



Universiteit Utrecht

BECOMING RATHER THAN BEING.

Identity Negotiations for Latin American Women in the Dutch Context

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1. INTRODUCTION

Feeling *othered* has gotten into my bones. Though I have never felt a great sense of belonging to anything, to anywhere, this feels quite different. Maybe because in the past I felt I had chosen, to a certain extent, where to belong and where to be a stranger. However, here, no one has asked me where I wanted to position myself. In many of my social circles I have been the only member of the global South, of somewhere far away and strange. Having to negotiate my identity on a daily basis for almost a year has been hard, enriching, exhausting, fun and everything in between. These negotiations have developed a curiosity to understand or at least listen to the stories of other women, who, as myself, feel the need to reshape themselves in order to live in a different environment to their own.

The stories of the four Latin American women I interviewed are very much my own story. We do not need to share a common country of origin, the same family structure, political views or religion; we share the feeling of not belonging, of trying to adjust always being aware of the implications this has. Most often than not, I saw myself in their anecdotes, in their feelings and in their experiences. I asked them to tell me their stories in order to find my own.

i) The research question and its importance

Throughout this thesis, I will try to answer how do Latin American women negotiate their identity in the Dutch culture. How do they position themselves in terms of race and ethnicity; Do they go through racialized experiences in the Dutch context; Do they feel their migration experience is gendered? Are other set of questions I will try to answer.

The importance of these questions resides in the fact that the Latin American community is quite invisible in the Netherlands. By invisible, I mean it is not the target of racialization *per se*, but that is often excluded from public spheres such as politics. This has an impact on representation as this invisibility reduces the chances of specific integration policies, for example. At the same time, this lack of visibility also affects the chances of integration of this community to Dutch society.

ii) The background of this project. The specificities of the Latin American Migration.

The Latin American migration has its own particularities; the biggest two migratory waves to Europe have taken place during the late 1970s and in the beginning of the 2000s. For the particular case of the Netherlands, a big flow of Surinamese migrants arrived in the 1970, specially to as workforce in low-skilled jobs (Peixoto 2005). The 70s' migratory movement occurred when many Latin American countries such as Argentina, Uruguay and Chile were going through military dictatorships,

“In the 1960s and 1970s, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile and Uruguay experienced military regimes that repressed labor unions, banned left wing political parties and were openly hostile to intellectuals and students. As a consequence, waves of exile and emigration took place from these countries to different destinations both inside and outside Latin America” (Solimano 2009, 8)

Some European countries became hosts to political exiles, specially the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. This meant that those refugees were not necessarily in economic needs, many of them were professionals, artists, writers, but had to fly to Europe from one day to the other because their lives were in great danger. Most of them were part of left wing intellectual or political movements. The other big wave of migration happened in the early 2000s when an economic crisis affected South America (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile). In this case, most migrants were low qualified workers who had lost their jobs in their homelands due to cuts on budgets, the closure of many factories and enterprises, and who could not make ends meet. They flew mostly to Spain, due to the language similarities but then stayed within Europe and many of them left Spain because of its economic situation. On top of that, there are also Latin American migrants who come from overseas territories which hold a special position because they do have the legal and formal way to live in the Netherlands but nonetheless are somehow excluded.

Differences that could be highlighted in the Latin American context (class, ethnicity, country of origin), loose some their meaning when resignified in a new context where everyone is the 'Other' and where similar power relations (racism, lack of access to certain commodities, sexism) occur to those almost everyone who is part of that group.

This is understandable because dynamics to which we might be vulnerable to in the home country might differ from the subordinations we experience as migrants in other countries. With this I am not stating that all experiences in the diasporic context should be put together as the same, but, the point is that they share a similar relation and interconnection with certain power structures and with certain oppressions.

“The complex experience of self and other (the all-other within me and without me) is bound to forms that belong but are subject neither to ‘home’, nor to ‘abroad’; and it is through them and through the cultural configurations they gather that the universe over there and over here can be named, accounted for, and become narrative. Travellers’ tales do not only bring the over-there home, and the over-here abroad” (T.Minh-ha 1994, 21)

A common sense of not belonging, of neither being here nor there is a trait among diasporic subjects. It is translated to a way of relating to the world around us. In the realm of the symbolic, it is present in every interaction and it is embedded in a larger discourse that regulates a way of belonging to a specific and foreign context.

In the case of Latin American migrants, they represent an invisible minority which is both excluded from the social and public representations and at the same time, not the center of attention.

“Vis-a-vis the developed West, we are very much ‘the same’. We belong to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the ‘Other’. We are at the outer edge, the ‘rim’, of the metropolitan world - always ‘South’ to someone else’s El Norte” (Hall 1990, 227-228)

The specificity of the Latina condition should be addressed as, often, the Latina category gains meaning in a specific context in regards to the person situatedness. Lived experience (Alcoff, 2006) is paramount when intending to construct a Latina identity, even with its particularities, differences, because it is always in relations with the global north, regardless of its specific location. Within its own differences and diversity, the Latin American community is something already constituted as an imagined community (Flores 2003) with very specific and different experiences within the group.

Besides language, almost all other components of culture are very diverse among Latin America, it is as if we would image the whole of Europe as one big group.

However, without essentializing, it might be useful to use the term in a way it reflects a set of oppressions and vulnerabilities that are specific to this group.

iii) Structure of the thesis

After this introduction, the theoretical framework analyzes two of the main concepts of this thesis: a) identity as something dynamic and contextually negotiated and b) the concept of diaspora as a never-ending process. These two concepts are the entry point to understanding the configurations that take place when shaping and negotiating our identity in the diasporic context. The methodological framework describes semi-structured interviews as a tool that brings forward the experiences of these women and the importance of a standpoint epistemology to produce knowledge from a feminist perspective. Chapter four describes how these women negotiate their identity on a daily basis; chapter five delves into issues gender and the gendered experience of migration while chapter six analyzes their reflections on issues of race and ethnicity.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Throughout this chapter, I will introduce the concepts of “identity” and “diaspora”. These two notions will allow me to analyze some ways in which the interviewees (all from Latin America) negotiate their identity in the diasporic context (the Netherlands). Understanding identity as something dynamic will allow the analysis to be more in line with the lives of these women who find themselves rebuilding and reshaping their identities according to their circumstances.

In order to bring light to the both the concept of “identity” and “diaspora” I will mainly work with authors such as Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah. They both work in the field of Cultural Studies with issues of race, gender and representation. It is important to highlight that, for them, “identity” and “diaspora” are always defined by context and are dynamic and always embedded in power relations. This approach is very accurate to my analysis as I will show further on.

i) Defining “Identity”

Identities are inscribed through social and power relations, as well as through language and cultural norms, among others. In these configurations, identity turns into a performative act in order to fit into them. It is a mode of being (Brah 1996) in a specific time for a specific space. Thus, the importance of embracing it as a process, as a construction within a given framework. This process entails negotiations, strategies of survival, and reshaping our own understandings of the context we live in. It is often mediated by language and other cultural configurations that have an impact on the production of our own subjectivities and that allow us to position ourselves in this new context.

Essentialist notions of identity (common past and history, fixed cultural traits, etc.) do not fit into this analysis as culture is understood as something dynamic and embedded in power relations that shift and change within time, history and politics. A linear understanding of identity shaping would mean a simplification of the process identity entails. Negotiations around identity do not occur in a vacuum, identity is shaped by our exposure to culture, to social interactions and to what is seen as normative within a specific time and space, it has its sets of boundaries (Sarup 1994).

“The constitution of subjectivity within heterogeneous discursive practices means that we inhabit articulating and changing identities interweaving across relations of race, gender, class or sexuality” (Brah 1996, 93)

As the author states, identity is articulated in relation to discursive practices; this is, it depends on the prevailing norms and values of a specific context and cannot be assumed as one-fits-all way of identity building. It operates as an entanglement of identity traits such as race, class or gender and the multiple articulations of these in different context will have different outcomes.

