understand, for me are my loved ones. I miss them a lot, but at the same time, even though I love my friends, I love my parents, I love my family, I wouldn't live in Chile. Once being here I don't want to return to Chile. I'm having a hard time here, it has been difficult, but I do not want to go back.

Nadia: For me it's similar too, even I miss my parents a lot and my country in many ways, like the friends, the food and all that, but I don't want to return to Mexico either.

AS: Why don't you want to go back?

Nadia: I think it's because what Raquel and Olga said before, I don't think I will find a place there, I mean I don't have anything to do there and here I'm with my partner, we have a family, and that's the most important thing for me now, I feel in place.

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<sup>19</sup> Moreover, when expressing emotions related to places of origin and home the participants tend to have marked expressions in their faces, sometimes hoarsely and tears or smiles and laugh as well as using metaphors to describe feelings and thoughts. These paralinguistic features reinforce the relevant character of affectivity in their lives and their sense of belonging.

In narrative 4 and 5, the feeling of longing expressed by the participants is related to a past locale: homeland, and to beloved ones that represent the importance of that locale. However, return plans do not seem to supply or give back feelings of happiness, because what those important locales and relationships represent, are not utterly attached to fixed places<sup>20</sup>. Instead, they can be reconstructed or adapted to what they want in the present. An important reflection is made by Nadia at the end of the extract about what is important for her now is the space she has constructed with her family. This special locale, or what could be called home, entails, as said before, an intentional and an affective dimensions: Nadia decided to migrate to form a family (intentional) and now having built a family gives her the sensation of a pleasing own locale (affective). This aspect is related to the idea of home and what it represents to her. As for Nadia, the rest of the participants agreed that home does not strictly refer to a physical place as their origin countries, although sometimes it is highly related to it; instead home is more a locale as described by Ghorashi & Vieten (2012, p. 727) “in which one is able to find satisfaction by improving oneself, or in which one can express oneself freely”. Home as a not fixed locale could be considered as a “shifting ground” as it can be situational and constructed through time. The way the participants construct home is highly related to their position in the migratory process (analyzed in the previous section). It was seen how the participants who were able to position themselves strategically, acting upon difficult and contradictory situations to finally find a balance, are also likely to establish a home away from an “original” home easier, and to even make that home “transportable”. The case of Olga (who is planning to leave the Netherlands to live in Norway) is a good example of this situation:

#### Narrative 6

Olga: I do believe that we can start from scratch, obviously it's difficult and it takes time, but now I feel that I have more strength, I have knowledge, and it's totally different. I found happiness here, I have

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<sup>20</sup> Even though the transnational approach taken in the present study does not assume a strict link to fixed spatial territories, it is clear that by no means fail to recognize the importance of specific territories through which transnational practices are developed. It is considered that despite a process (as the construction of home) is no longer exclusively associated with a specific territorial referent (such as the nation-state or country of origin), and begins to be marked by factors, actors and social processes; it cannot be separated completely from specific territorial references. This would be considered as a re-territorialized transnational approach rather than a de-territorialized one. Considering this perspective, the work done by Mato (1998) and Appadurai (1999) have been influential.

my family, I found a place and I feel at home. Now that I'm leaving, I know it's going to be difficult again, but I think it will be fine and I will feel at home there too. I will be with my family and I will find a balance there too in time, as it was here, but it's possible. And with people and family that stay behind, now with the internet it's so much easier to connect and communicate.

This is a clear explanation of how home is a situational locale that it can even “travel” with the migrant itself and which can be constructed in relation to time, and context (the influences of positive experiences as family formation and relationship with others as beloved ones). But despite the participants' ability of constructing a home away from the country of origin, most of the times, a common manner of identification was associated to a sense of belonging to their homelands. In this respect they expressed patriotic sentiments, for example through sports (World Cup football and the Olympics) and other cultural practices such as folkloric dances and music, even some of them started to perform or play “traditional” dances or instruments which they never did before migrating:

#### Narrative 7

Olga: Being here, one gets more affection to its traditions, isn't it? I went to an association of Andean dances as a volunteer and there I began to dance traditional dances, which in my country I would never do, but I love it!

Sonia: On Saturday I heard the Bolivian group and Andean music, wow, it was like coming back to Chile and northern Chile, and want to dance and want to enjoy and I was so excited.

