

Difference and Collectivity: The Amsterdam Queer Movement as a
Moral-Political Project

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Statement

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that I am the sole author of this dissertation. This dissertation contains no material accepted for any other academic degree or non-degree program. This dissertation contains no material previously written and/or published by any other person, except where appropriate acknowledgment has been made in the form of bibliographical reference.

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Vienna, 31 March 2025

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates how difference and collectivity coexist – and sometimes clash – within the Amsterdam queer movement. While Amsterdam is globally recognized as a pioneer of sexual liberation, this study reveals how internal conflicts shape the movement’s politics and identities. In this dissertation, difference between participants within this social movement is understood in two ways. First, difference in social location, produced through the intersection of dimensions like race, gender, sexuality, and class. This difference in social location brings with it specific experiences, interests, and inequalities between people and groups regarding power and privilege. Second, difference in understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project, meaning the different interpretations people have of what the queer movement should look like, what political goals it should focus on, and what forms of activism it should follow. These different interpretations are grounded in people’s moral frameworks, and constructed in a relational way, with people making judgments about their own and others’ activism. Using interviews, observation, and textual analysis as the main research methods, multiple movements and organizations – the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, We Reclaim Our Pride, Queer Amsterdam, Black Pride, the theatre production *Becoming*, but also governmental institutions like the municipality of Amsterdam – and the relationships between them, were studied.

Although the two types of difference – in social locations and in understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project – are connected, the central argument made in this dissertation is that it is important to make a distinction between them, as it allows us to better understand conflict within a social movement like the Amsterdam queer movement. Conflict in this movement is not only related to people’s different experiences and interests but is also associated with the existence of multiple moral-political subjectivities, with different

understandings of activism and politics. Especially the opposition between, on the one hand, single-issue LGBT activism and, on the other hand, queer activism – in which multiple political causes are connected – and intersectional activism – in which there is an acknowledgement of power differences within a movement and an active attempt of creating space for marginalized groups and making the movement more inclusive – is salient in this field.

However, this dissertation shows how contestation and conflict within the Amsterdam queer movement do not simply create fragmentation but can produce new relations of collaboration and collectivity as well, which can ultimately bring about change and transformation. This is, the dissertation argues, partly due to people's 'ethical freedom' to reflect on both their social location and the potential privileges attached to it, and on their moral frameworks in which their understandings of the queer movement are embedded. The changes flowing from this ethical freedom have informed a politicization of the Amsterdam queer movement, and a move from single-issue LGBT activism to intersectional queer activism, in which 'difference' is understood as something that does not need to be 'overcome' in order to create unity, but as exactly the thing that binds people together.

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Introduction: research questions, literature, and methodology

In Dutch newspaper *Parool*, which is a newspaper focusing specifically on the city of Amsterdam, the paper of 4 August 2021 contained a letter sent in by reader Dam Weijers. In this letter, the author says:

As long as the rainbow flag contains black and brown stripes referring to racism, I will not participate in Pride. Racism is a big problem, but gay and gender hate as well. I will not wear a Gay-Lives-Matter-flag to a Black Lives Matter demonstration. Then people will say to me, and they would be right: ‘That’s not what this is about’. And what else will be added to that flag? A star of David, because of the fight against antisemitism? Even in the Netherlands we are almost invisible. In only 1 percent of the commercials, we are visible. And almost never in movies. And in the news only when we are beaten up. In 193 countries we are not safe in the streets. In 70 countries we are persecuted and in 159 countries we still lack certain civil rights, which is basically apartheid. I do not want the fight for this being overlooked because of other issues. (Weijers in *Parool*, 2021, translated from Dutch)

The black and brown stripes Weijers is referring to are part of the ‘progress flag’, which is a design based on the original rainbow flag, introduced by artist Daniel Quasar in 2018, in the United States. In the progress flag, multiple elements have been added to the original rainbow flag, namely a black and brown stripe, focusing on queer people of color and people living with or having died from HIV/AIDS, and a blue and pink triangle, focusing on trans people. In later versions, sometimes a yellow and purple circle is added for intersex people. In Amsterdam, the progress flag is nowadays the main flag used by official institutions, like state buildings, universities, and more and more often places like bars and cafés as well. However, as Weijers letter illustrates, not everybody within the LGBTQIA+ community is happy with the flag, because of different reasons. Some find the original rainbow flag visually prettier; others find the specific addition of stripes and circles to represent specific

communities and groups ‘unnecessary’. Finally, some people are so emotionally attached to the original flag, that they feel something is ‘taken away from them’ by the progress flag.

More than a discussion about the rainbow flag, Weijer’s letter reveals something else, namely a particular view of the queer movement, about what an institution like Pride Amsterdam should focus on, and about in- and exclusions of certain topics or issues in queer, or LGBT, activism. Weijers’ letter suggests that they believe issues like racism and antisemitism are *different* issues than the discrimination of LGBTQIA+ people, and they are afraid that a focus on these ‘other’ issues will take away attention from this discrimination of LGBTQIA+ people. This is thus a particular understanding of what the queer movement should look like, and which issues should be included in this political project of activism and which issues should not be included. On the other hand, there are people and movements in Amsterdam that believe that issues like racism, classism, and ableism *should* be a part of the queer movement, and that these issues cannot be seen as separate, as there are many queer people who do not only face discrimination based on their sexuality or gender identity, but also because of their skin color, religion, or disability. Some people believe in the importance of this type of queer activism because of their own experiences with marginalization and discrimination, for example as a queer person of color. However, there are also people who inhabit a more privileged social position, because of the specific intersection of their race, gender, class, and gender, but who still politically and morally believe in queer activism that specifically emphasizes differences in experiences and power *within* the community. Then there are people, like Weijers, who think a focus on issues like racism does not have a place in the queer movement. These differences in understandings of activism and politics can lead to conflict and tension within a social movement like the Amsterdam queer movement.

This dissertation is about conflict around difference, of which much exists in the Amsterdam queer community and movement, which could make us question whether we can speak of one ‘community’ or ‘movement’ at all. The potential clash between difference and collectivity, is a broader phenomenon. We live in times where in the Global North, leftist politics are continuously losing from the right (Archer, 2011), with one of the main challenges for the left being how to create what Mouffe (2006) has called ‘chains of equivalence’ (Mouffe in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 971): moments of alliance building between people from different backgrounds joining forces for a bigger goal (Ibid.). This is where my first interest in this issue came from: a personal investment in left-wing institutional politics and the observation that in many countries today, left-wing political parties are not managing to create a discourse in which they successfully combine a creation of space for different experiences and ‘identities’, and a focus on connection between different groups of people and the building of collectivity.

As many feminist scholars (e.g. Parker, 1991; Dean, 1996; Lépinard, 2020) have argued, a focus on *universalism* for building collectivity has often ignored certain power relations and inequalities, with universalism usually meaning the interests of the most dominant group. This notion of universalism was born in the Enlightenment and is grounded in values like autonomy, rationality, and equal rights. However, as these feminist scholars point out, this understanding of universalism, although it claims impartiality, actually often erases particular contexts, and the ways in which people are situated differently in societies, and the power inequalities that come with this (Dean, 1996, pp. 92-145). As Fraser (1990) argues, critiquing Habermas’ understanding of the ‘public sphere’, the idea that deliberation within this public sphere requires the setting aside of people’s different social statuses and inequalities in these statuses, actually worked contradictorily. The universalism assumed in this bourgeois public

sphere in reality was based on particular rules of interaction and deliberation, rules that were not openly laid out. People who were seen as not adhering to these rules, or as not able to adhere to these rules, like women, racialized people, and people of the lower classes, were marginalized and excluded in this public sphere (Fraser, 1990, p. 63). Thus, this idea of universalism, in which values like impartiality and neutrality prevail, did not actually mean the inclusion of all groups of society. It meant the inclusion of a very specific group – white, bourgeois men – and the exclusion of other, more marginalized, groups (Ibid., p. 64).

If we really want to build a collectivity, in which all people are represented and cared for, this type of universalism does not work. Instead of hiding difference, we then need to actually acknowledge and emphasize difference. Often placed in opposition to a ‘politics of universalism’ is a ‘politics of pluralism’, grounded in the belief that individuals or groups should be recognized not on the basis of their ‘sameness’ to everyone else, but on their specific identity and uniqueness (Young, 1990; Taylor, 1994). Yet, how this politics of pluralism, in which there is at the same time a building of a political collectivity, could work exactly in the politics of left-wing political parties, in particular in the context of the Netherlands – the country where I was born and raised – I could not easily find. Therefore, I changed my focus, and decided to look at grassroots politics, i.e. social movements, and see how this combination of difference and collectivity works there. The LGBTQIA+ movement – and I will come to why I call the movement in this dissertation ‘queer’ instead of ‘LGBTQIA+’ later in this introduction – is a very interesting case for this, since the letters of the acronym already emphasize difference, between sexual identities and gender identities. Yet, we also speak of the ‘LGBTQIA+ *community*’, thus suggesting some form of collectivity. So how are difference and collectivity combined in this case?

My main aim in this dissertation is to look at which contestations, conflicts and tensions around difference exist in the Amsterdam queer movement, and where these contestations, conflicts and tensions come from. But also, to analyze what these contestations, conflicts and tensions mean for the ideas of ‘collectivity’, ‘community’, and ‘solidarity’ within this movement. The LGBTQIA+ community – locally, but also globally – can often be presented as a straightforward entity, yet, within this ‘community’ many differences exist. Like I said, the letters of the acronym already suggest these differences, however, difference does not only exist in people’s social locations, produced through intersections of different dimensions like sexuality, gender, race, and class, with certain privileges and power inequalities attached to these locations. In this dissertation, I look beyond the distinctive letters, and beyond social locations, focusing in addition on differences which are rooted in morality, thus in people’s values, in what people believe is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and in certain norms that exist in a society’s culture, and the way these values, beliefs, and norms affect people’s views of themselves and of others within the community.

I believe it is important to study this difference beyond social location, since often, in Dutch society, but also in other contexts, conflicts within movements and communities are explained by stating that some groups follow ‘identity politics’, with negative judgments of these identity politics oftentimes attached to this portrayal. For example, Bramen (2002) discusses why within academia, there are scholars – referring to people like Richard Rorty and Todd Gitlin – who ‘hate’ identity politics, as it would in their opinion lead to fragmentation within leftist movements (Bramen, 2002, p. 1). The issue of identity politics, in which there is an emphasis on an appeal to recognition of people’s specific experiences, oftentimes grounded in dimensions like race or gender, is complex, since it has the risk of making it seem that identity is something fixed and pregiven (Dean, 1996, p. 6). Within queer

activism specifically, there exists a tension between emphasizing and deconstructing identity categories (Gamson, 1995), with queer theory usually arguing for the latter, stating that identity categories should be rejected. At the same time, in this rejection lies the risk that very real consequences which are attached to constructed identities, like oppression and privilege, are ignored (Ibid., p. 400).

Differences in power, privilege and marginalization between groups within the Amsterdam queer movement will be discussed in this dissertation. Yet, my overall aim is to show that tensions within the Amsterdam queer movement are not *only* tensions around people's social locations, interests, and 'identities', and that tensions grounded in different understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project – by which I mean the ways in which people within the queer movement understand the political purpose of this movement, and the norms, values, and beliefs these understandings are grounded in – exist as well. Although these two types of difference – between, on the one hand, what some people have called 'identity', but what I will call 'social location', to emphasize that identities are not pre-given and fixed, but that the intersection of multiple dimensions does inform differences in power and privileges, and, on the other hand, between different understandings of the queer movement – are connected, with social locations potentially informing people's understandings of activism. Yet, they are not the same thing (Yuval-Davis, 2006). I believe it is crucial to dive deeper into the issue of difference within social movements, as too often, conflicts and tensions are dismissed as issues of social location and interests. This is not the full picture. As I will show in my dissertation, difference in understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project are central to the conflicts taking place in the Amsterdam queer movement, with these understandings at the same time being open to change, with people possessing a certain amount of freedom to ethically reflect on their

understandings, and with conflict and tensions sometimes leading to new collaborations and (moments of) collectivity.

Much of the existing research on the building of collectivity and solidarity across difference has focused on the feminist movement (see for example Dean, 1996; hooks, 2015; Lépinard, 2020; Lyshaug, 2006; Mansbridge, 1999; Srivastava 2005, 2006; Young, 1997). This scholarship is extremely useful for my project, as many of the issues at play in the feminist movement might be similar to the queer movement. Literature on the building of collectivity across difference also exists within research focusing on queer movements, by scholars like Cohen (1997), Hobson (2016), and Evans and Lépinard (2020). Although within this scholarship, there is a heavy dominance of research focusing on the Anglo-Saxon world, works on other local contexts exist as well (see for example Renkin (2009; 2015) on post-Soviet contexts like Hungary, Boellstorf (2004) on the Indonesian context, and Dave (2012) on the Indian context). In addition, theoretical as well as extensive empirical studies of sexuality, belonging, and solidarity exist. I hope my research can add to this existing literature, by following the lead of the scholars in Evans and Lépinard's (2020) edited book, who focus on the politics of difference within contemporary queer movements all over the world, using qualitative methods like interviewing and observation, and of Heywood (2018), who has conducted empirical research on the politics of difference in queer activism in Italy. Hopefully, my research can provide insights into the particular context of the Dutch queer movement – a national context which has the global reputation of being at the forefront of queer liberation – and at the same time engage with the broader theoretical questions around politics of difference, morality and ethics, and political subjectivities.

The main argument I thus try to convey in this dissertation is that 'difference' in the

Amsterdam queer movement – understood as the field of organizations, social movements, political institutions, and cultural institutions that are concerned with queer people in Amsterdam and the Netherlands – goes further than difference in interests, social locations, and sexual or gender identities. Difference also exists in understandings – and with that, practices – of activism, which are embedded in frameworks which I call morality: ideas of ‘wrong’ and ‘right’ activism and politics, grounded in people’s values, beliefs, and within socio-cultural and institutional norms. These different moral understandings of the queer movement produce political subjectivities that align with particular political projects and reject other political projects and therefore subjectivities. The moral and the political are thus completely interwoven in the Amsterdam queer movement, which is why I call this movement a ‘moral-political project’. Although difference in this way creates moments of conflict and tension, these moments of conflict and tension can also inform new collaborations and moments of collectivity, community, and solidarity.

Thus, difference in my research takes on two meanings. First, difference in the social locations and interests of different groups of people, rooted in the intersection of dimensions like race, gender, class, and sexuality, and which are connected to power relations, privileges, and inequalities. Second, difference in understandings of activism, based on people’s values, beliefs, and judgments, thus embedded in people’s moral frameworks. As I stated above, the first type of difference can of course inform the second type of difference, i.e. people’s moral frameworks can be influenced by their social locations. A queer person of color who has experienced discrimination based not only on their sexual or gender identity, but also based on their skin-color, might be more likely to believe queer activism as a political project should also focus on issues like racism. However, as I will argue in this dissertation, and grounded in Yuval-Davis’ (2006) argument on belonging, social location and the values and

political beliefs on which people base their understandings of the queer movement, and their ideas on how they themselves and others belong to this moral-political project, should not be conflated (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 202), and differences in understandings of queer activism go *beyond* social locations. These different understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project can lead to conflicts and tension, but these conflicts and tension can in turn inform new collaborations and (moments of) collectivity. In addition, difference in social locations can actually form the foundation of collectivity in particular understandings and practices of activism, namely in intersectional activism, understood as activism that recognizes power differences within the queer movement and shows an active commitment to creating an inclusive movement by consciously creating space for marginalized groups. I will come back to my understanding of intersectional activism in the literature review of this introduction. Thus, even though difference and conflict might seem incompatible with collectivity, community, and solidarity, I will argue that in my field, it is exactly difference and conflict that can form the basis of moments of collectivity. I would therefore propose to speak of these moments not as collectivity ‘in spite of difference’, but as collectivity ‘on the basis of difference’.

