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PANSEXUALITY: A MODEL FOR SOCIETY?!

Exploring the Interwoven Dynamics of Sexuality and Gender Binarity, and its connection to Colonialism and Capitalism Through the Perspectives of Three Queer Individuals

MASTER THESIS

BY LEONIE RUHLAND

Supervisor: Berteke Waaldijk; Utrecht University (main supervisor)
and Angie Harris; University of Granada (supporting supervisor)

Submitted to Utrecht University, Department of Gender Studies, and
University of Granada, Instituto Universitario de Estudios de las Mujeres y de Género

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of:
Erasmus Mundus MA in Women's and Gender Studies (GEMMA)

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In Co-Creation with Shofie & B.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the interrelatedness of gender and sexuality, as well as their complex relationship with societal structures. It explores heteronormativity, monogamy, and gender norms within the larger frameworks of colonialism and capitalism through the stories of two people who identify as pansexual and non-binary. Along their experiences themes such as Blackness, bullying, and prejudices against queer people are tackled. The article suggests that normative ideas aimed at maintaining white superiority are entwined with power and recognition, sustaining colonial hierarchies and a climate of oppressive and restrictive identity formation. Starting the research with the hypothesis: "If we were all pansexual then (gender) identities wouldn't matter", the author challenges the idealization of normative social concepts by critically examining them together with the research participants. Their role should be highlighted as being co-creators of theoretical insights, emphasizing the importance of learning from trans experiences to broaden perspectives and transcend societal norms. The thesis additionally addresses alternative concepts like plurisexuality and communal families.

Esta tesis explora la interrelación del género y la sexualidad, así como su compleja relación con las estructuras sociales. Explora la heteronormatividad, la monogamia y las normas de género dentro de los marcos más amplios del colonialismo y el capitalismo a través de las experiencias de dos personas que se identifican como no binarias y pansexuales. El artículo argumenta que las ideas normativas destinadas a mantener la superioridad blanca están entrelazadas con el poder y el reconocimiento, sustentando las jerarquías coloniales. La autora cuestiona la idealización de estas creaciones sociales examinándolas críticamente. La tesis también analiza ideas alternativas como las familias comunitarias y la plurisexuality. Las personas participantes funcionan como cocreadores de ideas teóricas, enfatizando la importancia de aprender de las experiencias trans para ampliar perspectivas y trascender las normas sociales.

Keywords: pansexuality, queerness, sexuality, gender identity, Blackness, society, colonialism, capitalism, monogamy, plurisexuality, marriage, nuclear family

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Content Warning

This thesis inhabits the telling of experiences of violence, racism, sexism, and other discrimination forms. Besides explicit language of violence it also includes explicit language of sexuality. Sometimes it might reproduce a binary narrative. However, the author is aiming at using this primarily in the required context or to label it.

Anti-Plagiarism Statement

I declare that this assessment item is my own work except where acknowledged, and has not been submitted for academic credit previously in whole or in part.

Acknowledgements

I am truly grateful to the people who continue to encourage me when I'm down. As one of those in the first row, my partner is there for me through every mood swing, every hour of tears, and every furious thought I throw towards him. I cannot truly express enough how much love and support he gives me with that.

I am also deeply thankful for the gift of having parents who always got my back and a sister who likewise loves me unconditionally. Also, the aunts, uncles, and cousins who show that even with significant differences, reliable ties can still exist.

And of course, my family beyond – the many flatmates who have influenced me with their unique personalities and knowledge. And my friends who sometimes come and go but always give me the care and space I need to be and grow.

Finally, I'd like to give a big shout out to all the queer people who brighten up our world and from whom I can learn day by day. Thanks to B. and Shofie for your strength and willingness to share your thoughts with me!

This is for you!

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1. INTRODUCTION

It might have all started with sex. What a surprise. Since our society seems to have a very weird focus on sexuality, mine might not be a very unique experience. But I feel now as if sex could be where it all starts and ends. May it be either in terms of sexuality or in terms of our gender.¹

For me, the latter came rather unconsciously whereas the first dropped in with a bang. When I was a juvenile, I was more of a nerd and often bullied for my style (I had none), behavior (I was taking too much space), and body (I used to be thick). Most of the time I swallowed the bullying comments. I did not go to my parents, it didn't feel like I had friends who could support me in my pain, and my teachers were of no use whatsoever. This damaged my self-esteem, leaving me insecure about my body and my worthiness of love, which affected my views on sexuality. In middle school, I didn't think anyone would want a relationship with me, even though it was a common topic among my peers.

After middle school, I changed. I grew taller, slimmed down, and my hair stopped looking like Hermione's of the first Harry Potter movies. I ended some toxic friendships and had a brief relationship, which sparked my interest in sex. I started having sex frequently and felt an attraction to women, though at the time, this was seen as merely an "exotic experience". Back then, being gay, bisexual, or pansexual wasn't widely discussed. I mostly slept with men because I was more insecure around women. During university, I engaged in many sexual encounters, accepting bruises, shame, and pain for the fleeting high of feeling wanted and loved. No one asked what was going on, but everyone had an opinion. I was labeled promiscuous, even by my feminist friends, while my male friends were never questioned. My female body was judged differently for the same actions, a gender difference I didn't understand for a long time.

¹ I do acknowledge that not everyone's identity or experience is primarily defined by sex or sexual relationships. For example, asexual people may not be sexually attracted or have a different connection with sexuality than people with sexual attraction. However, I am looking for explanations about certain societal structures and these are, as you will discover along this text, greatly connected with sex.

I am a white, able-bodied, queer, German woman in my thirties. I wasn't raised as a "normal girl". My parents were role models in equal representation for they shared household duties equally, with my dad taking care of me and my sister while my mom worked. We had mixed clothes, short hair, and no gendered toys. My parents also didn't emphasize material possessions (for example, I didn't and still don't care about clothing brands), and nudity was normalized, so I wasn't ashamed of my body. Their upbringing made me self-sufficient and clear about my desires. I never questioned my gender because it didn't matter.

Things changed when I went to school and faced bullying. My shame came from my environment, not my family. Magazines, commercials, and peers made me feel I had to act "girly". I hated it and became confused about my gender. I lost my confidence, body love, and self-esteem. Later, I believe I tried to regain them through sexual behavior, seeking validation from men to reassure my femininity. But it didn't really work.

Now, why do I tell all of this? First, I believe that many people share this kind of experience, especially non-cis²-males. I hope some of you can relate a little to the position from which I write the following text. Second, this very sexual period of my life remains critical for me in understanding societal inequities. I struggled with judgments about my behavior, wondering if I or society was to blame. Reflecting on my upbringing, I realized I had internalized societal standards that clashed with the lessons my parents had offered me. This stigma affected my self-esteem and identity, revealing how sexual activities shape our perceptions of life, relationships, and gender identities. This reflection has brought me to the wish to intensify my knowledge about societal structures, leading me to the research of this very thesis.

Alongside years of therapy and many conversations with friends, I engaged in self-reflection and feminist literature. During the pandemic, I read numerous books to help me treat myself with kindness and understand my desires and needs more honestly. Through the GEMMA program and my thesis research, I have come to believe that gender binarity and heterosexuality are legacies of colonialism and capitalism, a perspective I will explore using authors like Lugones (2008) and Vergès (2021) amongst others. In my opinion, these concepts harm society by reducing solidarity and tolerance, pushing us into narrow boxes

² I translate a definition from a very informative German gender-book for you: "A cisgender person's gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth" (Läuger 2021, p. 10).

that restrict our ability to accept and empathize with behaviors outside these limits. I long for a society that embraces all forms of existence and argue that the ideals of masculinity and femininity have failed, leading to problems with self-esteem and mental health.

Sarah Ahmed (2000) says that gender identity is always a matter of relations. Therefore, it makes sense to look at it in context of sexuality. I started this research with the thesis: "If we were all pansexual, gender identity wouldn't matter." This articulation between both will be explored throughout the thesis: How are sexuality and gender perspectives interdependent and interrelated and how do such societal ideals affect individuals? And what alternatives could we think about?

To grasp the impact of societal standards, I think it's crucial to listen to those who challenge them, often marginalized for diverging from norms. They must educate themselves on their identities outside of formal education and create safe places to affirm their presence. I believe they are most suited to investigate how societal ideals of sexuality and gender affect individuals. Therefore, I've had conversations with two individuals rejecting binary identities in gender and sexual orientation, aiming to explore their challenges in a world that socially, economically, and institutionally excludes them. I see these discussions as co-creations of hypotheses, bringing the perspectives of my participants into my study, so they're not like standard interviews. This thesis will be outlined in these discussions. A number of ideas were mentioned as being essential to comprehending the dynamics of our society in context of gender and sexuality. I will go over each of those ideas in detail in the upcoming chapters, taking into account what each of the two participants mentioned. You will find that although the topics of gender identity and sexuality will only be covered in detail in later chapters, they will always be present in the other chapters.

In what follows, I first introduce my methodology in Chapter 2, followed by an overview of the research participants in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, based on findings from the empirical conversations, I highlight significant systems and concepts related to my research questions through individual chapters:

I begin with the historical developments and effects of colonialism because one of my participants is Black and hails from a nation with a colonial past; as a result, their colonial legacy played a significant role in our conversations (4.1). This will include the influences of colonialism on gender identities (4.1.1) and a look at pre-colonial cultures to show how

normalized ideas differ from pre-colonial norms (4.1.2). This section also explains why discussing Blackness is essential to understanding gender and sexuality.

Next, I explore societal frameworks that were of great interest in the conversations with both my participants: monogamy and the nuclear family (4.2.3); gender identity (4.2.4); and sexuality (4.2.5). To fully understand these, my participants and me came to the understanding that it is relevant to examine capitalist structures (4.2.1) and heteronormativity (4.2.2).

Chapter 4.3 addresses the impact of violence on our perceptions of social concepts since both participants experienced a great deal in this regard. One extensively through racism, the other through bullying. In Chapter 5, my participants and I explore new relational models, including pan- and plurisexuality (5.1) and the queer-communal family as an alternative to the nuclear family (5.2). Finally, Chapter 6 concludes with a summary of the theories discussed as well as insights from our last conversation reflecting on the entire thesis. Additionally, there will be some final thoughts that might help the reader to get a positive prospect to work with. I'll share some key words that the participants provided with my reader because I found them to be incredibly helpful in thinking about the topic presented here: In chapter 6.A. we will embrace queerness; chapter 6.B. includes how new ideas can be stratified and 6.C. stresses the importance of self-worth.

Before we start, I would like to share how incredibly difficult I have found it to sort these things. I attached some research mappings I did in between the research in the appendix in order to share with you part of the process of me sorting my strain of thoughts. They visualize that there is no direct chronology of the themes. Thus, sometimes, some sub-chapters will come after each other even though you should read them simultaneously. It might be possible to read them in another order.

2. METHODOLOGY

„Feminism’s greatest contribution is an epistemological shift away from androcentric, boundary-specific methods that enforce traditional binaries—rational over emotional, authoritative voices over voices of the oppressed, public over private, transcendental truths over everyday experiences—toward refusing binaries—thought as rational and emotional, multiple views and truths, everyday private and public worlds” (Crawley 2012, p. 151).

With following a feminist line of research, my participants should be viewed as co-creators of expertise and as an essential component of developing theory. Leaning on a constructivist perspective of research, I believe data is never just found and collected but always shaped through the interaction and relationship between researcher and the participants (Charmaz 2021, p. 213). Therefore, I want my participants to have a say in what I produce with their knowledge until this paper is printed. I also want to really understand their life experience according to my research questions which is hard when you only do one little interview. This is why I’ve decided to do several conversations with fewer people. I knew the two people I chose and I did so because I found the impressions I had from both of their attitudes towards a hetero-focused, binary society fascinating. Both do not have an academic background but they educated themselves in order to understand themselves and following their own interests. They both live in Germany but they are not both German. Their locations allowed me to visit them in person which worked out in favor of the conversations since I believe personal contact always improves an understanding of each other. I am deeply grateful for the things both participants were willing and able to share with me. Not everyone is capable of such a self-reflection as I could experience with my two participants. I believe some of this must have been hard to tell and I know how exhausting it can be to relive things like that. I do my best to do justice to their stories and hope you, the reader, can take as much out of them as I did.

Based on the idea of grounded theory which is “a systematic method of conducting research that shapes collecting data and provides explicit strategies for analyzing them” (Charmaz & Thornberg 2021, p. 305) the conversations took part in three steps: **The first step** was a thorough overview talk about my participants’ past, their families and friends, and how they view and critique their life realities. In these conversations I mostly listened and let them talk. They were about them, not about me, and formed the base to work out what

aspects of their life and knowledge arose to be intriguing, illuminating and worth to digging deeper in regard to my research question. This mirrors the principle of grounded theory which inherits the idea that by using a continuous technique for data collection and analysis, researchers will systematically focus on the most crucial issues in their field of interest. Contrary to the presumption that data collection and analysis should not be done simultaneously, the researcher does both in a continuous cycle and is able to concretize its thoughts as a result (Charmaz & Thornberg 2021, p. 307). Grounded theory avoids prior assumptions and strategically crafted interviewing standards. Instead, it focuses on the experiences of research participants and develops its concepts through continuously narrowing down the data in repeatedly contrasting interviews and analytics (Charmaz & Belgrave 2012, p. 348).

Leaning on this, **step two** is a conversation that took place about two months after the first and in which I came to my participants with a more focused questionnaire including topics I wanted to talk more closely about. Creating this questionnaire had already included a) analyzing the first conversation and creating through it several tags that would lead to my main topics. And b) using those tags to engage into theoretical research. For the most part those tags (like colonialism, racism, gender identity, sexuality...) also informed the following chapter titles. Shofie seemed to have a vast library in her thoughts, so she mentioned some of the authors I decided to read for the theories. Others I read as a comparison to what my participants were telling me. But a lot I had already read before this research and therefore had informed my approach towards these conversations. In this sense, I will use theorists such as Judith Butler or Susan Serano since they have influenced my own way of thinking. However, there is also a ton of material that I just happened to come across in my journey for understanding myself; some of it will be incorporated into this thesis, but some of it will also serve as basic background information without being specifically mentioned. This said I want to suggest the book "Bisexuality in Europe" by Maliepaard & Baumgartner from which I extract a definition of pansexuality. Personally, I use pansexuality as a term that opposes both heterosexuality and monogamy. For me, it refuses the binary order and opens up to any individual no matter how they define themselves. Maliepaard & Baumgartner argue that instead of focusing on the gender binarity, people who identify as bisexual can better understand their sexuality and see themselves in a different light by contrasting monosexuals (straight, gay, or lesbian) with plurisexuals (such as bisexual or pansexual people). This,

according to Maliepaard & Baumgartner offers a move “away from understanding bisexuality as a middle ground that reproduces binary understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality” (2021, p. 10). Because of that I would like for you to understand the term “bisexuality” in quotes used in this thesis as synonymous to pansexuality.

I shared with Shofie my uneasiness about using theorists from the U.S. in order to explain Shofie’s experiences in Indonesia. They responded that they think that while their grandfather wasn’t born into plantations but forced labor, which played out differently than in the US, the theoretical conclusions are largely similar. Using theory to produce other theory and articulate new ideas doesn’t seem an issue for Shofie who also leans often on U.S. Black thinkers (C2, Shofie, l. 852-862). Since I am analyzing their experiences, I agree with Shofie and keep using U.S. theories to partially describe Western institutions in general.

Some quotes are corrected with the [sic!] mark in order to be grammatically correct. I want to acknowledge that my own educational, social, and historical background influenced how I conduct the conversations as well as shared experiences will also contribute to the research findings (Charmaz & Belgrave 2012, p. 349). As Tania Jain points out, being a member of a marginalized group myself, the themes I investigate can have an impact on myself and my thinking which consequently will also inform my approach to conducting theories (2017, p. 571f.).

Since my writing involves personal thinking processes, I will use autoethnography, which Sara L. Crawley defines as "a kind of self-interview" that balances empirical science, postmodernist deconstruction, and the activist goal of recording marginalized voices (2012, p. 143). Crawley argues this method is valuable in interviews as it considers the researcher's bodily reactions and consciousness. Influenced by Black feminist thought, autoethnography recognizes that narrative and discourse shape identities rooted in historical and contextual frameworks (Ibid, p. 153). Crawley asks: “Can we know if what is spoken by one person is understood by any listener?” (Ibid., p. 145). This question will guide my work: I will develop theories based on what my participants share and my own interpretations. However, to give my participants also the chance to include their point of view about my final understandings, **step three takes place:**

After sorting the second conversation with relevant tags and combining the material with related theories, I develop conclusions to my research questions. In a final meeting, I

share these preliminary findings and theories with my participants, allowing them to provide feedback and objections. These “evaluation talks” are included in this thesis, ensuring participants to have control over their experiences. Further, this three-step approach incorporates ethical mindfulness, addressing contextual ethics and participant confidentiality throughout the research process while leaning on the concept of situated research ethics: “Using a situated research ethics perspective allows a more dynamic and complex notion of confidentiality, enabling research that is ethically rich and rigorous” (Heggen & Guillemin 2012, p. 475). By maintaining ongoing communication and adapting to participant needs, I embrace process consent, allowing participants to comment on their confidentiality throughout the study (Adams 2015).

The preparation of the conversations is based on the concept of in-depth interviews, which suit grounded theory methods well. Questions need to be broad enough to encompass various experiences and specific enough to capture the participant's unique perspective (Charmaz & Belgrave 2012, p. 351). In-depth interviews allow an open-ended, extensive study of the interviewee's significant experience and insight (Ibid., p. 348). These spontaneous exchanges consider that words are not disconnected from social and historical contexts (Charmaz & Thornberg 2021, p. 317). Speech and language have social connotations, and I aim to uncover “their truth” rather than an objective “truth” (Tanggaard 2009, p. 1504). It is their own reality of their experiences that interest me.

I recognize the significance of participants' bodies as multiple, diverse, and situated (Ellingson 2012, p. 527). Haraway's notion of situated knowledge challenges research objectivity, emphasizing the importance of the researcher's viewpoint and methodology (Haraway 1988, p. 581). She critiques the hidden biases of heterosexual, white, male Western viewpoints as “the god trick.” Every theory stems from a specific viewpoint, considering the researcher's socialization and background. Therefore, clarifying my sociocultural insights and theoretical implications is crucial for a critical analysis (Elliston 2005, p. 44). As a female-identified, white, abled European middle-class academic, my experiences and understandings influence my theories. Although I share certain experiences with my participants since I identify as queer, their life experiences are distinct from mine, which helps me retain an open mind as I am not overly influenced by that lifestyle (Hesse-Biber 2007, p. 142). Further, I understand that I as a white person from the former First World may not completely understand the colonial wound even after I become aware of how

social norms are imposed and injustice it created (which will be explored more closely in this paper). That's alright since there are no universal experiences (Mignolo 2016, p. Xi). I acknowledge that even though I engage in the process of detaching myself from modernity myths, racial identities and hierarchies can be recreated within the context of research itself (Best 2003, p. 898).

I will especially keep in mind a guide for non-transsexuals saying that I should pay attention to what I learn about myself by observing trans lives, rather than what I learn about them (Hale 1997). Analyzing transness for me does not mean to understand trans people but to learn from their experiences how to broaden my life perspectives. Which is also why I believe my choice of approaching my research question of how societal ideals of sexuality and gender affect individuals through listening to individual experiences as perfectly fitting. To me, understanding a society's complexities comes from personal experiences combined with theories that help to explain the structures that underlie them.