In processes of recognition is how identity is formed (Hall 1996), recognized by the others, the subject is enabled to interact. In this regard, identity is always relational, this means that it is always defined by the context in which we live, and the power relations that take place within our own reality. It is not a fixed or monolithic entity, on the contrary, it shapes itself according to circumstances and the categories and labels we identify with, can change contextually. It also depends on our interlocutors, what sets of norms and values are we exposed to and what is considered valid at the time. As Hall explains,

“Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity” (Hall 1996, 4)

Indeed, negotiations around identity for the four women interviewed are often signed by difference and exclusion rather than commonalities with the Dutch culture. As I will explain further on, it is much easier for them to define themselves by contrasting their own practices to the those of Dutch than to think about the similarities. As stated above, identities have set boundaries because they are negotiated in a specific context and responds to concrete dynamics of power.

Identity can also be understood as different parts coming together in a specific context creating on the one hand, and responding to, on the other hand, a specific subjectivity.

“It accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation”. (Hall 1996, 4)

One important element of negotiations around identity is the fact that it does not exist a singular narrative among identity building. It is, in most cases, a negotiation that entails contradictions and back and forwards. In that non linear process, certain actions might be more meaningful in some contexts while lacking of meaning in others. As Hall explains, it is often linked to a time and a space and is related to a specific history and context.

ii) *Identity in the Diasporic Context*

Diaspora will be addressed as a never-ending process that does not finish with the person's settlement in a place, but refers more to specific form of migratory movement that is potentially always looking for a better place to live in order to reduce its lack of access to economic, cultural and social rights, among others. It is a phenomenon very much linked to globalization (Anthias 1998) and to the mobilization of people around the world in search of better living conditions. Diasporic subjects are related to a common place of origin whether this is concrete or symbolic.

“The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall 1990, 235)

It is important to highlight that this common place of origin -which is something tangible – does not imply an essentialization of the diasporic subjects; this common

original is only useful to the extent it might show certain power relations that can take place within a specific context but does not necessarily include other preassumed commonalities or 'natural' traits (Anthias 1998). Individuals within a diasporic group do not necessarily experience cohesion or homogeneity, in most cases, the place of origin might be the only element in common. It is important to mention that belonging or not, and relations within the diaspora are being negotiated, re shifted and revisited all the time and these revistations will have an impact on new configurations of identity. The same might apply to the experience of women in the diasporic context, "collective experience does not represent the sum total of individual experiences any more than individual experiences can be taken to be a direct expression of the collective" (Brah 1996, 89)

In this sense, cultural identity becomes more powerful than national identity (Poole 2003) in a specific diasporic context and the diasporic subject (Radhakrishnan 2003). This diasporic subject is neither fully constituted nor settled, "the diasporic/ethnic location is a "ghostly" location where the political unreality of one's present home is to be surpassed only by the ontological unreality of one's place of origin" (Radhakrishnan 2003, 323)

What we might experience as individuals in one place, will be different to what we experience as a collective in a foreign place. When our standpoint shifts, our own understanding of the context and our vulnerabilities might change as well. Our context and the discourses set around it will impact our negotiations around our identity. These negotiations will not always be conscious or planned, they also might come as a mere strategy of survival to the dynamics we are exposed to. As I will explain further on, most of the women I interviewed often feel the need to develop certain strategies to fit in into Dutch society, most of them associated with the wellbeing of their children. For instance, learning Dutch in order to communicate with teachers and other parents. This specific action exposes them to vulnerabilities such as learning a language while being an adult or misunderstanding school information due to their limited skills in Dutch.

iii) The complexity of gender in the Diasporic Context

In the case of Latina women, a complexity is added in terms of gender, not only are they migrant, but specifically they are migrant women, with all the complexities that come attached to it.

“Our gender is constituted and represented differently according to our differential location within the global relations of power. Our insertion into these global relations of power is realized through a myriad of economic, political and ideological processes. Within these structures of social relations we do not exist simply as women but as differentiated categories” (Brah 1996, 102).

It is undeniable that each Latina woman might go through different experiences and as a product of those experiences different outcomes might occur; however, they are presented to the social complexities as gendered subjects and face these complexities on a daily basis. This means they cannot remove themselves from certain configurations of power.

“How a person perceives or conceives an event would vary according to how ‘she’ is culturally constructed in the process of assigning meaning to the everyday social relations (...) articulating cultural practices of the subjects so constituted mark contingent collective ‘histories’ with variable new meanings” (Brah 1996, 117)

A change of “setting” might have consequences on the reshape of the assumptions around gender roles. Cultural constructions around gender shift within context as gender is a performative act than gains sense in a particular context.

“In other words, the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts. My task, then, is to examine in what ways gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts. (...) These possibilities are necessarily constrained by available historical conventions. The body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic” (Butler 1988, 521)

As Judith Butler states, the construction of gender is very much linked to a theatrical performance possible with the tools that our context and the discourse we are embedded in have to offer. Being a construction, it is (re) shaped and (re) defined by the material conditions around us. In the case of these four women, many of the elements

around gender and sexuality changed dramatically in their migration process and this new setting is also a part of their negotiation around identity.

Language is another key element in identity building, especially in a diasporic context when it becomes a tool of commonality with the different. It might act as a cohesive element when in search for other like us, it becomes an element of identification in a context that is not our natural one. It enables or restricts us from connecting with others. Especially in the Latin American context where even though different varieties of Spanish are spoken (except for Brazil and overseas territories of the Netherlands, France, and Great Britain), Spanish in the context of diaspora is a key and common element that grounds together many lived experiences and acts as a common denominator (Zentella 2007). Besides its unifying purpose in the context of diaspora, language is also a major element of othering when, not only as said before, it unites in difference, but also, it can show how people do not belong to a certain community. It becomes a mark to show that you do not belong, that there is something missing for you to be able to join and it leaves people out from other spheres such as the labor market, entertainment and social life in general.

“Because we think in language, we can’t easily comprehend how that language shapes our thinking; because we live through taken-for-granted social practices (as signified by the concept of habitus, referring to the processes through which self and social world ever shape one another), we can’t easily comprehend how they lead us to live our lives in some ways and not in others”. (Mathews 2002, 12)

Not only is language one of the strongest tools to communicate it also enables us to develop a sense of belonging to where we live; it also shapes our understanding of the world and of the context we are settled in. Not mastering the language, in this case Dutch, reduces the capability of socializing as well as of understanding what is going on around us. It acts as a material barrier but also as a symbolic one.

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The aim of my research is to explore how different women who are originally from Latin America and that at present live in the Netherlands negotiate and shape their identities in this country. As stated in the theoretical framework chapter, this question is relevant if we assume that identity is always fluid and changing, and that is built in regards to the context the person is living in. In this sense, the dynamics that take place for them in the Dutch context might be a key factor of the way in which they negotiate their identity and position themselves as Latin American migrant women.

The four interviews were conducted in Spanish and in three of the four cases, they took place in the interviewees houses. This created a relaxed atmosphere which helped them feel for at ease and also helped me when conducting these conversations.

i) Method and methodology

In order to answer my research question, I conducted semi structured interviews with women who were born in any country in Latin America and who have been living in the Netherlands for a considerable amount of time, more than two years at least. Ideally, I would have liked to interview women who moved to this country for different reasons, among them, political, economic, educational or personal ones. However, it was more difficult than I expected to find these interviewees and I decided to interview women who had come to the Netherlands due to family related reasons. This scenario helped me in the analysis of the gendered experience of migration, as we will see further on, all of the women interviewed moved to the Netherlands due to family projects.