Nadia: I have not been dancing, but for example I sing Mexican songs to my children. If Spanish is special, the music is like a triple special language. It is joy, the feeling, what you hear or what makes you dance, is like feeling your country.

Narrative 7 shows how cultural practices related to their homelands gain more value abroad, due to the pleasant feelings they transmit to the participants who are in a distant context to those cultural expressions; this is a way to keep traditions alive, as well as for the appreciation of feeling alive through, or being part of a larger “whole”, namely, a group or nation. This description expresses transnational belongings as a way to develop and maintain transnational links with one's “own group”. This identification has been studied by diaspora scholars such as James Clifford who reflects upon “the sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes the homeland, not as something simply left

behind, but as a place of attachment in a contrapuntual modernity” (Clifford, 1994, p. 311). From this perspective, the past does not necessary entails an urgency for people to return to a homeland (as the participants expressed as well), but a background that serves as a base of negotiations in the new environment. Nevertheless, a focus on belonging in terms of diasporic attachment has to be done carefully to not foreclose the concern about differences within the collective and not to link to a fixed place of origin. Otherwise, it will create essentially constituted grouping, failing to problematize the processes at work. Taking this into consideration, narratives of belonging have to acknowledge that a person’s positioning is multiply experienced, that is the subject who can position her-/himself in different social locations (gender, race, class, etc.) and to be part of different collectives at the same time. This means, according to Anthias (2006, p. 27) “that it is difficult to construct persons in a uniform or unitary way in relation to different dimensions of social inclusion and belonging”. Thus, it is necessary to move away from the conception of belongings as people’s group identities towards a process of identification related to social and cultural practices and arrangements that lead to particular forms of positionality both individual and collective; acknowledging that those practices are set in terms of transformation and renegotiations. In this light, the participants demonstrate cases of these negotiations of cultural practices while being in the Netherlands<sup>21</sup>. For example, practicing traditional dances, cooking “typical” food, and speaking Spanish with their children.

In relation to the language, it was seen as a general desire and need to maintain and transmit the mother tongue, since this entails executing an affective bond with the people close to them, especially with their kids and partners. The language for the participants is also a way to feel more comfortable, like a “safe locale” and with the possibility to speak Spanish with others, a sense of freedom and relief is reinforced. Ema, who has being living for a year and a half in the Netherlands and recently approached the organization “Nuestra Casa” expresses: “The decision to go to the stichting turned out great. Be with people who understand you and simply to speak Spanish is a lifesaver!” However, it can also be

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<sup>21</sup> This pattern is comparable with other investigations about Latin-American migrants in the U.S. It is shown how migrants do not detached completely from their societies of “origin”; they experience simultaneously aspects of their lives according to their home countries at the same time that they are incorporating to the receiving society. Mato (1998) and Flores (2003) present a deep state of affairs on researches conducted in this regard.

considered as a way for the participants to distance themselves from the Dutch environment (people, language, traditions etc.). For example some of the participants admitted using the language as an excuse to keep isolation, making the contact with the Dutch environment limited or non-existing. Evidently this results in feelings of loneliness and sadness, but it is necessary to consider which circumstances lead to the participants to have such experiences. The first factor is a lack of proficiency in Dutch or English that limits the possibilities to communicate with others; and the negative added-value given by the participants to Dutch language as non-emotional creating a barrier that prevents themselves to socialize with natives. As a consequence a dichotomy is constructed between Dutch people and culture -associated many times with negative feelings, and their own background –associated with positive values. In this respect it is worthy to mention that in some states of the group discussions the participants were self-reflecting on this dichotomy. After a first positioning of critique, rejection and opposition to what they defined as Dutch traits (e.g. independence, coldness and distancing) the participants reflected upon this classification, considering that many times it is due to a feeling of longing for their origin places; therefore they tend to remember only positive characteristics (e.g. happiness, warmth people, generosity, etc.) enhancing themselves in contrast to what is different and unfamiliar.