In this introduction, I will first introduce the research questions that led this research. I then outline the main concepts, theories, and literature that form the foundation of this dissertation, followed by an explanation of my methodology and used methods. Finally, I will introduce the main movements and organizations that will play a role in this dissertation and outline the chapters that will follow.

Research questions

The main research question that guided this research is:

What moral and ethical contestations and conflicts around 'difference' exist within the Amsterdam queer movement and how do these contestations and conflicts inform the building of collaboration and collectivity within this movement?

This main question has been supported by six sub-questions, with each chapter focusing on different questions. **Chapter 1**, which discusses the development of Dutch broader socio-political culture, and **chapter 2**, which analyzes the ways in which the Amsterdam queer movement is embedded in this broader culture, and in the urban governance of the city of Amsterdam, in which institutions like the Pride Amsterdam Foundation and Amsterdam's municipality play a central role, focus on the question: *what power relations exist within the Amsterdam queer movement, related to the national and local context, and how do these power relations inform conflicts and tensions within the movement?*

In **chapter 3**, which looks at different interpretations of activism within the Amsterdam queer movement, the question central is: *what different understandings of activism exist within the Amsterdam queer movement and how do these differences inform contestations, conflicts and tensions within the movement?*

Chapter 4, which dives into the issue of the production of different political subjectivities, focuses on the questions: *how do participants of the Amsterdam queer movement construct categories of political subjectivities within this movement and how do they create and blur*

boundaries around these categories and subjectivities? And what moral expectations and obligations come with this subjectivity production and what emotions are connected to these expectations and obligations?

Finally, in **chapter 5**, the final chapter, which analyzes changes and transformations within the Amsterdam queer movement, and the possibilities for a collective political subjectivity, the final two sub-questions are central: *how are new collaborations between participants and new forms of activism within the Amsterdam queer movement created? And how is a collective political subjectivity within the Amsterdam queer movement constructed, if it is, and what does this collective political subjectivity look like?*

Literature

In this literature review, I will outline the main concepts, theoretical frameworks, and scholarship that has informed this dissertation. Throughout the chapters, I will come back to these concepts and theories, but in this section, I sketch them and discuss the relationship between them. I do this by discussing three general areas: morality and ethics; subjectivities and subjectification; and collectivity and intersectionality. Although I researched the Amsterdam queer movement, this dissertation is not so much concerned with classical social movement theories, around issues like framing, political opportunities, and resource mobilization. Instead, the main frameworks I embed my work in are ones concerned with morality and ethics, theories of power and discourse, and (feminist) scholarship on difference and collectivity. I believe for the case of difference, conflict, and collectivity, these frameworks can help interpret these issues better than classical theories of social movements, in which elements like subjectivities production, the moral and ethical aspects of this

production, and the building of collectivity in combination with a focus on difference, have been marginalized.

Morality and politics, and the ethical freedom of self-reflection

As the title of this research states, I understand the Amsterdam queer movement as ‘a moral-political project’. Within sociology, morality is a concept that was used by early scholars like Karl Marx, Max Weber, and of course Émile Durkheim (Sevelsted & Toubøl, 2023, p. 16), who stated that morality “consists in an infinity of special rules, fixed and specific, which order man’s conduct in those different situations in which he finds himself most frequently” (Durkheim, 1961, p. 25). However, as Sevelsted and Toubøl (2023) argue, within studies of social movements, the concept of morality has been marginalized. Instead, classical social movement theories like resource mobilization theory and political process theory study social movements from a more ‘rational action’ or ‘structural’ perspective, looking at for example issues like framing, and political opportunities. Although these perspectives might be useful to explain certain aspects of social movements, I agree with Sevelsted and Toubøl that we need to place morality back into focus within studies of social movements. Like they state, social movements and their participants are – at least partly – mobilized by moral and ethical concerns, about what is wrong in society, about what the future should look like (Sevelsted & Toubøl, 2023, p. 4), and, as I will argue in this dissertation, by what the ‘right way’ of ‘doing activism’ looks like. Therefore, we cannot and should not ignore morality when studying social movements and activism, since that would mean we would overlook a big part of why and how people mobilize, and the way relations between people within movements are shaped. This means I am – in contrast to for example Durkheim’s understanding of ‘moral facts’, in which he tried to analyze morality as an objective outsider – looking at how my interlocutors make sense of morality and ethics, related to themselves, and to others

(Karsenti, 2012, p. 25).

In general, my use of the concepts of morality and ethics takes a Foucauldian approach.

Foucault (1990) argued that morality has multiple aspects, like *moral codes* – “a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family [...], educational institutions, churches, and so forth” (Foucault, 1990, p. 25), *morality of behaviors* – “the real behavior of individuals in relation to the rules and values that are recommended to them” (Ibid., p. 26) –, and, *conducting oneself* – “the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code” (Ibid.). What is very important in Foucault’s understanding of morality, is that it always involves a ‘relationship with the self’ and that people form themselves into *ethical subjects*, which should be understood as a process, in which people reflect on moral codes, their moral behavior, practices, and objectives, and based on this enact self-reflection, in which they can change themselves and the way they relate to these codes, behaviors, practices, and objectives (Ibid., pp. 27-28). It is this self-reflection that Foucault calls ‘ethics’ (Ibid., p. 29), and he sees these ethics as ‘freedom’, in which people are free to consciously reflect (Foucault, 1997). Yet, of course, this ‘freedom’ does not mean absence of power relations and systems. As Laidlaw (2002) argues, ‘freedom’ is always exercised in particular contexts, in which power relations and norms exist, and ‘freedom’ is a practice, as Foucault stated, and not an outcome or an end goal (Laidlaw, 2002).

The cruciality of reflection, or ‘thought’, in this understanding of freedom, is why I refer to ‘ethical freedom’, or ‘freedom of reflection’ in this dissertation, instead of to the concept of ‘agency’. I follow Laidlaw in this, who states that Foucault emphasized the aspect of

“choosing the kind of self one wishes to be” (Laidlaw, 2002, p. 324), whereas ‘agency’ can also be enacted without this conscious self-reflection, and which as a concept within social analysis is very much focused on people’s *choices* leading to particular *actions* (Ibid., p. 315). Although people’s choices and actions will certainly be a central theme in this dissertation, especially in chapter 5, which is about changes taking place within the Amsterdam queer movement and Pride Amsterdam, I also analyze, particularly in chapter 4, people’s ‘ethical freedom’ in discursively reflecting, and questioning their moral values, views, opinions, and the norms around them, with this reflecting and questioning not necessarily always leading to actions or changes.

Although scholars like Lambek, Das, Fassin and Keane (2015) argue that it can be dangerous to make a distinction between morality and ethics, as this distinction can lead to unnecessary objectification of these issues, as if they can be studied as essentialized issues separate from their context (Lambek et al., 2015, p. 3), I think if we make sure to take this context – relations of power, historical structures, emotions, social relations – into account, a distinction between morality and ethics can sometimes be useful, especially in the study of *change*. Therefore, in my analysis of changes and transformations in the Amsterdam queer movement, I understand the distinction between morality and ethics in the way Zigon (2009) outlines it. According to Zigon, morality can be understood as the norms, values, beliefs, and hopes that are around us through institutions – “those formal and non-formal social organizations and groups that are a part of all societies and that wield varying amounts of power over individual persons”, like state governments, religion, and companies (Zigon, 2009, p. 258) – , discourse – “all those public articulations of moral beliefs, conceptions, and hopes that are not *directly* articulated by an institution”, like the media or protest movements (Ibid., p. 259) –, and individual embodiment – “one’s everyday way of being in the world”

(Ibid., p. 260). Whereas this morality is often not consciously reflected on, *ethics* can be seen as the moments in which people take a step back and reflect on this morality, which Zigon calls ‘ethical moments’ (Zigon, 2007, p. 137; Zigon, 2009, pp. 258-261).

So, in this dissertation, I understand morality as the values and beliefs people hold, the norms encouraged by institutions, power systems, and structures of culture, and the behavior that follows from these values, beliefs, and norms. Often, this morality is something that people do not consciously think about or reflect on (Zigon, 2009). The moments in which people *do* consciously reflect on their morality, and potentially change their values and beliefs, and the behavior following these values and beliefs, is what I call ethics, following the notion that these ethics express a form of freedom, although always embedded in contexts and power systems. Judgments, for example about ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ activism, and therefore activists, inhabit a bit of an unclear position between morality and ethics, I would argue. Whereas sometimes, judgments, especially about others, can be made quickly, without conscious reflection, other times, it is exactly reflection that make people make certain judgments. I noticed this as well in my interviews, that sometimes, interlocutors actually reflected on their own judgments and sometimes changed them within the interview. In this dissertation, I therefore sometimes talk about judgments as part of morality, and sometimes as part of ethics. This shows that the distinction between morality and ethics is not always clear-cut, yet, I do make the distinction in this dissertation, since I believe it is especially useful for studying *change*, within people’s beliefs, values, and behavior, but also within the norms that institutions and power structures ingrain in society or in sub-groups within a society.

Thus, to reiterate, morality I understand as the values, beliefs, and judgments people hold and make without much conscious reflection, the socio-cultural norms that these values, beliefs,

and judgments are embedded in, often reproduced by institutions, and the behavior that follows these values, beliefs, judgments, and norms. Ethics I understand as the conscious self-reflection and the ‘working on themselves as ethical subjects’ people undertake, and the potential changes and transformations within people’s moral frameworks because of their judgments following this reflection, which can in turn inform changes and transformations in norms and institutions.

Analyses of the role of morals and morality in protest, although marginalized, do exist within social movement studies, for example in the work of James Jasper (1997), who looks at movements from a cultural perspective, stating that the ways in which we understand the world around us, the ways we think the world *should* look like – i.e. moral views – and the emotions we connect to these moral views, are all closely connected (Jasper, 1997, p. 108). He coined the term ‘moral shocks’, describing particular moments or events that can make people, often because of emotions like anger or outrage, mobilize and join social movements (Ibid., p. 106). Although I do not use Jasper’s concept of moral shock, I employ a similar concept in this dissertation, namely Zigon’s (2009) concept of ‘moral breakdown’. I chose to use this term, because Zigon, with this concept of ‘moral breakdown’, not only focuses on the reasons people politically mobilize, but also more broadly on the ways in which people *ethically* reflect on their moral frameworks, which he calls ‘ethical moments’ (Zigon, 2009, p. 258-261), with these moments sometimes informing change and transformation, not only in individuals’ morality, but also in institutions, as I will argue for the case of Pride Amsterdam, in chapter 5. As I outlined above, Zigon states that people’s conscious reflection on their morality can be described as ‘ethical moments’. Often, these ethical moments are brought about by the moments of ‘moral breakdown’ I just mentioned, in which people are forced to reflect on their institutional, discourse, and embodied morality because of an event or person

making them to, which can lead to change, within individuals themselves, within institutions, and within broader society (Zigon, 2009, p. 262). As Zigon argues, these moments of ‘moral breakdown’ do not have to be major societal disruptions like Jasper describes with the concept of ‘moral shocks’, but they can take place on a smaller scale as well (Ibid., p. 263), like I will discuss through the example of new protest groups participating in Pride events.

More specifically related to queer activism, Dave (2012), and her study of queer activism in India, is useful. Dave connects activism, affect, and ethics, and she understands activism as an ‘ethical practice’: “an effect of three affective exercises: the problematization of social norms, the invention of alternatives to those norms, and the creative practices of these newly invented possibilities” (Dave, 2012, p. 3). So, she understands activism as “critique, invention, and creative practice” (Ibid.), and ethics, in a Foucauldian way, as a reaction to norms and normalization (Ibid., p. 9). Utilizing this definition, in this dissertation, I am not only discussing the normative and moral conceptions and imaginations that participants have about the queer movement and activism, but also the practical way in which movements and organizations *question* and *challenge* the ways in which things happen – within broader society, in which heteronormativity prevails, but especially within the broader queer community, which some activists and movements understand as being dominated by homonormativity, meaning the valuing of heteronormative ideas and ideals within the queer community, instead of questioning and challenging these ideas and ideals (Duggan, 2002) –, and the alternatives they come up with. This also shows us how ethics should not only be understood as an individual process or practice, but that movements themselves, consisting of groups of people, also engage in a reflection on the norms and values around them and consciously react to these norms and values.

So, on the one hand, subjects within the Amsterdam queer movement are embedded in certain structures of power, for example related to particular institutions like the municipality of Amsterdam, to particular political cultures, and to power structures coming from relations of domination like colonialism, heteronormativity, and the patriarchal system; with these institutions, systems, and structures maintaining and reproducing certain norms, and informing people's moral codes and behavior. At the same time, as I will discuss particularly in chapter 4 and 5, people enjoy a form of freedom to self-reflect and to bring about change, which I will argue can be given rise to by the moments of moral breakdown that Zigon (2009) talks about. I thus ground my understanding of morality and ethics mainly in an anthropology of morality and ethics. I believe this framework can help studying the Amsterdam queer movement, as it moves away from the – sometimes restricted – focused view of social movement studies and incorporates more anthropological views on the ways in which people relate to the world, see the world, and make judgments of themselves and others within an activist movement like the Amsterdam queer movement. This view allows me to look not only at the ways in which morality and ethics inform people's reasons to politically mobilize, but also at the transformations in people's morality, and the relational judgments they make of themselves as activists, and others as activists, which are judgments often involving emotions, and sometimes leading to conflict.

As the title of this dissertation shows, I see the Amsterdam queer movement as a 'moral-political project'. I use this concept referring to Lépinard's (2020) notion of 'political project', in which people come together who share certain political goals and values. However, as she states, although there might be some sharing of political goals and values, in political projects there are also very different understandings of what these goals and values look like exactly, and what kind of action should be attached to them. Or as Flesher Fominaya

(2019) states: “individuals can claim and recognize in others a shared belonging to a specific movement or movement group or community, without sharing the same *definition* of the movement” (Flesher Fominaya, 2019, p. 431). These differences in understandings of a political project like the Amsterdam queer movement are steeped in morality, with people basing their understandings in certain cultural norms, values, beliefs and ideologies, and having ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ queer activism, and ‘good’ and ‘bad’ queer activists.

The Amsterdam queer movement is a ‘moral-political project’ in a complex way. Morality not only refers to the moral judgments, about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ activism, and the discourse attached to these judgments, but also to the socio-political culture people are embedded in and the norms that come with this culture, to the values people hold and the things they aspire to, to the political beliefs people subscribe to, and to the expectations people have of themselves and others, coming with these norms, values, and beliefs. These different aspects of morality of course intersect, and, as Heywood (2018) argues using the concept of ‘double morality’, people can subscribe to certain moral codes, but act not according to them, or break the moral codes they believe in, in particular contexts and situations (Heywood, 2018, p. 57).

In addition, not only does morality when it comes to the Amsterdam queer movement relate to broader society – on local, national and international level – in which certain norms and normalizations exist, but also to the many different organizations and groups *within* the queer community – again on local, national, and international level –, which will be the main focus of this research. As Fassin (2012; 2015) argues: morality and ethics are never pure and isolated. They are always embedded in relations of power, historical structures, emotions, and social relations (Fassin, 2012, p. 4; Fassin, 2015, p. 205). Thus, the moral-political conflicts

that exist within the queer community cannot be seen as separate from the broader societal level, since differences in understandings of what the queer movement should look like are connected to historical and social structures related to issues like race, gender, and class, and with that power and inequality. I call the Amsterdam queer movement a ‘moral-political project’ to emphasize the complete intertwining between morality and politics in this movement.

Political subjectivities and ‘living intersubjectively’

What is central to this dissertation are not only the ways in which people reflect on their *own* relation to morality and their own formation of ethical subjects, but also the ways in which people produce moral notions of *others*, which of course can never be seen separately from their perceptions of themselves. It is thus the production of subjectivities – moral *and* political – that is central to this dissertation. For Foucault, subjectivities are the product of historical structures *and* a process that people themselves conduct, *on themselves*, which he calls ‘subjectification’ (Kelly, 2013, p. 513). This idea of subject formation as a process will be a central point I will use in this research, following Lépinard (2020) in her understanding of ‘political subjectivities’ in her research on feminism and Islam in France and Canada.