I have chosen to conduct semi structured interview because I find it extremely important to collect and listen to the lived experiences of these women, and that cannot be achieved by a fix questionnaire that does not leave a lot of room for flexibility. Having a flexible questionnaire might enable women to tell their stories more freely and can contribute to their agency of deciding which experiences they want to highlight and which they do not find that important. Conducting semi structured interviews is an effective tool that enables insight into these women's worlds (Hesse-Biber - Leavy 2007). Moreover, these experiences differ from one woman to the other so it would not be convenient to have a fixed set of questions. Nonetheless, the interview questionnaire has certain guidelines and topics I wanted to discuss; among them, their arrival to the

Netherlands, which are the cultural differences they observe, what kind of struggles do they go through, how do they experience not being Dutch. As the experiences of the interviewees differ, a representative sample is not accurate to this type of investigation. The main goal is not to draw on generalizations but rather “to look at a “process” or the “meanings” individuals attribute to their given social situation” (Hesse-Biber - Leavy 2007, 119).

ii) The importance of women’s perspectives

The perspective of women is paramount to my thesis, as the category of gender in a diasporic context adds a new level of complexities. I could have chosen to interview both men and women, however, the gendered experience might give me more insight into the burdens of being a Latin American migrant in the Dutch context. The narratives around migratory movements are often related to men as workforce in receiving countries and the role of women is often described as secondary, following their husbands. Women’s experiences in the migratory process and in the actual settlement in a new country are often hidden and unarticulated (Hesse-Biber - Leavy 2007) that is why it is important to bring forward their lived experiences in these kinds of processes. Most often than not, women’s perspective is under represented and that is one of the reasons why it is so important to tell their stories

As we will see in chapter five, they often have specific roles in relation to transmitting values and cultural norms of their home countries and act as ‘boundary guards’ (Yuval-Davis y Stoetzler, 2002) in relation to their culture.

The specificities of the experiences of women add a level of intricacies to what it means negotiating the identity in a diasporic context as the axe/category of gender cannot be left behind. Specific power relations and oppressions might be experienced in the case of women that might shape the experiences of these women compared to Latin American migrant men.

iii) Standpoint epistemology as key to knowledge production

The importance of approaching this research through the standpoint epistemology resides in the fact that it is possible and very much advisable to produce knowledge from the own lived experiences of women, as stated before. It is very accurate to stick to

this epistemology and methodology of producing knowledge as the main source of information will be the lived experiences of these women in the Dutch context.

The small number of interviews that conducted is not statistically representative of all the Latin American women living in the Netherlands; however, in this type of research, the importance of lived experiences and of embodied experiences takes a great importance in the process of knowledge production from a standpoint epistemology.

“Feminist standpoint epistemology requires us to place women at the center of the research process: Women’s concrete experiences provide the starting point from where to build knowledge (...) feminist standpoint scholars emphasize the need to begin with women’s lives, as they themselves experience them, in order to achieve an accurate and authentic understanding of what is life for women today” (Hesse-Biber y Leavy 2007, 56)

The key element to knowledge production in this case, as the authors explain it, is the experiences these women might go through; listening to what they have to say, how they live their diasporic identity, how do negotiate their lives in the Dutch context is the main input to understand, on a broader sense, to which dynamics Latin American migrant women can be exposed to and how this articulates with the negotiation of their identities.

It could be argued that experiences are very personal, and that is something to consider when we decide, as researchers, to take into account lived experiences as the main entry point for knowledge production. However, these personal experiences can show how certain mechanisms take place in a broader sense, how certain power relations as well as oppressions are lived as a systemic reality to many women in this case.

iv) Issues of positionality

It is not possible to position myself outside the group of women I am working with. Besides the fact that we have different life stories, backgrounds, family compositions and ages, in the Dutch context we belong to the ‘Other’ group. Regardless of their degree of participation in the public sphere, whether they speak the language or not, their sense of belonging to the Dutch society is mediated by the fact that this is not the

country they were born in. Our conversations were mediated by the fact that I was the person asking questions and they were narrating their experiences. However, the similarities in our personal stories often overlapped and at some point I would share my experiences thus making the space more a conversation than an interview.

As already stated in the theoretical framework chapter, the ‘Latin American woman’ category is not a monolithic one, so I cannot say I share all the experiences with these women but we do share a common relational aspect to the Netherlands. On the one hand, we are involved in the same reality, embedded by similar power relations but on the other hand my position as researcher or facilitator makes me take some distance from the complex everyday negotiations of identity I am trying to know by conducting this research. Of course, this boundary is not fixed because I am also mediated by interactions and embedded (Lykke 2010) in certain power relations,

“...it becomes an important methodological principle to create and construct provisional and momentary cuts and boundaries between the researcher subject and the object of research, and define how they relate to each other in each particular research project”. (Lykke 2010, 151)

As Lykke explains it, the type of relation I negotiate with these women is key to my research. Though we might have certain experiences in common and most definitely we can relate in many aspects in regards to the dynamics we experiences as Latina American women living in the Netherlands, it is also important to set certain boundaries and to share our common experiences to an extent where their experiences still remain the key input of this research.

4. NEGOTIATING 'DUTCHNESS' ONE DAY AT A TIME

In this chapter, I will address how the interviewees negotiate their identity on an everyday basis. It is important to highlight, as it has been stated in the theoretical framework chapter, that identity is taken as a fluid, as something flexible that shifts and changes all the time. It is often a production (Hall 1990) very much linked to the context we live in, to its normative discourse and to the power relations we are exposed to. Throughout this chapter, I will expose some of the perceptions the interviewees have around the 'Dutch identity', some of the negative and positive perceived qualities they experience in their everyday lives as migrant women in this specific context.

This chapter does not intent to thoroughly describe Dutch society but rather bring forward the traits these women highlight and give sense to those experiences. It caught my attention that these women would often highlight the same traits though they live in different cities and they are of different age and nationality. As I said before, this does not thoroughly describe Dutch society but it can bring some light to the interactions these women are exposed to and how, with the cultural elements they have, interpret their new context.

i) Living cultural differences on a daily basis

All the interviewees highlight the difference between how people interact in their own countries compared to how they do it in the Netherlands. For all of them, interactions are much distant in the Netherlands, highlighting the fact that everyone has a very private life compared to the countries of origin of these women who, according to their personal experiences, consider people to be more interested in each other's lives.

They all highlight how structured and well-organized Dutch society is as a positive asset. Many of them have incorporated this structured way of life to their everyday routines such as recycling the bins. These negotiations shift and shape their everyday lives and allow them, to a certain degree, to pick and choose which aspects of Dutch habits to incorporate and which to leave behind.

“Cultural shaping involves “the cultural supermarket.” This is the level at which selves sense that they freely pick and choose the ideas they want to live by” (Mathews 2002, 15).

I would argue that these choices are not entirely free; power relations, issues of gender, class and sex most definitely are at stake but it is true that certain dynamics of picking and choosing do exist. As we will see further on in this chapter and the ones to come, these women actively decide what to take and what not to take from Dutch culture often related to the upbringing of their children and to what preserve or exposed them to.

Another big difference is how all the women interviewed had to learn that most things said to them were not personal. This means, according to the interviewees, that in the beginning they assumed that whatever was told to them was on a personal level but soon enough they realized that was not the case.

“Here one must understand that things are not personal, here the system functions in such a way that it turns people into work machines, nothing is personal. It took me years to understand that, I used to live with anxiety about what people would think” (my translation)¹

Many of them have struggled with Dutch people being profit-oriented, in this sense, all the interviewees mention how they feel their personal relations are structured in a non-spontaneous way, as if things had to be scheduled.

“They tend to look for opportunities, benefits, they are very profit-oriented. Coming from Latin American countries, where many other things matter in personal relationships, it is very shocking; (...) everything is so organized and structured, that is shocking. That sense of extreme utilitarianism is very strange to me; it is related to that sense of seizing time. It is also said it is related to religion, to Calvinism and austerity” (my translation)²

¹ “Aquí hay que entender que no es personal, aquí el sistema funciona de manera que las personas trabajen como robots, nada es personal. Me tomó años de soltarme de eso, vivía con una ansiedad de pensar lo que iba a pensar”.