Moreover, there are contextual factors that problematize the dichotomy as well. As explained in chapter 2, the pattern of “Dutchness” (Ghorashi & Vieten, 2012, p. 128) is set as the reference for the majority ethnicity in the Netherlands as well as to the cultural norm. Despite the Dutch discourse of migration, it is preferred that immigrants adopt Dutch cultural values as well as retain their own ones, but the recurrent process of considering the migrant as “absolute other” set the imaginary in Dutch society to perceive that most immigrants prefer to be separated and isolated by their own cultural codes. It seems likely that when immigrants want to maintain their links with their language and cultural practices -as narrative 7 illustrates, is interpreted as nonconformity to the desired integration, pushing them towards a forced assimilation of Dutch standards. Preserving language and cultural practices from original places is view as an obstacle to successful integration. It is therefore this contextual demand with an implicit process of “othering” which generates major disagreement and rejection from most of the participants. Through the exercise of “traditional” cultural practices, the participants have a way to perform identification as a transnational positioning. This positioning results from the process in which the cultural

practices performed are not strictly attached to the country of origin, but are instead performed in the Netherlands, creating a new locale in which they can represent themselves not just as migrant “others”, but as migrant women of Latin-American origin. They can conserve stronger links with their “traditions” and “backgrounds” without endangering the balance they want to achieve; in fact, some cultural practices can serve as a way to participate and share new experiences with Dutch natives (e.g. piñata)<sup>22</sup>.

The positioning the participants practice is not about duality of cultures, but about the desire of feeling recognized and respected for being different. Not as an inferior “other”, but as a diverse and culturally rich different subject. It is through those cultural practices (dances, food and language among others) that they create a sense of belonging outside the original homeland which is in constant interaction and negotiation with the new environment.

In sum, it is demonstrated how positioning is about a process of constant transformation where the participants are reconstructing and renegotiating their position in relation to their environment. In that process, the participants can, and have chosen to inhabit new locales (e.g. home) which can be considered “shifting grounds” as they are influenced by contextual and personal factors as well as being (re)constructed through time. Trying to find a balance between these factors is a difficult task. For example, the contextual limitations (e.g. language barriers, lack of job opportunities and social networks, limited governmental aids, and stereotyped gaze) sometimes seem to be stronger than the desire and strength the participants have to act and to overcome adversity, generating undesirable situations and feelings such as isolation and frustration, especially for short stayers (less than five years). However, some cases like Sonia, Irene, Isabel and Olga illustrated that such adverse situations can change in their favor. First, time factor plays an important role as most of the time a longer length of stay in the Netherlands help to “overcome” those contextual limitations. Second, the possibility to inhabit a new locale or “shifting ground” at the interplay of locations and dislocations but that transcends the dichotomy (of having to

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<sup>22</sup> It is a central element in Latin American holidays and celebrations, mainly birthdays and Christmas. It is a structure decorated on the outside and inside it contains candy’s or toys. This popular tradition has been used by the participants (mainly in their children birthday parties) to show cultural traditions and to interact with Dutch people –neighbors, colleagues and friends.

position either) ‘here’/’there’, ‘us’/’them’, ‘migrant other’/’Dutch’. Consequently, “shifting grounds” are potential locales through which migrant women can decide how to position themselves. This leads to the third and most important factor about positioning as a strategy to act and to resist: personal agency. In this case, agency is a capacity the participants can develop to be reflexives about their situation and positioning in the migration process, and to act upon it, making a positive difference in their journeys; including the decision about belong or not to a “place” or “group”. Regarding this, it was seen how the participants use strategically their “background” (e.g. cultural practices such as language, food, and dances) as a base of negotiation in the new environment, keeping traditions alive and simultaneously experiencing the receiving society. For example, practicing both Spanish and Dutch in the household. This informs the varied and fluid character of migrants’ lives and shows how positioning in migration is not completely related to a spatial place (e.g. country of origin), but neither completely detached. Rather, it is a process in which they can be dynamically placed in different locales at the same time as a way of transnational positioning without endangering the balance they want to achieve. This entails, most of the times, a point of empowerment rather than a cause of exclusion as it serves in order to safeguard a (re)invented locale named home away from the “original” one. It underlines as well the idea that women of Latin-American origin can be influenced by hegemonic discourses of representation and migration in the Netherlands, yet to be agents of their own lives, which can lead towards the emergence of an empowered and resilient female subject.