Lépinard states that in political projects, like feminism – and I believe we can understand queer activism in a similar way –, political subjectivities are *produced*, by individuals, by aligning themselves with certain political projects and collectives (Lépinard, 2020, p. 40).

Lépinard follows Judith Butler in stating that the political and the moral are in this process indistinguishable, thus arguing that in the process of political subjectification, the moral and the political are linked, and that this process does not only involve rational self-reflection, but also issues like emotions, social processes, and desires (Ibid., p. 41).

Just like I call the Amsterdam queer movement a moral-political project, when I speak of ‘moral-political subjectivities’ in this dissertation, I follow Lépinard, and thus Butler, in their notions that the moral and the political are closely connected, and therefore, the subjectivities I speak of, and the processes of subjectification, are both moral *and* political. They are political because the project of queer activism involves people’s alignments with different political views and beliefs, which inherently come with the potentiality of conflict (Mouffe, 1999, p. 754), and they are moral, because they involve notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ activism, with these notions always being linked to understandings of the queer movement as a political project. As Lépinard states, following Foucault’s understanding of the process of subjectification, this process is a process of self-formation, in which individuals understand themselves in a certain manner, embedded in historical structures (Ibid.). But of course, this process is not an individual process, but a social one, meaning that this process of self-formation is always shaped by understandings of the subjectivities of *others*, or as Häkli and Kallio (2018) call it: we, as political agents, always live ‘intersubjectively’ (Häkli & Kallio, 2018, p. 64).

I thus understand the production of subjectivities as relational, in which people’s understandings of themselves and their positions and those of others are embedded in social, historical, and spatial relations (Bond, Thomas & Diprose, 2020, p. 752). Thus, the self can never be seen separately from the social, and it is mainly this production of subjectivities of others, and how this production influences the way in which people understand their own subjectivities, that is central in my dissertation. We will see how people’s understandings of their own activism are often formed by positioning themselves against the activism of *others*, for example grassroots activists who position themselves in opposition to the activism dominating powerful institutions like Pride Amsterdam. Because these forms of activism, and

the social and political structures they are embedded in, are constantly prone to change, this means, as Bond et al. (2020) argue, that subjectivities are always “fragile, negotiated, relational, and contingent” in the sense that they are never set in stone, and that they can change and transform. Finally, the production of subjectivities always involves power relations, meaning that subjectivities are partly subjected to these power relations, but at the same time that people have the ability to exercise power themselves, on themselves and on others (Ibid.).

Possibilities for a collective political subjectivity?

I thus see the Amsterdam queer movement as a moral-political project, in which different subjectivities, with different notions and understandings of this project, exist, informing tensions, contestations, and conflicts between these subjectivities. This raises the question whether some form of collectivity is possible in this project, or whether differences are too big for people with different social locations, interests, and moral and political views, to come together to fight for the broader goal of queer liberation. There has been quite a bit of scholarship that has argued that building collectivity *on the basis of* difference is possible. In the final chapter of this dissertation – chapter 5 – I will argue that at least moments of this coming together are possible and that we see them happening in the Amsterdam queer movement. But in order to do this, I need to outline what I mean by ‘coming together’. I do this using the concepts of ‘collective political subjectivity’, ‘collective identity’, ‘intersectionality’, and ‘community and solidarity (across difference)’.

I take the term ‘collective political subjectivity’ from the human geographer Håvard Haarstad (2007), who defines it as: “the theory and practice of constructing a project around the interest of a broad range of actors who can negotiate the fundamental power relations in

contemporary capitalism” (Haarstad, 2007, p. 57) and who states that the main challenge for building this collective political subjectivity is “to negotiate, on the one hand, sensitivity towards difference, and on the other, organizing broad political collectives that can radically challenge structures in contemporary capitalism” (Ibid.). Although, as a geographer, Haarstad focuses extensively on the issue of scale, looking at local and global communities and movements, while I am looking at one local movement, I still think the concept of collective political subjectivity is useful for my field. After all, the broader Amsterdam queer movement also deals with the issue of scale in a certain way, namely in the navigation of the individual, group, and institutional levels within the building of a broader social movement. In addition, why I want to use the concept of collective political subjectivity, instead of only ‘solidarity’ or ‘community’, is because I want to explore whether, besides the potential building of care and empathy between members of the Amsterdam queer movement, there is a possibility of (moments of) collaboration between people with different backgrounds and potentially different interests with the aim of creating a common political project, which can question and challenge power inequalities, and structures of discrimination and marginalization that the queer community faces. Thus, the question is not only, how can a feeling of unity and community be created within the Amsterdam queer movement itself, but the question is also, how can a *political* collective be built that can carries out political messages to broader society? Haarstad proposes five principles that should be on the basis of this collective political subjectivity:

1. The main goal of a collective political subjectivity should be the challenging and leveling of power relations, and in order to do that, a different form of power should be produced, namely ‘associational power’, by (groups of) people coming together (Haarstad, 2007, p. 70).

2. A collective political subjectivity should not be seen as essentialist, thus it has no core identity. Instead, it should be regarded as a constantly shifting and changing network (Ibid.).
3. The politics in a collective political subjectivity will never be pure (Ibid.)
4. In the building of a collective political subjectivity, there will be a constant tension between dealing with difference internal to the collective in order to build a broader movement, and creating space for difference (Ibid., p. 71).
5. A collective political subjectivity will always come with disagreements, on its goals, practices, and values, and there should be space for these disagreements. There should be space and opportunity for new visions to arise, meaning that a collective political subjectivity should never have fixed goals and visions (Ibid.).

In chapter 5, I will focus on the question of collective political subjectivity in the Amsterdam queer movement extensively, looking at how, besides the creation of specific spaces for specific groups, plus care and empathy between members of the Amsterdam queer movement, different groups of people can come together, carrying out a political message against queer oppressions, *on the basis of* difference. As Heywood (2018) argues for the case of queer activists in Bologna, Italy, it is exactly this commitment to difference that can shape the basis of some form of ‘sameness’ between queer activists (Heywood, 2018, p. 95). This commitment to difference can then forge a collective identity for a social movement like the Amsterdam queer movement.

Collective identity

The role of identity within social movements has often been discussed within social psychology, but the role of *collective* identity has also taken a central role in sociological

social movement studies (see for example Melucci, 1996; Tarrow, 2011). Social psychologist Klandermans (2014) defines collective identity as the “cognitions shared by members of a single group about the group of which they are a member” (Klandermans, 2014, p. 3). Sociologists McGarry and Jasper (2015) employ a similar understanding of collective identity, adding emotions to the equation as well. According to them, collective identity involves an emotional attachment to a group, a clear notion of what the meaning of this group is, and an idea of who belongs to this group and who does not (McGarry & Jasper, 2015, pp. 1-5). Collective identity thus assumes a process of group identification on the individual’s end. However, in order for it to play a role in political protest a collective identity needs to become politicized (Klandermans, 2014, p. 4). This means that the identification with a group becomes a matter of struggle for power and people becoming involved in protest *on behalf of a group* (Ibid.). Group identification can encourage mobilization: people getting involved in social movements. But, as Klandermans makes clear, it is not a one-way street: mobilization in turn can strengthen identification. Thus, mobilization and identification reinforce each other (Ibid., p. 5).

But *how* do these group identities develop? Taylor and Whittier (1992) have tried to answer this question by looking at lesbian feminist communities in the United States in the 1970s. They propose three analytical tools for grasping the construction of collective identities. First, **boundaries** create differences between in- and outsiders: they make clear what people inside a movement share and how they differ from the dominant groups they protest against (Ibid., p. 111). Within the lesbian feminist movement, boundary markers were created by building separate institutions, like health centers and newspapers, independent from the institutions embedded in patriarchal structures (Ibid., p. 112). Additionally, a specific ‘women’s culture’ was established, focusing on ‘female values’. Believed was that ‘male characteristics’ like

hierarchy and violence, should be excluded, while ‘female characteristics’ like collectivism and care should be promoted (Ibid., p. 113). Second, **consciousness** enhances collective identity by providing movement members with an understanding of their marginalized position, and by supplying interpretive frameworks to recognize this oppression in their daily lives and develop expectations of how their ‘free’ lives *should* look like (Ibid., p. 114). Taylor and Whittier argue that within the lesbian feminist communities, the shared consciousness focused on the view “that heterosexuality is an institution of patriarchal control and that lesbian relationships are a means of subverting male domination” (Ibid.). The final analytical tool which can be used to understand how collective identities are constructed, is **negotiation** (Ibid.). By this Taylor and Whittier mean the daily practices and used symbols employed in the movement’s resistance (Ibid., p. 111), trying to change meanings and structures (Ibid., p. 118). The lesbian feminist movement challenged the existing ideas of women being fragile and passive, connected to certain beauty standards, by women cutting their hair short, and wearing comfortable clothing (Ibid., pp. 119-120).

There has been more and more criticism on some of the traditional understandings of collective identity. For example, McDonald (2002) asks whether the classical notion of collective identity is still useful in times when movements increasingly take the form of networks and flows, and argues that there should be more attention to the contradictions that come with identity and self-understanding (McDonald, 2002, p. 111). Gamson (1995) states that classical social movements literature has not paid enough attention to a new type of tendency in some movements, in particular queer movements: to blur and deconstruct group identities (Gamson, 1995, p. 392). Flesher Fominaya (2019), based on Melucci (1995), focuses specifically on how it is not common interests per se that can build collective identity, but that a group identity can actually be created through conflict and difference (Flesher

Fominaya, 2019). In my field, it seems that some queer movements actually *make use of* the multiplicity of identities to create a collective identity. Intersectionality – a concept helping us recognize how dimensions of people’s lives intersect and create experience – can then form the basis of a collective identity.

Intersectional & queer

Intersectionality is a term first introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), employing it to draw attention to the experience of black women, especially within fields like employment and regarding violence. However, the understanding of the term has been built on earlier Black feminist thought, especially by bell hooks (2015[1984]). In her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks argues that up to that point – the early 1980s –, much feminist theory and activism had been produced by privileged, white women, who lacked knowledge and awareness of the experiences of women ‘at the margins’: black women and women of color (hooks, 2015, p. 29). Because of that, feminist theory excludes large groups of women and mainly pays attention to the experience of ‘women at the center’ (Ibid.; Chun, Lipsitz & Shin, 2013, p. 923). Instead, what is needed, is a fuller understanding of the interconnectedness of several dimensions of people’s lives, like gender, race, and class, and how the intersections of these dimensions create certain experiences and connected oppressions (hooks, 2015, 70-71).

Within queer theory, the place of the concept of intersectionality is a complex issue. As Gamson (1995) makes clear, queer theory’s main aim is to deconstruct binaries and categories, to problematize these categories and to demonstrate the unstableness and constructiveness of identity (Gamson, 1995, p. 394). It emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to the gay and lesbian movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which emphasized the identity

categories ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’, and took an assimilationist approach to politics, by trying to show how gay people are ‘similar’ to heterosexual people (Ibid., p. 395). Black feminist thought focusing on intersectionality, although asserting that identities are constructed, puts emphasis on the ‘reality’ of identity categories. Identity categories may be constructed, but their connected consequences – oppressions and privileges – are very real and concrete (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1298). Gamson (1995) states: because of the extreme focus on deconstruction, queer theory risks ignoring concrete violent social structures that affect certain groups, and therefore risks ignoring intersectionality (Gamson, 1995, p. 400).

Crenshaw (1991) makes a distinction between *structural intersectionality* and *political intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991; Roth, 2021). Structural intersectionality encompasses the ways in which the intersection of multiple social elements – like gender, race, sexuality – informs specific experiences and marginalizations. So, within the category ‘women’, women of color face different forms of exclusion and discrimination than white women. Political intersectionality involves the ways in which political projects can, or fail to, be intersected, with Crenshaw pointing towards the exclusion of the experience of women of color in feminism, because the feminist movement was dominated by white women (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). Connecting social movement studies and intersectional theory, Cole (2008) states that within social movements that form around a particular identity group – for example, women – it is often the interests of the relatively most privileged groups that are focused on (Cole, 2008, p. 444), in the case of the feminist movement white women. The LGBTQIA+ movement in the Netherlands, even though the name already suggests different identities, has for a long time been dominated by relatively privileged groups like white gay men (Wekker, 2020, p. 168).

Roth (2021) uses the concept of intersectionality to describe the ways in which, *within* a social movement, different groups are positioned. As Roth argues, political intersectionality can create a collective identity, and a movement that is committed to the recognition of political intersectionality is not only aware of power differences between groups in the movement, but also actively attempts to create more inclusion, for example by making space for the most marginalized people and emphasizing their experiences (Roth, 2021, p. 3).

This ‘intersectionality as collective identity’ is also discussed by Evans and Lépinard (2020), who consider three ways in which intersectionality has been used in feminist and queer movements. It can function as a strategy for successful coalitions, it can be employed as a strategy to challenge power relations and promote inclusivity within organisations and movements, and finally, it can function *as an identity*: individuals can describe themselves as intersectional, and movements can employ intersectionality as part of their collective identity (Evans & Lépinard, 2020, p. 5). Evans and Lépinard state that movements can organize around an intersectional identity, for instance through separate organization and self-mobilization, in order to make this intersectional identity more represented in the broader movement – e.g. by self-organization of women of color within the feminist movement, or queer people of color within the queer movement (Ibid., p. 7). That way, movement activists make use of the concept of intersectionality to identify themselves and their movement (Labelle, 2020, p. 206). In addition, Laperrière and Lépinard (2016) discuss the ways in which intersectionality might be used as a strategy for inclusion, representation, and the building of collective identity, focusing on the Québécois women’s movement. They argue that feminist organizations use intersectionality in two ways: to include minority women in the feminist project and identity, and to dispute the notion of a single feminist identity (Laperrière and Lépinard, 2016, p. 380). These two ways of using intersectionality are often

in conflict with each other, since the first strategy involves a belief in a unified feminist identity and project, whereas the latter challenges this belief (Ibid.). A focus on the latter way, although it might challenge the usual notion of the category ‘women’, might actually enhance collective identity, the authors argue, when it makes feminist subjects believe that the specific betterment of the well-being of minority women – in their case Native and immigrant women – will eventually contribute to the well-being of *all* women (Ibid., p. 379).

Mansbridge (1999) argues that separate organization and representation of black women *by* black women – ‘descriptive representation’ – can enhance the communication within a movement and increase the connection of black women to the feminist project (Mansbridge, 1999). Finally, Labelle (2020), writing on intersectionality in the Québécois queer movement, states that a focus on intersectionality as a collective identity does not necessarily mean a fragmentation of movements, but that separate mobilization of marginalized groups *within* the queer movement, focusing on intersecting identities, can actually enhance inclusivity within this movement and make historically marginalized groups more connected to this broader movement (Labelle, 2020, pp. 213-214). That way, intersectionality can function as the thing that binds people to a political project and to each other: as a collective identity.

As I will discuss in this dissertation, for many of my interlocutors, intersectionality is a significant concept, and they know the meaning of the concept very well. Many of them refer to their notion that the queer movement should be an ‘intersectional movement’, referring to the importance of the queer movement to be an inclusive movement in which the visibility and recognition of the most marginalized groups – e.g. queer people of color, trans people, queer refugees – is central, thus involving an active commitment to political intersectionality (Roth, 2021). As I stated, within queer theory, the concept of intersectionality is complicated,

because the commitment to the deconstruction of identity categories brings with it a risk of ignoring real power differences, specifically *within* the queer movement. Many of my interlocutors *do* specifically refer to power differences within the movement and the importance of recognizing the ways in which some groups are marginalized in multiple ways, thus sometimes emphasizing identity categories instead of completely rejecting them. This resonates with Brown's (2015) description of one of the differences between queer theory and queer activism: although queer movements do not see identity categories as fixed and bounded, they do sometimes emphasize these categories to fight for the liberation of particularly marginalized groups (Brown, 2015, p. 3).