² “Tienen una forma de ser muy orientada a encontrar las oportunidades, los beneficios, profit oriented. Viniendo de países latinos donde hay muchas otras cosas que importan en las relaciones personales, choca mucho, todo está muy organizado incluyendo las relaciones personales (...) Todo está tan estructurado y tan orientado, eso choca mucho. Esto me es totalmente ajeno, ese utilitarismo tan extremo. Eso está relacionado a eso de aprovechar el tiempo, también dicen que está relacionado con la religión, con el calvinismo, con la austeridad”.

The interviewees also highlight in a positive way how Dutch people tend to be very direct and blunt, something most of the women were not used to in their home countries but that, nonetheless, find it useful in personal relations. All of them mention how at first, they were struck by this way of interacting among each other, but then actually tried to incorporate this practice into their everyday lives.

“They are very direct when treating with people, they don’t control what they say, they even don’t control their tone. Back home, the opposite happens, people tend to be more cynical; in Paraguay people tend to sugar coat everything. Here in the Netherlands- people are direct” (my translation)³

“Another cultural trait of Dutch people is that they are extremely direct. They always tell the truth, even if it hurts, they will never sugar coat it or give you some introduction to what they want to tell you” (my translation)⁴

This new way of relating has consequences in these women’s everyday lives. As they mention, they had to train themselves to understand this new dynamic. Most often than not, throughout our conversation, they would recall moments where they did not understand this way of relating and how this made them feel anxious and lost.

In regards to their social capital, all the women claim they did not know many people when they arrived at the Netherlands. This weak social capital has an impact in the possibilities they have of socialization as it is less likely for them to meet new people when they arrived to the Netherlands, some of them have expanded their social circles within the years while others still struggle to make friendships or connections in the Dutch context. Some of them have made Dutch friends but they all claim to feel more comfortable within Latin American social groups.

“We socialize with a very international group of people because the girls go to an international school and I work at a very international place. As

³ “Los tratos, ellos son muy directos, no modulan lo que te dicen, ni el tono modulan. Allá en cambio llegas a sentir cinismo de la gente, pero es que en Paraguay te tratan como esponja y acá es tomátela y es así”.

⁴ “Otra característica cultural del holandés, es que son sumamente directos. Es siempre la verdad, aunque duela, nunca te la van a matizar o te van a hacer una frase introductoria”.

we have been so lonely and with a lot of house-related duties, we have not been able to develop a social circle, an active social life so the friends we have are related to our kids or some work colleagues; they are a mix of many nationalities” (my translation)⁵

In this dynamic of “cultural supermarket” (Mathews 2002) mentioned before, this interviewee mentioned how her husband and her had chosen to send their kids to an international where they could meet children from all over the world and be exposed to different cultures. I had the chance to share a barbecue with this family and some of their friends; I found myself speaking in Spanish, Italian and English and sharing experiences and anecdotes with people from all over the world. I saw the comfort and reassurance having this type of circle had on my interviewee, where she was less anxious and more relaxed than in the outside world (we also spend a day together strolling around Maastricht).

ii) Living in a multicultural environment

All the women talk about how positive it is for their children to grow in a multicultural environment, something that would not be very possible in their home countries due to the lack of diversity compared to the Dutch context. This multiculturalism has had a positive impact in their children’s bringing up by exposing them to other realities and making them more flexible to new experiences. One of the interviewees talks about the experience with her own son,

“It is surprising how he adapts to every different context. He likes the sea by his grandparents’ house, how my family talks to him -in Spanish- or when my

⁵ “Nosotros nos movemos en un círculo muy internacional porque las niñas van a un colegio internacional y yo trabajo en un lugar muy internacional. Lo primero que tengo para decir es que como hemos estado muy solos y con mucha carga en la casa y en el trabajo no hemos desarrollado un círculo, una vida social sumamente activa entonces las amistades que tenemos las tenemos sobre todo a través de las niñas y alguna gente del trabajo y son un poco de todas las nacionalidades”

mother or sister come to visit. In his daily life, he lives as a Dutch kid". (my translation)⁶

All these new configurations and negotiations of their identities and those of their children -which are very much dependent on these women's decisions on how to bring their children up- contributes to the notion that identity in this diasporic context is rather a way of becoming than a way of being (Hall 1990). Not only has this multiculturalism had a positive impact on their children but also among themselves as it has helped them to rethink about their own assumptions about their religion, their position in society, etc.

"And suddenly you find your children telling you 'I am the only catholic in my class", it is important how they see us, to listen to what they think about it. Us, Catholics, we never thought people could see us differently, it is good to hear the perception of other religions. On a cultural level, I am loving it, I believe culture is something flexible and that we have the capacity to question it and decide what to take from it and what not" (my translation)⁷

During our conversation, this interviewee highlights how she had not questioned herself about certain traits of her identity such as religion. Growing up in a religious environment, she lived this process freely as her parents practiced two different religions. Throughout her life, she has always been connected to the religious life by volunteering at different churches and working in different organizations. The naturalization of this element of her identity is moved by the fact that her children start sharing spaces with people from other cultures and religions. Her positioning and construction of herself changes in this new context.

⁶ "Sí, es fantástico cómo reacciona, cómo se ubica en cada contexto. Le gusta el mar de la casa de los abuelos, cómo le hablan en casa o cuando vienen mi mamá o mi hermana, la parte materna y el comportamiento cuando está acá, en su vida diaria es holandés".

⁷ "De repente encuentras que tus hijos "soy el único católico en la clase" y además cómo nos ven, es importante oír esa percepción porque jamás los católicos creeríamos que otros nos ven de esa manera, eso me ha parecido tan bueno oír de otras religiones. A nivel de cultura me ha encantado, creo que la cultura es algo moldeable y uno tiene que tener la capacidad de cuestionarla y decir qué me vale y qué me estorba".

“But there is the production of self as an object in the world, the practices of self-constitution, recognition and reflection, the relation to the rule, alongside the scrupulous attention to normative regulation, and the constraints of the rules without which no 'subjectification' is produced.” (Hall 1996, 13)

In this case, the production of herself was very much mediated by the naturalization of her religious environment. In her changing of context, she is exposed to new realities that also make her question her own subjectivity.

iii) Incorporation of Dutch elements to their everyday life.

Punctuality, austerity and formality are three of the main aspects these women highlight as having incorporated or trying to incorporate to their daily lives.

“They are very straightforward, it is simpler. I have not taken it in completely but I know I have something to learn from them; I need to find a balance between our passionate ways and their cold blood and rationality”
(my translation)⁸

“I see myself incorporating practices I did not learn throughout my childhood, things I learned from other cultures. I try to do this because I think it’s healthier, it makes one feel more confident. Maybe because in my life I have gone through overly passionate experiences; those are heritages from more rational and calm cultures” (my translation)⁹

All of them have identified in Dutch culture something related to people being more direct and blunt when communicating. Even if in the beginning they would

⁸ “Los tipos son muy straight forward, digo esto, decís que no y se olvidan, es más sano. De eso sí no lo he incorporado totalmente, pero siento que tengo algo para aprender de ellos, encontrar un balance entre lo apasionado y sangre caliente y la sangre fría y racionales que son ellos”

⁹ “Me siento incorporando cosas que no mamé en mi infancia, incorporando cosas que vienen de culturas aprendidas. Obviamente lo trato de hacer porque siento que es más sano, te da más seguridad. Quizás porque en mi vida he sufrido ese exceso de apasionamiento por cosas que no lo ameritaban tanto, son elementos heredados de culturas más racionales, más sosegadas”. (I3)

struggle with this type of interactions, all of them highlight it as a positive asset of Dutch way of living and mention it as something they are trying to incorporate in their everyday lives. Though in the beginning it was uncomfortable to adjust to this new way of relating, most of them see themselves incorporating certain dynamics they learnt in the Dutch culture to their everyday lives.

