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'Like a piece of meat in a pack of wolves': gay/bisexual men and sexual racialization

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ABSTRACT

Human geographers have analyzed the co-constitutive relationship between race, gender and sexualities across different spaces and social contexts and have called for intersectional approaches in discussions of identities, power and space. This article applies an intersectional framework to the processes of sexualization, racialization and exoticization that shape the daily lives and erotic/romantic encounters experienced and narrated by participants to two different projects: gay and bisexual men from a North African background living in Belgium; Italian gay men living in England; non-White gay men living in Italy. By discussing qualitative data collected during interviews with these men, and through a continued dialogue about this data between the authors, the paper explores both the effects of these processes on the lives of participants, and the strategies they enact to navigate their social worlds. The focus is on two elements, central to participants' narratives: the specificity of the intersectional experience of encountering men who expect a specifically gendered and racialized performance based on 'roughness' and 'wildness', and the capitalization on these exoticizing and racializing images to increase one's desirability on the dating/hook-up scene and everyday social and work life. By highlighting these elements, this paper shows the importance of applying an intersectional approach to analyses of the entanglements of racialization and sexualization in order to complicate linear accounts of these processes.

Introduction

This article explores the entanglements of processes of racialization and sexualization in the lives of gay and bisexual men in three European contexts

(Belgium, England and Italy). The point of departure for our discussion is an acknowledgement of the difficulty to discern and verbalize those elements that make us sexually and/or romantically attractive and desirable to others. Observing and discussing how one's desirability is produced, experienced and acted upon helps us understand the lines of power that intervene in shaping sexual and romantic encounters and relationships. We apply an intersectional approach to our analysis of racialized sexualization and sexual racism to highlight the workings of these multiple lines in their intricate entanglements.

The idea of looking at how different lines of identification and oppression interlock in shaping individual and collective experiences and social relations originated at the interface of Black feminist activism and theorizing decades before the articulation of intersectionality as an academic concept (Collins and Bilge, 2016). In these first articulations, the term worked to highlight the specific entanglements of race, gender and class in shaping the lives of Black women in the United States (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991). Since then, the concept has expanded across geographical contexts and disciplines (Carbado et al. 2013). As pointed out by Hopkins (2019), human geographers have been interested in the co-workings of categories of race, gender and sexualities since the 1990s (Jackson 1994; Kobayashi and Peake 1994; Peake 1993). Valentine (2007) for the first time articulates an approach that is intersectional in name as well as in focus in the discipline. From this moment intersectional research in the discipline has flourished and expanded and it includes work spanning different geographical contexts and focussing on different lines and entanglements of identification/oppression (Hopkins 2004; Hovorka 2015; Irazábal and Huerta 2016; Rodó-de-Zárate 2014; Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina 2018; Silva and Ornat 2015). This breadth of research has shown the specific contributions that a geographical intersectional approach can produce, with its inherent attention at how interlockings of lines of identification/oppression unfold across different spaces and places, and how this unfolding is intimately linked to location and social context (Hopkins 2019; Rodó-de-Zárate 2014). In this paper, we bring this geographical intersectional approach to an analysis of sexual desire and encounters in the lives of gay and bisexual men, as we explore how different lines of power intervene in shaping sexual desire and encounters, and how gay and bisexual men experience and act upon these entanglements. The contribution of the paper is twofold. First, we highlight the ambivalences driven by racialization and exoticization that shape sexual desire and practices. We avoid a linear and uniform account of racialized sexualization as we counter those analyses that seem to frame social categories as fixed and pre-given. Second, we contribute to increasing debates on creative and critical methodologies (e.g. Burlingame 2019; Hawkins 2021) by showing the benefits of a 'dialogical' approach (Pozzebon, Rodriguez, and Petrini 2014) to interpretation and

analysis of qualitative data and collaborative writing. As detailed in the section on methodology, the two authors re-interpreted data from two distinct research projects by developing a sustained conversation around it. By engaging in this dialogue as research itself, we allowed for a serendipitous re-interpretation of data that we had considered 'already interpreted'.