Some of my interlocutors also use the word 'queer' to describe their activism – sometimes in combination with the concept of intersectionality but not always at the same time –, which they see as the 'right' type of activism: activism in which multiple political causes and struggles are connected, for example the fight for liberation of queer people, for anti-racism, and for Palestinian liberation. As Highleyman (2002) states, referring to the US context, throughout time, queer movements have focused not only on sexuality-specific issues, but have connected these issues to broader themes of global justice, inequality, and other 'progressive issues'. She describes how in the 1990s the Philadelphia chapter of AIDS activist group ACT UP actively transformed its movement from focusing specifically on issues related to sexuality to one relating these issues to broader social struggles (Highleyman, 2002, p. 107). Cathy Cohen (1997) states that queer politics and activism should fight the systems of power that oppress multiple groups and people (Cohen, 1997, p. 442). In this type of politics, broad coalitions are formed between people who deviate from 'the norm', thus connecting multiple struggles and fights.

For many of my interlocutors it is this connection of multiple struggles and causes that they describe by using the term ‘queer’. This understanding of activism is then oftentimes contrasted with ‘single-issue activism’, in which issues related to sexuality and – sometimes – gender identity, are separated from other issues, like racism, classism and sexism (Ferguson, 2019, p. 111). In queer activism, Brown (2015) states, reiterating Cohen’s (1997) call, coalitions need to be built between groups who are marginalized by a world in which neoliberalism prevails (Brown, 2015, p. 16). These groups do not only include people who are marginalized because of their sexuality, but also people who face discrimination because of their gender, class, and race. The term ‘queer’ within activism then means the inclusion of multiple political causes in a movement.

In this dissertation I sometimes talk of ‘intersectional’ activism and sometimes of ‘queer’ activism, with the first referring to movements committing to a political intersectionality in which structural intersectionality is recognized, marginalized groups are at the center and in which there is an active attempt to make the movement more inclusive, and the latter referring to the notion that within the queer movement, multiple political causes need to be connected. It is however important to note that these two types of activism are closely linked. A movement that is aware of structural intersectionality, in which multiple systems of power contribute to the marginalization of social groups, might want to connect these systems of power and marginalizations in the activism it externally expresses and therefore focus on multiple political causes. Cole (2008) outlines the views of multiple feminist activists, who describe the ways in which their movements have tried to build alliances and coalitions with other movements, by focusing on their shared experiences of marginalization (Cole, 2008, p. 447). Although I am in this dissertation not focusing on coalition building between queer movements and movements which do not identify as queer movements, the commitment to

connecting multiple political causes on the basis of shared marginalization within systems of power, is clearly important for many of my interlocutors who define their activism as ‘queer’.

Also, some of the movements I researched, commit to *both* intersectional activism *and* queer activism, in which there is not a focus on the complete destruction of identity categories, but in which identity categories are sometimes emphasized to reveal the multiple systems of power people deal with, therefore not ignoring difference between social groups but actually drawing attention to it. Later in this introduction I will come to why I call my general field of study ‘queer’, but it is important to keep in mind that not everybody calls their movement or activism queer. Queer is a term that is used some of my interlocutors to describe a specific type of activism which they see as morally ‘right’, and to contrast it with ‘single-issue activism’. Although intersectionality can be an important part of this activism, I make the distinction between ‘intersectional activism’ and ‘queer activism’ because they refer to different things: the first one to more internal movement processes in which intersectionality can become a collective identity, and the latter to the political commitments movements and activists externally express.

The concept of ‘intersectionality’ thus plays two roles within my field. On the one hand, the concept is useful to analyze how multiple dimensions of people’s lives – like gender, race, sexuality, and class – intersect, producing specific experiences, privileges, and marginalizations, which we can call structural intersectionality. Because these dimensions intersect in different ways for different people, social locations differ between individuals, within a society, community, or social movement. Yet, intersectionality within a social movement can also be used as a way of describing a particular understanding of activism. This is activism in which the recognition of structural intersectionality, the centering of the

most marginalized groups and people, and the active commitment to making a movement more inclusive, are fundamental. So, the concept of intersectionality is important in both the types of difference I discussed at the beginning of this introduction. First, as a way of recognizing that people inhabit different social locations because of the intersection of multiple dimensions, and that these social positions come with inequalities in power and privilege. And second, as a way for people to describe a type of movement in which the recognition of these inequalities, the emphasis on difference, and the active commitment to making this movement more inclusive are central.

Community and solidarity

Following from the discussion on intersectionality as a collective movement identity, we could ask the question how collectivity *internal* – thus in the relationships between people – to the movement could be formed, in which so many different interests and identities exist. Asking this questions brings us to concepts like community, solidarity, and care, with which I already made a start in the previous section, by discussing how intersectionality as a collective identity can enhance internal inclusion within a social movement.

Durkheim (2014) discussed two forms of solidarity: ‘mechanical solidarity’ – grounded in similarity of background and identity – and ‘organic solidarity’ – grounded in the interdependence between people based on division of labor (Durkheim, 2014). However, as Calhoun (2002) states, in contemporary social movements the question of solidarity often goes beyond these two types, which I believe is also the case in the Amsterdam queer movement. The question is not so much about solidarity between people who are very similar or who depend on each other as a result of the division of labor, but about possibilities of solidarity between people who are perceived as – at least in certain ways – *different*. What

does this emphasis on difference mean for the understanding and possibility of solidarity between movement participants?

There are several (feminist) scholars who argue that solidarity with attention to difference, and without a notion of sameness, is possible. Mead (1934) introduced the concept of the ‘generalized other’, meaning the ways in which people can take the role of ‘the other’. This other is not a specific person, but it comprises the universal, general position of people outside yourself (Mead, 1934, pp. xxiv-xxviii), and thus an individual’s understanding of the expectations of a certain social group (Dean, 1996, p. 35). Dean (1996) argues that because we internalize the expectations, values, and views of multiple groups, we cannot speak of one generalized other (Ibid., p. 37), therefore challenging the commitment to universality on which Mead’s argument of the generalized other is built. Instead, Dean argues, we can understand solidarity across difference through the concept of ‘reflective solidarity’, meaning that people should attempt to take the position of “a situated, hypothetical third” (Ibid., p. 174), in which they accept that the experience of others potentially differs from their own, but that they are still obliged to pay attention to this different experience (Ibid., p. 173). According to Dean, that way solidarity can still be grounded in a certain notion of universality – the engagement of people with the perspectives and experiences of others – without assuming similarity (Ibid., p. 174).

Young (1997) takes a similar position on solidarity as Dean, arguing that commonality and identification are not necessary for solidarity. Instead, she emphasizes the significance of ‘wondering’, meaning an openness to ‘other’ or ‘different’ interests and views (Young, 1997, p. 56). This openness and wondering also takes a central position in Lugones’ (1987) concept of “world”-travelling, by which she means our ability to playfully travel to other people’s – in

her case other women – lifeworlds, and understand their experiences in these worlds, and, very importantly, see the ways in which we ourselves are understood in these other people’s eyes (Lugones, 1987, p. 17). “World”-travelling can then allow us to reflect on ourselves, and deconstruct ourselves, and it can form the basis of loving others (Ibid.).

Lyshaug (2006) accepts some of Dean’s and Young’s points, but also criticizes their understandings of solidarity. According to her, Dean does not explain *how* we can take the position of the hypothetical third in a respectful and responsible way, and Young’s concept of ‘wonder’ risks highlighting an other’s ‘strangeness’, and exoticizing this ‘otherness’ (Lyshaug, 2006, pp. 84- 85). She argues instead for her concept of ‘enlarged sympathy’. Lyshaug states that solidarity across difference needs ‘imaginative identification’, which does *not* involve claiming commonality, but does make people being more sensitive to other views and experiences more likely, because of identification as some sort of thought experiment (Ibid., pp. 93-95).

Lépinard (2020) is not convinced by the usefulness of enlarged sympathy. According to her, although this concept might be a way of creating more attention to difference within the feminist movement, it is not a solution for producing solidarity *across* these differences (Lépinard, 2020, pp. 193-194). She states that what is needed instead is a ‘feminist ethic for responsibility’, in which solidarity is not based on identification, but on the commitment to providing care to the feminist community and other potential feminist subjects (Ibid., p. 214). This shared responsibility is what feminist subjects binds together. Similarly, hooks (2015) argues that ‘Sisterhood’ as a form of political solidarity is possible within feminism without assuming common oppression and that this Sisterhood can only be realized when intersectionality is acknowledged (hooks, 2015, pp. 141-142). According to her, women need

to be willing to accept responsibility for fighting against systemic oppression that does not affect them individually, and that in that way, solidarity can be established (Ibid., p. 194). Bond, Thomas and Diprose (2020), in their research on climate activists, also make use of this concept of ‘feminist ethic of care’, stating that this care is “relational, situated, non-violent, nurturing, restorative, and future-oriented” (Bond et al., 2020, p. 757) and that these ethics of care are also a commitment to a particular way of practicing politics (Ibid.), making clear that external and internal politics are connected in a moral-political project like the feminist movement or the queer movement.

All in all, these authors have attempted to explain how solidarity, community, and care might be possible in movements and political projects which involve participants with different social locations, identities, and experiences. They differ in their understandings of how this solidarity can be produced. What they all have in common however, which is restated by scholars like Beamish and Luebbers (2009), Binnie and Klesse (2012), Case (2012), and Droogendyk et al. (2016), is the understanding that the building of solidarity and care across difference always comes with conflict and friction, around questions of belonging, political commitments, and community, but that at the same time this difference cannot and should not be ‘eliminated’ to create solidarity. As Heywood (2018) argues for the case of queer activism in Italy, a commitment to difference is what can bring people in this political project together. He calls it an ‘ethical commitment’ to difference that produces collectivity within queer activism (Ibid., p. 95). Thus, again, the moral/ethical and the political are completely intertwined in the project of queer activism.

Methodology

There is thus a close intertwinement between the moral and the political in a project like the Amsterdam queer movement. Rubin (1984) states that the issue of sexuality is always political, as it is embedded in relations of power, in which some sexualities and sexual acts are marginalized, while others are supported and encouraged (Rubin, 1984, p. 171). Pigg (2012) argues that especially within sexuality, the moral and the political are very clearly both playing a role, as sexuality is not only an individual experience, but it is embedded in a particular culture, in which certain beliefs around sexuality exist. In addition, sexuality is a part of social institutions – like the family, the state, social movements, and the economic system – which politically and morally influence the ways in which sexuality is understood, valued, and regulated (Pigg, 2012, pp. 328-329).

Understanding sexuality as both a political and moral issue, has consequences for the way it should be studied, namely simultaneously as part of systems of power and as part of systems of meanings, values, and norms (Ibid., pp. 327-328), with these systems of course being in relation with each other. Following these two points, my methodological viewpoint starts from the notion that a combination of structural analysis – for example, of historical structures of Dutch socio-political culture, and of the resources and power of institutions like the municipality of Amsterdam and the Pride Amsterdam Foundation – and an analysis of people’s understandings, meanings, values, opinions, and judgments, should be combined to be able to paint a comprehensive picture of the Amsterdam queer movement as a moral-political project. My research methods reflect this methodological viewpoint.

The three main methods used in this research are semi-structured interviews, (participant) observation, and analysis of texts like policy documents, press statements, social media posts,

documentaries, and media articles. I used the software of ATLAS.ti to analyze these interviews, fieldnotes about my observations, and texts. I interviewed 27 people, some of whom twice, most of them individually, and two of them as a duo. I used snowball sampling to find my interlocutors, starting from my own network and then being introduced to new people through my interlocutors' networks. My interlocutors are almost all involved in activism, but all in a different way. Some of them are actively involved in queer movements and organizations, organizing protests and events themselves; others have been participating in events and protests that they have not organized themselves. Many of my interlocutors have participated in Pride Amsterdam events or in Pride events in other cities. The vast majority of my interlocutors live in Amsterdam and are active in the Amsterdam queer movement, but I have also interviewed a few people living in other Dutch cities, like Rotterdam and The Hague, with some of them being active in the queer movement there. Although this research focuses on the queer movement in Amsterdam specifically, the Netherlands is such a small country, with the bigger cities being located very close to each other, that there is a big overlap between movements and activists in these different cities. My interviewees' ages range between 20 and 64 years old. 8 interviewees identify as non-white, and 19 as white. Finally, 20 interviewees have the Dutch nationality, and 7 interviewees do not, although all my interviewees live in the Netherlands. While some of my interviews were conducted in English, most were conducted in Dutch. Most of the quotes I use are therefore translated by myself, which is also the case for most of the quotes from analyzed texts – e.g. policy documents, media articles, press statements, and social media posts.

The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I had some in advance prepared themes with a few questions attached to each, that I brought with me to each interview, but that at the same time I left space for the interviewees to bring up topics and issues themselves and for

the interview to follow its own course. This means that the time each interview lasted varied, with most interviews taking around one hour, but with the longest interview taking almost three hours. I asked my interviewees to tell me about their involvement in queer/LGBTQIA+ activism, and their trajectory of getting involved. I asked them about their more general ideas and opinions on queer/LGBTQIA+ activism, using questions about their notions of the goals of this activism, what for them the ideal queer movement and activist would look like, and for whom certain social movements are and are not intended. I inquired about their understandings of solidarity and community, by asking them what their understandings of these concepts are, if they are important concepts to them at all, and by asking them to give me examples of moments in which they felt solidarity and community were present and examples of moments in which they were not. Finally, I laid out two ‘cases’ for them, namely that of the We Reclaim Our Pride protest during Pride Walk 2021 and the conflict between We Reclaim Our Pride and the Pride Amsterdam Foundation that followed from that moment, and that of the different existing rainbow flags, with the progress flag – which includes a black and brown stripe representing queer people of color and a pink and blue triangle representing trans people – becoming more and more popular in Amsterdam. Sometimes my interviewees knew these cases already, sometimes they heard about them for the first time from me. My aim for including these cases in the interviews was to make the questions very concrete and let my interviewees reflect on some real-life examples instead of only on more conceptual questions like ‘what does solidarity mean to you?’.

By combining questions about these broader, conceptual issues, and questions about very concrete conflicts and tensions taking place in the queer movement, I hope to have created the space for different scales of reflection within the interviews. Like I stated, besides these prepared themes, I kept space for my interviewees to come up with issues and themes, and

with examples of conflicts and tensions within the movement, themselves, and I asked follow-up questions based on their specific answers. At the very end of each interview, I asked my interviewees if they could tell me their age, gender and pronouns, sexual preference or identity, and ethnicity. I left it completely up to the interviewees how they interpreted these questions, and the background information I provide about my interviewees in this dissertation is based entirely on how they answered these questions, thus on how they identify themselves.

I would like to make one final point about interviews as one of my research methods. We could ask the question whether these interviews created the ‘ethical moments’ I discussed in the literature review themselves, meaning moments in which people are made to reflect on their values, beliefs, judgments, and the norms around them. To this question I would answer that yes, interviewing as a method in this research inherently means asking interlocutors to reflect and to discursively express these reflections. It was not always the case that this reflection only happened for the first time in these interviews, since multiple interlocutors told me about ethical moments and self-reflections following these moments which happened to them in the past. More importantly, I would argue that the fact that my interlocutors reflected on their moral frameworks because of my interviewing does not undermine my argument of people having the ethical freedom to self-reflect. In contrast, it actually shows this freedom. As I will discuss in the section on positionality, the researcher is always part of the research. My positionality *and* the action of doing research in the first place, and the research methods that come with that, will always influence the field, which is inevitable in qualitative social research.