“The ‘boundary guards’ identify people as members or non-members of a particular collectivity. They are closely linked to specific cultural codes of style of dress and behavior as well as to more elaborate bodies of customs, religion, literary and artistic modes of production, and, of course, language”. (Yuval-Davis y Stoetzler, 2002)

For example, in the case of one of the interviewees who had already lived in a Central American country with one of her daughters -the other one was not born yet-, she points out that while leaving in this Central American country, she would actively avoid her child reproduce certain behaviors usually related to very gendered attitudes. While in the Netherlands, she has also decided to send her children to an international school so they could have a more ‘neutral’ education rather than sending them to a Dutch school. In both cases, she acts as a guard, as the author explains it, to the cultural values she considers to be good for the upbringing of her children and leaving behind others that she does not consider necessary for her daughters to learn. In this sense, negotiating their identities becomes a process of articulation,

“There is always 'too much' or 'too little' - an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality. Like all signifying practices, it is subject to the 'play', of *differance*. It obeys the logic of more-than-one. And since as a process it operates across difference, it entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of 'frontier-effects'. It requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process” (Hall, 1996, 3)

As the author explains it, this identification on difference, contributes to the process of defining oneself and the members of their family. As we will see further on, it has been easier to the interviewees to define themselves in regards to what they are not - compared to Dutch- than to what they are. In relation to the symbolic boundaries Stuart Hall mentions, in the case of the interviewee before mentioned, she has clear

delimitations of which elements does she want her children to incorporate and which she does not. And these elements left behind, also help to redefine what they contrast with what they are not. As Yuval – Davis states,

“The community is perceived as a ‘natural’ social unit. It is ‘out there’ and either one can belong to it or not. Any notion of internal difference within the ‘community’, therefore, is subsumed to this organic construction. It can be either a functional difference which contributes to the smooth and efficient working of ‘the community’ or it is an anomaly, a pathological deviation. (...) the perspective of the community as fixed can create exclusionary boundaries of ‘the community’ which would keep as ‘the other’ all those perceived as different”. (Yuval-Davis 1994, 181)

One of the interviewees experienced something none of the other interviewees expressed, she willingly tried to stay away from Latin American groups due to the fear of not adjusting to the Dutch context,

“I distanced myself from certain Spanish-speaking groups. I did it because I feared not learning Dutch. There is a tendency of “only our way of doing is correct” and I am afraid of that when you need to learn to live with others”
(my translation)¹⁰

This interviewee questions the naturality of her community. How it is assumed their ways of doing are the correct ones, especially when living in a different context. She fears not adjusting and removes herself from that space.

¹⁰ “Tomé distancia de los grupos hispanohablantes, lo hice por el temor de aprender el idioma, tiende a haber mucho un “solo lo nuestros está bien” y me da miedo cuando necesitas aprender a vivir con otros”

5. “GENDER”, THE UNDERMENTIONED EXPERIENCE

In this chapter, I will address the invisibility of gender as a relevant category in the migratory process of the interviewed women. If we take the category of ‘gender’ as a social construct, the gendered experience might vary from one context to the other; specially in the case of these women who have moved from their home countries to the Netherlands in some cases, and from other countries -different to their home countries- to the Netherlands. It is important not to take gender as a monolithic entity but rather as a “product of social order (...) where gender relations express asymmetry, inequality, domination and power not only between the genders but also within one gender category” (Lutz 2010). It is important to highlight that the migratory experience is often mediated by other factors such as life cycle, class, ethnicity (Lutz 2010) that might add levels of complexity to the experience itself. However, the analysis of gender as a paramount category in the migration experience and its implications cannot be left behind.

i) A gendered migration

The main reason for most of the women interviewed – three out of the four women- to come to the Netherlands was their husbands/father of their children. In this scenario, moving to the Netherlands became their life project. This means that the migration process was linked rather than to a personal project, to a couple or family one. It would not be fair to assume that the reason for moving to this country has turned them into passive and neglected women (Al-Ali 2010); however, there is a migration pattern that seems to be gendered (Ghosh 2009) not only in the initial processes of migration but also in the opportunities of women in the new country,

“A large part of female migration, whether internal or across borders, is for purposes of marriage or because the husband is moving. But international migration for work shows clear demarcations and separate niches for male and female labor. Male migrants tend to be concentrated in the production and construction sectors, and to a much lesser extent in service activities. Female migrants, by contrast, are dominantly found to be working in specific service activities – in the domestic work and care sectors, as well as in entertainment work” (Ghosh 2009, 8)

As noted by Ghosh, there is a specific experience of migration that has gender as its main axis; this is, in the case of female migration travelling due to family or partner's reasons. This gendered experience does also imply a limitation in the type of jobs offered to women, usually as care givers or in job that required less skills than what they are actually trained for.

Regarding job opportunities, two women have struggled to find jobs and either have chosen to get volunteering positions or have founded their own business in different fields from what they have studied. One of the women has not looked for a job yet due to her lacking knowledge of Dutch and only one woman works in the position of her field of studies. This does not necessarily and directly mean that gender has played a part in these difficulties but it shows that the situation that the main reason for coming to Europe is related to their husbands/father of their children, that the taking care of the children often has an impact on the sociability of these women. In some cases, they were often offered positions for which they were over skilled.

“I just waited and then looked for something to do on my own. Yes, you can work as a cleaning lady or serving at a restaurant, in those areas you can find jobs. Even in the port you can also find jobs but those are heavy-duty positions. You do not need a lot of Dutch, just to say 'hello' to people and understand some directions. But, one does come with aspirations, I got a training on this, studied this, and I like it”. (my translation) ¹¹

As this interviewee expresses it, her job opportunities were mostly related to cleaning and other low skilled jobs where not even Dutch was strictly required. These opportunities did not match her skills, which were higher than those of the positions she was offered. Other interviewee mentions that she ended up volunteering at different religious organizations because the job offers she got, did not match neither her level of formal education nor her work experience.

“At the destination, migrant women are often subject to different kinds of discrimination. This is true especially in labor markets, because of highly

¹¹ “Esperé y vi por mi cuenta otra cosa para hacer, sí, podés dedicarte al área de limpieza o servicio en restaurantes, ahí tenés trabajo, mismo en el puerto podés trabajar también, pero son trabajos muy pesados, tanto holandés no necesitás para saludar a la gente y un par de instrucciones, pero más de eso. Pero claro uno viene con sus aspiraciones, yo me capacité en esto yo estudié esto y me gusta.”

gendered notions of what is appropriate work for women, which can result in women migrants being crowded into care activities, paid domestic work and informal sector occupations to an even greater extent than in the home situation, and often despite higher qualifications”. (Ghosh 2009, 24)

As the author expresses it, certain gendered notions about which jobs are suitable for women are at stake and often compromise women’s opportunities to regardless of their skills and level of education. This leaves the migrant women with little opportunity to escape those types of jobs. On top of this, the usual gendered division of tasks within the household where typically women are care givers and men are bread winners, often reduces their chances of finding jobs or being able to organize their family life and household in a way that leaves them time to get a job; in this sense, the arrangements of the private sphere often affect those of the public domain (Yuval-Davis 1994).

It might seem somehow evident that gender is related to both the change in their life projects as well as their possibilities of finding jobs. Though it would be a mistake to address gender and women’s experiences in a diasporic context as a monolithic entity (Anthias y Yuval-Davis 1989) it is important to problematize and analyze this relationship. In the following section, I will address some hints on some explanations about why gender does not come up as a relevant category in the migratory experience.

ii) The invisibility of the category of gender

In the scenario where the women have moved to another country to pursuit personal projects, they do not identify gender as being an added complexity to their experience in the Netherlands. The living condition and the level of autonomy of the four women interviewed are diverse. Some of them have jobs, others have started their own business, two of them are very active in their community through volunteering activities and participation in NGOs, one of them does not have a paid job and takes care of their household. Despite their different situations, levels of autonomy, sense of agency and empowerment, gender does not come up as a category which adds any complexities to their lives as migrant Latin American women in the Dutch context. There are some references to the lack of opportunities or to the struggles to integrate to Dutch social life but the interviewees do not seem to make a strong connection between the category of gender and how this affects their everyday life. This could be explained, partly, due to the internalization of certain traits of the hegemonic value system (Yuval-Davis 1994,

179) where gender is not seen as a relevant category to explain certain exclusions and oppressions.