I view my research as an ongoing journey, initiated years ago, one that I aim to enrich by adding foundational knowledge by collaborating with my participants. I hope that with the way I choose to approach this thesis, knowledge is produced like Haraway's metaphor of her "balls of yarn" describes: Through loosening and entangling connected threads get unfolded and lines of ideas and concepts become visible. This can "lead to whole worlds" (Markussen et al., p. 338).

3. THESIS PARTICIPANTS

To introduce the three individuals who are making theory in this paper, I've decided to give you a few of their experiences first before discussing them on a theoretical basis. I either let them speak for themselves in terms of listing quotes, or I sum up stories they told. To keep the reading flowing and comprehensible, I gave myself permission to shorten some lines, eliminate "ehms," and repeat terms from discussions that weren't necessary to grasp the subject. The translation of B.'s words always aims to capture the essence of what B. said in German. I spoke in English with Shofie. I also marked the quotes in colors for a better overview. Shofie's are purple, B.'s green, mine are blue. The citations are marked (C1/C2/C3, Shofie/B., l. XY), which lists the talks that correspond, the participant, and finally the line that contains the full statement. You can always verify them in the attached transcriptions.

Shofie

I went three times South of Germany to meet Shofie. Shofie defines themselves as a "trans non-binary femme" and originally comes from Indonesia. Shofie went to Germany in 2021 where she visits a language school and does dance performances. Currently, Shofie is struggling with a legalization process and fears to get deported. Their gender process started there once realizing that the assigned male gender did not fit. For a short time once arriving in Germany, Shofie went back into the closet to navigate the racial aspects in the new country. Quickly though they realized the impossibility of that and started to identify as non-binary. Within the conversations Shofie mentions that they would like to be a woman but an own version of it and that they would be the happiest when being misgendered as a she. We will come to the meaning of this later but for now let me point out that I will switch between both pronouns they/them and she/her for Shofie throughout this paper because I'd like to address this desire. I have met Shofie only once before these conversations and only online when I requested her for a workshop about transformative justice. There, I learned about some of her anti-capitalist, decolonialist, and gender critical ideas and they clearly stuck with me since I had to immediately consider her when coming up with the idea for my thesis.

Shofie was born in Indonesia. Shofie had to move a lot, within Indonesia and countries around. They told me how they would rarely see their father because he would

often work in another city or island. Unlike the other adults in their family, Shofie got along well with their mother's side grandfather, with whom they used to live. Shofie often had to take care of their five younger siblings. In the following quotes, Shofie reflects on the complexities within her family, both on unstable financial situation and societal expectations. She says that they resulted in her confusion about life ideas and structures. This was intensified by her parents' desires to conform to societal standards of beauty (light skin) and gender (born a boy, behave like one!) which they would discipline through violent means:

"That was also part of the story of the family. How this juggling who to support. And it's not like my mother had a stable job. There is a lot of precarity, there is a lot of structures that emerged out of that precarity. Not necessarily bad but it's something that I get to see and be confused with" (C1, Shofie, l. 73-77).

"It seems to me like my father really wants to be an Indonesian. A pure - quote on quote - Indonesian. An indigenous. And I hate him for that, a lot. They bleached me, I remember this, they literally bleached the shit out of me" (Ibid., l. 391-394).

"I copied the handwriting of this neighbor of ours. She is a woman. And I thought she had a very beautiful handwriting. So I copied hers. And I remember my mom being very mad at that. Because she said that is a girly handwriting" (Ibid., l. 308-310) "I guess the earliest memory I have is being mad at for doing an altar for (...) this Bollywood actor Sha-Rukh Khan. (...) I was playing brides basically with him. And I remember that was heavily, heavily punished" (Ibid., l. 426-432).

"When I say fight, I mean something that involves a belt, slaps and punches. (...) There is never merely verbal things. (...) He [the father] was like a machine with the belt" (Ibid., l. 320-325) "we've been fighting a lot" (Ibid., l. 231).

Shofie further discusses her school experiences, including being refused entrance to higher courses despite her academic achievements (C1, Shofie, l. 566-577), being banned from clubs or mocked for crafts made out of garbage material (C2, Shofie, l. 568-584), and being falsely blamed for her parents' inability to pay school fees (C1, Shofie, l. 616-627). With connecting those experiences with her race, these experiences left her feeling insulted and marginalized underscoring the structural difficulties she encountered in education.

"Marx has a very tender place in my heart. He has a lot of fucked up shit, yes, but, I come to really like his language and I can now formulate the class thing with race and gender. And this assemblage is what allows my enunciation. (...) it allowed me to enunciate the conditions of life that was imposed upon me, and the condition that I wish for myself, and the wish of how much I want to live (...). My question is: Why do I need to die? It seems like I have to. And I don't want to. I want to fucking live. And it takes a very funny route this want to live. Because at one point it also included that I wanted to kill myself" (C1, Shofie, l. 654-670).

B.

B. was similar easy to think about for this work. I knew B. much better, we used to live together for a few months in a shared flat along with nine other people just before I had left Germany for my Masters. We also shared some experiences within the field of awareness work, an approach that supports people who experienced discrimination and violence at parties. I got to know B. as a person who is quite critical of any traditional, normative lifestyle and who has a high sensitivity for people who have experienced pain and violence. B. left school when they were 17 and started an education as a cook. They had to terminate it, too because of severe depressions. Today B. works in a restaurant as a waiter. B. is a native German and has been outspoken about their gender identity for a number of years. They were born a woman and identified as such until they began their transformation in 2014, living as trans-male first, then non-binary to the current time. I say I knew B. before yet I did not know their past as much as they were willing to share with me for these research conversations. I was very nervous talking to B. because I was afraid it might interfere in our friendship. But the feeling moved quickly and I got to know B. only much better.

Within the conversations, B. often describes how they were bullied and socially isolated because they didn't conform to gender norms. They think back to their early attempts to break free from traditional social structures and their insatiable curiosity:

“I actually started when I was 20 to consciously cut myself off from social structures and I've always learned to want to question everything” (C1, B., 875-878).

“I didn't really have any friends. I was bullied a lot. Because the gender norms of course were even worse in elementary school and I just wanted to play with the boys. (...) They didn't want to play with me. Well, and neither did the girls, because I didn't want to play with them either. What they did was boring” (C1, B., l. 345-354).

“I also had a phase in which I lay in bed for a long time at night and wished that I was a boy when I woke up, but not yet because I had the thought that I wanted to be a boy, but because I noticed that the fat boys weren't bullied as much as the fat girls” (C1, B., l. 821-825). “[My siblings] bullied me, too. My brother especially, he always just called me fatty. That means I came out of school and then it always continued like that [at home]. We also often fought, like, a piece of my tooth broke out or objects were used” (C1, B., l. 194-198).

B. further spoke of curious and rebellious moments in the classroom, including sexual doctor games with other kids or bringing earthworms inside and digging them into plants (C1, B., l. 311-323). As for their parents, B. talks about a messy divorce between their parents when B.

was very young. This resulted in B. and their siblings living with their mother, whose new partner would turn out to be abusive and violent. Until today, B. is not certain if that man also abused them. The relationship culminated with the man raping B.'s mother and attempting to kill her, forcing the mother to receive round-the-clock inpatient care. B. calls both this and the experience of their parents' divorce a "traumatic experience" and a "big break" of family and living structures (C1, B., l. 53-103). After this experience, the mother was barely a figure of support and the siblings would compete for their mothers' love of which there is only a little bit of love left that can be mustered. B.'s father wasn't of help either which resulted in feelings of depression and being misunderstood:

"I expressed suicidal thoughts when I was eight or nine. Because at the time – that was my reason, or what I could explain to myself – I was very overweight and I was teased, bullied very much for it. (...) I've been depressed since my early childhood" (C1, B., l. 145-150).

[The therapists said] "Okay, you're fat, so you probably need to lose weight. But that was always a coping mechanism for me. I was an absolutely misunderstood being at the time and all I actually needed was a person who would take me seriously. And sees my suffering. And acknowledges that" (C1, B., l. 158-162).

Leo

I told you a lot about myself in the introduction, so I'll keep it brief here. I am quite cautious to define myself, whether in terms of gender or sexuality. I believe I do not represent the "ideal woman," and I am not monogamous. Although I am sexually attracted to the feminine body, I am shy around non-male people. I suppose that's because I believe there's a lot more depth, sensitivity, and intricacy. In general, my connection with my sexuality is a really strange one since I haven't learned to have a healthy relationship with my own body, therefore it's not easy to love myself enough to accept sexuality. I guess all of my experiences have left me puzzled, which is why I'm so interested in theories.

"I keep thinking, theoretically I understood and I want to change all of that, I want to break [heteronormative rules] down. Which at the same time is still often really difficult, because I also grew up in those structures. I want to describe myself as queer and sometimes I'm afraid to do that because I'm afraid of queer eyes that see: "but you have a heterosexual partner." Or now: "but you've moved in together as partners, you're currently living the normative life." And then I feel a certain shame somehow that I don't want to feel because I think that, yes, fine, but I also love my partner exactly because he doesn't correspond to this masculinity that is so toxic and that is so modeled" (C1, B., l. 484-494).

4. SOCIETAL IDEALS

B.: "And then I went to the 'JungLesbenZentrum'. I still have goosebumps because that was an incredibly important moment for me. The fact that I had access to the queer youth center, was an incredibly important moment in my self-development" (C1, B., l. 555-559).

"And then I identified with my community, so to speak, for the first time. And identify with the fact that I am part of a marginalized group. And from this I also understand that there were injustices that had an effect on me, for which I had done nothing. And from it I created my own worldview pretty quickly" (Ibid., l. 865-875).

Shofie: "I was aware of the influences that was in me. That there were many thinkers that I was thinking with and many people that I was thinking in theories. (...) They are seen not so much as a negation of one another, but as a way through, as an opening, as a narrow opening, in between, so to say" (C2, Shofie, l. 14-22).

Leo: "I was actually glad that you spoke through some other theories, some other voices. Because for me, this made such a nice relatability because I also read most of them. (...) I mean, maybe we lean on other theories, but finally it's our own what we make out of it" (Ibid., l. 36-42).

The above quotes demonstrate the importance of intellectual curiosity, critical engagement, and community support in the quest of self-awareness and intellectual autonomy. B.'s experience prompts them to confront societal injustices and construct their own worldview. Shofie considers influences of theories as complimentary rather than antagonistic, providing a deeper understanding of complex ideas and viewpoints. Whereupon I highlight the value of individual interpretation and combination in creating distinctive viewpoints.

The two participants stressed that employing ideas related to identity development and impacts had aided in their understanding of their challenges. One more than the other, yet both returned time and again to concepts and ideas that could account for their non-normative positions. You will therefore read about all the thoughts and ideas that were essential for them to better understand themselves, as well as for me, in the sections that follow.

After all my studies, I am astonished how much of it would have been of great use when I was younger. I am past thirty now and I can't believe I went through all that violence and insecurity clueless about what I know now. School really teaches you shit if I may say that. It doesn't provide you at all to live your proper truth within the reality we live in.

“We don't get the message at all that it's so incredibly important to build a good relationship with yourself. That's not part of our social development” (C1, B., l. 949-951).

My realization strengthened through the conversations that knowing history is intensely important to understand today's structures of society and with it to understand yourself. And not only the holocaust as German schools love to obsessively teach. Don't get me wrong, this has to be part of school, too, but likewise I feel that we need to teach children much more the heritage of racism, sexism, ableism and so on. I hope to be able to explain you the reason for it in this thesis.

The development of how we become as we are now and how we understand things like gender identity, sexuality, race or cultures are not results of chronological happenings. Most of them happened simultaneously and over a long period of time. We cannot say something like: “In 1546 there was a person who said: Look, from now on there are two different genders and I call them man and woman.” That's obviously not what happened. But because the creation of social identities happened slowly, continuously and very secretly so to say, it is hard today to believe that this thing “gender identity” or “heterosexuality” might not always have been there. So, where to start to explain all of this?

Throughout the conversation process I extracted three main aspects that in my view build the foundations of today's understanding of life concepts such as gender and sexuality. **First**, ideas like gender identity, sexual orientation, and blackness were invented to establish a social and racial hierarchy in which the white Western man is at the top. This happened primarily during colonialism for which is why I will start with this topic. **Second**, structures of partnership and kinship are social frames to uphold this hierarchy and likewise places that own a high influence to our evolvement of identities. And **third**, forms of oppressive violence such as bullying and racism are tools used to keep adapted social structures alive. How I came to this conclusion will be investigated within the upcoming pages.

4.1. Colonialism

“By the 20th century in Europe, by the end of it, identity can no longer be defined internally. It has no longer any internal consistency that is bearable for anyone who wants to continue living. So, identity is therefore defined from the outside. I trace this back to (...) the early days of colonialism, where the simultaneity of the construction of the colonized is helping to define the construction of the colonizer. The dark other and the white self. But not only that, there are other axes also” (C2, Shofie, I. 179-185).

In this chapter, I will discuss how colonialism influenced the societal principles we live by today. The realization why this is an important topic to talk about quickly emerged in the conversations with Shofie. I already had the impression that this would be of great interest for my research after my academic program. I understood that colonialism has a lot to do with how we define identities today. That’s what Shofie talks about in the quote above. As a Black person who grew up in a colonized country, Shofie had studied this issue a lot. Shofie tells me that their grandfather had introduced them to many authors who helped them to articulate their experience they made because of their skin color. Experience like these:

“There are several occasions, which I remember fleetingly attributing to blackness before it is then captured. The explanation itself is captured to become something shameful like laziness or lateness or other qualities that blackness is associated with through imposition. (...) for instance, when you do well at school, like your peers, you are the one who is accused of cheating, no one else. Even when there is no evidence that I was cheating, it's always attributed that I am giving other people opportunities to cheat. So the explanation is always secondary for me. Very early on, I understand that it doesn't matter what you do. It will always mean something else, because I don't have a say about what I mean” (C2, Shofie, I. 557-565).

Shofie describes certain behavior or certain attributes that are automatically (sometimes subconsciously) connected with blackness. Shofie says: “There is this dear fact about white men that they like to think, that they're very individual and highly personalized. (...) But that itself shows up in white men in opposition to something. In opposition to women, in opposition to queerness, in opposition to Blackness” (C2, Shofie, I. 330-335). Shofie relates this opposition to theories of Frantz Fanon: “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon 2002, p. 110). Fanon describes how the interdependency of blackness and colonialism is a heritage that accompanies Black individuals until today: „I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics” (Fanon 2002, p. 112). Fanon says here that the skin color stands for

everything the colonial settler had put on it in order to manifest his superiority. „I am the slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance” (Ibid., p. 116). As a white person, I didn't understand the dimensions of what Fanon says for a long time. But I have read some literature about Black feminism that helped me out here. For example, “A Decolonial Feminism” by Françoise Vergès. The author also leans on Fanon who claimed that because Europe was founded on stealing the global riches this wealth is also the wealth of the Third World. This would mean that Europe is essentially the product of the Third World. Vergès writes that to blur this slavery and colonialism are continuously tried to be overlooked by the colonial states. “This implies a desire to erase these peoples and their countries from the analysis of conflicts, contradictions, and resistance” (Vergès 2021, p. 9). Let's take a look at how colonialism and blackness intertwine:

“Up to 15th century, up to 20th century, you have this internal and external play of what an identity is. (...) Capitalism is still trying to congeal as a separate entity from feudalism. The capitalist class is still coming into consciousness. And it doesn't come into consciousness in a day or night, it comes into consciousness in centuries through the constant act of colonization and expansion, inside and outside. Whereas if we have identity as some kind of an internal structure that is supported by feudal mode of production. Capitalism cannot accept that anymore. Capitalism expands outwards and tries to monopolize or tends towards monopoly” (C2, Shofie, l. 186-194).

Shofie describes an historical development: As Europe continued to practice feudalism, which involved communal land work, capitalism slowly took over, and with it what we call modernity. According to Shofie, this was intertwined with a change of identity understanding.

I could comprehend Shofie's telling since I had learned much of it during seminars and readings. I will cite various theorists I got to know there throughout this chapter. For example, I learned about deviant pre-colonial social structures like those of the Yorùbá'n civilization from Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (I will talk more about it in Chapter 4.1.2.). According to Oyěwùmí, the notion of modernity prompted the emergence of capitalism and industrialization, as well as the formation of nation states and the expansion of regional inequalities within the global system (2002). According to the author, the shift from feudalism to capitalism changed both identities and economic systems over centuries through a complex interaction of internal and external causes. Thomas Lambert states that as capitalism grew, resources became monopolized, and when combined with colonialism, feudal identities and social structures were questioned on a worldwide scale (2019).

“Blackness with a small letter b is the blackness that is utilized in order to construct this identity that only makes sense under capitalism, which is whiteness” (C2, Shofie, I 498f.).

Shofie aims for the idea that the creation of modernity is inherently conditioned by the history of slavery which had produced an identity constructed upon blackness, forced production and finally capitalism. In fact, as I learned through María Lugones, colonialism had provided for a white superiority through the “invention of race” which is “a pivotal turn as it replaces the relations of superiority and inferiority established through domination. It re-conceives humanity and human relations fictionally, in biological terms” (2008, p. 2). Lugones hints towards the idea that whereas in feudalism the crown and the nobility were in power, capitalism was making use of “race” in order to produce hierarchies. Andrew Delatolla says that “white men saw themselves as progressed, developed, and rational, engaged in a set of universal moral values that justified their civilizing projects” (2020, p. 150). According to Delatolla, they thought that societies in the global south couldn't become “civilized” and used false science to not only say that people there were different (lightly said) based on gender and race but also to use this difference in order to legitimize violence, oppression, and the appropriation of land, goods, and bodies. Aníbal Quijano explains how colonialism established the fundamental and global social categorization of the world's people according to the concept of “race”: “race became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society's structure of power” (2000, p. 535).

“In the wake of this dispossession, if I can use a metaphor that Christina Sharps used, that [blackness] then becomes emptied out, hollowed out, burnt from the inside to turn into some kind of a vessel by which whiteness can float on top of this ever drowning or violent waters called capitalism. (...) That is blackness in small letter b and then there is blackness in capital letter b where Malcolm X put an X on his last name, where trans people chose a name for themselves (...). This (...) should be seen as a result of a real struggle to erase the colonial imposition on what it means to be black and what it means to be queer and what it means to be a woman” (C2, Shofie, I. 502-5512).

Shofie separates two ways of writing blackness: “Blackness” with an uppercase “B” indicates a return to one's own Black identity and reassertion on it. For Shofie, it is an intentional, powerful manifestation of Blackness that goes beyond the limits of colonialism and institutionalized oppression. This oppression is referred to in the ‘black with a small letter’. Shofie says this is an identity that is based on a fake science which was used to defend the

illusion that whiteness is superior and everything else is inferior and subhuman. I think it is a fake teaching that we subconsciously (or not) learn from early age on and that leads to experiences such as Shofie told above and feelings of shame that they internalized:

“It was my race that made me corrupt. I thought that. I formulated it in myself in terms of these. As I grow up, as my grandfather told me stories, and introduced to me authors (...) it was only through this repeated exposure that I can externalize this from myself (C1, Shofie, l. 716-720).