## Chapter 5

### Constructing commonality and collective identification

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This chapter will focus on answering the second part of the research question, namely: how the participants collectively experience their positioning in the migratory process. This means to explore the factors which unite the participants across differences and how they, if so, make sense of themselves as a cohesive group with a shared positioning/identification. To do so, it will seek how the participants' narratives collectively frame and describe situations and experiences which are recurrent among them. That is, to explore experiences of cohesion and commonality through two variables: 1) shared cultural and social practices (values, traditions, beliefs), and 2) sense of acceptance in a community related to experiences of exclusion/inclusion. This will help to consider a possible collective identification among the participants as well as the exercise of solidarity and care practices.

#### 5.1. Shared practices and positionalities

The most important common factors that were seen among the participants were language experiences, formation of family and parenting practices.

##### Narrative 8

Raquel: The language gives a lot, when you can talk to someone who speaks like you, how would I say?

That you can get to know other people much faster and you can connect with them much faster too, like friendships and so on.

Ema: Yes, the mere fact of speaking in Spanish and that you speak and feel understood is a relief, and also finding people who will understand you by the circumstances; that is to me, I don't know, I cannot describe it. I realized that I was not alone with these problems of adaptation and culture shock, obviously not all have exactly the same realities, but it is a huge support; yes, definitely I feel very good here, I needed this, I mean I need this space to share, to talk. Thank you very much for listening.

Irene: All of us are here, you're not alone, and here we share many things. We may not be identical or we are not best friends, but we do understand you and only being able to get together and talk, that's a relief. I know.

Raquel: We all know. At first you have no contact with people who speak Spanish, then you start to have children and the children start looking to share and have them practice, you become friends.

In this narrative is shown how the participants express a necessity to socialize with similar others which is facilitated by a freedom of expression in the same language. This sense of unity through the language is in turn reinforced by an emotional link they experience while communicating and being together. A link which is not easily built with Dutch people, because of language and time restrictions, what results in different given-values to the relationships developed with Spanish-speakers (mainly positive connotations) in contrast to the relationships with Dutch people. This is partially justified by socio-linguistic literature which has demonstrated how members of minorities groups have linguistic practices that evidences the “we - they” dichotomy. When language minorities attempt to be more active in the receiving-dominant society, the “we” or migrants’ mother tongue, the language spoken in the household and shared by the participants is endowed with positive affective characteristics such as familiarity and intimacy, although it might be considered in the dominant society as low in prestige. On the other hand, the “they” language or dominant tongue possess high status because it is associated with the public and dominant sphere of labor force, money and power (Fishman, 1989 in Vedder & Virta, 2005, p. 322). This relation is also influenced when most of the participants have been in the Netherlands for shorter periods of time and have limited command of Dutch, which allows the possibilities to build links easier with other Spanish-speakers and to create a sense of unity among them.

Other factors that unite the group are the formation of family and the gendered positionality of being (or becoming) mothers in the Netherlands. Regarding the formation of family, it was found that in nine out of ten cases, the reasons for moving to the Netherlands were influenced by living together with their partners (Dutch in 9 cases). This characteristic is consistent with the overall gendered characterization of Latin-Americans in the Netherlands where intermarriages became more common (see chapter 2). But more important here, is that this “trend” influences the construction of commonality among the participants who enjoy sharing personal and even intimate experiences of multicultural couples which are similar with the experiences of other participants. Regarding the gendered positionality of being, or becoming mothers in the Netherlands, it was seen that it is one of the most important aspects in the lives of the participants as many times they prioritized this topic during the interviews. It is also the factor that unites the meeting group

“Moeder en Kind”. This group reflects first, upon their common positionality (motherhood) which in many of the cases is a relatively new role in the participants’ lives; second, upon the desire to create a space to interact in Spanish with peers (other Spanish-speaking mothers and their children) which they cannot find in the new setting; and third, to share concerns and experiences about related aspects (such as upbringing and childbirth) distinct to the experience they have with the context (e.g. Dutch in-laws, institutions –schools, kindergarten, and health system). It is through the sharing of these experiences that cohesion among the participants is practiced. It also evidenced the necessity of understanding and similarity which it is associated with a sense of acceptance.