After detailing what we mean by 'dialogical' re-interpretation of data (i.e. what this dialogue looked like in practice, and what data we dialogued about) in the methodology section, we proceed to discuss the themes around which our conversations coagulated in three sections. The first of these looks at the impact of the interlocking of processes of racialization and sexualization in the lives of participants. The second discusses the ways in which some participants capitalize on these entanglements to accrue their desirability and attractiveness. The third complicates linear understandings of power and desire, showing how an intersectional approach that takes categories of social context and place in serious consideration enhances our understanding of how gay and bisexual men experience, contrast and utilize racial sexualizations.

Methodological notes

The choice to work on a joint paper resulted from our individual responses to the call for papers for the special issue this article is part of. As we read each other's abstract, we both felt the need to know more about the other's ideas. From the first conversation that ensued, it was clear that a dialogue between the two of us would be fruitful. The work for this paper started out of interest in each other's research, out of surprise at the commonalities of experiences for participants from different backgrounds and out of a desire to better understand how processes of sexualization and racialization unfold in different European contexts. Ale shared data from his ethnographic project on intersections of Islamophobia and homo/bi/transphobia in Brussels, in the form of 15 semi-structured interviews with gay and bisexual men of North African background/descent (out of a total of 30 interviews with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background) (Boussalem, 2021). Cesare used data from his project on the life choices of different generations of gay men living with HIV in England and Italy, notably 15 (8 with Italians living in England, 7 with non-White men living in Italy) out of the 59 biographic interviews with gay men living with HIV in both countries (Di Feliciantonio 2021, 2022). Ethical approval for the two projects was obtained from Newcastle University, and the University of Leicester and the European Commission (i.e. the funder) respectively. As our conversations gained depth and level of detail in our sharing and commenting each other's data, we noticed that we had started a process of re-interpretation. This dialogue, this 'new' data, resulted in a more nuanced understanding of how sexualization,

racialization and exoticization work together at different locations for different people (s. Table 1).

This article is the result of this dialogue, which echoes the 'dialogical principles' conceptualized by Pozzebon, Rodriguez, and Petrini (2014: 295) as 'principles that respect contextually situated visions of validity' (authenticity, plausibility, criticality, reflexivity and artfulness). While Pozzebon and colleagues' approach concerns the dialogue between researchers and academic readers, in our case the dialogue concerns peers developing a framework to analyze data from different projects and write about it. As suggested in the previous paragraph, our 'dialogical' interpretation unfolded in different phases. Our first conversations were broad: we told one another about our research projects and findings. As correspondences and tensions between our understandings of racialization and sexualization emerged, we went back to our transcripts. Individually, we selected interviews that were particularly relevant for the themes we were discussing, and shared with one another extracts from those where participants who identified as gay and bisexual men talked about their experiences of racialization in their erotic and romantic encounters. In the case of Ale's project, all transcripts of interviews with cis gay/bisexual men of North African descent were selected, as they all spoke about the topic extensively. In Cesare's research, racialization had emerged as a theme in the interviews with Italian and non-White participants living in England, and non-White participants living in Italy. However, in line

Table 1. Outline of research projects and data selected for this paper.

Project	Location	Dates	Total interviews	Interviews selected for this paper	Researcher
"Lives at the intersection": experiences of homo/bi/transphobia and Islamophobia for LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels, Belgium	Brussels, Belgium	August 2017– August 2018	30 interviews with LGBTQ people from a Muslim background living in Brussels	15 interviews with gay and bisexual men from a Muslim background	All interviews were conducted and analysed by Ale Boussalem (who has also translated quotes from French to English)
Analysing the migration choices of HIV-positive gay men in England and Italy (HIVGAYM)	Bologna and Milan (Italy); Leicester, London and Manchester (England)	March 2018– August 2020	59 biographic interviews with gay men living with HIV	15 interviews (Italians living in England; non-White participants living in Italy)	All interviews conducted and analysed by Cesare Di Feliciantonio (who has also translated quotes from Italian to English)

Source: the authors.

with the relational perspective of his project (Di Feliciantonio 2023), Cesare opted to include only Italians in England and non-White participants in Italy to better highlight the contextual character of the processes analysed, and the nuances and contradictions in participants' narratives around skin tone and racialized sexualization.