“Because when you experience these kinds of things, it's not just other people's imposition that you want to explain away by something else. It is also your impulse to not make it about race, to make it at least more meaningful, to make it at least less humiliating than it already is. But Baldwin doesn't allow that. He insists that you see it as it is and organize and resist” (C2, Shofie, l. 608-612).

Shofie acknowledges Baldwin as a deep influence and leads me to quote him from an intriguing dialogue with Audre Lorde: “One of the dangers of being a Black American is being schizophrenic, and I mean ‘schizophrenic’ in the most literal sense. To be a Black American is in some ways to be born with the desire to be white. It’s a part of the price you pay for being born here, and it affects every Black person” (Baldwin & Lorde 1984). This internal conflict, which can be read in Shofies’ usage of “impulse” and Baldwin’s schizophrenia, in my opinion highlights the significant psychological effects that racial identification and cultural expectations have on Black people. This means that in order to bring about significant change and preserve one's dignity, Shofie and Baldwin both emphasize how critical it is to identify and tackle racism on the inside as well as the outside.

Supported by theoretical input, I understood through the conversations with Shofie colonialism to be at the heart of identity creation, closely followed by capitalism. Before we get into capitalism, I want to discuss the linkages between gender identity and colonialism, as well as take a detour into the conceptual reality of precolonial societies.

4.1.1. The Impacts of Colonialism on Gender Identity

“What I think is often not taken into account is that the Western binary gender system was brought into the world through colonialism (...). So, the binary gender in itself is a racist system because only white men and only white women [were meant], everyone else was wild and exotic. So, this category man and woman was only created for white people anyway, at least in the western, binary gender system” (C2, B., l. 54-60).

“Masculinity and femininity that is registered as masculinity and femininity, in so many instances doesn't apply at all to blackness. (...) in many ways, because of how blackness occupies the zone of non-being, it is outside gender” (C1, Shofie, l. 791).

Along with both participants, I recognized the relevance of Blackness in Western social situations. Therefore, a linkage of it towards gender identities made not only sense to me but was also stressed by both Shofie and B. as you can see in the quotes above. This linkage will be explored in this chapter.

With the notion of “non-being” (1987), Shofie makes a reference to Hortense Spillers, a famous Black theorist whom we talked about in our conversations. According to Spillers, the colonized person was treated as “flesh to be used”. The colonizer needed to reduce the Black body to flesh in order to legitimately hurt it. Black people were perceived solely through their skin, not their full physique. Thus, as Spillers writes, the Black person is rendered invisible in this white world since beingness is associated with the body rather than the flesh. Gender as a category of identification is related to the body. Therefore, according to Spillers, the Black individual is virtually genderless (Spillers 1987, p. 74f.).

B. is saying in their quote above that categories for gender identity were only created for white people. To understand what they mean by that I used Lugones' concept of "coloniality of gender" (2008). It describes how a Western, white perception of gender identities (and its binarity, respectively) has been implemented on those subjects who have been colonized. Lugones writes how the white perception was and is founded on patriarchy, which is a constructed sociality based on the idea that the establishment of gender binarity is centered on masculine privileges to maintain men's dominance (Lugones 2008, p. 10). In reference to exemplary societies, Lugones explains that in pre-colonialism, people did not necessarily have such an understanding of the feminine and the masculine. In fact, some societies didn't even work with differentiations based on sex (see next sub-chapter). Furthermore, Lugones argues that whereas every non-white person primarily experienced

de-subjectification, the identification of divine femininity and masculinity—which had been created as the most admirable to reach—was reserved for the white individual (Lugones 2008, p. 13). Shofie, who has read Lugones, acknowledges this when she talks about Spiller’s concept of non-being and further explains:

“Gender then is imposed quite literally through the process of enslavement, through the process of division of labor and other things, where certain work is given to this group and other work is given to another group and in different social class, different division of labor. (...) All of this is enforced through a violent process towards the surface of what the European man is defined” (C2, Shofie, l. 295-301).

I link Shofie’s description of “the surface of European man” to Lugones division of a “light” and a “dark side” of the gender system. The “light side” mostly favors white bourgeois men and women (the European) by establishing gender roles and relationships. While typically idealized and portrayed as soft and goodhearted, it limits women’s roles to social reproduction (babies!) and homemaking while excluding them from positions of power and knowledge production (see Ch.4.2.1). The “dark side” of the gender system is according to Lugones violence and oppression against marginalized genders who are subjected to exploitation, forced labor, and sexual violence by white colonizers, resulting in their exclusion from important aspects of life such as decision-making and economics:³

"The gender system has a “light” and a “dark” side. The light side constructs gender and gender relations hegemonic ally. It only orders the lives of white bourgeois men and women, and it constitutes the modern/colonial meaning of “men” and “women.” (...) The gender system is heterosexualist, as heterosexuality permeates racialized patriarchal control over production, including knowledge production, and over collective authority. Heterosexuality is both compulsory and perverse among white bourgeois men and women since the arrangement does significant violence to the powers and rights of white bourgeois women and it serves to reproduce control over production and [sic!]. White bourgeois women are inducted into this reduction through bounded sexual access. The “dark” side of the gender system was and is thoroughly violent. We have began to see the deep reductions of anamales, anafemales, and “third” genders from their ubiquitous participation in ritual, decision making, economics; their reduction to animality, to forced sex with white colonizers, to such deep labor exploitation that often people died working" (Lugones 2008, p. 15f.).

Writings by Vergès would add: “Colonized women were reinvented as “women” in light of the norms, criteria, and discriminatory practices used in Medieval Europe” (2021, p. 27). While colonized people were expected to adhere to colonial norms and ideals about race and

³ It might be worth noting that it might be no coincidence that already the definition of “dark” and “light” are specifically connotated as they are, with “dark” symbolizing something negative.

gender, full participation in society was denied at the same time. “Like, Hortense Spillers and Fanon, (...) You're denied that other than the surface that you need to play, right?” (C1, Shofie, l. 795-799). As I interpret this, Shofie states that Black people are not allowed to live their own identity, but carry out the identity that white people have assigned to them: “the surface you need to play”. As a result, they also adapted gender identities which is also shown in Fanon’s writings: “The white world, the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man – or at least like a n*⁴” (Fanon 2002, p. 114). Fanon demonstrates the demeaning illustrations that are supported by racism and colonialism. In his book, he describes how blackness was related to animality, bad and mean behavior, aggression, cannibalism, while any other characteristics were erased: “His metaphysics, (...) were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him” (Ibid., p. 110ff.). Shofie acknowledges this imposition and tells how they were internalized by herself: “why did they hit me? Oh it's because I was doing this. And why would I be doing this? It's because I'm black” (C1, Shofie, l. 774f.). Further, Shofie connected their gendered behavior with their blackness:

“I thought it was something inherent in me. These expressions. These gender things. Because I'm black and I behave like this. It's because I'm black that I steal (...) it was not a realization so to say, but it was how I think about - how I blamed myself” (C1, Shofie, l. 702-707).

Shofie was not only unable to understand their own desires and gender, but also was unable to recognize their inner aspirations because of this prejudice. Neither did they question the gender implications of their actions. Shofie connected this “unusual” behavior to their skin color which made it also impossible for them to embrace their race:

“There is a fleeting sense that that is what blackness is. It's with shame, of course. But immediately, it's explained away as laziness, incompetence, lateness” (C2, Shofie, l. 587-589).

“I wouldn't be able to deny expressions that then be interpreted as something within Blackness. I would say that certain Black expression that was not, quote on quote easily translatable as a gender expression, but it's registered as such. There is a lot of this. There is this in braiding. There is this in how we relate to taking care of our skin. There is a lot of experiences of parenting and parenthood, and how one relates to

⁴ Fanon uses the n-word in his book which he perfectly can do as a Black individual. I, as a white person, will not reproduce it however, and will be sticking with an asterix.

others. Which is a big part of gender expression and how I relate to you and how I talk with you” (C1, Shofie, l. 796-807).

Shofie says that indeed there are typical Black expressions but they don't necessarily have a lot to do with the kind of gender expression white folks would expect. In this context, Shofie makes an interesting observation of how expressions of conversations play a role in the gender thematic. They state that the forms of communications and approaches vary in relation to who is present in the room. For example, Shofie observed how a Black man would act when encountering white women. He seems rough and domineering in the conversation. “I can see how gender would play out here and I can see what he's trying to do. He's trying to be a man” (C1, Shofie, l. 840f.). However, when the same Black person approaches Shofie he no longer poses as a white man as Shofie calls it: “as a black trans person talking with a Black guy is an extremely different feeling than when I talk with a white guy. I feel like there is a lot more tenderness, a lot more femininity” (C1, Shofie, 832-834). Shofie says that for white men “conversation seems to hold such weight for arguments and for holding on to opinion and presenting it” (Ibid., l. 810-812), and adds laughing: “they're very paranoid, aren't they?” (Ibid., l. 809f.). Talking to cis-women however would be like having an aid to get to the point you want to make:

“they help you get there to what they're talking about. And the other way around. And (...) when in my silence I would try to find it they are also finding with me. They're holding that space” (Ibid., l. 825-828).

This experience highlights the fluidity and complexity of human connection within larger societal frameworks of race and gender by illuminating the ways in which social identities cross and influence interpersonal interactions. Shofie feels that interactions with cis-women are more helpful and cooperative than those with white men, who approach conversations with a sense of weight and importance. In contrast, Shofie senses a softness and femininity in the encounter with a Black man, pointing to a distinct mode of communication and connection within their racial identities. With white women however, the male appears to make an effort to demonstrate his masculinity.

To me, this shows how colonialism had an impact on Black individuals' gender by shaping their gender expressions and interactions based on the racial dynamics and expectations imposed by a history of oppression and subjugation. I find it very telling that Shofie says how Black men would behave differently depending on their opposite. It makes a

lot of sense when considering how gender was imposed as described above. The tenderness and femininity Shofie perceives in interactions with a Black man, versus the domineering behavior in the presence of white women, underscore how racial identity can shape gender expressions. Concluding through Shofie's statements, I understand this intersectionality as a legacy of colonialism, which created complex social hierarchies and norms that individuals navigate daily. When following this strain of thought we can understand gender binarity as a creation primarily for whiteness and done so in hierarchical terms, with femininity subordinated in order to protect the white men's superiority. By connecting Shofie's tellings with theories I find that gender standards are created, upheld, and used as an excuse for oppression and exploitation in particular social circumstances. By imposing rigid gender norms and creating racial hierarchies, colonialism has shaped the ways in which people express and experience their gender. I realize that any non-white individual is forced into this system but only as subordinate, denying them the classifications at the same time. I'd venture to say that throughout the process of forcing them to become an inferior part of their white, 'modern' power system, any understanding outside gender binarity has been tried to erase. Luckily, they have not been erased completely.

4.1.2. Beyond Binarity

My research subjects and I were all in agreement that there is a conception of femininity and masculinity that we are taught is innate, or physically inherited. In that context we addressed briefly the subject of 'what was there before'. Since I had studied some pre-colonial culture, in contrast to Shofie and B., this time I was the one who contributed their expertise in order to share my strategy for thinking beyond binarity. To allow the reader the same input, I will share some of those ideas in this chapter.

Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí argues that in Yorùbá'n civilization (which is located mostly in Western Africa), gender was not a guiding idea prior to colonialism. She writes that Western scholars' perception of gendered systems in Yorùbá society stems from a Eurocentric perspective and a misreading of language (1997, p. 31f.).⁵ Oyěwùmí describes how in Yorùbá'n there apparently was no gender system because "men" and "women" were not social categories. Instead, the relationship system was based on seniority for social standing, which means that members of a family are identified by their age rather than gender. According to Oyěwùmí there is no hierarchy between male and female and the idea of traditional family bonds seem also blurred. Rather, the person's social standing supposedly fluctuated on a frequent basis as a result of the people and with whom they connect (2002, p. 6): „In Yoruba society before the sustained infusion of Western categories, social positions of people shifted constantly in relation to those with whom they were interacting; consequently, social identity was relational and was not essentialized” (Oyěwùmí 1997, p. xiii).

The indigenous Dakota identifying author TallBear writes that “prior to colonization, the fundamental social unit of my people was the extended kin group, including plural marriages” (2018, p. 148). TallBear claims a strong authority of native women and a powerful bond that those kin relations would provide – also in relation to childbearing.

María Lugones further questions a focus on womanhood in general within indigenous American culture and describes how many indigenous communities in the Americas

⁵ Quick excursion on our understanding of knowledge: Oyěwùmí argues that knowledge production is constructed by and for whiteness, beginning with Descartes' phrase “I think therefore I am,” which established Western Cartesian Dualism. This dualism, imposed globally, created a division of humanity into superior/inferior and rational/irrational categories. Europeans were positioned as the source of knowledge and knowers, legitimizing white superiority over "non-reasoning and irrational" Black individuals (Lugones 2008, p. 4; Chigumadzi 2023; Oyěwùmí 2002). "Europe is represented as the source of knowledge, and Europeans as knowers" Oyěwùmí 2002, p. 1).

recognized individuals who did not neatly fall into the male/female dichotomy prior to invasion. According to Lugones, colonizers were frequently terrified of indigenous peoples' sexual activities and envisioned them in exaggerated and inaccurate ways. That's what's made them strangers, animalistic, other, exotic (2008, p. 7). Lugones provides an alternative view of gender in which individual predisposition, inclination, and temperament were used to determine gender roles, rather than biological factors. For example, if a female tribe member had a dream about weapons, she would be deemed a male for practical purposes (Ibid., p. 10). Lugones' study challenges gender binarity by exposing the culturally diverse understandings of gender in pre-colonial indigenous American communities:

"Understanding the place of gender in pre-colonial societies is also pivotal in understanding the extent and importance of the gender system in disintegrating communal relations, egalitarian relations, ritual thinking, collective decision making, collective authority, and economies. And thus in understanding the extent to which the imposition of this gender system was as constitutive of the coloniality of power as the coloniality of power was constitutive of *it*" (Lugones 2008, p. 12).

Lugones claims that the colonial imposition of a rigid gender system severely altered social connections and power dynamics. This imposition was as fundamental to the coloniality of power as it was to the imposition of these gender standards. Following this, Lugones offers an alternative paradigm for understanding gender that rejects biological determinism while embracing the many, culturally unique ways in which gender may be experienced and expressed.

Unfortunately, this thesis doesn't provide for enough space to explore deeper the pre-colonial circumstances of relations and identities. But I hope to have given you, the reader, an idea about how the Western assumptions of gender and relationship realities are not realities for everyone and are not fundamental or natural as we are made to believe. Moreover, reading about those realities leads me to believe even stronger that colonialism was a cruel act to oppress feminine gender in any way possible. I don't want to deny that some sort of masculinity and femininity also existed in other cultures. But as we have heard now, they were perceived differently and not given so much importance.

Oyěwùmí stresses that gender is a social construct shaped by history and culture and that it is an oversimplified concept that was universalized in order to organize society around male privilege (2011, p. 1f.). Within the next chapters I will discuss how this concept became such a common ideal.

4.2. Capitalism

Leo: "I think all of the social structures of Western capitalism are based on the functionality of the [heterosexual] nuclear family."

Shofie: "Without the acknowledgement of the historicity of capitalist imposition on the mode of reproduction or how capitalism distributes and arranges, how a worker is reproduced and maintained. Without that, there can be no understanding to begin with, right? (...) So, you were saying, that through this, sexuality comes as a consequence of this arrangement of how a worker is reproduced."

Leo: "I think it's rather interdependent. Because we need those workers and the reproduction, we have to follow the construct of men, women. They're coming together. So this can only come through heterosexuality."

Shofie: "(...) Whereas I can imagine that sexuality can be much bigger than that. It is only this part, which is penetrative sex with a certain understanding of what orgasm is, with a certain condition of how orgasm can be, and with a certain result of the sexual act. This is what is captured as sexuality and is imbued with meaning and encoded and territorialized by capitalism. But that doesn't mean that there is no form of sexuality that exists outside the limit, the hegemonic limit" (C2, Shofie, l. 120-128).

In our second conversation, Shofie and me went deep into philosophical thoughts about the construction of sexuality and gender. In this little extract above you can see how we define them as interrelated; their construction – the binarity of both sexuality and gender – always connected and informing each other. We also observed that there is one exceptional understanding of sexuality which misses many aspects and desires in favor of a focus on penetration and orgasms. While speaking with Shofie, it became evident to me that it is difficult to go beyond this narrow concept of sexuality because we have internalized it so deeply. I call this the *trouble of sexuality*. I will discuss this issue later, when we come closer to the meaning of Shofie's "form of sexuality that exists outside the limit".

First, I'd like to explain how Shofie and I discovered why we think society views sexuality as a limited concept. We believe that heteronormativity, marriage, the nuclear family, and monogamy all contribute to preserving sexuality and gender, all interconnected through colonialism and capitalism. Shofie previously stated that Marx and his theories about capitalism had greatly affected her. Thus, this chapter will begin with basic capitalism theories and proceed to the concepts sustaining this system.

4.2.1. The Necessity of Gender Binariness for Capitalism

When reflecting my current ideas about the constructions of sexuality and gender to B., I said:

“Heterosexuality was created to ensure that - also with regard to marriage - that there are couples, married couples, and therefore also binary, that there are men and women who have to be heterosexual in order to be together, to be able to maintain capitalism and this world that the white man desired” (C2, B., l. 35-40).

This idea of a necessity of a man and a woman who maintain capitalism was taught to me through the concept of social reproduction theory (SRT). The content of this theory is also frequently mentioned by Shofie. Therefore, I will explain this concept in this chapter and I will do so leaning on theories I have read in class. SRT is based on Marx’s understanding of a capitalist production cycle, which is concerned with the process of producing surplus value from fundamental goods.⁶ SRT broadens this theory by showing how the production of surplus value and oppressive categories coexist at the same time (Bhattacharya 2017, p. 14). Nancy Fraser argues that next to the necessity of men’s labor (to produce goods), women's unpaid domestic duties, such as childcare and caring for the house, is critical to society and necessary for capitalism to function well (2017, p. 23). Male dominance is the foundation for the devaluation of the reproduction labor performed by female bodies. Men are the ones in charge, running the majority of the economy, while women take care of the home, making sure it's clean so men can unwind, and eventually bearing children (Ibid., p. 27).

As mentioned, Shofie agreed with me about my understanding of this constructed division. Further, they added that they think that sexuality within capitalism is territorialized by the idea that it merely is considered as the activity that results in producing offsprings: “the fact that sexuality comes as a mode of reproduction, might maybe a capture, a territorialization of what sexuality is by forces of production at any stage of its history” (C2, Shofie, l. 121f.). Through this belief, sexuality has to be hetero and is limited to penis-vagina penetration in order to give sperm into the ovaries.

⁶ As Shofie has mentioned earlier, the ideas of Marx are of great use in this context. But please understand that I cannot explain Marx’ outlines of capitalism fully due to lack of space. However, I would strongly advise you to look into him, even if you don't want to read the daunting book "Das Kapital" you can simply google him.