In their narratives, they do problematize some notions and assumptions around issues of gender (for example how emancipation is seen in the Dutch context), however, it is not brought in as a category of analysis in their lived experiences; it is, in a way, invisible. Even they do not explicitly mention gender they all narrate gendered experiences.

“So, did I feel discriminated for being a woman? No. Or even harassed on the street? No. Neither did I feel mistreated or sexually harassed for being a woman. When I looked for a job no one told me “you are a woman”, they did not even look into what had I studied, they just looked into what I am skilled for and what my potential in the future is” (my translation)¹²

As a similar process to the one related to the category of race -that I will address in the next chapter-, women often do not identify acts of sexism other than those related to violent acts. As this interviewee points out, she has not gone through any straight forward and visible act of gender violence.

One explanation to why gender is something invisible could be, as Anthias points it out, “asking someone a question about their ‘identity’ often produces a blank stare, a puzzled silence or a glib and formulaic response” (Anthias 2002, 492). It could also be related to the fact that not only these women experience gender oppressions from their own home countries -due to living in patriarchal societies- but also need to adjust to the expectations of the Netherlands in regards to gender roles.

“As these concrete passages underline, female ‘new citizens’ in the Netherlands have to balance their multilayered and plural experiences of national and cultural belonging with the perceptions of the dominant Dutch culture” (Ghorashi y Vieten 2013, 732).

¹² Entonces, ¿me sentí discriminada por ser mujer? No, o en la calle misma, que alguien me haya maltratado por ser mujer no, acoso sexual tampoco. Cuando busqué trabajo tampoco me dijeron “sos mujer, no”, tampoco miraron qué cosas estudié y qué cosas no, miraron de qué soy capaz y qué puedo desarrollar en el futuro”

This could also be related to the fact that identity, as it has been explained in the theoretical framework, is not divided in different categories but is a mix of many traits that change with time, are dependent on context and respond to specific dynamics.

iii) *The role of women in the migratory process*

According to Anthias and Yuval-Davis,

“we can nevertheless locate five major (although not exclusive) ways in which women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices. These are: a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities; b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture ;d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences- as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories; e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggle” (Anthias y Yuval-Davis 1989, 7)

I will focus on the idea the authors develop in regards to the reproduction of ideology and culture. In this sense, it is important to highlight that all the women interviewed fall into at least one of the ways in which women participate in the diasporic process proposed by Anthias and Yuval-Davis. For example, most of them feel a great sense of responsibility on transmitting their children their homeland values.

“I teach them some Guarani, so little by little they start speaking it. It makes them laugh because the words are very different to Dutch or German. I also teach them children's songs in Spanish and the importance of sharing time and moments with their friends without looking at the time, the importance of playing” (my translation)¹³

¹³ “Les enseño también un poquito de guaraní, de a poco hablan, les da risa porque son palabras muy diferentes que el holandés o el alemán, cancioncitas de allá también, en español, las costumbres de juntarse entre amiguitos y estar toda la tarde sin mirar el reloj, de jugar”.

In the case of this interviewee, she transmits her children not only her language but also specific children songs, she acts as a cultural carrier (Anthias y Yuval-Davis 1989) in the sense that she gives a specific space in the upbringing of her children to learn cultural features (language, songs and traditions) of her home country.

Others describe this experience of reproducing values by actively avoiding their children being exposed to certain cultural ideas they do not agree with,

“That is what is most difficult, that one does not realize (...) The easiest way to explain it is by describing what we are not (...) there are certain values I have not taught them, so they are not that way” (my translation)¹⁴

In all of the cases, the narratives of the women are focused on transmitting or avoiding the transmitting certain cultural values, according to the place(s) they live or have lived in. Or even avoiding the incorporation of certain Dutch cultural traits. They act as boundary guards (Yuval-Davis y Stoetzler 2002) in the sense that they take the responsibility of deciding which cultural values will be part of their children’s education and which will not. This could also be explained by the fact that in most cases -three out of four- the partners of these women -fathers to their children- are European so by “default” it is easier for these children to incorporate and live by the cultural values of their fathers rather than their mothers. This might have an impact on the efforts these women make to assure their children will also learn the cultural values of their mothers as, of course, it is more complex to teach cultural values that they do not experience on the public sphere.

“When we speak of social locations we refer to how people are positioned within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based and other socially stratifying factors” (Pessar y Mahler 2003, 822)

Their sense of responsibility is such, that many of them claim they have learned Dutch for their children (in order to interact with teachers, for example).

¹⁴ “Justamente lo difícil es que una no se da cuenta. (...) La forma más fácil de explicarlo es diciendo lo que no somos (...) hay valores que nunca se los inculqué, entonces ellas no son así”

“I felt encouraged to teach people about my country, its history and its people. That was no interesting to me back how, everyone knows about it. While being here -the Netherlands- everybody asks and you start gathering information; they made me develop an interest for my country, my traditions and my culture” (my translation)¹⁵

In this case, the interviewee highlights her need to transmit information about her own country, about its history and traditions. She has actively learnt about it in order to share it with people who ask. Other interviewee highlights how, in a specific event -the World Cup – she took the opportunity to share her country’s history and football tradition with her colleagues.

In my assessment, even when these roles are not imposed and women might choose to develop them (Yuval-Davis 1994), it is often linked to a gendered conception of what women, specially mothers, should be responsible for -the transmission of cultural values to new generations-.

¹⁵ “Es un poco lo que impulsé a que conozcan acá, cómo es un paraguayo, la historia de Paraguay y no me interesaba tanto allá, todo el mundo sabe. Y estás acá y te preguntan y te pones a investigar, me hicieron desarrollar el interés y también poder difundir un poco la historia y la cultura de Paraguay, las tradiciones”

6. REFLECTIONS ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

One of the key aspects of this research is to identify how Latin American women negotiate their identity in the Dutch context. To my surprise, issues of race almost did not come up during the interviews. Despite that a set of questions targeted these topic, the four women interviewed do not consider having suffered “major” acts of discrimination neither from being Latin American nor for being women. They do mention some episodes or anecdotes where they have felt “othered” or being treated different to Dutch people, for example, but they do not consider these, acts of discrimination.

The interviewees were very reflective on their lives as migrant women, they were able to acknowledge the difficulties of their situation, were able to analyze Dutch culture and its intricacies. However, when asked about race specifically, most of them would declare they had not thought about that before, or would not go into a deep analysis of their situation as migrant women. This caught my attention because diasporic narratives are often mediated by the category of race and could be something the interviewees could come up with by themselves according to the level of analysis they would go into in other topics.

It is important to highlight before going into the analysis that there is a specificity in the Latino experiences as there is a wide diversity within the label “Latin American”,

“To put it straightforwardly, we simply don’t fit. Racialized identities in the North have long connoted homogeneity and easily visible identifying features, but this doesn’t apply to Latinos (...) We have no homogeneous culture, we come in every conceivable color, and identities such as “mestizo” signify the very absence of boundaries.” (Alcoff 2006, 229)

In the case of this quote, the author refers to the ‘North’ as the United States, however, I have chosen this quote as it can also refer to the ‘North’ as a global north, regardless of geographical details, as a specific -and unequal- power relation that occurs between a global north and a global south. As the author explains it, there is no homogeneity in the Latin American continent in regards to race and culture. The variety of origins (Europe, Asia, Native Americans), the different racial mixtures that have

taken place, the different languages, the unequal levels of development and other features make Latin American a very diverse continent.

Throughout this chapter I would like to give light and suggest some explanations to understand a certain level of invisibility of the categories of race and ethnicity.

i) Defining race and ethnicity

I have struggled myself to define what do I mean by race and what do I mean by ethnicity.