We met regularly over the space of a few months, each time bringing more data to discuss. As our conversations proceeded, we realized the centrality of the nodes that we present in the empirical section of this paper. The wide presence and impact of sexual racism among gay and bisexual men emerged clearly in our individual projects. Bringing them together allowed us to focus also on the strategies employed by participants to capitalize on it in different contexts, and to reflect on the need to apply an intersectional approach to analyze it.

We are very aware of the difference of the two research projects and sets of data discussed here. Our aim is not to treat these as part of one bigger research project, nor to write a paper that sums them up in the name of a supposed generalizability of experiences. It is also important to emphasize that our aim was never to conflate different experiences of racialization but to question the presumed fixity of specific social 'major' categories using our data on specific forms of racialization and sexualization. In doing so, we follow Katz (1996) in articulating what might be defined as a 'minor theory' of racialized sexualization. For Katz, 'minor theory tears at the confines of major theory; pushing its limits to provoke 'a line of escape', a rupture—a tension out of which something else might happen. Minor theory can scratch at major theory from a range of different positions but its claims are interstitial, and minor and major both must be joined to oppose inequality, injustice, impoverishment, and oppression effectively' (1996, p. 489).

At the core of our dialogical approach lies (self-)reflexivity. What we mean here is not some sort of 'epistemological standard' required of academic outputs in order to be considered critical (while reproducing problematic categories), but as the starting point to contest a presumed neutrality of the research process that erases the bodies and the lived experiences of researchers, and their encounters with research participants (Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha 2017). Acknowledging the role of (self-)reflexivity implies acknowledging that the arguments we make in this paper result *both* from the codes/themes each of us developed for his own research, *and* our own interactions as shaped by shifting roles, identities and circumstances. The encounter and the discussions between fellow researchers and their own data have come therefore to shape the analysis as much as the experience of 'being in between' (Katz 1994) the space and time of the fieldwork, the space and time of transcribing and coding, and different identities (as researchers, as migrants, and as sexual subjects).

'This thing of the Belgian who loves Moroccans': sexualization and racialization

The narratives offered by research participants on their experiences of sexual desire and desirability and erotic/romantic encounters highlight the co-workings of processes of sexualization, exoticization and racialization in shaping their day-to-day interactions with other men. These interactions between sexual, (post)colonial, and racial/ethnic lines of Othering, and their effects on the lives of racialized populations, have been observed by many scholars (Boone 2014; Fay 2018; Wekker 2016). Schaper et al. (2020) use the term 'sexotic' to indicate how Western geographical and social imaginations are influenced by the 'sexual' and the 'exotic'. These two dimensions intervene in shaping the assumed 'differences in the sexual drive, attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behaviour' that are attached to different populations, and the regions they inhabit, as well as the constructions of these populations and regions as differently 'sexually attractive, desirable, and stimulating' (p. 2). They contend that to understand how these power dynamics shape sexual desires and encounters it is necessary to apply an intersectional lens to the observation and analysis of sex and sexual practices, paying close attention to 'the interplay between […] categories like race, class, gender and sexual orientation, and the discriminatory effects their interactions engender' (ibid., p. 4).

In this article, the interactions between sexualization, exoticization and racialization of gay and bisexual men emerge as impactful in the daily lives and encounters of research participants. In the context of the data presented here, sexualizations of men from an Orientialized North African background are particularly relevant. As noted by Boone (2014), the history of contacts between the West and the Arab/Orientalized East has been marked by a homoerotic sexualization of the Other. This is still particularly relevant in cultural representations of Arab/Muslim men across different geographical contexts. It has been noted, for example, how gay pornographic representations of Arab masculinities and sexualities often rely on stereotyped images of Arab men as hyper-masculine or marked by feminized passivity, revealing the essentialized fantasies and desires that underpin imaginations of the exotic Other (Cervulle 2006; Rees-Roberts 2008; Tziallas 2015). The relevance of these sexualized and exoticized images emerged at multiple points in interactions with research participants. An emphasis on the specificity of the desire directed at the bodies of Arab men was very common across our interviews. For example, Youness (27, Moroccan descent, living in Brussels) explained that 'there is this thing of the Belgian who loves Moroccans'. When elaborating further on this specific desire directed towards North African men, participants often mentioned the binary imaginations of hyper-masculinity and passive femininity that inform representations of the gay Arab body:

> Actually, Arab men have only two ways of being. That's it. […] So, like, the first one would be, so this super-masculine guy, beyond hairy, you know, like… we want the masculine Arab guy to be huge, ah… sweaty as fuck. […] Whenever I sweat, during a gay party, there is always, at some point, some guy who comes to me, touches me, and is like: 'Oh my God, I love an Arab that's sweating'. […] Or the opposite. Which would be like the hairless, skinny, ahm… Shehrazade-looking… […] (Hamid, 25, Tunisian/Indian descent, Brussels).

In the extract above, Hamid stressed how there are only 'two ways of being' available to Arab men in their sexual encounters. The widespread presence of this binary is confirmed by the number of participants who mention these hyper-masculine/hyper-feminine stereotypes attached to Arab men. Salim (28, Moroccan descent, Brussels) directly linked these imaginations to porn representation:

> I don't know if it's an idea that has been put in my head, also. That from porn movies. I don't know. But I have the impression that the white man fantasizes hugely on the Arab man.

The first 'way' available to Arab men, characterized by hyper-masculinity, is the most recurrent in participants' narratives of sexual and erotic encounters. While Hamid highlighted how 'sweat' and body size are important features of this image, participants mention other elements. These include a dominant sexual attitude and a 'rough' sexual performance, with Salim explaining that the Arab that is fantasized upon is 'the Arab top, dominant, who will spit on you, who will… slap you', combined with sexual prowess and a big penis. Manuel (24, Spanish/Moroccan descent, Brussels), echoing Salim's description, says:

> You think about Arab guys being like super-manly, kind of… rebel, or kind of like man… super-men, super-macho, and then having big cocks.

Many participants expressed discomfort with these images and the role they play in shaping their encounters with men. They often stressed how they find themselves in the situation of having to confront and address the expectations white men have on their bodies, their sexual attitudes and performances during their encounters. These expectations are often explicitly voiced by the white men encountered by participants. Hamid, for example, mentions how people he has sexual interactions with assume he likes rough sex because they read him as Arab. He talks specifically of one occasion where someone started grabbing his ass and crotch in an aggressive way at a sex party. When confronted with the inappropriateness of his 'grabbing' and the non-consensual pain this was causing, the man justified his actions by saying: 'You Arabs like it rough'. Other participants' narratives mirror

Hamid's, as they highlight that the problem is the assumption that Arab men like to engage in certain sexual practices, adopting a specific sexual attitude. Importantly, some participants stress that this imagination of Arab bodies and performances is so pervasive that, even when these are not explicitly voiced by the men they encounter, they might still play an important role. Manuel, for example, when talking about the expectations of hyper-masculinity that other men might have when meeting him, said:

> I don't know if people expected something from me that I couldn't give. At least they didn't tell me. But some people don't… don't write me back after meeting, so maybe it was expectation that comes with this.

Amine (38, Moroccan, Brussels) also mentions how white Belgian men assume that sex with him will be marked by a certain degree of brutality, as he distances himself from this expectation:

> I am like I am, I stay natural. And there were some people that, ok, they said, they asked, they wanted some brutality in the action […] If the guy is asking for this brutality, I don't like this.

Amine's feelings about the sexualization of Arab bodies are complex. On the one hand, he recognizes that it is problematic, and he distances himself from the expectations of brutality that accompany it. On the other, he acknowledges that this process results in a specific kind of attractiveness that is attached to the bodies of Arab men. While this desirability can be capitalized upon by participants, as we explore in the rest of this article, it still retains a degree of problematic essentialization. In Amine's words:

> The person could even be racist, doesn't like Arabs, but for sex, when it comes to sex, it's something different.