## **5.2. Sense of acceptance and commonality**

The necessity the participants expressed to feel understood entails a desire of feeling accepted as well. To feel accepted is part of the process of identification that in this case is centrally related to experiences of exclusion and inclusion (Anthias, 2006). The exclusion the participants experienced is connected with contextual restrictions such as language problems, limited job opportunities, unproductiveness and dependency on partners<sup>23</sup>. These limitations generate feelings of frustration and isolation which are vanished on the moment the participants get together. When they share not just similar cultural practices, but when they express having experienced similar limitations in the transnational environment they live in, a new collective locale is created. This common locale produces a sense of empathy and understanding among the participants, achieving positive feelings such as relief, happiness and company. This is a locale where they do not have to explain themselves; rather they feel accepted and safe, because the contextual limitations fade away -at least momentarily, and therefore a sense of unity and cohesion is constructed.

This new locale is comparable to what the participants have achieved individually. As concluded in the previous chapter, they have chosen to inhabit “shifting grounds” through which the process of positioning is seen as a strategy to act and resist adversities. Similarly, in this common locale a form of collective agency can be achieved as well.

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<sup>23</sup> Yet not directly related to discrimination in the Netherlands. Although the topic of discrimination was not explored in this research, at any moment the participants refer to it. The conversation sometimes led more to situations in which they felt excluded rather than discriminated, mostly by contextual effects such as language and job opportunities, and few situations related to stereotypes of migrants or Latin-Americans.

Agency here is about the strategies these women collectively use to lead their lives on their own terms; it is a matter of resistance to the contextual limitations they share, and a choice to participate and act, making together a positive difference in their lives. For example, the formation of the group “Moeder en Kind” as a space created by themselves for themselves. Another example is some of the participants who have been actively participating in the organization “Nuestra Casa” as trained volunteers of the group “Apoyo a la Mujer”. Through this work, they help other women of Latin-America origin through a close support of difficult situations such as relationship problems, disorientation of new arrivals and legal procedures. This collective agency can be considered as a form of solidarity which is not strictly related to a political practice, but associated to the feeling of being part, accepted and actively participating in such collectivity<sup>24</sup>. They work together for the sake of a common benefit; they look for inclusion, better opportunities and care amongst the group. It underlines not only the important role of a community in migrants’ lives, but the possible construction of coalition around a shared positioning yet not homogenized.

As explained in the theoretical chapter, according to Mohanty, a coalition can only be constructed having previously exposed and acknowledge the potential of the differences within the collective (Mohanty, 1995). It helps to understand how the coalition seen among the participants is not an essentialist action that intends to reduce to a homogenous group with identical interest and desires among its members or to force an alliance under ethnical or geographical affiliation. Rather it intends to see how shared practices and common exposure to contextual limitations, makes this a “united” group across diversity, for what is important to highlight the heterogeneity of its constitution. In the previous chapter was seen how differences are drawn among and within the group, for example the recognition of the participants’ different positionings in social divisions, when the analysis reflected upon their differences of age, class, nationality, legal status and job status. Yet at the same time the participants expressed to feel “united” among them, as well as to negotiate their

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<sup>24</sup> It is worthy to consider that the participants and some of the women who are part of the organization may experience this collective agency because they have had contact with the organization “Nuestra Casa” or similar organizations. Thus, contacting, socializing and connecting with similar others (e.g. Spanish-speakers) probably are not instant needs for all migrant women of Latin American origin. Therefore, the generalization of these results must be done carefully, given also that the study sample is small. Nevertheless, it presents an important contribution in the study of transnational migration, as it includes a group’s reading of their reality. It is a partial and situated view that must be taken into account to decipher social relations of migrants’ experiences.

respective national backgrounds to some more embracing “community”. An example is the way they express themselves as a group, emphasizing the affective component in their relationships:

Narrative 9

Sonia: We are more dependent on that, on affection, on relating to people.

Irene: But at the same time we enjoyed it, as we say, we need it, we greet, we interact.

Nadia: It's that, a need to interact as a group, of being a community.