“This is all happening under the capitalist mode of relations of production. Outside of relations of production, it's very hard to talk about sexuality” (C2, Shofie, l. 107-109). According to this, the capitalist mode expects that every individual is looking for the ‘opposite’ sex in order to find love, in order to found a family. Shofie made me realize how hard it is to think sexuality beyond this thinking, a matter I will explore more in another chapter. Along with her statements and the above observations I conclude that to enable capitalism to work, sexuality is used to persuade people that the heterosexual, monogamous married couple is their ultimate goal in life. When thinking like this it appears that gender differences as well as heterosexuality are natural rather than something created by society. This naturality I got to know as heteronormativity.

4.2.2. Heteronormativity

B.: "I experienced at the beginning of my social transition a lot of stigmatizations with my genitals. (...) This is also an experience that many trans people have, that cis people (...) absolutely need to know what kind of genitals you have so that they can classify you" (C1, B., l. 1350-1359).

"I also had such a romantic relationship that some cis-hetero identifying women found me attractive, but still have a lot of boundaries in their head with which I have to deal with then. Because, I just don't have a penis" (Ibid., l. 1101-1105).

In this chapter, I will discuss the concept and meaning of heteronormativity. I will highlight a few theorists who have studied this topic in order to bolster my views based on my talks with participants, but I will concentrate on B. and Shofie's comments because I find them to be more relatable than academic commentary. Furthermore, by putting on a focused lens to gain additional self-awareness by hearing about trans experiences - consulting the non-transsexual guide, as stated in my process (Hale 1997) - I realized how much I, too, had internalized the classification of male = penis; female = vagina, by listening to B. and the stigmatization they experienced. For example, I have caught myself instinctively thinking, damn, I am also curious about genitals. Talking with B. sometimes felt like a mirror was being held up. It showed me that we (as a (Western) society) think that we need genitals in order to represent a certain gender and we always have to be able to define the gender because apparently, we can only be either female or male. Any deviation of this seems to confuse many people. "Because otherwise you are what? Then you are nothing" (C1, B., l. 1360f.). While neither B. nor Shofie have explicitly defined it, they did refer their arguments quite often to the term heteronormativity:

"Cisness and heteronormativity come as a layer above the body. Come to be constructed, the desire itself. So, it's not imposed through repression, it is imposed through self-repression, so to say. It is imposed through the construction of desire" (C2, Shofie, l. 202-204).

Understanding the experiences of B. and Shofie, I think heterosexuality becomes central to classify gender binarity. It is the heterosexual desire that is imposed on us and which is predicated on the idea that there are two binary genders and that they are inherently drawn to each other. Which I understood is necessary because of capitalism (see above). So, heterosexuality becomes the norm. It is drilled into the heterosexual mind that this is the standard; sexuality itself, the object of all our desire = hetero-norm. This is why we require a

penis or a vagina in the first place, and they have a variety of gendered connotations (see Ch. 4.2.4).

This focus on heterosexuality reminded me of the concept called compulsory heterosexuality. This is, according to its name giver Adrienne Rich⁷, the “enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economic, and emotional access” (2003, p. 26). Rich argues that while disguising it as a typical sex drive that “cannot take responsibility for itself or take no for an answer”, heterosexual compulsory allows men to keep their dominance, to suppress female independency in order to subsume their sexuality, their labor, their ability to care and nurture (Ibid., p. 20f.). Although I do not think it is only the female that is subsumed solely here, I do believe it is crucial to understand the concept of heterosexual compulsory along with heteronormativity as it allows us a perspective with which to understand the “trouble of sexuality” in general. Shofie says:

“Once you deconstruct the idea that sexuality, heteronormative sexuality and race and gender are eternal, essential qualities, then you can see what kind of impositions are done on it to dominate a certain group of bodies” (C2, Shofie, l. 288-291).

Leaning on Shofie’s argument, I understand compulsory heterosexuality as an oppressive social construct that restricts the options for sexual and gender expression. In our talk, Shofie had mentioned Judith Butler, one of the first theorists about gender identities, who writes: „The naturalization of both heterosexuality and masculine sexual agency are discursive constructions nowhere accounted for but everywhere assumed within this founding structuralist frame” (Butler 1999, p. 55). There is a recurring topic for questioning and dismantling racial, gender, and sexuality-related social norms and conceptions. Shofie's claim and Butler's theory both stress how crucial it is to identify and challenge the way these conceptions are imposed in order to understand and challenge oppressive power dynamics.

My thesis study continuously points me in the direction of the idea that, because heterosexuality demands us to fulfill its desires, our gender manifestations reflect this. Shofie made me understand that there are certain expressions of masculinity and femininity we are taught to inherit in order to attract “the other gender”. She makes a good comparison to a

⁷ I use Adrienne Rich very carefully here because she allegedly is a terf, a trans-exclusionary radical feminist. Whereas the text that I read did not include trans-hostile allegations, Rich did contribute to the very well known anti-trans book “The transsexual empire” by definitely terf-feminist Janice Raymond. However, I use her concept “compulsory heterosexuality” nevertheless because I believe understanding this helps to understand also the rest of enforced structures that I will talk about in the next chapters.

book written by Column McCann. *Dancer* chronicles the life of Nuriyev, a well-known Soviet dancer who was raised in poverty. She tells how one passage in the novel shows Nuriyev wearing his sister's jacket because his family couldn't afford new clothes after his father returned from the war. His father critiques the jacket's buttons, hinting that men should not wear such clothing. "And the comment is: here, heteronormative imposition" (C2, Shofie, l. 401). Shofie describes the societal pressure on gender expression, even in minor elements like clothes buttons, and how it impacts Nuriyev's view of his own identity:

"A slow and gradual movement in men, for example, is not a tradition that Europeans used to accept in ballet. A man has to be pointed and direct and sharp, strong. Whereas the slow and gradual movement (...) might be perceived as disgusting or as unmanly" (C2, Shofie, l. 407-410).

According to Shofie, the jacket the dancer was wearing was a woman's jacket. Therefore, he was not supposed to wear it. This implies that a man is not supposed to express any feminine expression. I will talk more about those gendered divisions in the next chapter. Along such expressions, B. and I had noted, with annoyance, that there seemed to be a tendency to accept violence as normal behavior:

„For me, what is seen as accepted heteronormative sexuality, is already invasive in many cases or violent or not self-determined by all parts. And this is seen as okay and normal. But if people like to dress up in panda costumes and jerk off in there, that's perverted. But five guys hit on⁸ a woman in a club until she somehow gives in because she's afraid, that's normal." (C2, B., l. 351-354)

B. suggests that non-males are frequently objectified sexually since heteronormativity relies on masculine acts. Meaning that they're being viewed or treated primarily as an object of sexual desire rather than as a whole person. I am often astonished how the majority of us keep reproducing this acceptance. But we do and we do it partly unconsciously and automatically. When I shared my thoughts with Shofie about how gender is a construction in order to make heterosexual normativity possible which in reverse stabilize a capitalist society, Shofie responded: "it points out how the state gives privilege to heteronormativity" (C2, Shofie, l. 997-999). We think that because of this privileging it makes it easier for individuals to simply follow this line instead of refusing it.

This makes me think of Sara Ahmed, the author I mentioned in the introduction and whom I have read first time during a seminar in Hamburg. According to Ahmed,

⁸ The German word was „berudeln" and has a much worse meaning than 'to hit on'. I hope you still get the sense of the argument.

heteronormativity makes it easy for a person's perception of things in the world to be directly correlated with their identity as a gendered and sexual person. She talks about both decisions concerning life choices and objects of desire. Heteronormativity for Ahmed is a “straight” line by which we orient ourselves – a line that enforces heterosexuality and monogamy: “To become straight means that we not only have to turn toward the objects that are given to us by heterosexual culture, but also that we must “turn away” from objects that take us off this line” (Ahmed 2006, p. 21). For Ahmed this is where race also comes in. That straight line is a white line. The privileges of the states are made for whiteness (see Ch. 4.1.). Shofie also points this out:

“Heteronormativity is conceived and recognized by whiteness, which is the group of people or the institution rather, that can grant recognition in order to grant access in power” (C2, Shofie, I., 493f.).

For this reason, any deviations of “typical” (white) gendered behavior are connected by Shofie with Blackness:

“And then I started to be blamed for what I liked. In terms of other people, of who I like. And I used to like cute guys. It was so obvious to me. And then I blamed myself for doing that. And I blamed my race for making me do that” (C1, Shofie, I. 708-712).

I noticed how Shofie links their sexual desire to their race. Since their attraction to boys didn't fit the expected behavior for someone perceived as a boy, Shofie thought it must be due to their race, as they already felt their race was considered unacceptable. I have pointed out before how Western capitalist societies believe white heterosexual males as superior. I wrote that in order to be perceived as civilized and modern, colonized cultures had to adopt a dynamic that favors masculine governance. However, they were not granted the same authority as white people. The first book I've read about masculinity was written by bell hooks (2015). You can learn a lot about white heteronormativity when looking into Black feminist theories. hooks writes that many heterosexual Black males feel under pressure to live up to masculine norms in a culture where white supremacy and patriarchy are prevalent. According to hooks, racism may make individuals feel dehumanized because they think it keeps them from fully gaining access to patriarchal control. In response, some Black men express disrespect for women and gay men by exaggerating their misogynistic masculinity. Hooks says that this is frequently motivated by a fear of being identified as feminine (hooks 2015, p. 147).

“I try to remember or try to make sense about what happened between me and my ex, Jesse, we were both Black, he was from Sudan. (...) for three years we were relating in the closet for fear of so many things, and so many times in these three years that I wish we were white, so that black queerness is not so disgusting to other people” (C2, Shofie, l. 663-667).

Just as hooks has theorized, Shofie describes a perception that Blackness and queerness is something that cannot go together, that is “disgusting” and to be blamed for. This implies that while queerness is already regarded as abnormal, Blackness heightens this perception, making it even more perplexing. Shofie points out: “Blackness or black heteronormativity is nothing like white heteronormativity” (C2, Shofie, l. 518). This aligns with hooks’ idea that the gender ideal we often seek is inherently a white ideal.

In the documentary "Paris is Burning" (1990), hooks observes that Black drag performers, rather than embracing their own identities, strive to imitate a kind of femininity associated with whiteness. This imitation reflects a deeper desire for authority and recognition in a patriarchal white society. hooks writes: “Black people/people of color, who are daily bombarded by a powerful colonizing whiteness that seduces us away from ourselves, that negates that there is beauty to be found in any form of Blackness that is not imitation of whiteness” (hooks 2015, p. 149). Shofie shares this feeling, noting that “the heteronormative form is unsustainable, unfair; it's a promise of happiness that remains a promise” (C1, Shofie, l. 461f.). According to Shofie, heteronormativity, often promoted as the path to fulfillment, exerts immense pressure to conform. It is not just something that exists in the background but is told children to aim for. As Sara Ahmed argues, “we do not know what we could become without these points of pressure, which insist that happiness will follow if we do this or we do that” (2008, p. 90).

Consider Shofie's various experiences based on race and gender, as outlined in Chapter 4.1.1. Their experiences in relation to the theory described show that this need to replicate whiteness is more than just surface mimicry; it reflects a deep-seated need for validation and approval in a society that values whiteness and its accompanying norms. The temptation to adhere to heteronormative standards begins at an early age, influencing desires and ambitions in ways that frequently suppress personal identity and authenticity. A matter I will discuss in the next chapter.

4.2.3. Monogamy and the nuclear family

“Sexuality comes as a consequence of this arrangement of how a worker is reproduced” (C2, Shofie, l. 111f.).

Throughout this paper I explore how the experiences of my participants represent how the society controls our understanding of sexuality and gender identity. Talking to them showed me in a non-abstract way (as academic writing tends to) that there are sections of society that demand us to adhere to established sexual and gender norms and because of that it appears that gender differences are natural rather than something created by society. This way of thinking contributes to the concept that men and women are separate and immutable.

In the conversations, Shofie and me have worked out that certain societal frameworks are designed to regulate and control reproduction, thereby maintaining the stability and productivity of the workforce. These are meant by the “arrangement” Shofie calls in the quote above and inherit concepts such as monogamy and the nuclear family. I will explore this within this chapter.

Shofie’s insight, “when you deconstruct sexuality first then you can see how colonialism interferes in your bed” (C2, Shofie, l. 262), suggests that by questioning sexual norms, we can reveal how heteronormative heterosexual partnerships were enforced through colonialism, disrupting pre-existing kinship systems in colonized cultures. As mentioned before, these traditional ways of life were replaced with the ideal of marriage-based nuclear families, a transformation that aligns with Arya Priya’s observation that the nuclear family model is particularly suited to modern societies with specialized labor needs and geographical mobility, emerging prominently during the industrial revolution (Priya 2017, p. 28). Priya’s text “Observations on the Changing Pattern of Family as a Social Institution” has helped me with some on point information during my thesis research. Her perspective is reinforced by Shofie’s critique of the nuclear family:

“I have very negative view of the nuclear family and I think it's an institutional scam, it's a capitalist requirement, it's not eternal, it's a very recent thing, it's not natural at all (*emphasizes*), by any measure (*keeps emphasizing*). In fact, any family, if you see the heteronormative form is very forced, like they force it at the cost of everything” (C1, Shofie, l. 458-471).

Shofie highlights how the nuclear family is a relatively recent construct, heavily promoted and enforced to meet the demands of capitalism. Going with this, it's not an inherent or natural form of human organization but a structured imposition that benefits modern economic systems by creating stable, predictable units of labor and consumption. I delved into some theoretical research to compare this to historical insights.

Priya writes that industrialization changed the emphasis away from extensive family units, which were prevalent in both indigenous and Western cultures, and toward nuclear families, isolating them to socialize children and regulate adult personalities. Monogamy evolved as a method for controlling private property and female sexuality, ensuring legitimate heirs and male privilege (Priya 2017, p. 2). Oyěwùmí claims that the nuclear family is “a gendered family par excellence”, understood as the little kinship system composed through a patriarchal father, a housewife-mother, and one to three children, for which is why “gender is the fundamental organizing principle of the family, and gender distinctions are the primary source of hierarchy and oppression within the nuclear family” (2002, p. 3f.). TallBear further argues that the nuclear family is a product of colonialism and capitalism and promotes white male superiority: Western countries accepted Christian marital values, which impacted national agendas and settler-colonial nation-building. According to this, heteronormative marriage intersected with race, class, and gender to privilege specific populations and maintain disparities after WWII: “White bodies and white families in spaces of safety have been propagated in intimate co-constitution with the culling of black, red, and brown bodies and the wastelanding of their spaces” (Ibid., p. 147).

That the Western idea of the nuclear family is implemented on their (former) colonized states but not really possible to reach is a reality that Shofie could experience firsthand:

“If I speak from my family's background – you have a mother and a father who is never home. They had to work and sometimes they had to work abroad, sometimes they were on a different island. And you have accumulating children, like three and then four and then five and then six” (C2, Shofie, l. 415-420). “It doesn't matter whether I was a child or whether I was competent or not. It doesn't matter if we could pay the water electricity, if we had water or had food. It doesn't matter. What matters is that I will be the person who is asked whether they [the siblings] have eaten, whether they have showered, whether they are clean, whether they have the clean clothes. (...) So, role: caregiver” (Ibid., 1063-1068).

The poverty of Shofie's parents would make the desire for the nuclear family impossible to be reached. They didn't have the money to pay for childcare or to get a

housemaid. Shofie was the one who had to take care of their siblings. In nations like Indonesia where families aren't necessarily wealthy, the conventional definition of a family can't be sustained. But it is still perceived as the ideal. Shofie said that they could see the concept of the nuclear family as to be desired by their parents, “not only because of themselves but it was imposed” (C1, Shofie, l. 55f.). This demonstrates how, depending on the region of the world, economic circumstances can have an impact on the idea of sexuality. Moreover, it shows how the Western world is controlling the narrative about sexualities and partnership values. By looking for contrast, I found TallBear writing that extended kinship relationships, involving shared responsibility for parenting, housing, and resources, have been the norm in Indigenous communities throughout history. They contend that de-centering the nuclear family and monogamous marriage models could result in more wholesome and encouraging communal structures, perhaps providing a way to recover from the trauma caused by colonialism (TallBear 2018, p. 156f.; more about non-monogamy in Ch.5.1.).

Another move to look for contrast let me to Mimi Schippers and her book “beyond monogamy”. Schippers argues that everyone is forced to live in pairs due to institutionalized, forced monogamy, regardless of gender or race, yet when we discuss the failures of monogamy, we are really discussing privileges based on race and gender: “the monogamous dyad, as an institutionalized and compulsory relationship form, not only privileges the monogamous couple, it also intersects with race and gender to support white supremacy and heteromasculine dominance” (Schippers 2016, p. 15). For example, to make indigenous people in the Americas less like their own culture and more like the colonists, the colonists used concepts like monogamy, nuclear families, and marriage as superior to indigenous methods and to seize control of indigenous lands and household while imposing those concepts onto them. And to suppress the former reality of indigenous women to own land and authority: “The colonial state targeted women’s power, tying land tenure rights to heterosexual, one-on-one, lifelong marriages thus tying women’s economic well being to men who legally controlled the property. Indeed, women themselves became property” (TallBear 2018, p. 148).

Comparing this to what Shofie had told me leads me to the result that it seems like everyone, regardless of identification, must be in a couple in order to maintain nuclear families and monogamy. This creates a hierarchical structure by offering exclusive benefits to

white, heterosexual couples. And while it can be reproduced in same-sex couples, the nuclear family is something related to heterosexual binary. Further, it serves as a cultural and personal control mechanism, assuring the stability of leadership for white men.

With Shofie I realized that this is done despite the fact that many people are incapable of upholding these ideas. Shofie's parents attempted to live an ideal that they were not able to achieve. Different family or relationship concepts could have rescued Shofie from the difficult burden of caregiving when they were too young to be put into this responsibility. Shofie did not have a childhood because they were responsible for their siblings and had already been assigned a duty they did not choose.

This is a common narrative among Indigenous and Black individuals as I discovered thanks to extensive readings throughout my past years. TallBear (2018) is one of many authors who describes the pain and suffocation Indigenous people experience due to norms that don't fit their life standards. There is various literature by now about non-whites who write about their struggle to adapt to white social norms (e.g. hooks 1984, Ahmed 2000).⁹ Shofie on the other hand could experience firsthand that this type for family did not allow them to discover who they truly are. Their gender expressions were denied from an early age, and there was no security structure in place to supply Shofie with trusted adult folks who would accompany them on their trip and show them unrestricted love and respect, as growing children require. This is an experience also B. can talk of:

“For me, family has always meant pain. Always pressure, always expectations that are passed on to me with which I have nothing to do with. (...) the way I got to know the family bond was simply traumatizing. And I see a lot of guilt in the nuclear family concept. Because, in the end, the whole thing is, well, you're basing the child's security on the fact that two people love each other forever in this world. (chuckles) That's so unrealistic” (C1, B., l. 216-225).