Besides conducting interviews, I have been present at multiple events and protests, observing

and often participating myself, thus employing participant observation. I have participated in demonstrations organized by Black Pride and Queer Amsterdam. These are the most prominent movements and organizations that have explicitly countered the Pride Amsterdam Foundation: the biggest and most resourceful LGBT organization in Amsterdam and the Netherlands. In addition, I have been present at events organized by the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. In the summer of 2021, I was a volunteer for the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, which meant I participated in a welcome meeting for volunteers, and I worked at an open-air cinema event organized as part of Pride Amsterdam. Finally, I observed multiple discussion panels and theatre shows created around the theme of queerness. By studying more grassroots movements, as well as the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, I hope to show the different types of activism that exist within the broader Amsterdam queer movement. I follow Milani (2015) in his notion that for the case of queer activism, it is important to look at *both* discourses and practices (Milani, 2015, p. 433). This is why I combine the methods of interviewing, observation, and analysis of texts. For the analysis of practices, observation was a very useful method, but during my observations at events, discussion panels, and theatre productions, I was also able to ‘observe’ discourses, but in a ‘practical’ setting.

The third method I used was the analysis of texts like policy documents, media articles, press statements, social media posts, and documentaries. As many of the conflicts within the Amsterdam queer movement play out online or in the press, I think it is very important to take this space into account, and I see this space as an inherent part of the Amsterdam queer movement, besides the ‘physical’ spaces like the streets and the theatre. As I look in this dissertation at people’s moral understandings, production of subjectivities, and construction of categories, I rely heavily on discourse analysis. I approach discourse analysis less from a purely linguistic standpoint, and more from a critical standpoint (Van Dijk, 2015), meaning

that I try to look beyond what is literally said and written, and analyze the embedded meanings of these oral and written texts. As Uitermark (2012) states, discourses used in civil society communities are never neutral but are steeped in moral judgements of who belongs and who does not belong (Uitermark, 2012, p. 24). ‘Discursive struggles’ are taking place in these civil communities, and to analyze these discursive struggles, one needs to look at the way in which people construct categories around themselves and others (Ibid.).

Following the notion of Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk, 2015) that power, and with that oppressions and marginalizations, are an inherent part of discourse, I look at how this power is embedded in discourse, for example by analyzing policy documents of the municipality of Amsterdam, in order to see how this institutional actor does not only carry out power by having control over issues like funding and permits, but also by being able to set conditions for these funding and permits, and by discursively influencing the way the queer movement in Amsterdam is understood. In this sense, power can be understood, like Critical Discourse Analysis does, as ‘control’, namely as being able to influence the way people think and act (Ibid., p. 469). Yet, as Van Dijk states, this power can also be questioned and challenged through discourse (Ibid., p. 467), and I would argue that this questioning and challenging can be seen as a form of power in itself, which can be enacted through discourse, either in written text, or in oral text. Therefore, I do not only apply the analysis of discursive struggles to the texts like policy documents, media articles, press statements, social media posts, and documentaries that I mentioned before, but also to the interviews I conducted myself, and the discourse I observed at protests, panel events, and theatre shows. My interlocutors discursively express themselves in the interviews, creating categories of understanding around themselves and others, enacting power by influencing the way queer activism is understood *and* by questioning these understandings, and therefore immersing

themselves in the discursive struggles Uitermark (2012) talks about, around questions of who and what do and who and what do not belong in the moral-political project of the queer movement.

‘Queer’ instead of ‘LGBT’

I have decided to refer to the researched movement as ‘queer’, instead of ‘LGBT’. Many of the activist movements I looked at use the term ‘queer’ instead of ‘LGBT’, yet not all. The Pride Amsterdam Foundation, which has been organizing Pride Amsterdam for over a decade, *does* use the term ‘LGBT’. This is an interesting fact in itself, and I will discuss this difference in more detail in chapter 3, where I focus on the opposition between ‘single-issue activism’, which usually uses the term ‘LGBT’, and in which liberal values like equality of rights are central, and ‘queer activism’, which focuses on a connection between multiple political struggles. So, it must be kept in mind that not all organizations and movement I studied call themselves queer. The reason I have myself decided to refer to the general object of study in this dissertation as ‘queer’ instead of ‘LGBT’, is grounded in two reasons.

First, the term ‘queer’, within its connected academic field of queer theory, has been used to question, deconstruct, and challenge binaries and identity categories (Cohen, 1997; Gamson, 1995). Lovaas, Elia, and Yep (2006) argue that in contrast to ‘LGBT’ studies, which have often treated the categories responding to the letters as relatively stable, ‘queer’ theory is exactly about the deconstruction of these categories and identities (Lovaas, Elia & Yep, 2006, p. 6). I approach the notion of identity and subjectivity as constructed, produced, and unfixed. This research is exactly about *how* and *why* subjectivities, categories, and in- and exclusions are created. This means I problematize this production, and do not take it as a given fact. This

is not to say that categories, like the ones corresponding to the letters of ‘LGBT’, are not perceived as fixed and have extremely real consequences. This is what feminist scholars like Crenshaw (1991) have argued for issues like gender and race: constructed identity categories come with concrete oppressions and privileges (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1296-1298). But then again, the question is how and why these categories can become understood as fixed, and how consequences are attached to them. To appreciate my constructivist approach to identity, I use the term ‘queer’, which emphasizes the constructed quality of identities, subjectivities, and categories (Cohen, 1997, p. 439).

Second, following Butler (1993), the term ‘queer’ should be understood as a verb – ‘queering’ –, thus as an act of performativity, making clear that it does not only involve – constructed – identities and subjectivities, but also the practices and actions that create these identities (Butler, 1993, pp. 17-18). This again fits with the focus of my research: how are certain subjectivities and differences produced, *through practice and discourse*, and what are the consequences of these productions for the building of collectivity? Thus, the term ‘queer’ emphasizes the performative nature of identity, subjectivity, and social movements.

The reason I call the general object of study in this dissertation ‘queer’ is thus grounded in the theoretical and analytical reasons I outlined above. Yet, as I discussed earlier, I also empirically refer to the concept of ‘queer activism’ to describe a certain type of activism many of my interlocutors adhere to, namely activism in which multiple political causes are connected. Multiple of my interlocutors use the word ‘queer’ themselves to describe this type of activism, often contrasted to ‘LGBT’ activism. ‘Queer’ thus takes on two roles in this dissertation: as a general, analytical, way of describing my field *and* as an empirical way of describing a specific type of activism.

Positionality

Reflexivity – in which the researcher critically looks at her own influence on and position in the research – is a crucial part of social research (Finlay, 2003, p. 5). As Haraway (1988) states, as a researcher you are always involved in the research yourself, taking a certain position (Haraway, 1988, p. 581-583). It is impossible, and probably undesirable, to eliminate this positionality. However, it is important to be aware of this position you take, as it might impact the research in certain ways.

As I stated earlier, my interest in the topics of difference and collectivity came from a personal investment in – and disappointment with – Dutch and global left-wing institutional politics, and a belief in the importance for left-wing political parties to come up with a convincing discourse around the combination of difference and collectivity. Being active in the youth organization of the Dutch GreenLeft party between 2017 and 2020, and discussing this issue with other members, I realized more and more that it might be more fruitful to look at grassroots movements and their politics, than at political parties, as political parties are embedded in a context that is by definition relatively conservative, in the sense that political leaders – especially in a political climate where the right dominates – try to avoid conflict within their own parties, and are scared to take risks. As I argued before, I chose to look at the queer movement, as the notion of difference is so embedded in this movement, while at the same time positioning itself as a community. In addition, through my own personal circle of friends, I have been committed to the issue of queer liberation myself for a long time, and, being from Amsterdam, I had quite a few contact points through which I could start the process of finding interlocutors. This means that from the people I have interviewed, I knew some already personally, either through my friendship circles, or through political circles, although I refrained from interviewing close friends.

Thus, the choice to research the Amsterdam queer movement is grounded in multiple reasons, some of them being academic reasons – the fact that the queer movement is a very interesting case for studying difference and collectivity and the fact that Amsterdam specifically is internationally regarded as a relatively queer-friendly city, making it an interesting context to research conflict and tension within the queer community – and some of them being more practical, personal reasons – the fact that I, and many people I know, have been involved in the queer movement, making queer politics an issue close to my heart, plus the fact that because of this involvement, I knew I would be able to find interlocutors. As Cox (1993), Makovsky (2013), and Romero (2020) make clear: academic fields like sociology and anthropology are built on commitments to social justice, and engaged research can make it possible to move beyond mere description of social problems and processes, to potential solutions (Cox, 1993, p. 14) or valuable insights for a broader societal context. I hope this research can provide insights into the building of collectivity within progressive movements and politics, while at the same time considering the reasons for the production of difference. Potentially, these insights can be of use in the broader project of left progressive politics.

Besides discussing my reasons for studying the Amsterdam queer movement, I think it is important to reflect on my background as an individual, not only with regards to my network and political beliefs, but also with regards to certain markers like gender, race, and sexuality, thus my social location. I am a white cis-gender woman, and even though I have great affinities with the queer community, I am in a heterosexual relationship. Although this last point is of course not immediately visible for my interlocutors, and only one interlocutor directly asked me if I identify as queer myself, the markers of race and gender are directly visible. In addition, presenting oneself as an academic researcher sets certain understandings and expectations for people. In my attempt of reaching out to organizations and movements

focusing specifically on queer people of color, I noticed hesitancy, and it thus has been a lot more difficult to interview people from these organizations. The reason for rejecting my request for an interview some of these organizations mentioned to me directly mainly had to do with the fact that I am a researcher and that I had no financial means to pay for people's time.

I also always asked my interviewees if they could introduce me to other potential interlocutors. Something interesting I noticed there was that some of them – especially white interviewees – were reluctant to introduce me to people of color in their network. Some of them told me that they think these people would say no, or they said they themselves felt uncomfortable asking them, knowing that they are often approached for research projects, and not wanting to bother them. So, whether the fact that I am a white woman really played a role in why people did not want to be interviewed, I do not know. But in general, it is necessary to reflect on the concept of whiteness, which is, as Deliofsky (2017) states, a “mark of power”, which “can affect the research relationship” (Deliofsky, 2017, p. 5). Deliofsky in her article reflects on her own research as a white woman in which she interviewed other white women, therefore looking specifically at how this research relationship is affected when researcher and research subjects belong to the same gender and race. In my research, this definitely plays a role as well, as I have interviewed white women. However, I have also interviewed white men, women of color, and white and non-white people who do not identify as either male or female.

Thus, whiteness – and perhaps cis-genderness – as a mark of power plays a different role in these different research relationships. For example, in some of my interviews with white interlocutors, some negative feelings towards the inclusion of the fight against racism in queer activism were expressed. We could wonder whether these people would have expressed

themselves in the same way if I would have been a non-white researcher. This research relationship I had with my white interlocutors is what Deliofsky calls a relationship in which the researcher and participant are both racial ‘insiders’ (Ibid., p. 6). The relationship I had with my interlocutors of color is affected differently by my race. For example, one black female interviewee, when I asked her for her thoughts on the participation of white people in queer people of color’s events and demonstrations, seemed to very careful to make clear she believes white people are welcome at these events. On the other hand, another interviewee of color expressed very critical notions of whiteness and white people to me. So, I cannot say how my race – and gender – influenced my research relationships exactly. Yet, what I am trying to convey here is that, in a critical research project on difference and power like this one, I the researcher am as much a part of the field as my interlocutors. This is not only a matter of the way my own personal values and experiences influence the way this research has been designed and analyzed, but also the way in which my interlocutors see me – especially regarding my role as a researcher and regarding ‘power marks’ like race, gender, and sexuality – and the way their understandings of me affect their discourse and practices.

The field

To understand the relations between multiple queer organizations within the Amsterdam queer movement and community, we cannot take ‘the movement’ for granted. We could even question whether we can speak of *one* movement, since there are so many sub-movements and organizations dedicated to specific groups. Yet, as I discussed at the start of the introduction, the constant discourse around the ‘LGBTQIA+ community’, also expressed by most of my interlocutors, suggests some form of (imagined) connectedness between queer individuals and groups. There are discussions around the meaning of Pride Amsterdam and its inclusiveness, often suggesting that Pride should be for the ‘*whole* community’. When I

speak of ‘the Amsterdam queer movement’, I speak of the field of organizations, social movements, political institutions, and cultural institutions that are concerned with queer people in Amsterdam and the Netherlands. I follow Evans and Lépinard (2020) in their notion that to understand the politics of difference in activism like feminist or queer activism, it is methodologically needed to approach this activism as a broad field, rather than only looking at individual organizations or movements (Evans & Lépinard, 2020, p. 293). This is why I regard the Amsterdam queer movement as a broad field in which not only particular social movements and individual activists should be studied, but also political actors like the municipality of Amsterdam, and cultural institutions like the world of theatre, and the relationships between all these entities.

Regarding the concept of ‘activism’, which I speak of for the social movements and organizations I studied, I do not commit to a specified definition, but I look exactly at different understandings and meanings of activism and the practices that are connected to these understandings, for different movements, organizations, and individual activists. For the case of ‘political institutions’ – for example the Amsterdam municipality – I do not speak of activism. I will argue that these institutions play a crucial role within the broad Amsterdam queer movement, influencing movements and organizations within this broad movements, and informing discourses around queerness. However, the institutions themselves are state institutions, whereas the movements and activists I study are part of civil society, with these two fields of course influencing each other, or with civil society sometimes even becoming a part of the state (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 975), and with some activists or activist groups trying to have their politics heard *within* political institutions. Thus, while I include state actors within my definition of the Amsterdam queer movement, I use the concept of ‘activism’ to describe movements and organizations which were founded by civil society

citizens, even if they potentially have become influenced by state actors.

Here, I would like to very briefly introduce the field of social movements and organizations I studied. As there is quite a bit of overlap between movements and organizations in terms of participants, and some movements' names are similar to each other, I think it is important to have an overview of the main ones that play a role in this thesis; an overview one can come back to. Some other organizations and movements will be mentioned in the chapters as well, but the ones below are the main ones – either in size and power position, or because they are movements *reacting to* the bigger, more powerful organizations, generally receiving quite a bit of media attention. This is meant as a very concise overview, whereas in the dissertation chapters, I will outline the history and structure of these movements and organizations in more detail.

I have provided all my interviewees with pseudonyms, to guard their privacy. In cases of observational data at official public events – for example discussion panels or stage events at demonstrations – and in my use of public media articles and media interviews, I have used people's real names, since they have decided themselves to publicly and openly speak at these events or to media platforms. As most of the organizations and movements I have looked at are very active on social media and in other media outlets, I do not think it makes sense to give different names to these organizations and movements, as they are so easily traceable.

Pride Amsterdam Foundation

The Pride Amsterdam Foundation is the organization that has been organizing Pride Amsterdam – Amsterdam's and The Netherlands' biggest LGBT event of the year – since

2014. The two most well-known events of Pride Amsterdam are its Canal Parade, during which around 80 participating boats representing companies, political institutions, NGOs and social groups sail the canals of Amsterdam, and, up until 2022, Pride Walk, the protest march marking the start of Pride Amsterdam. The organization was first called the Amsterdam Gay Pride Foundation, but in 2016, the name was changed into Pride Amsterdam Foundation, as the word ‘gay’ was seen as too narrow to reflect the diversity of the LGBT community. Pride Amsterdam itself has been organized since 1996, founded by entrepreneur collective Gay Business Amsterdam, and later organized by a foundation called ProGay. What is important to know is that Pride Amsterdam is not ‘owned’ by any specific organization, but that it is the municipality of Amsterdam that decides which organization can organize Pride Amsterdam, providing the necessary permits. As will become clear in this dissertation, this allocation of permits has not been without conflict and the way Pride is organized in Amsterdam has been changing since the last few years. Yet, at the time of writing this dissertation, the Pride Amsterdam Foundation is still responsible for organizing – a part of – Pride Amsterdam and is still one of the most powerful organizations within the Amsterdam queer movement.