Not just in the previous extract, but constantly, the participants refer to themselves as *we*, or *us*. The use of these pronouns indicates how they include themselves within a collective narrative, they appropriate shared values and they make sense of a commonality, a sense of ‘us’. Other examples are: “For me, *we* Latinos are more relaxed”; “for *us* it is important the expressions of affection and touching”; “I think *we* are more demonstrative” (emphasizes added). They also are self-reflective on the shift towards a plural pronoun, as Irene says: “It is no longer: *I* want, is: where *we* go and what *we* do, and *we* eat, and *we* don’t know. It isn’t: *I* go, it is better: *we* go. It is something *we* do and enjoy together” (emphasis added). These are positive acts of collective identification made by the participants. Even though they are “strangers” to each other (some of them met during the interviews), and despite all the differences among them, they are experiencing a process of union and friendship construction. This is what Ahmed (1999) notes as the important role of community in the recreation of migrant selves. How communities come to be constructed through a collective act of remembering and sharing in places where migrants feel unfamiliar. It is then the remembering and (re)enacting of shared cultural and social practices through estrangement and across differential individual positionings that constructs a sense of commonality among the participants in this study.<sup>25</sup>

The sense of commonality enables practices of solidarity which are in turn facilitated by institutions such as the organization “Nuestra Casa”. The important role of

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<sup>25</sup> From this point can be derived further analysis about community formations amongst people of Latin-American origin beyond an ethnic or gender affiliation. Some consulted researches have studied the construction of “Latino” transnational communities in the U.S. See Mato (1998) and Flores (2003) or in Spain, see Moraes (2007). However, studies located in Europe (except for Spain) are still scarce yet needed.

(socio-cultural) transnational organizations in migrants' lives has been studied by different scholars (Ghorashi, 2004; Moraes, 2007; Roggeband & Verloo, 2007; and Portes, 2003). These researches agree that migrant or diaspora organizations serve as fundamental agents in the tangled scenario of transnational migration. They not only transcend national borders, but also the dualities between past and present, place of origin and place of residence respectively. This active role influences the way migrants position themselves in the new setting, offering new forms of integration into the receiving society while simultaneously renewing involvement with their homelands, functioning as a platform to organize migrants' efforts around collective identification and practices of solidarity.

In the case of the organization "Nuestra Casa", it offers information, services and tools to the visitors, trying to teach them to find a way to live (actively and participatory) in the Netherlands (e.g. Dutch classes, legal assistance, information workshops and work training). At the same time it attempts to keep "traditions" alive in praising and celebrating cultural ceremonies (such as religious celebrations, national days and festivities, partaker of dinners, music, dances, etc.). It also works actively to raise awareness on Latin-American presence in the Netherlands, especially women, participating in institutional networks with migrants and gender NGO's, and with Dutch official institutions (e.g. Municipal Health Service or GGD)<sup>26</sup>, as well as opening places to the receiving society to discuss and inform about this population (e.g. informative workshops, volunteer positions for Dutch people)<sup>27</sup>. These activities contribute not only to recognition and differentiation from other migrant groups, constructing this presence as a synonym of diversity; but also as a way of identification. First, showing the plurality among this "community" helps to create an image as a diverse and culturally rich group, away from the assumption of being inferior because of being the "other", but instead respected for being different. And second, as a way of identification, offering spaces to create a sense of belonging outside the original homeland. This entails, most of the times, support rather than problematize a balanced

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<sup>26</sup> In Dutch "Gemeentelijke GezondheidsDienst" (GGD).

<sup>27</sup> Other similar examples out of the group sample were found. In the Netherlands the women organization "Diaspora Solidaria" facilitates the commitment of Latin American migrant women to social change in their countries of origin, through the financial support for initiatives that promote the rights of women and youth in Latin America. In London the Latin American Recognition Campaign (LARC) is a project run by and for Latin Americans in the United Kingdom working towards the recognition of the Latin American community. The analysis of these organizations are not the focus of this paper, however a study based on their functioning in terms of transnational solidarity would be an interesting topic for further research.

positioning of migrant women and their offspring. It is in this type of context where a sense of commonality of Latin American women emerges as a collective way of identification through diversity.