B. critiques that their family has never allowed them to simply be whoever they are. Further, due to their experiences of a messy divorce and an abusive relationship of their mother, the security system of family was broken. “It's been drilled into the children beforehand that family is your security and you don't need anything else, because the family is always there for you, but then this falls apart” (C1, B., l. 227-230). For B., this was a

⁹ Here we should also look outside academia and into novels that might be fictitious but are always leaning on historical realities: Honorée Fanonne Jeffers: “Die Liebeslieder von W.E.B. Du Bois; Susan Abulhawa: “Während die Welt schlief”; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi: “Americanah”; Candice Cart-Williams: “Queenie”; Akwaeke Emezi: “Freshwater”.

traumatization. Especially within early childhood in which an individual is being formed and forms itself, the idea that “you somehow experience all your security and all your happiness from this one construct, that’s a house of cards just waiting to collapse” (Ibid. I. 232-234). B. strongly believes that the construct of the nuclear family not only is based on the heteronormative system but also, and this is important, reproduces it. And thus, the reality that still primarily people read as women playing the role of caregivers reproduces the construct to this day (Ibid., I. 238-241).

I can see two arguments in all of this: First, the nuclear family lacks of a safety network for a child. It is too small and too easily breakable as that a child could really trust in its stability. Priya writes about an “isolation of the nuclear family” (Priya 2017, p. 29). An isolation not only from others but also in itself. I agree with the opinion of B. and Shofie that the nuclear family along with its necessity to be based on the idea of the everlasting partnership is an unrealistic ideal. B. believes that “there are definitely fewer people in the world who somehow had a healthy, happy upbringing than there are people who had to suffer because of that this construct was created far from reality” (C1, B., I. 234-237). And numbers prove that. In Europe, the divorce rate has continuously increased since the 1960s (Amato 2014). Since a time that is known as the countercultural decade. And since divorce became better accessible. This shows that if taken out of stigmatization, condemnation, and ban, the numbers of people who want to leave their partner rises. And research shows that children of divorced parents frequently experience more health problems, both physical and mental, than children of parents who are still married (Ibid.). This is not to argue that people should stay married, rather the opposite. Rather, as B. perfectly embodies, it is the married construct in the first place on which we can predict an unstable life for children. As B. outlines several times, children are often the most suffering individuals from these structures since they have no power to do anything against it, they have to rely on the adults and structures around them. For B. this meant misery: “I was never offered a way out. I couldn't see the hilltop. There was no hope to gasp” (C1, B., I. 835-837).

The second argument I conclude through Shofie and B.’s tellings is that the nuclear family is based on concepts that are already intrinsically unfair and unstable and reproduces them. Because of the expenses associated with raising children and providing for living needs, only the wealthy are able to sustain a functional family. Furthermore, because historical power dynamics have established societal hierarchies based on nationality and

economic status, the connection between colonialism, capitalism, and the dominance of white Europeans in the rich class further reinforces the repressive nature of the nuclear family (Priya 2017). Further, along with B. and Shofie, I find that the foundation of nuclear families is gender binarity. It forces the members of that family into a binarity that was never possible to be chosen by the young ones. Since they are expected to adhere to the established gender roles within the family system, this can restrict the options accessible to young people regarding their gender expression and identity.

4.2.4. Sexuality & and its trouble

When I talked to Shofie and B. about their experiences of their childhood, their exploration of gender identity as well as sexuality, we came to investigate concepts such as the need for social reproduction to generate labor; heteronormativity as a framework for social reproduction; and monogamy and the nuclear family as these ideal life structures we ought to long for. Both of them figured that these ideas reinforce the impression that this way of life is natural and the only option. I have compared this to theories in the chapters above. This led to the result that everyone in this system becomes critical to maintaining social order, producing a self-perpetuating cycle. Once I understood this, I came closer to understand why concepts like sexuality and gender identity are such an important topic within Western societies. To make it short: I realized that pretty much everything is connected and interrelated with them while they keep informing each other.

After discussing the outlines that surround the two concepts of sexuality and gender binarity, I will now discuss them explicitly, starting with the former.

“Sexuality seems to me to be more ‘essential’, like it has an essence of what it means. And there is an intense mythology surrounding it, let's just say, taboos associated with it and a certain function” (C2, Shofie, l. 149-151).

“There is pleasure that is not recognized as such. And that is not captured as sexuality, because it's a pleasure that doesn't fit or doesn't enforce or in fact challenges the hegemonic narrative about what sexuality is” (Ibid., l. 231-233).

Shofie says that this hegemonic – meaning a predominant – narrative is connected with certain codes for sexuality. Shofie and me have discussed how heterosexual partnerships are accepted as normal and societal norms have influenced our conception of the "real" body. These norms attribute our desires to the physical characteristics of our bodies, but they ignore the ways in which societal expectations and beliefs shape our desires. In a move to explain the construction of desire, Shofie tells an example of a commercial for a cigarette brand in the 1920s. As women to that time wanted to be thin¹⁰, the brand used this desire for their campaign in order to look attractive.¹¹ “So it uses a latent idea of what is already desired and channeled and manipulated this way or that way” (C2, Shofie, l. 209f.).

¹⁰ I'm not going to comment on the unnatural, unreachable body goals that women were expected to reach – to that time as still today... ah, sorry, I guess I did after all.

¹¹ The slogan was: „Reach for a lucky instead of a sweet” (truthinitiative-org 2017).

This example shows how companies can use what people already want to make them want their products even more. It further demonstrates how society standards can affect and direct our desires. It also emphasizes the complicated interplay between personal aspirations and greater social factors. It helps us understand how what we see and hear in society can change what we like and what we think is important.

Such a type of directed desire is demonstrated in the societal focus of the phallus. B. understands heteronormative sexuality as an oppressive mechanism that favors masculinity and the penis through a centralization of the act of penetration. B. has experienced this several times when they were stigmatized for their gender. They have told me how conversations often moved towards genitals when discussing their transness. While feeling this stigmatization as completely unnecessary, B. personizes a refusal of an idealization of the penis:

“It became clear to me very quickly that I wasn't going to build a penis because I don't want to have a penis. I like my genitals, that works great for me (giggles). And the danger that this will get worse (...) well, you always lose functions, you always lose feeling. So, no, what for? So that I can fit into a picture that I don't even need for myself” (C1, B., l. 1305-1311).

I said before that I slightly felt caught when talking to B. I understood that Western society has conditioned us to believe that the penis is the most important thing in the universe, imposing this image on us through the obsession with sex as penetration, while any deviant act or the lust of feminine bodies is condemned or mystified. A theory I heard by Emilia Roig (2023, Chapter 10.9).

Emilia Roig is the author of a very intriguing German audiobook I have listened in which the oppressive mechanisms of marriage is brilliantly explored.¹² Along her train of thoughts, Roig asks the question: How would a sexuality have looked like if men would have had the same consequences of penetration as women? Roig speculates that if men would also be affected by unwanted pregnancy, abortion, fistula, or even death, men might have treated penetration as a special praxis only for reproduction. She asks: “Wouldn't sex that doesn't focus on penetration be the best contraceptive?” (Ibid., Ch. 11.2, 0:25-0:30).

¹² With Roig I started to strongly believe that marriage also is a crucial factor for the division of gender, its inequalities and the strengthening of oppressive systems. However, this was not further discussed by my participants for why I dismiss this topic in this context and simply recommend to listen for what Roig has to say.

This also prompts the question of what places could have been opened up if the fixation with the phallus had not been? It is hard to think outside this construct. I think this is why it is so hard for many people to believe that there might have been different understandings of social structures than the division between male and female and their assumed desire for heterosexuality. This is this “trouble of sexuality” I mentioned before and that is repeatedly considered by my research participants: There is “a fascinatingly broad field of what people can perceive as sexual, but a fascinating small field of what is socially accepted” (C1, B., l. 347-349). B. is expressing the thought that we are so stuck in a certain box of thinking sexuality that we cannot see beyond.

“Sexuality is what I find when I run away from myself. I stumble upon my sexuality. But there is always this running away first. And it leads you to places that you didn't know where there in the first place” (C1, Shofie, l. 1049-1051).

Through the refusal – or also impossibility – for Shofie to adapt heteronormative expectations, Shofie refuges in a form of sexuality that leads them to new visions of possibilities. This fits to Shofie’s explanation that their definition of sexuality comes always last:

“It comes first in the observation of like ‘oh I guess that happens, so this seems like it fits for now’. (...) and normally things would change in me also. I recognize myself to resonate with certain things more than other things. [and] some things become unbearable for me” (C1, Shofie, l. 1064-1069).

Shofie’s identification with sexuality always comes retrospectively: “it's more like I desire, or something connects with something, I become me, and then I find the language that describes that” (C1, Shofie, l. 1054f.). Shofie describes how their concept of sexuality changes throughout time, with their association with it occurring retrospectively. This road of self-discovery entails rejecting heteronormative standards and embracing a type of sexuality that is more closely aligned with their genuine identity. They describe a process in which they identify specific wants or connections within themselves, which leads to a better understanding of their identity. This shows that Shofie's understanding of gender identity is flexible and ever-changing, influenced by their experiences and self-awareness.

While the connection between gender and sexuality is not specified in Shofie’s case, B. does connect them:

“I think with ten I definitely had a try at sex. But he was also ten, so of course it didn't really work. Or I have photos taken or taken photos of my body and then dealt with it in a very, very shameful way. (...) I think I was subconsciously very concerned with my body, because I should be something that I'm not and somehow I felt a kind of identity conflict and that's why I think I had a great interest in other bodies” (C2, B., I. 201-212).

B. has always questioned the expectations given along with their assigned gender. But this also made them uncomfortable with their body. Because of this uncertainty they explored other bodies in order to find a relationship towards their own.

B.'s notion made my heart jump a little because it exactly describes what I meant in the introduction by referring to Sarah Ahmed who believes gender identity is also always a matter of relations. She thinks that we are defining ourselves in connection towards others and how others define themselves in return. In “embodying strangers”, Ahmed emphasizes encounters between different bodies and how they shape our ways of being in the world (2000, p. 44). She writes: “I will argue that there is no body as such that is given in the world: bodies materialise [sic!] in a complex set of temporal and spatial relations to other bodies, including bodies that are recognised [sic!] as familiar, familial and friendly, and those that are considered strange” (2000, p. 40). This implies that bodies appear inside a web of temporal and spatial relationships to other bodies; they do not exist in a vacuum. Thus, our concept of self is influenced by other bodies. This shows that the interactions we have with other people and the ways we view and engage with their bodies are closely related to how we understand gender identity. This is exactly how B. described learning about themselves through exploring others. This brings me closer to answering my research question on the interrelation of sexuality and gender. With Shofie and B.'s narratives, I argued that I believe they inform each other, now I want to specify: only within the societal norms we live in. Since (hetero-)sexuality is so important within capitalism, it shapes gender binarity. This, in turn, influences our personalities, as we are born with expectations to embody certain characteristics (such as sexual desires) without our consent. If this weren't the case, who knows who I would be today? This takes me back to my original thesis, "If we were all pansexual, gender identity wouldn't matter," and makes me wonder if we might genuinely lessen the significance of gender by accepting everyone sexually, regardless of gender?¹³

¹³ This response is set inside a specific analysis and situation, recognizing that it may not be applicable universally. It emphasizes the possible difficulties of generalizing from Westernized viewpoints on sexuality and relationship dynamics. The emphasis is on challenging the notion that all bodies have active sexuality or are

After B. had told me their story of first identifying as a Lesbian before becoming non-binary I have asked them – much ashamed I must admit – if it might be possible that their desire for the same sex might come because of their very bad experiences with men. B. said very directly:

“And even if. Yes, okay, completely logical. That's what I would say. Not your fucking business, too. And then that's the case, but that doesn't take away the legitimacy of my sexuality” (C1, B., l. 369f.).

What I hear out of this is doubting the notion that homosexuality would be devalued, even in the event if B. developed a strong attraction for the same sex as a result of negative experiences with one gender. I interpret this as rather a demonstration for the idea that we can, first and foremost, choose whom we love, and second, how some behaviors can have such significant consequences that they push individuals away from a particular gender group. Further, I wonder, what does that tell us about this particular gender group? B.'s experience shows that sexuality might be both constructed and decision-based. I conclude from this that desire cannot be located as something occurring in the body with no agency.

Judith Butler had an idea about how desire constructs our gender that resonates in B.'s experiences. In her famous work “gender trouble”, Butler claims that occasionally, people are drawn towards the same sex, but they choose to suppress these feelings because society teaches them this is wrong. As a consequence, those who suppress their emotions may shy away from anything too feminine or too masculine (depending on their desire) which results in an overexpression of femininity or masculinity, according to Butler. She concludes that society then produces demanding concepts about different sexual identities based on the suppression of homosexuality. According to her, this denial however, might lead to psychological anguish and a negative self-perception. If avoiding homosexuality is the basis for being either feminine or masculine, then identifying one's gender entails assimilating and even transforming the gender we're trying to avoid by developing our self-image. This implies that conforming to anti-homosexual laws shapes not just our physical appearance but also our sexual desires and ultimately determines our gender identity (Butler 1999, p. 68-89). Butler comes to the result that a collapse of traditional gender roles might occur if society stopped enforcing heterosexuality as a requirement. I connect this with a statement by B.:

engaged in sex, acknowledging that other communities may value aspects of relationality that are not often classified as "sex" or "sexuality" in Western terminology.

“If we break down the binary, then there is no longer this need to classify oneself sexually. Because there is no longer anything to assign yourself to, because people identify freely” (C2, B., l. 467-469).

If asked, B. wouldn't identify as pansexual. Because “every identification of sexuality is again based on the understanding of the binary gender” (C1, B., l. 1224-1226). Because of that, B. also states that they lose the interest for people who identify within this binary realm. They acknowledge that this is something that is also hard and hurtful because:

“I don't see that person as being responsible for my own suffering. But she is part of it socially. And she often doesn't defend herself against it and she doesn't break away from it, from this role. But you could really solve something if people, people who are not affected by suffering, consciously decide to no longer be part of it” (C1, B., l. 1096-1101).

It appears that B. finds it difficult to be comfortable with someone when they know that this person is a part of the same system that denies B.'s existence. Shofie says something similar: “I need to know that the other person plays with their gender. I need to know that for myself” (C1, Shofie, l. 1182f.). It is critical for both of them that the other person recognize that gender is a construction. This made me understand how deeply cultural norms and cultural institutions that deny or invalidate people's identities create challenges to trust and intimacy. This need for recognition and understanding of gender fluidity highlights the impact of inflexible gender standards on those who defy or do not fit into these norms, emphasizing the need of shared ideas and values in developing meaningful connections.

Shofie claims that there is a conflict in all of us to those inherited conceptions, which some people feel more strongly than others. She says that usually cis-men are “so scared of this contradiction, when it's actually, it makes a lot of space, it's actually a beautiful thing” (C1, Shofie, l. 1216f.). It's a space through which we could explore anything that's beyond the restricted sexuality we are taught and beyond the restricted identities we reproduce. “My sexuality, I define it in terms of how I perceive the other person or understand not to look at my partner as contradiction” (Ibid., l. 1218f.).

Shofie follows the idea to reimagine relationships beyond sexual desire, which opens the door to new social ties that we haven't explored yet. Shofie exemplifies their understanding of sexuality with a comparison to play:

“To have my sexuality and how I use the word play for it is much closer to how I relate to sexual acts. Which is not strictly what sexuality is. (...) this state of play, this playful state where I can be in and I can get out of. I can retreat, I can go, but I can move in it.

Where I had sex with men who seems like they cannot bear this state (...). I'm talking about the state that I'm in, that feels awesome to me, that sometimes I just want to stay there for a long time, I don't want to go out of it. Ehm... and I don't need the other person for it" (C1, Shofie, l. 1118-1163).

I think in Shofie's argument is a sense of using sexuality as more adaptable, personalized and flexible and to shape it in accordance with own preferences, needs, and circumstances. It refuses to restrain the term towards certain meaning but opens it up for exploring and experiencing. This reminded me of a text I've read in context of my research. In "The End of the Monarchy of Sex", Benjamin Noys (2008) advocates for a spiritual politics practice, which he defines as a communal uprising that questions how authority dominates us through our bodies and relationships. It is not about escaping to some remote location, but about thinking critically and creating great changes in our environment. Consider a society in which individuals prioritized their own needs over the potential harm they could cause to others or the wider environment. This kind of thinking is known as "nihilism." It's similar to caring exclusively about ourselves and not giving a damn about other people or anything. Noys argues that we might risk feeling empty or as though life has no purpose if we just concentrate on what makes us happy without considering how it impacts other people or the environment around us. So, it's crucial to consider how we might improve the world for everyone rather than just concentrating on what makes us happy: "The relentless discourse of sexuality that leaves us with 'enjoying in itself' tries to prevent the formation of new relations that would not be coded in terms of sexuality" (Noys 2008, p. 113). Noys discusses Foucault's belief in asceticism, which is a kind of self-training that liberates oneself from social expectations, particularly with regard to sexuality. It's about defying the expectations society has of us and discovering new ways to be free (Ibid., p. 116). The concept of asceticism implies a return to pleasure while we move away from our obsession with desire. I understand desire here as the socialized desire that is connected to the physical characteristics of our bodies. This approach recognizes capitalism's influence on desire but concentrates on breaking free from it rather than continually dissecting it (Ibid., p. 117ff.). Noys argues to break free from current standards which we can by now understand as the binarity of both sexuality and gender and as this very narrow concept of male to female penetrative sexual act. Rather, according to Noys, we can see sexuality as an extension of the body, as a tool to think beyond it.

Sexuality is fluid, in my opinion. I do not believe that we are born with an unchangeable set of desires and qualities. Naturally, there are certain features that we possess that we may find difficult to modify. However, upon reflection of my past and present, I can confirm that the traits I struggle with most today are not intrinsic; rather, they have been shaped by the actions of others. Given that those qualities have emerged in this manner, why not sexual desire as well? This thought is shared by B. who relates sexuality to individual characteristics:

“I don't know where that [sexual desires] comes from either. We as humanity don't know that yet. We haven't explored that yet, haven't figured out how sexuality really develops. (...) what I think is that it is simply part of human diversity and that sexuality is part of the character. (...) We can't even say what is what and what comes from where, as long as everything is still tied up by some constructs that we live in society” (C2, B., l. 376-389).

I believe that we have come to a point to be able to understand sexuality not only as this very intimate and pleasurable act but also as a form of connection. In contrast to the narrow understanding of sexuality within the heteronormative lifestyle, both Shofie and B. see sexuality as a field of possibilities, as a sort of entrance door to explore and discover things about oneself, about others, about how to be in this world. It's a queer approach towards sexuality.

“The purpose of all these myths and taboos and heteronormativity and monogamy is to enforce a certain narrative about scarcity that queerness intervenes and disturbs and disrupts and tries to show the teamingness of sexuality” (C2, Shofie, l. 152-154).

Shofie uses the term queer in a broader definition. As anything that challenges, undermines, or questions normativity, as well as being and acting outside of it. According to her, it may have to do with identification, including gay, bi/pansexual, and transgender, but it may also have to do with how one lives, behaves, or perceives the world. It can also refer to a way of life that is more about perspectives than gender identity. B. calls it a “broad umbrella term. So, I just don't have to classify myself” (C1, B., l. 1216f.). Shofie says: “When I describe myself as pansexual it's more to make plenty of space for my partner” (C1, Shofie, l. 1193f.). Pansexuality is here understood as part of queerness and merely used for a necessity to categorize rather than a strict identification. This speaks to how I have defined pansexuality in the methodology chapter. Shofie uses this classification in order for others to gain freedom to express and be however they want. “Queerness is that layer that recognizes pleasure or

the erotic in things that is not supposed to be desired. And it's always an accident when that happens" (C2, Shofie, l. 212-213). This idea of an accident appeals to me. It highlights the potential that all three of us perceive in sexuality. You can discover things about yourself "accidentally" when you are allowed to explore without feeling like you have to perform a penetration act or believe you have to have an orgasm at all times. It primarily depends on how willing we are to be vulnerable with ourselves.