'It is what I sell, mainly': erotic capital and agency

> Q: One of the themes emerged during the first interview is how your being North-African had an important role in your sexual and work life. Do you want to talk about it?
>
> YWC: Yes yes, it is not a problem, I often talk about it, in the end it is what I sell mainly.
>
> Q: What do you mean?
>
> YWC: If you see one of my ads, a story, a video, I play a lot with my being [cut for anonymity], Arab men are very popular! Strong, hard, beardless when young, bearded when older, you are there realizing a fantasy, that's what they want. If you look at what I publish you are not going to find a picture or a video where I seem bottom, everything around my being masc, the client dreams about the top Arab man, brutal, spit, slaps, these kinds of things only. They get in touch over

the phone, or via chat and the question always comes 'are you dom?', Or 'you are just top, aren't you?. My job is mainly being a top.

The above extract from the interview with YWC (25–35, North-African, Milan) reveals how specific subjects make use of racialized sexualization to empower themselves and increase personal access to economic capital. YWC arrived in Italy from North Africa in 2011, 'young and desperate'. Because he was a minor he was taken in charge by the state, but what he received was not much: 'some basic education, a shelter, (…), but also much segregation'. However, he soon discovered that he owned a specific form of capital that he could use to improve his own condition in a discriminating society: erotic capital. Hakim (2010) defines six main elements composing erotic capital: beauty; sexual attractiveness; social skills in interaction and the ability to make people like you; liveliness; social presentation; sexuality, including sexual competence, playfulness and erotic imagination. However, YWC's erotic capital was also increased by his being Arab. In his words:

> in general there is attraction towards Arab men, there is the idea of strength, you think of a masculine man, Italians see us like that, that's what makes me earn money. We are considered a bit like shit, all dangerous, there is a lot of that stuff, but we also inspire sex.

YWC's words are echoed by his flatmate Prince (35–45, North African, Milan) who describes being Arab (and good-looking) in the gay scene as 'offering you the opportunity to fuck basically anyone, maybe they don't want to hang out with you or have anything serious but they definitely want to be fucked'.

The combination of owning erotic and body capital (Wacquant 1995), and the process of racialized sexualization has allowed YWC and Prince to increase access to economic capital, getting to live a good life in terms of money earnt, living in a nice flat in one of the most expensive areas of Italy (and Europe), consumption capacity and possibility to travel around Europe for work. Following the Foucauldian perspective on power as circular (1982), i.e. power is not absolute and unidirectional in every circumstance at any time but can be exercised by different subjects at different times and under different circumstances, we can see how YWC and Prince were able to enact some form of agency in a racist and discriminatory society that conceives them as dangerous because of their ethnicity. This is a well-established argument in the erotic/sex work literature. In her analysis of a collective of Black and Puerto Rican exotic dancers in the US, Khan (2020) has shown how space and place, together with racialized sexualization, determine their potential to enact agency at work, empower themselves and challenge the normativity of whiteness. In his study of Latin American male sex workers in Dublin, Ryan (2019) analyzed how research participants capitalized over their body features to navigate

opportunities in work, education and dating. This was made possible by hook-up apps (e.g. Grindr) and social media (e.g. Instagram), facilitating the conversion of body and erotic capital into economic capital; to achieve so, the sex workers interviewed by Ryan make use of racial stereotypes (e.g. Latinos as sensual, exotic and passionate) to build their online identities. This echoes YWC's discussion at the beginning of the section about him presenting himself always as 'masc' and top online. Prince adopts the same strategy, even though he considers himself fully versatile; however, he explained, 'I can't say it to my followers, it would destroy my brand, (…), my ass is just for few, lucky ones who don't pay for it'.