“Race is indeed a pre-eminently socio-historical concept. Racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded. Racial meanings have varied tremendously over time and between different societies.” (Omi y Winant 1994, 4)

In this sense, racial meanings are also embedded in certain discourses and are very much shaped politically by context. Racial labeling, or belonging to a certain racial(ized) group defines or at least shapes our social interactions, power relations and opportunities. I have thought of race as something related to biology, at least linked to some physical traits and had not thought about how it is embedded in historical and political contexts.

“...we mask the historical construction of racial categories, the shifting meaning of race, and the crucial role of politics and ideology in shaping race relations. Races do not emerge full-blown. They are the results of diverse historical practices and are continually subject to challenge over their definition and meaning” (Omi y Winant 1994, 7)

Racial categories are also historically constructed and are not reduced to biological characteristics. Up to this point, ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ could be something similar, nonetheless, there is a distinction between one and the other. ‘Ethnicity’ has a ‘common origin’ element which can be identified by the members who belong to a certain ethnic group. ‘Race’ is a much broader category that does not search for a common origin but for common and fixed traits. Belonging to a certain ethnic group entails sharing certain ethnic resources (Anthias 1992, 424) such as language, culture and a common origin

that belonging to a racial group do not. Ethnic belonging (Anthias 1992) is i) relational: it is constructed with others and by differentiating from others; it is ii) political: it is not taken from granted sense of belonging; iii) exclusionary: it implies boundaries.

“Ethnicity is seen as providing the individual with a sense of belonging, and with roots, and is non essentialist. Race, on the other hand, constructs the ‘other’ as ‘fixed’, natural, and hailed by the self-evident attribute of not being the same” (Anthias 1992, 427)

It is important to distinguish between the two concepts, however, this distinction does not come up in the conversations I had with the four women. Maybe because the questionnaire did not delve into these two separately or maybe because this distinction is more theoretical than experiential. On a practical level, it is not an easy task to differentiate between one and the other. Now that I have theoretically explained them, I will not draw the line between one and the other when analyzing these women’s experiences.

ii) Internalization of the hegemonic discourse

According to the interviewees, none of them has suffered any explicit act of discrimination in the Netherlands in regards to their race or ethnic belonging. They often express feeling isolated and excluded from certain spheres (especially when referring to the labor market) and that some differences are made between them and Dutch people (again, in job related spheres) but they do not consider these strong acts of discrimination. When the question “How is your experience as a Latin American woman living in the Dutch context? Have you suffered any acts of discrimination?” they often would answer no. In their own speeches, they would associate ‘act of discrimination’ with a violent and direct act to themselves either physically or verbally.

“I cannot even say they are racist, I have not been through that type of discrimination. I have not suffered anything, I do not see them like that, at least in my personal experience. Maybe there are some people... the fact

that they are cold does not affect me that much. I hope that at some point I can integrate, we choose to stay in the Netherlands” (my translation)¹⁶

As one of the interviewees suggests, she expresses she has not gone through any acts of discrimination against her. Her struggles to integrate to Dutch society (as she states, “I hope that at some point I will integrate “) are so because, in her words, people are “cold”, meaning distant. According to her experience, acts of discrimination could be dismissed and interpreted as a characteristic of Dutch people in general. In this case, certain internalizations of the hegemonic discourse or assumptions (Yuval - Davis 1994) about how a society works, acts as an obstacle to fight this exclusion the interviewee feels.

The other interviewees as well do not recognize acts of discrimination (in the understanding that those are violent acts) but do pinpoint certain contexts where they feel discriminated, for example that of the labor market.

“They identify us as a minority, people look at you in the streets and see you as a minority. I have to be honest, this is the first country where this happens to me, where I belong to an unwanted minority. I have never been attacked or have anything serious happen to me, but this did not happen when I lived in France. It has been a new experience, feeling that people are staring at you, feeling that people think that this is a type of migrant they would rather not have”.
(my translation)¹⁷

¹⁶ “No sé porque ni siquiera te puedo decir que son racistas, no me tocó vivir la parte de la discriminación, no sufrí nada, no los veo así, por lo menos en nuestro caso. Por ahí hay personas que...el hecho de que sean fríos es su modo, tampoco me influye demasiado. Tengo esperanza de que en algún momento me pueda llegar a integrar, nosotros elegimos quedarnos en Holanda”

¹⁷ “Pero sí te ven como una minoría, la gente te ve en la calle y te ve como una minoría. Tengo que ser honesta que este es el primer país donde me pasa eso, donde pertenecés a una minoría no grata, nunca he sentido una agresión por eso, o algo muy fuerte, pero en Francia no me pasó. Ha sido una experiencia novedosa, sentir que cuando la gente te está mirando, sentir que la gente piensa que es una inmigración que preferiría no tener”.

iii) Weak sense of belonging to the Latin American community

In general, the category of neither of race nor of ethnicity belonging is something they problematize around. It is not an explicit axis of their identity and, when asked, race is often equated with nationality. There is not a strong feeling of ethnicity but rather of nationality. If we understand ethnicity in terms of Yuval – Davis (1994, 182),

“Ethnicity is primarily a political process which constructs the collectivity and its interests, not only as a result of the general positioning of the collectivity in relation to others in the society, but also as the result of specific relationships of those engaged in “ethnic politics” with other within that collectivity” (Yuval – Davis 1994, 182)

There is a weak sense of belonging to a collective. As the author explains it, and in the case of the Latin American community, there is not a strong feeling of collectivity or common interests. Most of the women interviewed would consider themselves as belonging to their country -often mentioning their nationality as part of their racial or ethnical identification-. As ethnicity is not something mentioned, there is also no such feeling as a collective and experiences of discrimination might feel somehow disconnected from one another even if they appear in their speeches. Even when the four women interviewed do mention some acts of othering, most of them do not feel racialized in the context they live in.

Most of the interviewees had never thought about their racial or ethnic belonging and they expressed it. This could give some light on why the interviewees felt puzzled and strange when asked about their race or ethnicity. It could also be explained by the fact that certain narratives, especially those of location (Anthias 2002) are often described by what the person is not rather than what the personal actually is.

In their own narratives, which are specific to the context they are living in (Anthias 2002), race or ethnicity are not relevant categories to their understanding and positioning within the Dutch context.

iv) Racial positioning within the diasporic context. A model.

According to Anthias (2002), there is a specific set of intersections within the context of the migrant that define racial positioning within the diasporic context; the society of

migration, the homeland and the migrant group. In this sense, the society of migration - the Netherlands- does not often racialize the Latin American community; the Latin American community might be perceived as an invisible minority, which suffers from exclusion but is not racialized as other groups in the Netherlands; this could explain why they interviewees feel certain level of exclusion and otherness but do not see them as active acts of discrimination To start with, it is not a group that catches the attention neither in its size nor in its symbolic relation to Dutch society. None of the interviewees would on daily bases wear or carry any symbols differential to those present in the Dutch society. The homeland, in three of the four women interviewed was not a strong value they carried due to the fact that they had already been living in other countries rather than their homelands before coming to the Netherlands, in some cases for more than 20 years. The migrant group, the Latin American community, does not enjoy a strong representation in the public sphere, although some NGOs exist, there is a sense among the interviewees of a lack of representation and cohesive force among the community. All the above mentioned could explain why none of these women have developed a strong racial identity despite of feeling they are different to the Dutch in terms of race.

v) *Race as a dichotomic category*

Race can be perceived as the dichotomy between the categories of “black” and “white”. The white ethnicity (Alcoff 2006) might refer to other groups rather than the Latin American community (for instance Italians, Irish, Eastern European migrants) and ‘white’ would be a category that does not match the Latin American. However, in that scenario, all the interviewees would perceive themselves as white. As Alcoff explains it,

“... it becomes important to use the category white and to self-identify as white when the category black is present in order to establish one’s clear demarcation, and out of concern that a category like “mestizo” might be allowed to include black people. The category white is also used to separate out so-called whites from “Indians” a category that bears racialized meanings in Latin America”. (Alcoff 2006, 236)

When race is perceived as a dichotomic category and the two values that compose it are either black or white, it would be clear in the case of these women that they would

self-identify as white. As categories change contextually, the meaning of 'white' in the Netherlands has different connotations than the one it would have in Latin America.