"There are things that everyone does that is queer, except that people are afraid of seeing that and expanding on that. It's almost like have a song stuck in your head, but you have to sing it under your breath or something. Instead of giving it space where queer community then comes and expands on that for you as a way of resuscitating that line, that articulation" (C2, Shofie, l. 388-392).

We come close now to the alternatives I am also eager to investigate in relation to my research questions. But first, let us tackle the 'other half' of my interrelated identity duo.

4.2.4. gender identity¹⁴

Leo: "What I now become to realize is, gender identity is like the last part. It is the result of everything. And this is very interesting for me, especially also in terms of sexuality, (...) sexuality was always this penetration thing. I think because of that, I had struggles also with my own sexuality (...). I can feel that there's more to it than penetration, but I couldn't pinpoint it. It's like a puzzle. These little pieces that come together" (C2, Shofie, l. 906-916).

What I have come to discover through Shofie and B.'s narratives is, put simply, that gender binarity is the result of combining the elements of social reproduction, heteronormativity, monogamy, nuclear family, and sexuality. Likewise, gender binarity and its expectations uphold those concepts. This made a lot of sense to me: Inequality is not caused by gender; rather, it is the result of corrupt, unjust, and oppressive structures that gave rise to gender identity in the first place. Of course, since all of that inevitably follows the path of that corruption, it also relates to gender identity. Now that I've finally gotten to the stage where I believe it to be relevant, I can discuss gender identification more closely.

"[The girls] were somehow, they were all very clean and very... very well dressed, you know, very nicely dressed and, like, no. That's not me at all. I want to be dirty" (C1, B., l. 352-356).

"Say, I need to go out and I'm going to wear something. This is a massive event. Because, what I want, is that I want to look femme. But what that means is that I'm anticipating other people's way of looking at me. The question of whether I'm comfortable or not is out the window. (...) like, wearing something, that at best - if I go to a man's toilet, they would point me to a woman's toilet and if I go to a woman's toilet, they want me to a man's toilet" (C1, Shofie, l. 968-985).

Shofie, B., and me were never divided by the thought that masculinity and femininity are separated by society into distinct identities by repression and exclusion. I guess we all have certain characteristics in mind when we hear those terms. B. understands femininity as being nice, clean, expressing a good behavior whereas the man is allowed to play in dirt. And as you can see through Shofie's impression, gender has a lot to do with expressions, how we dress and how we look like. Notions about gender expression always make me think about Susan Serano. I got to adore her during my self-education before the academic studies

¹⁴ There are a lot of theories going deep into philosophies such as famous Freudian Oedipus complex (see Butler 1999, Rubin 1975). I won't get as far into this as that would significantly extend the possible length of this thesis. Rather I am interested in the connections of theories and how they can lead us to alternative understandings.

because I have learnt much about gender through her personal trans perspective. She says that there is a huge impact of the other's perceptions and interpretation of us that determine our gender: "While we may like to think of ourselves as passive observers, in reality we are constantly and actively projecting our ideas and assumptions about maleness and femaleness onto every person we met" (Serano 2007, 163). Serano writes it's a popular belief that being femininity implies losing status and respect, and that you should desire to be a guy. The presumption that femininity is intrinsically "contrived," "frivolous," and "manipulative" is actually what makes masculinity appear consistently "natural," "practical," and "sincere" in contrast to femininity (Serano 2007, p. 43). Following this, consequently, a culture as a whole adopts an uncomfortable and contentious view of femininity. This is mirrored in Shofie's experiences:

"I dance and the way I dance is a place of wound for me. It has always been ridiculed; it has always been coded. Something other than what I mean. I wear the things that I like to wear. I would sneak into my parents room and I would wear my mom's stuff, I would wear my sister's stuff, I prefer them." (I1, Shofie, l. 291-295) "my parents would say: Don't do that. These are girl things, don't do that. Oh no, you're not allowed to take part in this, this is for girls" (C1, Shofie, l. 207-209).

Shofie's experiences reveal that behavior is always already coded. Because there are these assumptions and these unspoken rules how to dress and how to behave according to a certain gender, many people are having hard times to understand and accept even deviant expressions. Whilst talking with Shofie and B. I realized how much we as people continuously dress up in order to be acknowledged in a certain way. I remember that in school and university I often looked into my closet always with the thought: "How would they like this?" Sure, I still do that sometimes, but without really realizing it I started to dress differently once I had started the reflection process. Ever so often now I pull randomly stuff out of my closet and wear whatever is the most comfortable. Surely enough this is rarely anything "girly".

B.: "Trans people feel the pressure even more acutely when growing up, (...) the pressure of these social roles. So that a trans woman is scrutinized even more intensely than a woman. And a trans woman has to be even more of a woman than a woman has to be" (C1, B., l. 1372-1378).

Shofie: „in a sense queer fashion is what you do to fashion, so to say. But this thing that you do to an article of clothing, is not registered as queer among white people when it's blatantly queer among Black folks"

Leo: “because Black women have to dress even more feminine.”

Shofie: “Yes. So when they refuse that, there is queerness already there, but it's too plain for whiteness to register that as such” (C2, Shofie, l. 811-826).

As pointed out in the former chapters, both my participants and me understand the binary genders as made for whiteness. Among theory, I discovered a type of parallelism between Blackness and transness. I told Shofie about this similarity when I told them about the writings of Bey and Warren. I said that the authors relate Blackness to transness and consider them as a space for newness. Calvin Warren argues that Blackness is a kind of hybrid category that exists outside of gender, similar to transness: “We might call this symbiotic blend a form of transness, in which the blending troubles not just gender categories but also the categories of the human itself” (Warren 2017, p. 269). Marquis Bay likewise compared transness and Blackness and said that trans* existed from the beginning, it’s a process that is constantly evolving; a flexible identity that encompasses more than just transgender people: “trans* is that refusal to be itself, to be sure of itself, to be sure that it is where it's at” (Bey 2017, p. 266). There is clearly a deviation of gender identities in this as Bey argues for a plain identity of an individual in itself, one that doesn’t rely on gender, which Bey then calls trans*. By defining Blackness as a composite category that exists outside of gender and comparing it to transness, both authors show the complexities and fluidity of both ideas. From this perspective, one may claim that broader societal factors like whiteness and Blackness impact our sense of gender and sexuality, frequently elevating some identities while marginalizing others. Maybe our ideas about being a boy or a girl, and who we love, are influenced by bigger ideas about being Black or white that people have created over time. A notion that supports the ideas my participants and me have outlined in context of colonialism (Ch. 4.1.).

The fluidity of identities is recognizable in the biographies of my participants. Both B. and Shofie have made a process that resulted in turning away from binarity. But first, both used to embody “the other” gender of their given ones. Shofie was born an assigned boy and moved around as a woman for some time and B. was born an assigned girl and moved around as a man for quite some years. When I asked B. how they realized they didn’t want to be a guy they said:

“My experiences with men growing up were absolutely toxic and negative. Men have always been perpetrators in my perception. But also my own perpetration, which I was confronted with in my first relationship. And then I had a very blatant discourse within myself: I know what kind of suffering that can bring. And I'm currently in the

process of reproducing it myself. And I can't keep this cycle going. (...) I think I understood at the same time how toxic these roles are and that the roles turn people into perpetrators. So I actively worked to stop filling these roles" (C1, B., l. 1409-1430).

B. not only experienced other masculine behavior as harmful but also developed harmful behavior themselves while internalizing masculinity. B. understood that those behaviors were connected to certain roles which they then decided to get rid of in an impressive process of self-reflection.

While femininity is often ridiculed or viewed as the weak gender, I read that expectations of masculinity can lead to self-destructive behavior. Because of their privileges and embodiment of authority, men seldom learn to manage their emotions or their need for relationships. Digging from my self-education book-shelf I want to introduce Jack Urwin: He writes in his book with the telling name "boys don't cry"¹⁵ how boys are learning from early age on to be strong and on the winning side and how this leads to an extreme high rate of suicide among men. Further, he connects these attributes to abstracted things like wearing blue or pink baby clothes. He says that no single product, behavior, or word bears sole responsibility but if we support the idea of baby boys wearing blue, we are also supporting cultural expectations about what men should and should not do depending on their gender (Urwin 2017, p. 71). These are expectations B. wants to refuse no matter what. Instead, they emphasize embracing the originality of every person, regardless of gender:

B.: "I am human. I know who I am. And I know what I can do and what I like and what I don't. And I expect the same from my opposite. (...) I've had a few experiences and also relationships in which the person didn't want to do anything with my body. That's just... that's so toxic. (...) "I'm afraid that I'll be read as male which restricts my behavior even more because I won't be associated with it in any way. But there's nothing you can do about people doing that. They read me that way from their own, still very heteronormative image" (C1, B., l. 1106-1134).

During our conversation we again and again touched the idea that gender is actually a source of friction that often stands in the way of us accepting and embracing the other. B. stressed the belief that both femininity and masculinity are inhabiting characteristics that restrict a personal self-development and don't allow a person to really become whomever they feel and like to be. Instead, in trying to refrain from any gendered attributions, B. tries to be the person they actually like to be.

¹⁵ This is indeed the title of the German translated book. I use this one since it's out of my personal book shelf. In original the title is: "Man Up: Surviving Modern Masculinity".

When I talked to Shofie about their process towards non-binary, Shofie also expressed some fears. But other than B.'s rejection of gender, Shofie is actually longing for femininity which she doesn't dare to appropriate:

"I'm afraid of hurting other people through it, I'm afraid of taking other people's space. (...) I want to be a woman, don't get me wrong. I worry that my chances of doing that is so little that I'm afraid of disappointing myself" (C1, Shofie, l. 1004-1013).

I find this very interesting because there is an embracement of femininity instead of an emphasis for masculinity we are mostly taught. I think that we are educated with this believe that masculinity is the ideal gender, that a man is the superior individual. We are taught through superheroes, politicians¹⁶, book protagonists etc. that it is usually men who save humanity and our world. But Shofie is so respectful for femininity – not masculinity – that they actually fear to call themselves a woman because they don't want to hurt people who are – in the understanding of heteronormativity – born this way. I had to think once more about Hortense Spillers who argues that Black men need to reclaim "the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within," which means admitting that historically, Blackness has only been "in full effect" inside Black women, and that their particular experience needs to be valued by Black men which would give them the tools they need to separate Blackness from whiteness (1987, p. 80). Even though this reproduces gender binarity I think there is some crucial argument here (also for whiteness) since femininity, as Lugones would say, is indeed the constructed "other" against the "divine" masculinity and only through its downgrading can the latter come first (Lugones 2008). I believe this is why Shofie expresses her fears of becoming truly feminine. Because femininity truly owns characteristics that need to be embraced, not downplayed. If we were to argue in binary terms, opposed to masculinity, femininity is the gender that fights for equality. Thus, accepting femininity becomes a kind of resistance to restrictive gender stereotypes. This thought has prompted me for an argument towards B.:

Leo: "I think in a world in which we still use masculinity and femininity and will have to use it for a while, because I don't think we can detach from it so quickly, especially people who identify very, very much with it. I often ask myself, (...) how can we rephrase that? That very cis-male guys, well, not that I want to protect them, but that

¹⁶ Although this one is a tricky one since they are also the ones who are starting all the wars and at least in my opinion are anything else than heroes. But this is another discussion.

they can continue to maintain their masculinity and can still be sensitive and can still care and so on.”

B.: “To me, this feels like a pact with the devil. I see absolutely the right, women are part of a marginalized group and from this experience comes a strong need for identification with it and an acceptance of the role. And a need to lift this identity out of marginalization. I totally see that and it's absolutely worth. But that would also be solved if the binary system was no longer there. Then this negativity towards the image of woman would no longer exist, because the image of woman no longer exists. And people would have the freedom to develop personally as they are. (...) [But] people are still fighting for recognition of patriarchal power. And that's where I'm like... no... we can actually collectively give a shit about this recognition and simply work for the personal liberation of each person” (C1, B., l. 1153-1189).

Honestly, I totally get and embrace what B. is saying. But I can't get over the fact that I wonder how we are supposed to overcome gender in a world that is still highly founded on it. I completely agree with B.'s arguments, don't get me wrong, but for me this is – unfortunately – still a utopia that we won't be able to reach very soon. This utopia clashes with the reality that even us, queer subjects, are often unable of fully identifying. As I explained to Shofie:

“I don't really question my womanhood, let's so say. I questioned womanhood in itself. But I also realized in the past month that I questioned more how people reacted to my behavior, because it was not womanly. Then I didn't question why I'm not like a woman, but I rather question why do people react like that” (C2, Shofie, l. 360-364).

It's like Susan Serano said: We are constantly projecting our ideas and assumptions of gender identities onto other people and because of that we react surprised or angry if others don't behave like that. However we react, the other person senses it and can sense that the reaction is intended to tell: you're not normal! So not I question my femininity but the others question me in not performing properly. Because my upbringing was (luckily) not focused on that, for a long time I didn't really care if how I behave is feminine or not. Until somebody reflected towards me that I am not behaving like I should. I came to learn that society frequently has strict opinions about how individuals should behave and display their femininity. It can be tough to embrace both your femininity and your true self when you act differently than what is expected of you or when people criticize you for not living up to these standards. I felt torn between staying true to myself and fitting into societal expectations of what it means to be feminine. This internal conflict led to emotions of insecurity, doubt, and discomfort. And a lack of self-worth. It takes resilience and self-

reflection to negotiate these competing influences and eventually accept your actual identity, including your femininity, in a way that feels genuine and uplifting to you. There was an argument by Shofie I found highly remarkable in this context:

“If I were to be a woman, it won't be in the heteronormative sense of the word. I want to be... in my own version of being a woman, and that to me seems like a negotiated space with my non-binarity. (...) Only as a non-binary person can I embrace my femininity, and whatever version of masculinity that I have” (C1, Shofie, l. 1017-1035).

Only as a non-binary can I embrace femininity. I love that sentence! I suppose Shofie means that non-binary people can embrace femininity because non-binary people exist outside of those standards, allowing them to embrace femininity or masculinity in ways that challenge conventional norms. Theories like the ones I am offering you in this thesis help me in the process to overcome my issues. And I think this is why Shofie's sentence got so stuck with me. Just like me, Shofie had said before that theories are “narrow openings”. She believes that theories can help you to figure out stuff about yourself. And in relation to questioning your own identity this can become an entrance towards new perspectives and the actual praxis of changing life concepts. It's like B. says:

„My own experience, my own gender identity had already, like, opened the doors. I realized that it was easier for me to question the structures than people who are still building their own identity on them” (C1, B., l. 885-888).

4.3. *The effects of violence*

“I wanted to kill myself - content warning. Because life is for me, if I've taken my desire and my expression is like, taken away from me, then let me take this. This body. So that I can still have some desire. Let me then determine how I can die” (C1, Shofie, l. 670-673).

Please take a minute to think about what you already know by now about Shofie and B. Perhaps you share my impression that there is often a sense of being misunderstood, even denied, and that the way they act, speak, or think is perceived as incorrect. And they get this feeling through violence¹⁷. Take on their position for a second: Because of the way you write, your parents hit or yell at you. Your favorite games are the reason your peers make fun of you. The teachers condemn you because of the way you create things. Some random person beats you up just because you were walking on the streets. Furthermore, everyone has an opinion regarding what you wear, how you talk, or what you like. Imagine you constantly perceive a feeling that you are wrong even though you are not even sure what or better, why exactly you are doing things wrong. This is difficult to grab as a child. B. claims that kids are shaped mostly within the age of 1,5 to 4 years, a theory that is common sense in the social research.¹⁸

“I'm mentally ill and I think I'll be burdened by it for the rest of my life because I was in the main formative phase, where people form their self-image and create what they can expect from themselves. And from the outside I got portrayed that I can't become anything, or that would have to be someone else in order to be accepted” (C1, B., l. 114-121).

Shofie agrees with this, considering that “continuous violence forms a certain kind of self that goes on” (C3, Shofie, l. 413f.). Both Shofie and B. have experienced a lot of violence in

¹⁷ Violence can be defined more broadly than only causing physical injury. It encompasses elements such as emotional violence, carelessness, and structural violence, which denotes societal circumstances that result in prejudice and unfairness (De Haan 2008). When I talk about violence, also in relation of my participants, I also mean words that hurt, being excluded or ignored, being laughed at or anything else that makes a person feel bad about themselves.

¹⁸ Already 1936 wrote Fromm and Horkheimer that early life experiences have a bigger influence on a person's character than events that occur later in life. This can result in dispositions that are resistant to alter even in the face of efforts to provide emancipatory education: “Die Erlebnisse, die ein Mensch in seiner frühen Kindheit und Jugend hat, sind für die Bildung des Charakters von größerer Bedeutung als die Erlebnisse späterer Jahre. Nicht so, daß Kindheitserlebnisse den Charakter in einer Weise determinieren, daß spätere Ereignisse ihn nicht mehr zu ändern vermöchten, sonst wären sämtliche Bemühungen um emanzipatorische schulische und außerschulische Erziehung von vornherein zum Scheitern verurteilt. Aber sie schaffen doch Dispositionen, die eine relative Schwerfälligkeit und Trägheit des psychischen Apparates realen Veränderungen gegenüber wirken.” (Fromm & Horkheimer 1936, S. 55).

their childhood. And they both draw a connection between their experienced violence and their personal uneasiness towards things that are perceived normal and natural. B. states very clearly how their refusal of the games they were supposed to like (as an assumed girl in childhood) made them being an outsider. Shofie describes how they liked “feminine” things and how they would “remember having crushes on boys”. They were both rejected whenever they expressed behavior that was not typical of their gender.

“So that's violence and it's not taken seriously. This is daily violence that people have to experience maybe ten years of their lives because they are legally obliged to be there. And it's not taken seriously. I went to my teachers, I went to my mother, I went everywhere and said: I can't do it anymore. There, nothing could be done” (C1, B., l. 376-382).

Especially parents, as usually first call to rescue, play a crucial role here. Shofie experienced physical violence from their parents as a response to their ‘misbehavior’. Likewise, grandparents did not appear as haven to seek support but instead accepted the violence and taught Shofie further that their being was somehow wrong. Similarly, B. lost their trust towards their family early on and considers the concept of nuclear family as foundation for possible trauma. “As a result”, B. reflects,

“I never experienced the development of self-worth. Because I couldn't accept [the binary gender roles]. That means I didn't have a role to attach myself to, from which I could learn about society. And I somehow blamed myself for it, that I don't fit in, I'm wrong, I have to change (...) and that I just knew that something was wrong, that something wasn't right, but I never had the right explanation for it. So, I always looked for it in wrong places. Because what else is left?” (C2, B., l. 817-834).

I think that we still greatly underestimate the impacts of forms of bully behavior to our self-esteem and personal development. I still believe the things I was told when I was young: “I’m not good enough. I must change to be accepted.” They are horrible things for a child to hear and believe. And even after 20 years not even the person who loves me the most is able to assure to me that this is not true. Ellen DeLara assisted me in understanding my own experiences with bullying as a very impacting and terrible process that gets silently under the skin. She writes: “We may not be able to depend on our memory for the name of a movie we saw once or for directions to a restaurant we enjoyed, but even a single incident of bullying can be seared into our memories” (DeLara 2019., p. 2).