The foundation is a non-profit organization and is comprised of a board and a working organization. While the board – comprised of six people – has a mainly supervisory role, the working organization – comprised of eight people – is the one responsible for the daily activities of the foundation, like fundraising, building relationships with sponsors and partners, and the organization of the actual Pride festival every summer. Only two of the members of the working organization are employed by the foundation, of which the most important person is the executive director. Since 2014, thus since the beginning of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, this role has been filled by Lucien Spee, with his role being discussed in more detail later in the dissertation. Finally, the Pride Amsterdam Foundation

includes multiple committees with their own chairpersons. Examples of committees are the Arts & Culture committee, Women & Pride committee, Youth Pride, Student Pride & Junior Pride committee, and Corporate Pride committee (Pride Amsterdam Foundation, 2024)

We Reclaim Our Pride

We Reclaim Our Pride (WROP) is a social movement that started organizing and mobilizing in 2017. In August 2017, it organized its first event in Amsterdam, during the Pride Amsterdam Canal Parade. A group of protesters gathered on a bridge in Amsterdam where the boats participating in the Canal Parade were passing, in order to protest against the way Pride looks like in Amsterdam. According to WROP, Pride in Amsterdam has been focusing too much on celebration, commercialization, and has been including actors that according to WROP do not have a place in Pride, like the police and right-wing political parties. WROP understands Pride as being born from the Stonewall rebellion in the United States, in which women, trans people and queer people of color were central actors, and WROP argues for a Pride based on activism instead of a ‘commercial party’, in which fighting oppression based on sexuality is connected to fighting oppression based on issues like class and race (We Reclaim Our Pride, 2017). The group also organized events in other Dutch cities, like Rotterdam and Utrecht. In 2021, WROP ‘blocked’ Pride Amsterdam’s Pride Walk, after which a change in Pride started to unfold, with Pride Walk leaving its collaboration with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation and becoming part of a new Pride organization called Queer Amsterdam, which was founded in 2023. Participants of WROP have been active in Queer Amsterdam since its foundation.

Queer Amsterdam

Queer Amsterdam was thus founded in 2023, following WROP's 'intervention' during Pride Walk 2021. WROP was already actively included in Pride Walk 2022, yet, Pride Walk was at that time still officially part of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. When the municipality of Amsterdam needed to grant a new permit for the organization of Pride in 2023, a group of people, including the main organizer of Pride Walk and people involved in other critical movements, decided to found a new organization called Queer Amsterdam and applied for this permit, which they received. Since 2023, two separate Prides have been organized in Amsterdam, one by the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, still including the Canal Parade, and one by Queer Amsterdam, now partly responsible for the organization of Pride Walk.

The Queer Amsterdam Foundation consists of six board members, and around 14 more volunteers. Queer Amsterdam does not have any permanent staff, although some board members are able to be reimbursed for their time through self-employment (Queer Amsterdam, 2024). Queer Amsterdam's main goal is to encourage the voice and strengthen the position of people who experience discrimination based on their sexuality and gender, and in particular people who besides this discrimination also face oppression based on dimensions like race, religion, and disability (Ibid.). Besides Pride Walk, events organized by Queer Amsterdam have included sport events, events for sex workers, dinners for the trans community, and queer cinema events. Since 2023, the organization Black Pride has been collaborating with Queer Amsterdam as well.

Black Pride

Black Pride is an organization founded in 2020 and was born from the collaboration between multiple activists and organizations that were already active before, focusing on the rights and emancipation of black queer people (ExpresZo, 2020). One of the main organizations involved in Black Pride is Black Queer & Trans Resistance, which was founded in 2018 by activist Naomie Pieter and anthropologist Wigbertson Julian Isenia. After collaborations within the Pride Amsterdam Foundation failed, Black Pride was founded, organizing a full week of protests and events in 2020, 2021, and 2022. The week included demonstrations against the marginalization and discrimination of queer people of color, but also more celebratory events like club parties. In addition, the Black Pride week usually includes a ‘healing event’, in which the healing of the trauma of queer people of color is central. Finally, Black Pride as an organization offers mental health support through their community care program (Black Pride, 2024). Since 2023, Black Pride is organized as part of Queer Amsterdam. The organization is still independent, although Black Pride founder Naomie Pieter is also a board member of Queer Amsterdam.

Becoming

Besides looking at social movements and organizations, I have also analyzed multiple theatre shows and productions. As I will argue, I understand theatre as a form of activism, namely ‘artivism’ (Borrillo, 2021), which can be used for political and social change, and provide empowerment for civil society (Ibid., pp. 154-155). Theatre is also a very interesting site to look at in my field, as it inhabits an uncomfortable position between grassroots activism and institutionalized spaces. Even theatre productions with an activist and idealist goal have to deal with institutions like the world of theatre and funding agencies. As my field in general is very much affected by this moving between grassroots activism and institutional structures, I

found it very useful to research a specific queer theatre series. This series is called *Becoming* and is a product of collaboration between theatre maker Boris and the CC Amsterdam theatre in Amsterdam. Boris is an established theatre maker, who became quite well-known because of his production *Boys Won't Be Boys*, which is about the questioning of hegemonic ideas of masculinity. After wanting to broaden this theme, Boris created *Becoming*, in which the aim is that every season consists of multiple shows dedicated to a specific sub-group of the queer community, for example the bisexual community, the trans community, and the queer people of color community. Boris creates these shows in collaboration with organizations focusing on these specific sub-groups, sometimes being on stage himself during the show as well, while other times leaving the stage completely to these organizations. In addition to the goal of 'giving the stage' to different queer groups, the overarching goal of *Becoming* is 'mixing' and 'connection' between these different groups, meaning that there is one evening at the end of the season in which the different organizations create a show together. Additionally, the hope is that audience members who come to a show of one specific group also join the other shows, therefore potentially learning about people and groups they did not know a lot about before.

Becoming receives funding from the Amsterdamse Fonds voor de Kunst (Amsterdam Fund for Art), which is financed by the municipality of Amsterdam. Even though I only researched the first season of *Becoming* for this dissertation, the production by now has multiple seasons, also taking place in different theatres in Amsterdam and outside Amsterdam.

Chapter outline

In addition to this introduction, this dissertation consists of five chapters, plus a conclusion.

In *chapter 1*, I discuss the macro context of the Netherlands, and specifically its socio-political culture. I start by focusing on the Dutch self-image as a modern society in which values like liberalism and tolerance are central. At the same time, racist structures are built into Dutch society, rooted in histories of colonialism and immigration. I use Gloria Wekker's (2020) notion of the 'Dutch paradox', explaining how because of the self-perception that many white Dutch people have of living in a morally and ethically superior country, when this perception is questioned, defensiveness and aggressiveness come to the forefront. The other main point I discuss in this chapter is the Dutch political culture of consensus building (the 'poldermodel') and how this informs a culture of depoliticization and deradicalization. The point of this chapter is to situate my field – the Amsterdam queer movement –, where we can see these things taking place on a smaller scale, in a broader context, making clear that this dissertation is not 'only' about the queer movement, but about broader social and political structures in Dutch society. I also provide a brief historical overview of queer activism in the Netherlands, specifically focusing on the COC and more radical queer collectives.

While the previous chapter focuses on the broader socio-political-historical structures in Dutch society, *chapter 2* makes the direct connection with my field: the Amsterdam queer movement. It outlines how the political and social culture of the poldermodel play a role in this field, by specifically discussing the position of Pride Amsterdam as an event and organization, arguing that Pride Amsterdam – the biggest and most famous LGBT event of the country – has been consciously founded as a depoliticized event, in which celebration and

commercialism has been central. I embed this analysis of the founding of Pride Amsterdam in the political field and urban governance of the city of Amsterdam.

There are two main points I discuss in this chapter. First, the cultural history of Amsterdam as a city of freedom and progressive politics. I argue that throughout time, capitalism and tourism have made many of these progressive cultures disappear in the form they existed, swallowing them into the neoliberal culture that currently dominates Amsterdam society. Second, I look at the municipality of Amsterdam specifically, which has always been dominated by left-wing progressive political parties. I outline how the municipality of Amsterdam is a key player in the Amsterdam queer movement, in particular related to topics of funding and permits. I discuss the ambivalent relation that many movements and organizations have with the municipality, in which they are dependent on funding from the municipality, but in which they at the same time are often critical of the municipality.

I also discuss the role the municipality plays in Pride Amsterdam. The main tension that is fleshed out here has to do with grassroots movements and organizations – and cultural fields like the theatre – having to deal with institutional factors and the loss of a certain amount of autonomy because of these institutional factors. This makes clearer how Pride Amsterdam as an organization, but also the grassroots movements which have separated themselves from Pride, do not operate in a vacuum, but in a political context, in which there is a competition for and a dependence on permits and funding. Because of this dependence, the municipality has the power to set certain conditions for receiving funding and permits, like movements and organizations having to create alliances and coalitions, making these issues moral issues, as they say something about what the municipality regards as ‘correct’ activism’. I argue that the municipality of Amsterdam should therefore be regarded as a key actor in the Amsterdam

queer movement.

Chapter 3 is the chapter focusing on the first part of the main research question: what moral and ethical contestations and conflicts around ‘difference’ exist within the Amsterdam queer movement? The tensions that live within the Amsterdam queer movement mentioned in previous chapters will be fleshed out in this chapter. I argue that different understandings of queer activism, and what queer activism *should* look like, form the foundation of many of these tensions. Based on a specific ethnographic case, namely the ‘intervention’ of We Reclaim Our Pride in Pride Walk 2021, I identify multiple binary oppositions that play a role in these different understandings: ‘single-issue activism’ versus ‘queer activism’, ‘activism in the streets’ versus ‘activism within institutions’, and ‘activism linked to capital and the state’ versus ‘independent activism’. Although these binaries are often used in discourse and understandings when organizations, movements, and individuals talk about their own activism and the activism of others, they are, as is the case with most binary oppositions, simplified. I will argue that in reality, the way activism is understood and carried out often blurs the boundaries of these binary understandings and involves combinations of supposed oppositional ideologies and practices.

In addition, I discuss the place of ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ in queer activism, and how different understandings of this place lead to conflict within the movement. Finally, I argue that the Amsterdam queer movement can be understood as a moral-political project because it involves the production of political subjectivities embedded in moral relations. People, groups, and movements create categories of activism and activists and attach moral conceptions – e.g. related to ‘authenticity’ and ‘respectability’ – to these categories, in which they understand themselves *in relation to* others (people, movements, institutions like Pride

Amsterdam) and the other way around. This production of subjectivities can again lead to conflict and friction, since it often includes hierarchical thinking in which people see certain activism and activists as ‘better’ or ‘more authentic’ than other activism and activists which can make the experience of activism very personal and emotional for people.

In *chapter 4*, I continue looking at the moral and ethical dimensions of the relations between people and groups within the Amsterdam queer movement. Whereas the previous chapter focused on tensions growing from different forms and understandings of activism, this chapter dives deeper into the issue of subjectivities production, and the moral expectations and obligations, and emotional reactions, that come with this production. I start the chapter with a discussion of the rainbow flag, and the different forms and meanings it takes for different people, embedded in emotional attachments, and argue that a symbol like the flag actually reflects deeper notions of queer politics, and the ways in which people subscribe to certain flags reveal their commitments to the different types of activism I discussed in chapter 3. These different commitments show the multiplicity of political subjectivities within the Amsterdam queer movement, the tensions around them, and the expectations people have of others to use specific types of flags, illustrating the moral dimension of this multiplicity.

In the second half of this chapter, I zoom into a specific political subjectivity, and the ways in which moral judgments of this subjectivity are expressed by many of my interlocutors through the construction of certain categories. The main category I discuss in this chapter is that of the white gay man. I use a combination of intersectional theory and theory on boundary formation (Korteweg & Triadafilopoulos, 2013) to argue that intersectionality, in which a certain combination of ‘axes of difference’ is emphasized, is employed by participants of the Amsterdam queer movement, to convey understandings of ‘right’ and

‘wrong’ political subjectivities. ‘White gay men’, and to a lesser extent ‘white lesbian women’, function as categories to express understandings of people who are viewed as privileged but who do not speak out politically, who do not support people within the queer community who are less privileged, and who are seen as subscribing to single-issue activism instead of queer activism. The expectation of these people to speak out politically and show support with people within the queer community who are less privileged is higher than for people who do not belong to these categories, and it is sometimes regarded as an ‘obligation’ for the people in these categories to get politically involved and show solidarity with marginalized groups within the queer community. Thus, the category ‘white gay men’ should be seen as signifying more than literal white gay men. The construction of this category, which is not simply a rational process, but which comes with emotions and desires, signifies a particular form of subjectivity production, in which moral understandings of the queer movement as a political project are expressed, and judgments of how people do and do not fit in these understandings.

Notions of who has power within the queer movement underly this understanding, which is related to historical dominations within big organizations and events like Pride Amsterdam, and historical marginalization of certain groups within the queer community. A particular intersection of identities – race, sexuality, gender – is then employed to express these understandings and judgments. Yet, the boundaries around this category are more fluid and nuanced than they maybe seem. People have a certain amount of ethical freedom to reflect on their social locations and privileges, and on their values and political beliefs. This means that, although the production of the category of ‘white gay men’ is grounded in structures of power and privileges, on a deeper level its use reflects particular understandings and judgments of political subjectivities, meaning that some literal white gay men are able to escape this

category.

In *chapter 5*, the final chapter, the second part of the main research question is central: how do contestations and conflicts inform the building of collaboration and collectivity within this movement? In this chapter I do two things: first, I move away from the tensions discussed in the previous chapters and focus on collaborations between different groups within the queer community, looking at Queer Amsterdam and the *Becoming* theatre show as the main ethnographic cases. I argue that conflicts taking place within the Amsterdam queer movement have created moments of ‘moral breakdown’, informing ‘ethical moments’ (Zigon, 2009) in which people and groups reflect on their moral codes, leading to change, and to new forms of activism in which difference takes center stage. Ethics then is understood in a Foucauldian way, as a process of reflection, and as a form of freedom (Foucault, 1994).

Second, I focus on the question whether in a movement in which there are so many differences – in social locations and power, but also in understandings of activism and notions of the queer movement as a moral-political project – exist, a form of collectivity is still possible. Using Haarstad’s (2007) five principles of a multi-scalar political subjectivity, I argue that Queer Amsterdam and *Becoming* can be seen as examples of moments of collective political subjectivity, built on a belief in intersectional activism, in which collectivity is built *on the basis of* difference, not ‘in spite of’. As scholars like Heywood (2018) and Labelle (2020) have stated, a commitment to difference and intersectionality can create a collective identity within the queer movement and encourage inclusivity in the movement.

Chapter 1: The development of Dutch political culture

“Remember the past, create the future”. This was the official slogan of Pride Amsterdam 2019. According to the website of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, which has been organizing Pride in Amsterdam since 2014, the theme was based on the commemoration of the Stonewall rebellion in New York City, United States, which happened 50 years earlier (Pride Amsterdam, 2024). Thus, Pride Amsterdam 2019 was referring to a certain past, yet this is not the past of queer activism in Amsterdam, or the Netherlands. Stonewall has become a global reference point of queer activism (Manalansan, 1997), yet it still took place in a specific national context, which is not the context that is central to this dissertation. So, the aim of this chapter is to outline the socio-political and historical context of the Netherlands specifically, in order to situate the research subject of this dissertation: the queer community and movement in Amsterdam. I am following Klapeer and Laskar (2018) in their notion that, for the queer movement, the local and the transnational are entangled in complex ways. So, although I am in this chapter focusing on the local context of my research, it should be kept in mind that of course, these local histories and processes are always related to global phenomena and structures, which the importance of Stonewall in non-US contexts like the Netherlands exemplifies. So, in this chapter, it is the national ‘paradigm’ (Adam, Duyvendak & Krouwel, 1999), embedded in a global context, that is central. After all, following Peterson, Wahlström and Wennerhag, “LGBT politics are shaped only in part by globalization, they are also fundamentally shaped by their national and local contexts, which set the parameters for their specific translation of identities, political goals and strategies, and cultural practices” (Peterson et al., 2018, p. 73).