### *Conversational interactions*

In this last part, I want to briefly reflect upon some of the dialogic and interactional processes which took place during the interviews. As stated in the methodological chapter, through the use of focus group interviews is possible to analyze these elements, which influence the reception and representation of the narratives' content and contribute to the interpretation of the meaning of the experiences made by the participants. In this case, regarding the way participants express cohesion and coalition calls attention to some interactional and paralinguistic features. In general, the three sessions with the participants were held in an agreeable and friendly space, probably because some of the participants already knew each other, but also due to the atmosphere of camaraderie, intimacy and respect that was achieved. This demonstrates the value of a non-hierarchical, participatory and dialogical based method as focus group, and how having locate myself on the same plane as the participants, namely, not imposing any hierarchical relation (researcher-subject) but being one participant more, enabled the participants to be more comfortable, emphatic and therefore more actively involved in the research process<sup>28</sup>. The narrative was fluid and was often experienced as a conversation rather than a formal interview. In some points the participants managed the course of the conversation by asking each other questions and having rapport among them. Besides the agreement orally expressed and the empathy with other's interventions, there was frequently shared laughter and nodding, as well as the use of humor to lighten difficult topics. These elements and signs articulate and embodied the participants' mutual agreement of points of view and beliefs, and contributed to see, through the focus group, a genuine interaction among them as well as the meaning of the experiences constructed by the group. These meanings include a tangible empathy and desire to care for each other.

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<sup>28</sup> Some final remarks made by the participants in the evaluation of the sessions reflect how the interviewing process and in general the space that "Moeder en Kind" represents, offer for them satisfaction and empowerment.

In sum, the sense of commonality among the participants is certainly facilitated by the communication in the same language and through the meetings in places such as the organization “Nuestra Casa” and the group “Moeder en Kind”. The way they construct this commonality as well as the way they conceive a collective identification, respond to the need and desire to connect with similar others which is done in two ways: 1) remembering and (re)enacting of shared cultural and social practices (such as language experiences, formation of family and parenting practices), and 2) common exposure to contextual limitations (such as language problems, limited job opportunities, unproductiveness and dependency on partners). Indeed, culture, gender and ethnicity play an important role of cohesion here, but are not determining factors that bounded the group; instead they are axes which facilitate the relationships and interconnections among the participants. But the core of the commonality which became evident is mostly about sharing experiences and practices, the very desire of having significant bonds and build friendships, to help and understand others’ as well as feeling understood and accepted, about common struggles with their daily lives as migrants and mothers, and about the choice to participate and act together for a common welfare. This does not imply a natural link; rather, through the recognition of differential positionings among the participants it is possible to consider a shared (and strong) positioning/identification through the estrangement of the new setting, namely unfamiliar environment and contextual limitations. This enables cross-border practices of solidarity that though collective agency can create positive changes in their journeys.

## Conclusion

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In this study on the influence of transnational migration on the lives of women of Latin-American origin, the attention was not just on the process of adaptation, but on the larger experience of transnational location, the diverse positioning they inhabit and the affections produced in this positioning. By taking the conceptual model of translocational positionality (Anthias, 2002) as a framework for this research, it was possible to think of migrants' lives and experiences as located, as always relational to (individual and collective) agency, to context and time, as well as through intersections of gender and ethnicity.

In the first place, it was demonstrated how the process of positioning in migration is not completely related to a spatial place, but neither completely detached. The positionings the participants negotiate are between different locales (the receiving society –here, and the homeland –there) rather than identifying with one or another side. In this process, there is indeed a personal struggle, both individual and collective, to achieve the most favorable conditions to balance. However, there is the possibility to imagine, create and inhabit powerful and emancipatory locales *elsewhere* beyond this dichotomy. The new locales the participants can inhabit are “shifting grounds” which in many cases are still limited by contextual factors (e.g. language barriers, lack of job opportunities and networks, limited governmental aids and stereotyped gaze). But also, these locales are a way through which migrant women can decide how to position themselves and to develop personal agency. For example home is a representation of such locales because first, it does not have restricted spatial links, as it is not necessarily situated in the place of origin or in the Netherlands. And second, it is constructed through personal choices (as the ability to make home “transportable”), and contextual effects (as the influences of positive experiences such as family formation). So, considering these “shifting grounds” as new locales from *elsewhere*, it is not only to consider the interplay of locations and dislocations in migration that transcends dichotomies and national borders (‘here’/‘there’, ‘us’/‘them’). But to consider the process of positioning as a strategy or capacity that can be developed by migrant

women to be reflexive about their difficult situations, and to act upon it. For example, finding or constructing a home away from the “original” home, makes a positive difference in their lives. These “shifting grounds” will always be at the intersection of agency and structure for what the process of positioning will carry constant transformations and renegotiations of the self in relation to the environment. Therefore, the interconnection and mutual influence of both personal and external factors shaped the way the participants experience migration and position themselves. This shows the “translocational” nature of migrants’ experiences which are situational and time related.