There is this feeling of not belonging and not being right within all three of us research participants. Shofie says: “In the beginning.... I didn't understand a lot of things, just

like I didn't understand why I'm like this, you know, why I'm not a part of wherever I'm at" (C1, Shofie, l. 387f.). I hope I could clarify how Shofie's experiences have to be understood in the context of racism. Bullying can occur for a variety of reasons and targets people based on perceived vulnerabilities or differences, whereas racism is rooted in institutional discrimination and prejudice based on race or ethnicity. Bullying and racism may cause harm in similar ways, but it's important to understand the distinct historical and societal contexts of racism as well as the particular difficulties it presents for individuals who experience it. I have told Shofie how I'm hesitant to say that we have shared experiences because as a white person I have no idea how racism must feel like. Shofie responded:

"I'm not quite sure if how you feel about not having an experience of race or not having an experience of this is entirely true. It might feel that way, yet certain things kept being reproduced and certain things kept being reproduced outside of what whiteness wants you to reproduce" (C1, Shofie, l. 330-384).

I think what Shofie means is that the influence of racism persists and shapes society in diverse ways, even if I don't experience it personally. Certain parts of race continue to be reproduced or maintained in society, and these characteristics often contradict what being white, or the prevalent cultural norms attached to it, demands or expects. Shofie stresses the ongoing impact of racism on society dynamics and that its consequences are still felt today, shaping society norms and structures. In other words, even if I, as a white person, do not directly experience racism, its existence and perpetuation have an impact on the larger social fabric and contribute to systemic inequalities. Shofie's point of view emphasizes the significance of recognizing and resolving the long-term impacts of racism, especially for people who have not personally experienced it. Once again, this goes along the thought that colonialism and its construction of blackness have actually put in motion the constructions of not only racial but also gender inequalities, basing them on concepts such as the ones I have outlined above. Shofie further adds during our evaluation talk that violence is not simply present or absent but comes in forms that are considered acceptable or unacceptable depending on individual perspectives and societal standards. She calls for a nuanced understanding of violence, recognizing that some forms are necessary for challenging and transforming oppressive systems, even as they disrupt existing norms and expectations:

“For instance, abortion. Instead of saying: oh no, we go back to this concept of agency in order to do that; No, it's a violence that preserves certain sense of self and other things that should be defensible especially because straightness enforces the same kind of violence” (C3, Shofie, l. 418-421).

B. believes that from early age on most people already accept these clear boxes and boundaries that are imposed on them. And bullying is an “executive arm, this gender control, so there is this development control” (C2, B., l. 311f.). I would connect this to what DeLara argues about how systems and its rules and standards have certain measures to preserve them – sometimes without the executing people really understanding what they’re doing. Those measures are laws, unspoken rules, but also racism, sexism, and bullying. They usually have great impacts on the people who receive them and which accompany them often all of their lives. DeLara writes: “Troubled kids or anyone who is considered “other” are typical scapegoats in school systems. In any system or organization that is dysfunctional, people are scapegoated by others as the ones who are causing the problems in the system. This serves to divert attention away from everyone except the one who is scapegoated. It also serves the function of letting everyone else in the system off the hook” (DeLara 2019, p. 9).

When reflecting my thoughts about violence towards Shofie in our last conversation, they took into consideration that violence as the

“bullying kind, it's really hard to address. It's isolated. Probably the problem is not there at all. The problem is completely somewhere else. It's a displacement. So I wonder if your theory depends on this particular form of violence” (C3, Shofie, l. 91-93).

I responded that I see this sort of violence as very systemic form that erupts through individuals who partly cannot be blamed for their mindset, considering DeLara’s arguments. I agree with how Shofie reflected on this: “you use violence because you don't want to lose that connection to the structural violence” (Ibid., l. 115).

I understand that the Western system is a white, heteronormative system. Along with Shofie and B. I argued that our stability is the binarity of gender, heterosexuality, and the superiority of whiteness. In the context of bullying, B. has made me to realize that violence manifests as a disturbing yet significant tool used to drive children to adhere to specific behavioral standards and systems.¹⁹

¹⁹ In our last conversation, B. highlighted social media as a major factor that complicates things further. B. noted that these platforms, used from a young age, often reflect the bullying experienced in school, adding harassment and outdated life concepts from all directions. B. believes that old-fashioned ideas about

I believe that Shofie's feeling of "no matter what I do I cannot cross" is a state of being that many people who don't belong to the constructions of white heteronormativity can relate to. Shofie's says a really strong sentence: "violence addresses the vulnerability of our reality" (C1, Shofie, l. 365f.). It means that violence draws attention to the fact that our reality is fragile or easily harmed. Or, to be more specific, that the system we consider as reality is not the ultimo. It is not a reality everyone shares. Shofie follows their sentence with the note: "it makes it impossible for us to relate" (Ibid., p. 12) which means that this violence also clouds us for tolerance and acceptance. In fact, when I reflected my results along with this thesis to B., B. said that those who use this kind of violence against another are "the people who are so deeply immersed in this logic that they see you as a threat to destabilize their stability" (C3, B., 116f.). This portrays violence as a defensive response by people who have a strong interest in upholding a specific social order and highlights the significant influence of society systems on people's actions as well as the irrationality and insecurity that underlie such behavior.

I conclude through Shofie and B.'s tellings that in seeing violence acts as a catalyst for exposing the inherent fragility and instability of cultural institutions that are frequently viewed as solid and unchanging, acts of violence, such as racism and bullying, expose these institutions' basic flaws, calling into question the concept of an objective and unchanging reality. In essence, violence serves as a lens through which we may see the fractures and vulnerabilities in the fabric of our seen reality, leading us to rethink and reevaluate long-held ideas and power systems.

masculinity, especially spread by influential people like Hip-Hop artists, are considered trends and are hard to correct once shared in live streams. "What happens via social media is what happened back then only within your circle of friends, is now happening totally amplified somehow through totally well-known voices that simply echo it" (C3, B. l. 81-93). This presents a whole new subject though that requires further investigation. Some understanding of it can be found in (Bell & Bayliss 2015) and (Tabassum 2022).

4.3.1. Using pain for change

Some people need identities in order to experience self-worth or to feel connected to something. I understand that. I do, too. But I also believe that it is this enforcement into categories in the first place that make us feel this way. It's not an easy task to change that. Already refraining from those concepts without even realizing can lead to a lot of pain as we could see through the experiences of Shofie and B. They did not know in their early years what was going on. But already people hushed them for their "abnormality"²⁰. Luckily, both have not let others destroy their strength and they have continued their path of finding their truth against any systematic barriers.

„I've always been very self-effective, so that I can really feel suffering so deeply, that I can really bring about... um, change. So that I implement this consistently" (C1, B., I. 910-913).

B. used their sorrow and pain as some sort of transformative power. This had me think about an author who had influenced me a lot in my journey. I am super glad I finally get to cite Susan Stryker who was my "narrow opening" towards trans theory and who had taught me the idea that trans can be seen as a representation of instability that forces people to confront their own gender construction (Stryker 1994, p. 240). How cool is that? Stryker also argued for rage as a sort of fuel, a tool to work with the struggle, a power to transform (Ibid., p. 248). I think this is what B. does. And what I actually do, too. When we experience situations that make us feel pain or anger then we usually reflect those situations and try to learn from them (I say we because I know B. good enough to know that they does the same). We look at ourselves to understand what was going on that made us feel like that. And when possible and needed, we talk to other people that were part of this situation to make them understand what was happening. This already mostly culminates in change. And sometimes, it also leads us to be louder in a broader sense. To make political posts on social media. Or to start initiating workshops to help others understand.

Whilst agreeing with this in our last conversation, B. added that they believe that traumata are catalysators that can go in various directions. "I see suffering as a motivator to

²⁰ Abnormality is an ugly word and I was thinking long if I should even use it. But the longer I hesitated the more I thought: Actually, we should embrace that word as something good. People would probably argue "well this reproduces that there is a normality in the first place", but let's be realistic here: There is indeed a normality, a constructed normality and in celebrating abnormality we could make the first step of deconstructing it.

change something, because at some point you just can't handle the suffering anymore... at some point you're full" (C3, B., l. 160f.). They acknowledge that, while it can be inspiring, processes can also be demotivating and can alter in any direction, noting that the psyche is often unpredictable.

Not necessarily in this context, but likewise worth mentioning is Shofie's notion of grief. She said: "If I can redefine a family, I would redefine it to (...) people and beings who are, whose loss are really intolerable to me" (C1, Shofie, l. 499f.). Grief is defined by Butler as internalizing the lost object and allowing it to become part of oneself. This method promotes progress by integrating the other within us (Butler 1999, p. 78f.). As a result, recognizing sorrow as a transformational force can promote human growth and understanding, and not only in family relationships. This said, I think it is time to not only critique the current reality but also talk about how we could make it different.

5. NEW RELATIONS

I have shown you my line of thoughts that accumulated through a mixture of conversations with my participants and theoretical input. And I hope I could make you understand through this how me and my participants think of gender identity and (normative) sexuality as constructed things that mostly play in favor for white individuals. I hope you understand that I do not want to condemn whiteness but I want to stress how important and helpful it can be to engage into theories about the past and about life concepts in order to not only understand the own self better but also to move towards a more appreciative and tolerant togetherness within our societies.

Neither do I want to demean monogamous relationships. Some people truly prefer them and that's fine. However, our society usually portrays monogamy as the sole acceptable partnership, which I do not feel is accurate. I advocate for openness to different partnerships because I feel it can promote tolerance and benefit society. Understanding how sexuality may operate as a space for growth allows us to see certain spaces as a help to become who you want to be. For me, those spaces are relationships. Families, friendships, intimate partners, they all (are supposed to) provide a trustful space in which you can evolve. Personally, I have never thought of sexuality as being limited to a single, exclusive relationship. While I've just experienced extremely deep love in a way I never have before, I still don't believe "the one love" is realistic in a world of over eight billion people. There are numerous varieties of love and affection, which lead to various types of sexuality and the ability to love multiple individuals at the same time and in different ways. Why limit ourselves? Each individual has different interests, requirements, and desires. It's ridiculous to expect one individual to handle it all. As Foucault suggested: "[t]he problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of sex but rather to use sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships" (Foucault 1989, p. 204. In: Noys 2008, p. 107). Let's talk about this multiplicity.

5.1. Pan- and plurisexuality

“That's how I see relationships, that depending on how the person you're in a relationship with has their own biases, it influences them, it influences how the person can support and accompany your personal development or not. And yes, of course that influences, because we give some relationships a very strong importance (...). That's why I see relationships as yes, as a very big factor in personal developments of all kinds” (C2, B., l. 428-435).

I am non-monogamous. So many times, I have come across this prejudice: “So, you're having an open relationship in order to fuck whomever you want, right?” Even though there might be some truth to it – yes, it's very freeing to be able to fuck whoever I want, thank you very much – I think the question overlooks the real greatness of non-monogamy. And it says more about the person who asks than about the responder. There is this obsession with sexual intercourse while really for many people in a non-monogamous relationship it's rather about affection, trust, love, bonding.

“When I talk, for example, about sex in the context of queerness and what that can be, it is negotiations, coming together as an access of need and an expression of gender through sexuality or expression of sexuality through gender” (C2, Shofie, l. 146-148).

Sexuality for Shofie is connection. And they relate it to queerness because it is queerness that make us see the socialized concepts in another light: “Queerness tries to elaborate, so to say, to expand the idea and the narratives and the stories and the myth about sexuality” (C2, Shofie, l 196f.). We call it “queering” something, but I think finally it has not necessarily anything to do with being queer. This elaboration Shofie is talking about I interpret more like a coming back to something that was most likely already there before. Something that was only formed, cutted, and caged within the colonial-capitalist constructions. I understand this “queerness” we're talking about essentially attempts to remove the veil on something that was concealed behind a set of rules that we were led to believe were true. We got a glimpse of this something in the chapter of pre-colonialist cultures.

“There is pleasure that is not recognized as such. And that is not captured as sexuality, because it's a pleasure that doesn't B.fit or doesn't enforce or in fact challenges the hegemonic narrative about what sexuality is. In terms of friendship, for instance, you have erotic forms of relating that is dismissed. So for instance, cuddles between friends. (...) [Queerness] is a refusal to limit the erotic pleasure to a relationship, a ‘coupledom’. And to certain acts and certain gestures that is allowed to who and to whom” (C2, Shofie, l. 231-237).

You see here how Shofie opens up the understanding of relationships towards friendships. The concept of monogamy devalues friendships while it establishes a fixation on the heterosexual partnership. Rumbling in my pansexual-research again, I want to introduce Christian Klesse who has written about anti-monogamy in context of bi-feminism. Klesse argues that being open to several relationships also challenges the usual ideas about relationships and friendships, giving us freedom to reshape our understanding of both. It forces us to consider more carefully who and why we want to be close to (Klesse 2021, p. 76). This presents an opportunity to give relationships in general the weight they truly deserve in this life, as, in line with the findings made by my co-creators, I see relationships as a major source of support and influence for the development of personal character. In our evaluation talk, B. resumed about some further thoughts:

“Lately I've been thinking more often about the fact that we also have emotional hierarchies (...), these hierarchies between romantic and friendly platonic relationships. I would like to break up the idea that you can only get this closeness from romantic relationships. For me they are often much more fragile than platonic relationships” (C3, B., l. 245-252).

B. criticizes a “Velcro fastening mechanism” (Ibid., l. 256) that romantic relationships tend to have, often with the consequence of a distancing of the couple from their friends which they relate to invisible rules: “we often have these fixed roles or processes or steps that somehow come from an automatic space. But hey, why? I didn't even put it there” (Ibid., l. 285f.).

Such rules also include power dynamics in heterosexual partnerships which can be changed by non-monogamy. Further, as Klesse argues, sexual engagement with queer people allow to question and deconstruct the gendered order of things (such as the penis-vagina penetration): “bisexual nonmonogamy carries a deconstructive potential with regard to normative ideas concerning intimacy, gender, and sexual identity” (Klesse 2021, p. 76). In our evaluation talk, Shofie added a word that they considered important in this context: labor.

“To have relations that is a certain way, that allows you to do a certain labor, identity labor, the labor of self-formation, that allows you to feel more aligned with that performance than with other ones. And this is what sometimes when we say: allow me to grow or allow me to evolve. The labor part of identity making is something that I feel needs to be emphasized. With some people you feel more able to do that work, with some people you feel forced to do another kind of work of an identity formation or identity showing” (C3, Shofie, l. 236-241).

This is actually similar to what B. said in our evaluation talk: “I have emotions, (...) I don't share them with everyone, I share them with certain people” (C3, B., l. 247-249). Going with this, we indeed need several diverse people in order to form our own unique personality.

For me, pansexuality and plurisexuality²¹ go hand in hand but this doesn't need to be the case for everyone. I say so because it mirrors what I understand when I listen to B.'s and Shofie's arguments. Shofie says: “pansexuality is a word that makes space” (C1, Shofie, l. 1199f.). I believe this space-making is in context to everything, also to the ideas of friendships and partnerships as I have discussed above. Shofie has also claimed to reimagine relationships beyond sexual desire, as mentioned in the last chapter. Similarly, B. would rather refrain from any kind of categorization since it always “is again based on the understanding of the binary gender” (C1, B., l. 1225f.). B. stresses to see behaviors as simply a part of the individual's existence instead of pushing them into certain categories.

I think individuals who have several sexual partners don't necessarily need to feel constrained by a single, stable identity. They can travel between relationships and social contexts without necessarily identifying in a certain category because they don't have to. They can be who they want to be always in context with the accordingly person. For example, I can be the very orderly and rather decisive person when I'm around my partner whereas I tend to live out the chaotic and sometimes shy side on me when I'm with some of my queer friends.

There is this book Shofie and me discovered to have both read that has helped us towards a perspective beyond monogamy. Author Janet Hardy and Dossie Easton embrace any forms of plurisexuality in “the ethical slut” and write:

“Marriage is, we're told, a sacrament – a loving ritual where your faith and your community bless your union. (...) If marriage is sacred, as we think it is, why is legal recognition of a relationship, along with privileges like inheritance and parental rights, restricted to those who are willing to shape their lives to conform to somebody else's design? And why is it assumed to be only for romantic partnerships? Why shouldn't you marry your best friend if they're the person you want to spend your life with?” (Hardy & Easton 2017, p. 223).

This opens up ideas that could broaden our relationships and reduce systemic inequalities. In another note, TallBear argues that open non-monogamy has allowed them to make loving and encouraging friends with their partners' partners (TallBear 2018, p. 163), rejecting with

²¹ The term „plurisexuality” is borrowed from Malipaard et al. by Galupo et al. who wanted to refrain from a narrative that implies monosexuality as being the norm (Maliepaard & Baumgartner 2021, p. 10).

this statement an ever so often occurring thought that jealousy would hinder this sort of relationships.

Once more, Shofie wanted to add something when I reflected all these theories in our last talk. While completely agreeing with my arguments, Shofie said:

“That ties very neatly to straightness as bubbles. It's not just queerness that are bubbles. As soon as a straight person meets a queer person, they have to navigate a completely different relation that brings out a certain current in them that for them it might be challenging to find that. So, I absolutely agree that straightness is not just an essential understanding of the self. It's actually a communal understanding of the self, depending on the community that you navigate around. A person who is like so absolutely is straight (...) if they navigate queer relations and other parts, they might not be so defensive about their straightness” (C3, Shofie, l. 211-217).

Just as Shofie continues to emphasize, desire encompasses more than just sexual preferences and also includes the need for new connections and other approaches to one's own and other people's self-expression. B. had shared the thought that we wouldn't classify sexually if we break down the binary. My approach is a bit reversed but still very similar when I talked to Shofie:

Leo: “that's how I started the thesis research, right? With this hypothesis, if we were all pansexual, then gender identity wouldn't matter anymore. And it is connected to what you said about sexuality is not just the intercourse, but it's so much more. So, if we would be able to acknowledge that, also in terms of marriage or whatever, then it would also broaden our perception of relationality, of togetherness, of social structures in general, if you would continue to, you know, does it make sense?”

Shofie: “It makes a lot of sense. And broadens our resistance also. Broadens the possibility of resisting this kind of idea of sexuality. I really like what you said” (C2, Shofie, l. 919-927).

We argue that to break down the binary – both gender and sexuality – would mean to break down the heteronormative rules that accompanies them and this again means to challenge monogamy and marriage. And with it also the concept of the nuclear family.

5.2. *The queer-communal family*

“Sophie Lewis writes a lot about this. I admire her. (...) I think, due to the urgency of mass extinction, it needs to acknowledge that there are beings that should finally be acknowledged as part of us, part of our subjectivity, part of how we come to be, how we come to recognize and how we come to orient ourself in the world. Dogs, cats, birds outside... so it must include more than human beings. That's number one, number two, (...) it needs to embody a form of care that is resilient to capitalist appropriation. Which is not an easy thing to do” (C1, Shofie, l. 481-488).