The production of erotic capital and the enactment of agency have been widely discussed in the sexual fields approach (e.g. Green 2008, 2013) which conceives sexual desire (and erotic capital) as resulting from the encounter between micro-interactions and structural forces (such as racism). According to this approach, different characteristics assume more economic 'worth' within specific sexual fields, so individual actors try to maximize their erotic capital by highlighting those characteristics that are considered desirable in that sexual field. In the case of YWC and Prince, this means working to increase their physical strength, be fit and keep their appearance 'masc' (bearded, short hair) given these are the most valued features for Arab top men.

It is important to stress that a capitalization on racialized sexualization is not exclusive to research participants who practice sex work, nor to participants of color. Gab (35–45, White Italian, London) describes how his looking as 'the beefy Latino[1]'(muscular and with a darker complexion) allows him to be invited to many sex parties, often organized by wealthy men who, despite paying for everything (e.g. Uber, drinks, drugs), do not necessarily expect having sex with him. 'It's like they enjoy having hot guys around and do not mind the clear lack of sexual attraction'.

Another participant, Raffaele (35–45, Italian living in London) discusses how his sexual life in London benefits from his 'Mediterranean' complexion:

> Here someone like me fucks a lot, olive skin, dark eyes, some belly but built up, English like Mediterranean men.

In his experience, having an olive skin makes him look like an Arab man, provoking the same kind of (sexual) expectations discussed so far:

> perhaps it happens also at sex parties, these guys want to be subdued and fucked hard and perhaps two minutes earlier they were topping. I'm top and I like to dominate so it's better for me [*laughs*] but a bit less would be ok too, no? There is this thing that they want you to say dirty things in Italian, I don't really understand this thing, it's not because I'm dark and I have a nice cock I'm necessarily dom top, I like to bottom too [*laughs*]. Sometimes you feel like a piece of meat in a pack of wolves when you go to parties or orgies […].

Raffaele appears therefore to gain pleasure and improve his sex life thanks to his complexion even though he also expresses discomfort for being 'the dark one' that everyone takes for granted being top and dominant. It is important to note how during the interviews he used multiple adjectives, that someone might find confusing, to describe his skin tone; however, this occurred also with other participants, e.g. Lorenzo (35–45, Italian living in Leicester) who, across the interviews, described himself as 'White', 'dark' and 'very dark'. Raffaele plays ambivalently with racialized sexualization; for example, his Grindr profile does not mention him being Italian. Questioned about it, he explains:

> I hook-up more [*laughs*] perhaps they think I'm North African, Arab and they message me, there is this being into mixed men and I look mixed no?

Raffaele's example is further confirmation of the pervasiveness of stereotyped imaginations linked to North-Africanness/Arabness: even men who are not from a North-African/Arab background can accrue their 'erotic capital' by strategically capitalizing on some phenotypical, 'darker', 'Mediterranean' features. While Raffaele acknowledges some limits that these stereotyped imaginations have on the person seen as 'Mediterranean', playing on racial ambiguity by not expressing his Italianness and letting his potential partners imagine him as 'mixed', 'North-African' or 'Arab' is more advantageous.

Racialized sexualization in context

In the previous section, we showed how the effects of the entanglement of sexualization and racialization can be capitalized upon by gay and bisexual men. These processes have adverse effects in shaping sexual and romantic encounters for North-African and Arab men, who often do not have the possibility of avoiding these by performing some form of racial ambiguity. At the same time, they often do make the most of these processes by capitalizing on them to accrue their desirability and attractiveness in the dating and hook-up markets. Acknowledging the existence of a racialized erotic capital, and the ways in which participants can use it to their benefit, goes in the direction of problematizing some of the binary constructions along which racial and sexualized power dynamics are constructed and experienced.