In addition to this, diasporic subjects as the four women interviewed, are challenged to reflect on their race, gender and ethnic identity (Alexander 2010) due to the flexibility and lack of fixity of their living situation that could also explain why they do not have a specific answer to this question. As one of the interviewees, who has lived in other places as well as the Netherlands,

“When I arrived to Central America mi husband and I were the 'gringos'. The 'gringo' was the enemy (...) However here some people told me I could pass for Dutch, but, as I have been living as an underdog for so long here, it has been a challenge to have my self-confidence back (...) My father was black and he used to say, “they are a bit racist” and I would tell him that I had not noticed. He would answer “you are white”, and I was left wondering what he meant” (my translation) ¹⁸

In her experience, her racial identity has changed in relation to the location where she was living. So, for a certain context (Central American country she has lived in) she was “the enemy”, as the *gringo* -word use in Spanish to refer to a foreigner, most often referring to someone from North America -. Though this specific term is not an insult, it has a slightly negative connotation. However, when she moved to the Netherlands, people would say that she could pass as Dutch as a positive asset, that she could mingle in with the rest of the Dutch population and that that was something good. There is a specific level of complexity in her case as her father was a black man living in the United States and she is a white woman. In all these three scenarios (Central America, the Netherlands, and the United States) the symbolic significance given to her race changes in each of the contexts.

¹⁸ “Cuando llegué a Centroamérica éramos los gringos mi esposo y yo. Pero el gringo era el enemigo (...) aquí hay personas que me han dicho que podría pasar como holandesa pero como aquí he estado tanto tiempo de under dog, me ha costado mucho poner mi autoestima en su lugar, (...) mi padre era moreno, me decía “son un poco racistas” y yo les decía que no he notado nada y él me decía “tú eres blanquita” y yo decía “¿a qué se refiere?” “. (I2)

7. CONCLUSIONS

The stories of these four women is the story of many more. Their diasporic subjectivities are configured in a way that could resonate with so many more stories of gendered migration. More than personal anecdotes, these narrations entail a way of relating to the world; neither here nor there, neither belonging nor being a complete outsider. Negotiating everyday their positions in the Dutch context means revisiting themselves on and on.

The never-ending process of living as a diasporic subject means an understanding of identity as something both dynamic and relational. Thus, a process done by sharing and interacting with others in a specific context that does not have a beginning or an ending. This context is not set in a value free environment, it is mediated by certain discourses and power relations that, more often than not, are different to what is familiar. Throughout the conversation with these four women, they were very aware of the unfamiliar setting they are living in. Being capable of acknowledging these differences has been a key factor to their adaptation to Dutch society.

Their stories and anecdotes made me understand how identity is built and negotiated through every day performances and is mediated by cultural norms and values. Their stories made me realize it takes great courage to understand these entanglements and to be able to reshape and redefine oneself in this new environment. All of the elements that constitute their identity are pieces of a puzzle that might never be finished, with some pieces missing and others that will never fit.

The perceived traits of Dutch culture are often shared by most women regardless of their nationality, age and family constitution. This characterization of Dutch culture does not intend to be exhaustive or accurate; however, it shows the entanglements of certain power relations that take place in the Dutch context for these Latin American women. It was a peculiar experience to listen to how they see and live “dutchness”, and how this resonates with my own understanding of this culture.

In the four conversations I had with these women, they narrated gendered experiences of migration; however, none of them identifies gender as a relevant category that has an impact on their lives and opportunities. They are very much

responsible for the reproduction of cultural values (Anthias y Yuval-Davis 1989) and they feel a great sense of responsibility in doing so. They actively choose certain aspects of their cultures of origin to transmit to their children as well as those of Dutch society. One of the main reasons that I wanted to interview women with children was to delve into the processes of transmitting cultural values and norms. Their experiences matched my assumptions, acting as cultural carriers (Anthias y Yuval-Davis 1989), these women feel the responsibility to share their culture of origin with their families and other people, as well as to assimilate the (new) cultural context they live in. Their identity configurations are mediated by the material conditions than enable their subjectivities.

The lack of bringing gender in the analysis can be also related to the fact that both their country of origins as well as the Netherlands hold on to patriarchal discourses that push forward for the invisibility of gender as a key element.

Similar to the category of gender, race is not very relevant in their negotiations around identity. More often than not, they identify situations where they felt othered or different in terms of race; they, as well, narrate stories of everyday exclusions (from job opportunities, from casual interactions, from Dutch social circles). However, most of them claimed that they had not suffered any act of discrimination with the underlying idea that these acts assume violent actions. Certain assumptions around Dutch identity - for instance that Dutch people are open minded- might play against the identification of racists and exclusionary actions towards these women.

The biggest aim of this research process was trying to understand how these women negotiated their identities in the diasporic context. Through the narrations of their stories I was able to understand the complexities this entails and how much is at stake in this never-ending process. The lives of these women are mediated by an infinite number of entanglements. The negotiations around their identities are so complex and interwoven that it would be impossible to describe them all in this project. However, analyzing their everyday exposure to Dutch culture, their gendered experiences in migration and their positioning in regards to race and ethnicity offered me some hints to understand what entails to negotiate one's identity.

Now that it is somehow over, this thesis has been an excuse to understand myself as a diasporic subject. Feeling overwhelmed by this experience, I felt the need to listen to others and resonate with their stories. Often failing to understand my own

processes I tried to see myself in their narrations and to find the words to describe my own feelings. My own vulnerabilities and the shared experiences enabled us to go deep into what entails to live in an unfamiliar environment.

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APPENDIX

i) Informed consent¹⁹

CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO DE ENTREVISTA

____/____/2017

Yo, _____, por voluntad propia doy mi consentimiento para la participación en la entrevista que realizará Natalia Reyes en el marco de su proyecto de Tesis para la Universidad de Utrecht.

Manifiesto que recibí una explicación clara y completa del proceso de entrevista y el propósito de su realización. También recibí información sobre la grabación y la forma en que se utilizarán los resultados.

Hago constar que he leído y entendido en su totalidad este documento, por lo que en constancia firmo y acepto su contenido.

ii) Questionnaire interview

Introduction

-Where are you from? When did you arrive to the Netherlands?

-Was this your first time living abroad?

-Why did you come to the Netherlands? Did you think of other places beforehand?

-Who do you live with?

Arrival to the Netherlands

-How was your arrival to the Netherlands? Did you experience any difficulties?
(housing, health, paperwork, work)

-Did you know anyone before arriving to the Netherlands?

-Do/did you work/study in this country?

¹⁹ This consent guaranteed the anonymous status of the interviews. Some of the women were concerned about this because I already knew them from my internship experience. Due to this consent and the respect for their privacy, I decided not to include the transcribed interviews.

Cultural Differences

- Which are the main cultural differences you identify between your culture and the Dutch culture?
- What do you miss most about your country?
- Which elements of the Dutch culture have you incorporated to your daily life?
- In which aspects do you live similarly to the Dutch lifestyle?
- Which elements of your identity have you reinforced since you have been living in the Netherlands?
- Which elements of your culture of origin do you consider important to transmit to your children? And from Dutch culture? Do you consider their upbringing to be more Dutch, international or from your country of origin? Do you negotiate this with your partner? Do you experience any difficulties?
- Which are the positive and negative aspects of this type of upbringing?

Passing

- Do you see yourself in certain situations where you feel the need to hide that you are a Latin American woman?
- How would you define yourself in terms of race and/or ethnicity? Does that definition change within the context you find yourself in?
- How would you describe your experience as a Latin American woman in the Netherlands? Have you ever felt discriminated?

Community

- Do you have friends from both cultures (Dutch and your own)? Where do you feel most comfortable?
- Do you know any politician, social leader from the Latin American community in your city or in the Netherlands?
- Are you aware of any specific measures to include Latin Americans in schools or other institutions? (scholarships for example).
- Do you belong to any group, NGO, association of Latin Americans?