All three of us dream of relationship structures that extend the nuclear family and refrains from a focus on blood relations. I call this the queer-communal family in order to understand the concept of family, as well as the idea of communal life and queerness. Shofie mentions Sophie Lewis, an author I have also read before meeting Shofie. Lewis writes that individuals are already developing nontraditional life setups that include alternative parenting identities. They often achieve this by rejecting binary identities (also for their children) and by beginning their own families apart from romantic connections, going with the thought that “infants don't belong to anyone, ever” despite the fact that some persons may be a child's primary caregiver (2019, Ch. 1). Lewis argues that since DNA is a non-producing material and has no effect over an organism's behavior, the process of manufacturing genetic code is not even all that important: “To put it another way, parents' substance gets jumbled” (Ibid.).

B. likes this argument. B. believes that parenthood involves some egoism, that it is not just an altruistic decision but also has a self-serving dimension since the role of being a parent is socially appreciated and can give some sort of satisfaction: “I often find it actually a matter of wanting to improve an experience that you didn't have and that you now want to improve on in your active role [as parent]” (C2, B., l. 558f.). Instead, B. proposes stepping back from such roles and accepting responsibility for a child as the unique person they are, regardless if being mother or father, along with the other members of this small queer-communal family. This would also reduce the hierarchical roles a family can represent as I have explained in the last chapter. I recommended a feminist novel to B. that resembled some of their ideas. Marge Piercy writes in her story about a “women's long revolution”:

“Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding” (Piercy 1976, p. 110).

The novel was written almost 50 years ago. It demonstrates that the idea of breaking traditional hierarchies is anything but new. Neither is questioning the concept of nuclear families and promoting a more egalitarian and compassionate society where men are equally encouraged to embrace care and affection.

“It needs to embody a form of care that is resilient to capitalist appropriation. Which is not an easy thing to do. I sustain for instance a family that we chose, that we come together and we decide together that we want to be family. I come to put to extend myself, my time, my labor for them so that they can work to be exploited - that doesn't sound very appealing. But it's not like there is an alternative so to say. So I would love it, if it takes the form of like how communities support each other during strikes. This sort of coming together, where we're able to labor, be exploited, because that's necessarily what's within capitalism. But also being able to be resilient to being withstand long strikes. And this is my form of non-violence resistance” (C1, Shofie, l. 486-496).

Shofie says a critical thing here: She doesn't believe capitalism to overcome. She acknowledges that this is a state we are going to live in for quite a while. In a first draft I wrote that there will be no revolution, in our evaluation talk however, Shofie corrected me: “I think there is a revolution happening all the time. And what we will see that some point in the future, revolution can be only conceptualized retrospectively” (C3, Shofie, l. 343-346). There is an acknowledgement for all the resistance, activism, and processes that are already happening against the oppressive constructs I talk about. Still, this system will stay in place for quite a while and as a resistance, as Shofie says, we can change things within it: We can use our sense of sociality, self-reflection, affection and relations to create a livable space within it. We can refrain from the ruling constructs capitalism has enforced on us and create own ones. Like choosing what is family. Using a form of community to support each other – outside from blood relations. This is pretty much exactly what B. said about raising a child as a community. And, yet again, this concept is anything but new.

This idea takes me back to the well-known phrase also mentioned by Lewis: “it takes a village to raise a child” (2019, Ch.6). With it we come to a close to this circle of explaining how concepts like nuclear family and heteronormativity came to be the norm in the first place and how “queering things” is not necessarily something new but rather a form of getting to know again things that have been existent long before colonialism. Sophie Lewis argues that it's important to remember that many non-traditional family practices existed before capitalism and weren't necessarily aimed at challenging norms. They are simply overlooked because colonialism has taught us that modernity and its binary structures is the

one true reality we are supposed to own. However, some scholars argue that alternative family practices, especially among indigenous and black communities, have the potential for revolutionary change and communal bonding (Lewis 2019, Ch. 6). Pre-colonial societies featured structures that were not limited to two-person partnerships or based on a two-gender system, as I have mentioned in the relevant chapter. TallBear suggests that instead of labeling and categorizing intimate interactions such as sex and sexuality we might want to focus on relationships and kinship without any strict categorization. The author emphasizes relations towards bodies that are not human (2018, p. 159) which resembles Shofie's thought that kinship systems "must include more than human beings". Likewise, B. has argued for a movement from rigid labeling and categorization toward a focus on relationships without boundaries. Emphasizing the significance of expanding the definition of family to include things other than humans promotes a broader perspective on intimacy and connection:

"And therefore the care work but also the role of security, or that security-providing structure is simply more diverse and thereby reduces the probability that it will collapse completely. That also if one or two people have to move away from the structure, for whatever reason, then your whole life is not gone. But then there are always others and then you still have support" (C1, B., l. 248-259).

I find this super important. Do you remember how B. described family as a horrible memory associated with violence? For them, family entailed a neglectful father and a damaged mother incapable of providing affection and protection. In Chapter 4.2.3. I had concluded through the tellings of Shofie and B. that they condemn the nuclear family model for failing to offer a secure and reliable support network for children, as well as for creating situations predisposed to instability and suffering, particularly among the most vulnerable members. In the quote above, B. criticizes the nuclear family's fragility, citing its reliance on the presence and engagement of a small number of people. In contrast, B. believes more diversified and communal family forms provide a stronger and more resilient support system. They create a safety net that provides continuity and stability even when individual members experience changes or difficulties. B. feels that the nuclear family is destined to fail its children. I agree with this. Raising a child is a tremendous commitment, and everyone carries their own burdens. I think it's absurd to expect two or fewer adults to be there for a child's entire life, strong, caring, nurturing, supportive. I follow B.'s idea that an extended family provides greater security by distributing labor and care.

“I think that people would be happier if they just got away from this urban and anonymized life and somehow just lived together again in small communities, which I think somehow corresponds more to human nature. So really connected small communities cope with everyday life and with each other. And I see that as being extremely predestined for some people to have children” (C2, B., l. 629-633).

Expanding the concept of family could offer more support for children. In school, I had a social worker who felt like a spare mother, providing support and impactful conversations. B. said they found connection in a queer youth center. Shofie similarly told me how they found a haven in a dance crew. These are just a few possibilities to find other forms of family bonds. Why not actively build such trust-based relationships for children from the beginning? I discuss this topic often with my partner these days because if we are to become parents, I wish our children to grow up in a community. Having other trusted adults to turn to can make a big difference, especially if they have issues with their parents. I believe that this can boost their self-esteem and provide a safety net, particularly in contexts enforcing heteronormative norms. A broader notion of family emphasizes community and support over blood relationships, challenging gender norms and allowing children to discover their own identities. A queer-communal family structure could provide diverse perspectives, experiences, and affection, enriching everyone involved. Of course you have to actively build this. I am not saying this is easy. But what kind of change is? I believe that every relationship is a combination of love and fights and it takes great will and good communication to keep them alive. This is just what I would wish for a loving community who brings up children.

Shofie added another important factor of this concept: “It reproduces a very important context” (C3, Shofie, l. 297). Queerness gets reproduced differently in communal versus isolated contexts. Shofie exemplifies this by telling how in Bali, queerness thrives in underground spaces where older and younger generations interact, share resources, and pass on knowledge directly. This creates a close-knit, an informed community. In contrast, according to Shofie, Heidelberg's queer community is more generationally isolated, leading younger people to adopt a commercialized, depoliticized version of queerness from the media. This illustrates how communal families and close communities are crucial for reproducing and preserving rich, contextualized queer identities and histories.

“The reproduction is not just the reproduction of a being, of a living body but all the ways that's associated with a living body, including their physical safety and how they navigate life and how they navigate negotiations and other things” (Ibid., l. 335-337).

6. CONCLUSION

For this thesis I delved into several conversations with two non-binary, pansexual individuals and talked with them about their experiences when defining as such in a context that merely denies and discriminates their existence. I listened to how they worked through their processes and learned to embrace themselves by understanding societal dynamics. Many of their experiences are relevant to existing ideas. However, via our combined examination of the themes I discussed in previous chapters, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the complicated system in which we exist. There was a sort of round circle of all those notions in our discussions that I would not have discovered without my co-creators. Furthermore, their experiences sparked interesting ideas on how we could improve things.

Within the last chapters, that round circle is illustrated by the idea that there are concepts who uphold and inform each other in order to keep the white, Western man on the top: White people invented blackness as an identity in order to maintain white supremacy. Colonialism built a hierarchy with white men at the top, imposing gender norms on other civilizations. Understanding gender roles in pre-colonial communities is critical for understanding how colonialism impacted communal interactions and power dynamics. Social reproduction, which is necessary for capitalism, is predicated on heterosexuality which in turn needs gender binarity. To secure this as social standards, heteronormativity and idealizing conceptions such as monogamy and the nuclear family are constructed as the essential way of living. This is continuously enforced on any society following the Western norm. These concepts affect our personalities because we are expected to conform to specific characteristics from birth. It also affects a society in a whole because it creates inequalities, oppressions, goals which are impossible to reach by many. Finally, violent structures such as bullying and racism can be seen as a form of policing normative behavior.

To reject those ideals, B., Shofie, and I talked about embracing queerness, remaining open to any sexual desire, and avoiding potentially constraining monogamy while acknowledging the worth of different forms of partnerships. This also led to the awareness that the concept of family needs to be revised to include community kinship and alternative ways of raising children.

During the evaluation talks I got the wonderful feedback that overall, both Shofie and B. agreed with everything I reflected towards them. Some remarks they had I have already noted in the respected parts, some others you will read in the following subchapters in which I want to emphasize some final ideas that came up within our conversations and which hopefully might help you, the reader, too, in order to think a little bit differently.

A. Embracing Queerness

“There is no such thing as an essentially queer person. There are stories about essentially queer person, stories about being born in the wrong bodies. There are subject formations that allows that kind of narrative to exist in opposition to the hegemonic understanding of self. While, at the same time trying to get recognized, to be hegemonic” (C2, Shofie, l. 198-201).

“This is my resistance: I shall firm my desire that I want to live, I merely want to live. I don't want to take anything from you. Ehm, I want to add something to you actually though. For real” (C1, Shofie, l. 677-681).

As Shofie has said in the beginning of the fourth chapter, theories are like narrow openings, openings that could lead towards whole new dimensions. She stressed that learning about the theories discussed in this thesis has helped her comprehend her expected place in the world, as well as her ability to resist. This resonates with my feelings about this. Further, I want to highlight once more how we can learn more about ourselves by observing transness. I hope I could show that exploring queer ideas and theories might open our minds to the possibility of imagining other lives. I think this is what Shofie means in the second quote above: that transness can evolve our lives. It's not about taking things away. I mean, sure it can be understood that way if you believe the deconstruction of the concepts we discussed means to take something away. But I would formulate it differently. It's about unveiling the deeply oppressive, unequal, painful, unfair, and humiliating structures that those concepts inhabit. It's about making clear, that this only favors very, extremely view people and the rest is rather suffering from it. It's about changing and looking towards more inclusive, equal, fair ideas. This doesn't necessarily mean to get rid off nuclear families completely. It means to widen its structures, to broaden the idea of family we have. Besides, I strongly believe to move forward we also have to leave things behind. I would lie if I'd say this doesn't scare me. I can see that for those privileged enough it's easier to stick with the set frameworks and

rules that uphold a regular life. Communal living, for example, is no picnic and you have to be open for conflict, communication and compromises. But I am willing to try, I am willing to do the work and I am willing to jump over my shadows in order to gain a life full of love, acceptance, equality and a lot of colors. The same counts for identities.

“In that way, its cyclical, it enforces one another. And it's dynamic. It changes all the time. My gender, sexuality, class, race, changes in this position that I'm in” (C2, Shofie, l. 310f.).

I said that I believe sexuality is fluid. I think this is the case for many identifications. Shofie agrees with me. We change. We change when we grow up, we change when we find people who fascinate or violate us. We change all the time. How come that we are so focused on categorizing who we are? When listening to Emilia Roig, I thought she nailed it: “If we focus too much on our individual identities, we fall into a neoliberal logic, turning them into commodities, values and labels that completely define us. We lose sight of the systems that gave us these labels in the first place. (...) We should gradually overcome our identities. To do this, we must understand identities as constructs. Not as our essence” (Roig 2023, Ch. 18.11, 0:20-1:08).

Roig's thesis underlines the necessity to view identities as constructs rather than intrinsic essences. This perspective urges us to look beyond strict categories and identify the processes that develop and enforce these labels. However, while sexuality and other personal identities can evolve over time as a result of experiences and personal growth, racialized identities frequently confront specific limitations caused by institutional racism and historical events. Racialized identities are firmly established in social structures and can be difficult to change or escape due to society's fixed racial categorization. For them, overcoming constructions is comprehending how systematic racism and historical contexts form and restrict these identities. As I have worked out together with Shofie and B., it's recognizing identities as constructs that allows us to work on removing the structures that impose and reinforce these categories, resulting in a more inclusive and equitable society. And with coming back to my initial hypothesis, I think living pansexuality could broaden our tolerance of any gender identity. And, as change always happens along a process, it might indeed finally lead to a renunciation of the relevance of it.

B. Stratification

Shofie: "it's almost like the trickles of rain, you know, on the window, when you see sometimes they go down through a specific path and then you want them to go another way. So you try to put your finger there or you try to push some water from the other side, so they stratifies and then divert it in a different way. Is that something to be done? No, it's something to be repeated, I think. It's this little expression that needs to be reinforced and made space for" (...)

Leo: "I love it. It's also similar to what I come to realize that it doesn't make sense to try to convince people, but rather to live and represent. For example, my partner is vegan for 20 years. So now he is coming into my family and every time we come to visit, my mom's like: cool, now I can cook something vegan and can try it out. And by now, they always have soy sauce instead of normal cream."

Shofie: "It's stratified. (...) It accumulates. And then when you realize that you're not eating meat for a month already" (C1, Shofie, l. 728-766).

I'm often overwhelmed by the realization of how bad our world is, how many people suffer, and how the structures prevent people like B., Shofie, and me from having significant influence. But chatting to the two of them helped me realize how crucial it is to work with the small details. Start with oneself. To be able to accept and celebrate your own unique identity. It doesn't matter whether I'm a woman or not. Call me what you want. I am the many things experience and people have made me. And I believe that I represent someone who is supportive of others. When a friend told me that after listening to me, he resigned his job and pursued his true passion, I knew I had impact. Or how my partner now talks to other monogamous people about non-monogamy since simply being with me in an open relationship compels him to tackle this (fortunately, he does so in exchange with others). When I mentioned this, along with Shofie's idea of stratification, to B. during the evaluation, they agreed and said:

"I don't think you can really convince someone of anything, so I don't think that should be the way identities are formed. Rather, you see how other people live authentically and can thereby find out their own authenticity at some point. And I also see that as a big problem, that I believe that a lot of people don't live authentically, and not living authentically leads to violence, addiction, sadness, because, yes, there is always a friction between the two reality and identity that most people probably wouldn't be able to grasp" (C3, B., l. 401-408).

B. embraces once more to live authentically who you really are instead of the social role you are expected to. Through the narratives of B. and Shofie I come to conclude that embodying

any kind of non-normativity can influence others. It can broaden the perspectives of people who don't know anything else than the things we are taught to think is normal. Defining as pansexual, for example, might mirror a strong believe that gender identities in fact don't matter for a caring, loving, each other nurturing relationship. Coming across such attitudes can spark a change of mindset in others. It can help them to scratch the shell in which they might still be stuck in. And scratches, as you might know, have a tendency to stratify.

C. Self-worth

“We have so many subjects, but not one subject that somehow deals with what it actually means to be a human? And what kind of things can I actually expect here, socially and structurally? And how can I deal with this without betraying myself and being shit? Well, that would be an idea. And I think so many people act so violently and so terribly because they don't feel that self-worth and don't have a relationship with themselves” (C1, B., I. 952-959).

Self-worth. I think that is one of the most important aspects with which I started and now will come to an end. I wrote in the introduction that I have not developed self-worth because I was hushed by many people for what I did, how I behaved, how I looked like. And all of this because there exist those pictures of how we ought to be and behave. Did you ever asked yourself who decided this? Who made us think that way? And why we are following this? Asking myself these questions had started this whole theory, therapy, and exchange process that led to this very thesis. Hopefully I could outline some thoughts for a path to answer them. But to find a final response for yourself is up to you.

I did not have that queer embracing community for a long time. Luckily, I do now and even though my self-worth is not fully back yet I feel better than ever.

I love the nuclear family I grew up in. They nurtured me with love, affection, solidarity, and impressively much support. I could have never wished for a better one. I have no intention to downgrade this. They mean the world to me. But so do my friends. So does my partner. And sometimes also some other individuals I had and have sexual encounter with. Shofie emphasized the importance of surrounding themself with a supportive community where individuals can develop and express themselves freely. They believe this counts also as family. There is a quote stuck in my head of a series I watched the other day: “There is something much stronger than blood. There is choice” (sense 8, 2015).

I think of family as a network of ties that have been chosen and cultivated over time, rather than merely those related by blood. While my nuclear family was my foundation, my chosen family gives additional forms of support, understanding, and love that are equally important. Shofie's statement regarding the importance of a supporting group resonates strongly with me. It emphasizes the idea that family may be a fluid, ever-changing term that includes everyone who has a positive impact on our lives. This larger perspective on family allows for richer, more diverse connections, embracing ourselves for who we are rather than who we should be. As B. points out, we both think that we should place a higher importance on each individual's self-worth. When hearing this idea, Shofie stresses that developing self-worth should not be an individual goal but a structural one:

“For me self-worth or confidence, there are some things that flows in the air, there's not so much something that you can strive towards, it's not that a person can learn how to accept himself. It's less pedagogic than that. But it's actually much more related to - for me - labor processes, and by labor, I mean social reproductive labor” (C3, Shofie, l. 394-397).

By expanding and deconstructing family structures to be more inclusive and supportive, we can create environments that inherently value and nurture self-worth. This emphasizes the importance of community and social validation in building self-worth, rather than leaving it solely to individual efforts. In our evaluation talk, B. further added that “I believe that for real self-worth, before there is self-acceptance. I think you can only really have that if you deal with yourself and the constructs around you. And be able to separate from each other: Who am I? What is the system?” (C3, B., l. 433-434). Once more, we see here the emphasize on deconstructing the settings that are created for us. As B., Shofie, and I discovered during this research process, cultural standards of gender identity and sexuality (centered on penetration and orgasm) prevent us from realizing our full potentials as beings. A focus on specific acts and roles prevents people from exploring and expressing the whole range of their true identities and desires, stifling personal growth and self-discovery. Furthermore, when people are unable to meet societal expectations, they may feel inadequate and low in self-esteem. The pressure to conform to predetermined gender roles and sexual norms can contribute to feelings of failure along with poor self-worth.

Agreeing with that, I believe that choice, rather than blood, may build the greatest relationships to enable self-worth by building a community in which everyone feels appreciated and supported.

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APPENDIX

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| 1. Conversation 1: B. (coded*) | p. 85-122 |
| 2. Conversation 2: B. | p. 123-142 |
| 3. Conversation 3: B. | p. 143-153 |
| 4. Conversation 1: Shofie (coded*) | p. 154-190 |
| 5. Conversation 2: Shofie | p. 191-224 |
| 6. Conversation 3: Shofie | p. 225-239 |
| 7. Research Mapping | p. 240 |

**First conversations are included with codes in order to allow the reader a better overview and traceability.*