When talking about sexual racism, participants often refuse to be victimized. Salah (28, Moroccan background, Brussels), for example, after critiquing extensively the problematic sexualization he faced on his job as a young dancer, went on to nuance his views on these processes. While there are problematic sides to his experience of sexualization, he recognizes how difficult it is to disentangle his general attractiveness and desirability to that

linked to his Arabness, and it is not always easy, nor productive, to establish where one ends and the other begins:

> In the same way, they look at us as like a cliché that is negative, they also look at us as a cliché that is beautiful and exotic […]. For me, it's like a question that is asked that I can't answer easily. Because then we come into this level of taste […]. And having a feeling in the moment, of attraction, and trying to, again, put these two together, on each other, and trying to identify. Are you into Arab men because you're like… it's a fetish? It doesn't matter if I have this type of nose, that type of nose, this… I just need to be Arab and you love me? Or is it because you just… have… you just really like me for who I am, not because I'm Arab?

The questions Salah poses call for a complication of the ways in which entanglements of sexualization, exoticization and racialization are thought. On the one hand, the essentialization they produce feels oppressive, especially when participants are already experiencing different forms of vulnerabilities. Salah, for example, speaks of his discomfort as his body was sexualized by established choreographers while he was a dancer in the early stages of his career. In other contexts, this sexual exoticisation can be capitalized upon and even enjoyed. Salah speaks of his partner, who is a white Belgian man who has tended to be in relationships with North African people. Not only is this desire not problematic in Salah's eyes, but it is cause of enjoyment, and partly instrumental to their relationship. During his interview, Salah gives legitimacy to this sexualized desire for North African men, as he stands from his seat, moves his hips, and asks: 'What's not to like in this?'. Something that, at another age and in another context, he experienced with discomfort and reacted to with anger, becomes something to be proud of and celebrated. This gesture – standing up, moving his hips, showing (off) an embodied evidence of North African attractiveness – can be understood as a disidentificatory moment (Muñoz, 1999): images attached to the bodies of North African men were re-appropriated and re-signified, in a (counter)narrative move that acted on and against essentializing discourses around Arab sexuality.

Salah's example shows how the impacts of sexual racism are dependent on a variety of lines of power and privilege/disadvantage, and on the contexts where these unfold. It can be extremely damaging when the person subjected to it is in a position of vulnerability (i.e. a young precarious worker being sexualized by a potential employer). However, it can also produce benefits if the person possesses knowledge on how to use it and is in a position that allows him to set boundaries to its effects on his daily life.

In the previous section, we discussed Raffaele's experience of racialization and his response to it. Raffaele does not identity as Arab or North-African, as his background is described by him as Mediterranean. However, in the English context where he lives, he is able to capitalize on his dark features to activate in his sexual partners imaginations and desires linked to

North-African male bodies and their presumed rough topness. During the second interview, Raffaele recounted how during a past trip to Spain he was having sex with two South European guys who both assumed he preferred to bottom. Given the stark difference with his usual experience, he felt surprise and asked what made them think of that. Their explanation regarded how he looked like when they met him (i.e. height, body shape, what he was wearing), followed by a joke about how 'everybody is bottom here' [in Spain]. For Raffaele, this episode represented a sort of realization that his sexual attractiveness is very dependent on the context; for instance, he also mentioned another trip to Southern Europe where he tried to hook-up with two Mediterranean guys at a party but they both declined. In his own words, 'that was not something I was used to in London'.

Raffaele's experience echoes the one narrated by Marcos (25–35, Latin American living in Milan) about how in the Italian context he is usually expected to be a top ('the fantasy of the [cut for anonymity] man with a big dick, (…), that's why so many gay Italians love going there on holidays, [name of the country] is heaven for bottoms'), while in his home country local gay men tend to assume he is a bottom because 'I am not very tall, I have a big ass and my cock is not as big as others'. Place and context play a central role in the construction and experience of racialized sexualization. This is framed by Hulko (2009) as the contingency (in time and place) of intersectionality, especially when she argues that 'processes of racialization- the dynamics of privilege and oppression that form social location- can be different in two different places, although the person remains the same' (2009: 52).