While I come to discussing the Dutch queer movement specifically at the end of this chapter,

I will start with a review of the socio-political context of Dutch society more generally. I do this because I think the tensions and conflicts around difference that exist within the Amsterdam queer movement are related to these broader structures, and so to fully grasp the meaning of them, contextualization is needed. Specifically, I will focus on the norms and values that are central to Dutch culture, and on the role of race and racism in Dutch society, since this is a crucial issue in the current Amsterdam queer movement and community. This discussion of race and racism I connect to the notion of ‘innocence’ that exists among many white Dutch people. The dominant self-understanding of the Dutch citizen, of her country and of herself, is one of tolerance, openness, multiculturalism, and (sexual) freedom, which I will argue, is rooted in a political and social culture of liberalism, plus an ethos of capitalism, understood in the Weberian sense. Yet, this self-understanding makes the discussion, and tackling, of particular inequalities and power imbalances, in particular related to race, very controversial, and steeped in emotions. In the Amsterdam queer movement, we can see this taking place on a smaller scale. Thus, in this chapter I hope to situate my field and subject of study in a national context, in order to illuminate the issues, tensions, conflicts, discourses, and understandings of the queer movement, that will be discussed in the upcoming chapters of this dissertation.

1.1 The Dutch paradox

The Netherlands, in public opinion and discourse, both within the country and globally, has generally been regarded as a country at the forefront of modernization and progressive politics. As Maris (2018) describes, after the 16th century revolution, in which the Netherlands became an independent nation, the country distinguished itself from other European nations, by its commitment to freedom of religion and freedom of press (Maris, 2018, p. 1). A few centuries later, after the 1960s cultural revolutions happening all over

Europe, the Netherlands again played the role of pioneer: it was the first country to legalize euthanasia, soft drugs, and, important for this dissertation, gay marriage (Ibid., p. 2).

In her groundbreaking book *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*, Philomena Essed (1991) studied Dutch society from an intersectional standpoint, focusing on the way in which racism occurs in everyday situations in the Netherlands. She argues that in the Netherlands, the dominant understanding is that racism does not exist and that the country and its people are tolerant and accepting. In Dutch society, Essed states, an ideology of ‘ethnicism’ prevails, in which the outward claim is based on a self-understanding of living in a society which is multicultural and accepting of this multiculturalism, but which implicitly assumes a hierarchical thinking order when it comes to ethnicity, race, and culture (Essed, 1991, p. 4). This is what Gloria Wekker (2020) calls the ‘paradox’ that exists in the Netherlands: while the most dominant discourse presupposes tolerance and ‘color-blindness’ - i.e. the notion that there is no racism, because ‘we do not see color’ - the reality is that racism continues to live on in the Netherlands, rooted in decennia of colonialism and imperialism. Yet, because of this dominant self-understanding among mainly white Dutch people, the existence of racism, and the possibilities of tackling it, are extremely difficult to discuss, involving expressions of denial, and feelings of being attacked (Wekker, 2020, p. 7). At the same time, because of rising awareness and growing space for voices, for example in the media, pointing towards the existing racism in the Netherlands, there seems to be a Dutch ‘identity crisis’ playing out in current times (Van den Berge, 2018, p. 3), explaining some of the defensive and aggressive reactions to these voices, but also leading to change, as I will discuss in more detail when I will come to the example of Black Pete. This identity crisis does often lead to heated debates, tensions, and conflicts, which we can see in the Dutch queer movement as well, and which will be a central thread in this dissertation.

So, where does the image of the Netherlands as liberal heaven, or as Blakely (1993) calls it, “the modern society par excellence” (Blakely, 1993, p. xv), come from? How does its history of colonialism fit in this? And what is the history of queer activism and the place of it in broader political and social structures within the Netherlands and Amsterdam? In this chapter, I will try to answer these questions.

1.2 Individual freedom, pillarization, and the ‘poldermodel’

1.2.1 Dutch liberalism

In the 16th century, famous Dutch thinker Spinoza spoke of individual freedom, the importance of reason, and of political rights (Blom, 1993). These are values that we now connect to the political philosophy of liberalism. Liberalism, as a political and social culture, became more important in the Netherlands during the 19th century, especially with the introduction of the constitution by liberal politician Thorbecke in 1848 (Te Velde, 2008, p. 68). Important aspects of this constitution were the expansion of suffrage and establishing the right of association (Aerts, 2022, p. 151). Thus, liberal ideas, like individual freedom, have been a part of Dutch culture for a long time. Although freedom and tolerance are separate concepts, they are connected (Maris, 2018, p. 3). While freedom refers to, for example, individuals having the ability to choose themselves which religion they want to practice, tolerance refers to the expectance that others, including the state, respect this choice (Ibid., p. 4). The saying “live and let live” fits very well with Dutch culture and society.

The dominance of individualism in Dutch society has also been reinforced by its Protestant, and specifically Calvinist, religious history. As Weber (2003[1904]) argues in his famous book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Protestantism as a religion centralizes

the relationship between the individual and God and focuses on individual responsibility. Although Weber did not claim causality between Protestantism as the dominating religion and the likelihood of a country developing a country in which capitalist rationalities – like individualism and the duty of hard work – rule, and he also argued that the Netherlands did not follow full ‘modern’ capitalism like, for example, the British did (Ghosh, 2004, p. 369), Weber still believed the Dutch, especially in the late 19th and early 20th century, when ‘neo-Calvinism’ was prevailing, were followers of the ‘spirit of capitalism’ (Ibid.). Weber talked not only about capitalism as an economic system, but about the *ethos* of capitalism: the values, ideologies, mindsets, and moral and ethical understandings, connected to it. Although the religious aspect of this ethos eventually became less and less important, the rationalities remained, and I would argue that the significance of individualism and individual responsibility in these rationalities fit very well in the liberal values of individual freedom, and with that tolerance, of later Dutch society.

From the early 20th century, until the 1960s, the ‘pillar system’ dominated Dutch society: a societal division between different social groups, all having their own community, including schools, newspapers, shops, and political parties. The four main pillars included the Protestant pillar, the Catholic pillar, the socialist pillar, and the liberal bourgeois pillar (Maris, 2018, p. 301). Although interaction between members of these pillars was limited, elites of each pillar, on the political level, interacted with each other on the basis of consensus, which is a crucial element of Dutch political culture (Seidman, 1997, pp. 247-248). In this sense, the pillar model was following what Lijphart (1968) calls ‘pacification politics’, in which three elements are central: elites of each pillar tried to search for solutions to tensions between the pillars; elites of *all* pillars participated in this endeavor; and the state provided subsidies for schools of all pillars and there was equal representation of the pillars – through political

parties – in parliament, based on the total of votes won by each political party (i.e. not having any electoral threshold or having a first-past-the-post electoral system like in the UK and US) (Lijphart, 1968, p. 106). These collaborations between the elites of each pillar were institutionalized. Lijphart describes the Sociaal-Economische Raad (Social and Economic Council – SER), as the pinnacle of this institutionalization: this council, founded in 1950 and still one of the most important advisory institutions in Dutch politics today, consisted at its foundation of 15 representatives of employers, 15 representatives of employees, and 15 members chosen by the government. Usually, all these positions were divided among the four pillars (Ibid., p. 107).

The cultural revolution of the 1960s, which came with new social movements, the expansion of the welfare state, secularization, and the foundation of political parties, unions, and media which were independent from the pillars (Seidman, 1997, p. 248), broke down the pillars, and the system of collectiveness with it, rapidly, although the political culture of consensus remained to exist. Yet, this consensus culture became more professionalized, with the emergence of advisory groups and agencies, and this professionalization, plus bureaucratization, also happened for the governmental system of social services (Ibid., pp. 248-249). Individualism, secularism, and consumerism started to dominate Dutch society (Maris, 2018, p. 30).

As I stated before, I would argue that the importance of individual freedom, and with that tolerance, had been rooted in Dutch society and identity for a long time already, and that the pillar system did not change that. Yes, during pillarization, people stuck to the pillar they belonged to. In many other European countries, the 1960s were a decade in which people were able to free themselves of the pressures of the social groups they were born in,

increasing the importance of individual freedom. This was certainly also the case in the Netherlands, since the system of pillarization brought with it extreme internal pillar conservatism (Seidman, 1997, p. 249), and the time of depillarization created more opportunities for individual difference. However, the notions of freedom, tolerance and (political) liberalism, were already developed *before* the 1960s in the Netherlands, as early as the 16th century. This, I would argue, makes the self-understanding of many (white) Dutch people of their country, and of themselves, as free, tolerant, and liberal – values that inform people’s moral frameworks –, such a strong cultural, and emotional even, matter. As Wekker argues, when this self-understanding is questioned, for example by people pointing towards the prevalence of racism in Dutch society, defensiveness, and sometimes even aggressiveness, come to the forefront (Wekker, 2020, p. 7).

The same can be said for accusations of homophobia. As some of my interlocutors point out, because of the fact that the Netherlands has a relatively good track record when it comes to LGBTQIA+ rights, it is oftentimes assumed that homophobia and queerphobia do not exist, even though queerphobia *does* still exist in Dutch society, especially for more marginalized groups like trans people (Transgender Netwerk, 2023). As I will discuss in more detail in this chapter, this tension between the dominant self-understanding and the critique that is expressed by certain groups and individuals, can be connected to the concept of ‘innocence’ among white Dutch people that Wekker employs. This issue of innocence, and particularly the difficulty in discussing racism within Dutch society, and the marginalization of specific groups within the queer community, like trans people, plays a crucial role in the conflicts existing in the Dutch, and Amsterdam, queer movement.

1.2.2 The ‘poldermodel’

While individualism has been central to Dutch society and identity for a long time, this does not mean that Dutch political culture is characterized by complete self-interest and antagonism. In contrast, Dutch politics, and political decision-making, is known for centering the ‘poldermodel’. This model, based on ‘consensus building’, arose in the 16th century, when the Netherlands had to fight against rising sea levels and plans for containing the water needed to be made. Instead of the top-down rule taking place in many other European monarchies, the Dutch republic emphasized deliberation, collaboration, and compromise (Maris, 2018, vi). In the case of the fight against the sea, this deliberation and compromise was happening between different groups of farmers (Ibid., p. 44). Then, in times of the pillar system, ‘polderen’ was mainly taking place between elites of the different pillars.

In modern times, the poldermodel refers to the deliberative, collaborative political process between different political parties and civic institutions (Maris, 2018, p. vi). The political system of parliamentary representation, in which the concept of an electoral threshold does not exist, means there are many small political parties. The Dutch political landscape today is very fragmented, meaning that no party ever wins a majority during national elections, and governments have to always be formed consisting of a minimum of two parties, but in recent years often four parties. Political scientists have called this type of democracy ‘consociational democracy’, in which a fragmented political landscape is ‘solved’ by centralizing politics of consensus, accommodation, and depoliticization (Dudink, 2017, p. 6). As Dudink states, although pillarization and the development of a consociational democracy happened simultaneously, the process of depillarization did not harm the dominance of consensus building in Dutch politics: without compromise and consensus, no government could ever be formed. Yet, ‘polderen’ does not only refer to the deliberation between political parties. In

addition, civil society organizations and groups are oftentimes involved in political decision-making. As Uitermark (2012) states: “the culture of pragmatic compromise and consultation had become ingrained in the Dutch civil sphere” (Uitermark, 2012, p. 54). As we will see later in this chapter, for the queer community, the political lobby organization the ‘Cultuur- en Ontspanningscentrum’ (COC) has been a central actor on the formal political level, when it comes to deliberation and decision-making regarding the interests of the queer community.

What this emphasis on ‘polderen’ means is that agonistic politics, in which confrontation between different political players is central (Mouffe, 1999), is relatively unusual in the Netherlands. As Dudink (2017) states, in a consociational democracy like the Netherlands, there are multiple practices and procedures in place to avoid a situation in which compromise is not possible (Dudink, 2017, p. 6). The examples he mentions are the decentralization of policy-making to the level of institutions like trade unions and educational organizations, the postponement of taking decisions, the presenting of problems as ‘technical’ rather than ‘political’, and the creation of committees, given the task to discuss the problem, which has been taken away from political debate (Ibid.), with these institutions reproducing the cultural norm of consensus building. This is all done to make sure a situation in which confrontation takes center stage, and in which conflict seems irreconcilable, is avoided (Ibid.).

This creates a culture in which people who *do* confront certain dominant cultural repertoires, injustices, or discourses, are oftentimes regarded as ‘difficult’. In the documentary ‘Oproerkraaiers’ (translation: troublemakers), made by filmmaker Sunny Bergman (Bergman, 2020), the reactions of Dutch citizens are filmed who are witness to actions organized by activist groups, and activists are often portrayed by these citizens as ‘too radical’ and as ‘rioters’. One woman shouts to a Kick Out Black Pete – an organization which will be

discussed in the next section – “don’t you have to work or something?!”. In the same documentary, Elvin Rigters, member of Kick Out Black Pete, states “the presence of black bodies that are against something is already enough for people, and even some authority figures like the police, to fly into a rage” (Bergman, 2020). Bergman shows the views of Dutch people who find activists ‘annoying’, ‘polarizing’, or even ‘dangerous’.

In an article for Dutch newspaper *Volkscrant*, journalist Wietse Pottjewijd describes his experience protesting by himself against the monarchy, at an event where King Willem-Alexander was present, in 2015. Pottjewijd was arrested very quickly. Although the police later apologized, stating that the arrest was ‘a mistake’, Pottjewijd describes a conversation he had with one policeman, who said something very interesting. The policeman said that the afternoon with the King should have been ‘gezellig’, and that the journalist’s protest does not fit that idea (Pottjewijd, 2015). ‘Gezellig’, which comes from the German word ‘gezel’, meaning “someone with whom one is together” (De Wilde & Duyvendak, 2016, p. 990), is a very typical Dutch word. The word ‘gezellig’, which is an adjective, is often translated in English to ‘cosy’, but this translation does not completely express the meaning of the word. Peeters (2020) unpacks the word and argues that ‘gezellig’ can refer to multiple things, including places, atmospheres, activities, events, time periods, and people (Peeters, 2020). What is crucial, and what is missed by the translation of gezellig into ‘cosy’, is the need for *other* people to make something ‘gezellig’. A ‘gezellige’ activity is social and collective, a ‘gezellige’ person is somebody who is seen as socially skilled and who is nice to be around (Ibid.). As De Wilde and Duyvendak (2016) state it, “the aspect of company – the warmth and pleasantness of being together with others - [...] is essential to the Dutch meaning of ‘gezelligheid’” (De Wilde & Duyvendak, 2016, p. 990), with ‘gezelligheid’ referring to the noun version of ‘gezellig’.

While ‘gezellig’ is the *positive* version of the concept, ‘ongezellig’ is the *negative* version. Just as places, atmospheres, activities, events, time periods, and people can be ‘gezellig’, they can also be ‘ongezellig’, thus *not* warm, pleasant, and nice to be around. It is this concept of ‘ongezellig’ that is sometimes used as a label for activists, as the example of Pottjewijd and his anti-monarchy protests shows. The very strong symbolic meaning of ‘gezellig’, not just as a concept, but as an integral part of Dutch culture, makes confrontational politics of social movements a heated topic, and things like discussing racism especially difficult and full of tension. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the tension around activists pointing out the racist nature of the character ‘Black Pete’, who plays a role in the Dutch celebration of Sinterklaas. But I would also argue that the importance of ‘gezelligheid’ has a part in the Dutch queer movement, and the way Pride Amsterdam operates, and has operated since its foundation: as a celebration, a party, and not a protest. I would argue that there is a connection between the concept of the ‘poldermodel’ and of ‘gezellig’, which both are embedded in Dutch social and political culture in a pivotal way, and that these concepts inform a relatively deradicalized landscape of queer activism in the Netherlands, in which (appeared) consensus, and ‘warmth’ are crucial, leading to tensions when activists are seen as defying these things. Yet, as I will come to at the end of this chapter, this deradicalism is not the full story of Dutch queer activism, and more radical queer movements have existed in the past and are getting a stronger voice in the movement and community in Amsterdam, today.