Second, it was observed that the way the participants are collectively positioned in migration was through: a) shared cultural and social practices (e.g. language experiences, parenting practices and motherhood); and b) similar exposure to contextual limitations (e.g. language problems, limited job opportunities, unproductiveness and dependency on partners). These two conditions significantly united the group, producing empathy and understanding where the contextual limitations fade away -at least momentarily, achieving positive feelings (relief, safety and company) with similar others in an unfamiliar context. This results in the construction of a sense of cohesion and commonality that enables practices of solidarity and the exercise of a collective agency; for example, through the formation of the group “Moeder en Kind” and the participation as volunteers in the workgroup “Apoyo a la Mujer” of the organization “Nuestra Casa”. Therefore, this commonality represents a collective positioning/identification which is a matter of “resistance” to the contextual limitations they share, and a choice to participate and act together, making a positive differences in their lives.

Moreover, the analysis of personal narratives helped to visualize and voice individual and collective actions and meanings that migrant women of Latin-American origin have. The narratives, as a methodology, provided the tools for understanding the processes of negotiation these women undergone in their migration, as their narratives bring together the past and the present, as well as the contextual influences by which their social and cultural lived-experiences are located and changed. Therefore, paying attention to the relational and situational nature of experiences of migration from a transnational feminist perspective and through narrative analysis, gives a powerful approach to move closer to Latin-Americans migrants’ “realities”, by recognizing the diversity of their

experiences of positioning and the sense of commonality that unite them across such diversity. That is to render visibility to the needs, beliefs and desires of migrant woman, including the claims and attributions that they individually make about their position in the social and cultural world they inhabit, their views on where and to what they belong, as well as the forms of solidarity created among them. In this light, narratives of “translocational positionality” is also a voice from *elsewhere*, that serves as a new framework of evaluation to face the impact of dominant discourses over migrant women’s positionings, to problematize their representations of passive-victim, and to recognize them as capable agents in migration.

Additionally, my positioning as a researcher was challenging as I found myself being “insider/outsider” and participant/moderator at the same time. However, I consider that it represented more an advantage than a problem, offering a great contribution to the research. It enabled as well a process of positioning beyond each site: researcher-researched, which subverts arbitrary binary categorizations and gains the possibility to subjectively experience and at the same time to critically analyze the complex reality and logics of the life of a Latin migrant in the Netherlands. This permitted a more flexible understanding of complex and contradictory worlds indicating the instability of knowledge and it can counterbalance the appropriation of the other, challenging power relations within the research process.

Finally, by taking the participants’ narratives of their own experiences and reflections, I did not intend to provide a fully undistorted portrait of the social reality of Latin-American migrants nor to demonstrate the only way migration might be experienced. The research’s results showed some situational experiences of a group of ten migrant women who have shared some conditions to construct a special common locale. Under this light, the results could appear limited because the small sample and a “restricted” generalization. Yet, this study can be considered, according to Donna Haraway (1988), as *situated knowledge* as it presents a partial view of the larger social phenomenon of transnational migration. By including a group’s reading of their reality, as one piece of this tangled scenario, and as one node (of many) that must be taken into account to decipher social relations of migrants’ experiences; this study takes positioning and partiality as conditions of being including in making social and feminist research. However, the work is

not nearly done. There are task still ahead, given that the construction of knowledge is a process of constant evolution and negotiation as well as the lives of migrants subjects. Thereupon, some steps could be taken into account for further investigations, as the examination of processes of positionality longitudinally, including second and subsequent generations into analysis; and to continue including new research arenas to move beyond the common ethnocentric perspective. Nevertheless, I hope to have contributed to broaden the limited image of Latin-Americans in the Netherlands, as well as to present a more nuanced view on gender and transnational migration from *elsewhere*, by pointing to the significance and different ways in which migrant women of Latin American origin articulate the different positions they inhabit and the possibilities of looking at them as a cohesive and active group beyond links of 'blood' and 'land'.

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