Sexualizing, exoticizing and racializing discourses and imaginations play an important role in shaping desire among gay and bisexual men. The processes that produce these are not linear and they do not work along simplistic binary fields. Their entanglements produce different outcomes depending on the context in which they unfold, and the lines of identification and domination they interrogate. Consequently, they are experienced differently by participants, depending on the resources they have to capitalize on the images and tropes that they produce. An intersectional approach, with its attention to the entanglements of different lines of identification and domination, place and the social context in which these unfold (Rodó-de-Zárate 2014), the power dynamics that they reflect and produce, and the social relations that they impact (Collins & Bilge, 2016), is particularly useful to discuss racialized sexualization (Schaper et al. 2020). Understanding the co-working of sexualization, exoticization and racialization does not only entail highlighting, interrogating and critiquing the racist and (neo)colonial power dynamics that produce and reinforce them. It also involves observing the ways in which power is produced by minoritized subjects through the mobilization and capitalization of some of these sexualizing and exoticizing

images. These are, in some contexts, effectively appropriated to produce certain outcomes that are beneficial to racialized subjects themselves.

Conclusions

Following recent geographical scholarship highlighting the central role of place, location and social context in the interlocking of structures of power and markers of identification, the paper has developed an intersectional analysis of sexual racialization in the experiences of gay and bisexual men in different European countries (Belgium, England, Italy), revealing the ambivalences of power relations at work in the formation of sexual desire and encounters. Our analysis has proceeded along three main lines. First, we have shown how the daily sexual, erotic and romantic interactions and desires of research participants are shaped by the interplay of sexualization, exoticization and racialization. Second, we have analyzed the enactment of agency for those participants who manage to capitalize on sexual racialization in terms of lifestyle and economic means, but also in terms of sexual life. Third, we have discussed the nonlinear and contextual character of sexual racialization, showing how research participants experience differently the entanglements of sexualization, exoticization and racialization depending on the context in which they unfold and the (embodied, cultural, material and relational) resources they can count on: *dynamics of privilege and oppression vary for the same person across different locations (and moments in time), they are not fixed*. Our analysis challenges fixed and uniform representations of social categories and structures of power, revealing how the interplay between different (geographical and social) locations and practices can produce 'unexpected' lived, intersectional experiences. Place and space are not mere 'contexts' for relations of power to unfold, they actively shape their intersections in multiple, often ambivalent, ways. Our theoretical (but also ethical and political) effort can be framed as a form of 'minor theory' (Katz 1996) aimed at opening 'many spaces of betweenness from which to imagine, act, and live things differently' (Katz 2017: 597). In the case of our paper, this has meant experimenting with our analytical and writing practices by opening the use of data and categories to the encounter with the other's own data, categories, reflections and positionalities.

We believe that creativity and dialogue are important to make room for surprising and unexpected outcomes in our research. We did so by sitting together, taking time to listen to each other's data and reflections, widening the vocabulary of our individual experiences while exploring the ambivalences and nuances of a complex process very close to our own lives and trajectories. Our dialogue is at the intersection of different subject positions – never fixed, but always in flow – that we occupy as researchers, migrants

and sexual subjects (among others) across different locations. This effort has expanded the betweenness of the 'field' (Katz 1994), a powerful geographical concept mainly used to account for the encounter between the researcher and the 'other' during fieldwork and the long-lasting effects on the positionality of the researcher well beyond the 'official' (physical) boundaries of the fieldwork, to include the encounter with another researcher, their data and analytical categories. This has led us to question the supposed 'closing' of the analytical stage of our research projects by addressing new questions and exploring new themes. Following Lancione (2017: 575), we see this effort 'not limited to the acknowledgment of a hybrid positionality, but committed to meaningful engagement and change'.

We hope that our emphasis on dialogue as a research practice can be of inspiration for fellow geographers and social scientists willing to unpack the problematic construction and/or representation of some categories by engaging with the messiness of everyday erotic, romantic and sexual life 'as an ontological necessity' (Malansalan IV, 2018) against the hegemony of metrics in academic work that foreclose the possibility to listen and establish complex dialogues in the name of time efficiency and excellence frameworks.

Note

1. "Latino" is a word used by Gab during the interview to describe his appearance, as is "Mediterranean" for Raffaele (s. next paragraph).

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Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Data Availability Statement

Due to the nature of this research, data associated with it is not available.

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