In addition, we could question whether ‘consensus’ always means consensus, or if it actually means the domination of certain groups and institutions. Seidman (1997) argues that the consensus culture during the system of pillarization was ‘undemocratic’: the processes of consensus building took place between elites of each pillar, behind closed doors, and did not include any participation from other citizens, leading to a state of depoliticization among the

largest part of society (Seidman, 1997, p. 249). Lamusse (2016) states that ‘consensus’ emphasizes ‘unity’, but that this unity always comes with exclusion, of those who do not seem to fit within a certain community.

For the role of consensus in the queer movement, Duyvendak’s (1996) article on the deradicalized nature of Dutch queer activism is useful. Looking at the ways in which the Dutch government dealt with the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the poldermodel was central, Duyvendak argues that consensus does not always really mean consensus. Sometimes it means the domination of certain groups and institutions, marginalizing dissident voices (Duyvendak, 1996, p. 435). For the policies around the AIDS crisis, the Dutch government actively included people from the gay community – a “homosexual elite” (Ibid., p. 430) – in its policies, leading to an absorption of social movements into the Dutch state (Ibid., p. 431). In contrast to other countries, like the US and France, where queer movements had a mutual enemy – the state –, in the Netherlands, this inclusion of community members led to a depoliticized movement, since mobilizing would mean mobilizing against people from your own community (Ibid.). The AIDS policies of the Dutch government were presented as being based on consensus and unity with the community, yet, Duyvendak states, this notion of consensus can be questioned (Ibid., p. 435). First of all, internal conflicts in these advisory boards were not made public (Ibid., p. 431) and second of all, they were dominated by a certain group: homosexual men (Ibid., p. 435). Duyvendak argues that voices outside this group, or voices that did not agree with the general opinions, were marginalized, making dissent impossible (Ibid.).

As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapters, within the Amsterdam queer movement, historically and currently, the most dominant groups and institutions are mainly white

homosexual men, and the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. While Pride might have for a long time been presented as a celebration for the ‘whole’ community, dissident voices, represented by groups like We Reclaim Our Pride, Black Pride, and Queer Amsterdam – all organizations that will be discussed in this dissertation – have received more and more visibility and recognition, exposing how the assumed culture of consensus should not be taken for granted.

In this section, I have argued that Dutch socio-political culture should be understood as centralizing a few crucial elements: individualism, liberalism, and consensus building. The notions of tolerance and freedom are deeply embedded in the perception of many (white) Dutch people of themselves and their nation, and when these notions are questioned by confrontational activists, emotions of feeling attacked and denial dominate. Multiple of my interlocutors spoke about this self-image many Dutch people have, pointing towards inconsistencies in this image – for example focusing on the fact that queerphobia and violence towards queer people do exist in Dutch society today. Some of my interlocutors associate the ‘paradox’ that Wekker talks about with a certain form of ‘hypocrisy’, with for example referring to a dominating idea of ‘Dutch exceptionalism’, in which many Dutch people believe they live in one of the most tolerant countries in the world, ignoring discrimination and the exclusion of minority groups. In addition, I interviewed a few international students – from France, the United States, Brazil, Peru, and Malaysia – who moved to the Netherlands for their studies. Almost all of them told me that they had a certain image of Dutch society in mind before they moved, in which ideals like tolerance, freedom, and safety were central. Although for some of them, these ideals proved to be true, multiple of them also talked about their ‘disappointment’ after moving to the Netherlands, when they found out that when they would walk holding hands as a queer couple, people in the streets would look at them or comment, making them feel unsafe. This shows how a certain image of

the Netherlands exists, also globally, which is an image that might not be a complete reality.

In the Dutch and Amsterdam queer movement, a lot of the questioning of the Dutch self-image comes from activists who critique the centrality of whiteness in the movement and powerful institutions like Pride Amsterdam. As I argued, based on Wekker's (2020) understanding of the 'paradox' existing in Dutch culture, it is especially when issues of race and racism are brought up, that these feelings of denial come to the forefront, since an understanding of 'color-blindness' is prevalent in Dutch society. So, to understand the conflicts taking place in the Amsterdam queer movement better, it is crucial to know the history of Dutch colonialism and immigration, and how issues of sexuality are connected to race and religion.

1.3 Colonial history and 'color-blindness'

1.3.1 Immigration and Islamophobia in the Netherlands

Although a small country, the Netherlands has a vast history of imperialism and colonialism. In the 17th and 18th centuries – the centuries in which the country was seen as one of the most powerful empires (Blakely, 1993, p. 2) –, colonies included parts of India, parts of Brazil, parts of Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Suriname. Especially in Suriname, the Dutch nation was involved in the African slave trade (Ibid., p. 4). Suriname was part of the Dutch Kingdom, but it was only after its independence in 1975 that immigration from Suriname to the Netherlands took off (Ibid., p. 29). Today, the black community in the Netherlands is mainly comprised of people having emigrated from Suriname and their descendants. In addition, the Dutch Antilles, where in the 1980s the economic situation was harsh, and where educational opportunities were scarce (Colpani & Isenia, 2018, p. 213), form a big source of immigration.

In addition to immigration coming from former, and current, colonies, the largest groups of immigrants in the Netherlands have roots in Morocco and Turkey. In the 1960s, when the Dutch economy was flourishing, the government invited so-called ‘guest workers’ from these countries to fill job openings in the industrial field. Although many of these guest workers lost their jobs during the oil crisis of the 1970s, most of them stayed in the Netherlands, being able to reunify with their families because of ‘family reunification’ laws, leading to an increase in immigration from Morocco and Turkey (Zorlu & Hartog, 2001, p. 5).

I am discussing these two different groups of immigrants – people from the former colonies and the guest workers – because there are different matters associated with them that play a role in Dutch society. While both groups experience racism in the Netherlands, in the case of Dutch citizens with Moroccan or Turkish roots, there is an anti-Muslim discourse that dominates (Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010, p. 963). Muslim citizens are placed in opposition to ‘modern’, ‘secular’ Dutch society and are depicted as intolerant, conservative, and homophobic, with this framing having its foundation in discourse of political leaders (Uitermark, Mepschen & Duyvendak, 2013, p. 1-2). As Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens (2010) describe, sexual politics are central to this anti-Muslim discourse, especially among politicians, in which freedom of sexuality is seen as ‘modern’ and ‘civilized’, placed into contrast with ‘the uncivilized Other’, i.e. Muslims (Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010).

Thus, the anti-Muslim discourse among some Dutch politicians is not simply a discourse of conservatism. Instead, it is a populist discourse that combines ‘progressive’ perspectives, like sexual freedom and feminism, with anti-Islam and anti-migration ideologies (Uitermark et al., 2013, p. 3). Sexuality, and with it the queer community, can then be used as a source of Islamophobia, and as a way of emphasizing nationalism and national pride, through

‘homonationalism’ (Puar, 2007), in which homosexuality and queerness are included in certain discourses and certain understandings of nationalism, separating white Dutch queer people from queer people of color, marking the latter as ‘the Other’ (Ibid., pp. 196-197). A form of nostalgia exists among white Dutch people, and Wekker describes this nostalgia specifically for groups of white gay men, for whom nostalgia means a longing back to the times in which ‘we were safe’, meaning ‘before the Muslims came’ (Wekker, 2020, p. 155). The current biggest political party in the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders, has as its main focus the ‘countering’ of Islam. During the national elections of 2010, a large part of white gay men voted for the PVV (Ibid., p. 157).

This connection of (sexual) freedom to anti-Muslim sentiments has been developing for years in the Netherlands. An important figure for this was politician Pim Fortuyn, front man of the far-right party ‘Pim Fortuyn List’, who in the early 2000s became extremely popular with his anti-Islam, anti-multiculturalism, and anti-immigration ideologies (Mepschen et al., 2010, p. 967). Fortuyn was an openly gay man and paradoxically was known to have sexual relations with young Muslim men, while at the same time painting Islam as a ‘backward’ religion (Wekker, 2020, p. 184). Wekker explains this paradox as part of ‘colonial masculinity’: people of color – women and gay men especially – are sexualized and regarded as sexually available. Yet, there is a certain hierarchical thinking in this, with these people of color being seen as objects and therefore not as equals (Wekker, pp. 185-186). Fortuyn employed a populist discourse, in which he combined a dedication to issues like gender equality and sexual freedom with neoliberal and anti-Islam, anti-refugees ideologies, thus creating an opposition between ‘liberal’ values of Dutch society and the ‘dangerous’ Islam and immigrants threatening these values (Uitermark et al., 2013, p. 13). Dudink (2017) describes Fortuyn’s politics as actually criticizing the Dutch poldermodel, stating that Fortuyn saw this

political culture based on consensus building as ‘moral relativism’, in which politicians and political institutions did not ‘defend’ Dutch moral values enough, especially against Islam and Muslim immigrants. For Fortuyn, homosexuality and sexual freedom were central to Dutch culture, threatened by ‘Outsiders’ (Dudink, 2017).

Around the same time that Fortuyn dominated Dutch politics, Theo van Gogh, a well-known film director, was making critical films about Islam and especially the treatment of women in Islam. Mepschen et al. (2010) state that Van Gogh “became a symbol for the principles of political and artistic freedom” (Mepschen et al., 2010, p. 969). Both men were murdered, Fortuyn in 2002 and Van Gogh in 2004. Fortuyn was killed by white Dutch radicalized environmental activist Volkert van der Graaf, Van Gogh by Moroccan-Dutch radicalized Islamist Mohammed Bouyeri. These events were a shock to the country, and the anti-Islam sentiments in the country grew, with Pim Fortuyn’s political party becoming the second biggest party in the national elections of 2002, which took place after his death. Even though the party faced many internal struggles, and eventually dissolved in 2008, Wekker (2020) argues that the figure Pim Fortuyn laid the foundations for the popularity of Geert Wilders’ PVV, gaining votes throughout the years and winning the national elections of 2023.

1.3.2 Anti-black racism and Black Pete

While the discrimination of Dutch people of color who have roots in Morocco and Turkey is closely connected to Islamophobia, the black community in the Netherlands faces racism rooted in anti-blackness, connected to robust colonial structures in Dutch society. I understand racism as Essed (1991) explains it: as an intertwined process of macro and micro dimensions, meaning a dimension based on institutional, structural, and historical elements of discrimination based on skin-color, and a dimension based on more individual, specific,

everyday practices (Essed, 1991, pp. 24-25). Crucial is that these dimensions do not stand on their own, and that macro racist structures are created and reproduced through micro practices (Ibid.). Racism is an ideology of a dominant group, a structure created and recreated by systems and institutions, and a process, in which it is reproduced in everyday practices (Ibid., p. 27). A clear example of the existence of anti-black racism, the ‘subtle’ reproduction of it, and especially of the notions of ‘innocence’ prevailing among many white Dutch people, is the figure of ‘Zwarte Piet’ (Black Pete).

Black Pete is a central figure in the Dutch celebration of ‘Sinterklaas’, which is similar to Christmas, in which ‘Sinterklaas’ is Santa Claus, an old white man who brings gifts to children. Sinterklaas arrives to the Netherlands every year in November, according to the story by boat ‘from Spain’, and then stays until December 5th, when the main Sinterklaas celebration happens. Arriving together with Sinterklaas are his helpers: Black Petes. These are played usually by white people who have painted their faces black, their lips red, and who are wearing afro wigs and golden earrings. Although the story goes that Black Pete is black because he arrives in children’s homes to bring presents through the chimney, it has been accepted more and more that the appearance of Black Pete is based on stereotypical images of black people (De Jong, 2019, p. 279).

Up until 2011, the existence of Black Pete was relatively uncontested, at least in the mainstream media, apart from the mentioning of it in the Dutch version of Sesame Street, already in 1987 (De Jong, 2019, p. 279). During the arrival of Sinterklaas in 2011, black artist Quincy Gario wore a t-shirt saying ‘Black Pete is racism’, which started the discussion about Black Pete in the mainstream media and discourse. The discussion was heated, with Gario being called names on national television, and being attacked on social media by racist

comments (Ibid.). While on the one side, collective groups fighting for the remaining of Black Pete arose, claiming that Black Pete should not be regarded as a racist figure and that ‘it is all just an innocent celebration for children’, on the other side activist groups, with the main one being called ‘Kick Out Zwarte Piet’, started to organize (Ibid., p. 281). Since 2014, this activist group has protested at different local Sinterklaas arrivals every year (Heyblom, 2024). The change in Black Pete that the group proposed was to go from ‘Black’ Pete to ‘Chimney’ Pete, meaning that the faces of Pete would not be painted black anymore, but that there would only be some black wipes on the face, making it clear this blackness comes from the chimney. In addition, the red lips, afro wigs, and golden earrings had to be removed. At the time of writing this dissertation, in 2025, most Dutch municipalities have switched to Chimney Pete during the official arrivals, and the ‘Sinterklaasjournaal’ - the main television program for children during Sinterklaas times – also stopped with the portrayal of Black Pete (Ibid.). There are still some smaller villages in the Netherlands that are not planning on changing Black Pete and Kick Out Zwarte Piet has been protesting at these celebrations every year. Yet, during an interview with Amsterdam newspaper *Parool*, Kick Out Zwarte Piet front man Jerry Afriyie has announced that Kick Out Zwarte Piet will dissolve in 2025. According to Afriyie, the main goals of the group have been reached (Ibid.).

We could potentially say that the changing of Black Pete has happened relatively quickly, yet that partially disregards the voices who have been calling out the racist caricature for decades already. Still, since these voices became more heard in the mainstream media, the process has developed quite rapidly, with 65% of Dutch citizens believing Black Pete had to stay as he is in 2016, while in 2022, only 33% still believing this, with 55% of Dutch citizens being of the opinion that the appearance of Black Pete has to change (Driessen & Van der Schelde, 2022). So, within six years, the support for Black Pete halved. However, even though this change

has been relatively rapid, the road leading to this change has been full of tension, heated debates, and even violence towards anti-Black Pete activists. During the Kick Out Zwarte Piet demonstration in Gouda, in 2014, protestors were arrested by police using violence (De Jong, 2019, p. 282). In 2019, the building in which the group was meeting was attacked by about 40 people, who were breaking windows using stones and fireworks, and damaging the cars of the Kick Out Zwarte Piet members (NOS, 2019). In 2022, during a Kick Out Zwarte Piet protest in Staphorst, a town in the eastern part of the Netherlands, and known for being conservatively Christian, the cars of protestors were stopped by counter-protestors, who were at the same time throwing eggs at them (RTL Nieuws, 2022). During all these years, people who openly talked about their anti-Black Pete opinions were threatened online (De Jong, 2019, p. 283).

So, although the public opinion of Black Pete has changed over time, this change was surrounded by tension and violence. Wekker (2020) employs Gilroy's (2005) concept of 'postcolonial melancholia' to shine a light on these tensions and violence, arguing that in many Western-European countries, including the Netherlands, the loss of the colonial empire, and with that the connected power and prestige, has never been properly dealt with culturally. Because of this neglect, defensiveness prevails among white Dutch citizens when it comes to racism (Wekker, 2020, p. 224). Then, together with the dominant self-understanding of many white Dutch people as belonging to a nation in which tolerance, enlightenment, and liberalism are central (Van den Berge, 2018, p. 6), leading to a notion of 'innocence', in which Dutch people regard their country as morally and ethically superior (Wekker, 2020, p. 9), the moment people reject this dominant self-understanding, like the anti-Black Pete activists did by showing how the Netherlands is not free from racism, and that Dutch people are not 'color-blind', a crisis in this Dutch identity (Van den Berge, 2018, p. 3) gives rise to

violence and conflict. At the same time, we can see that this crisis in identity has also led to self-reflection and transformation among many Dutch citizens. I will come back to the topics of self-reflection and transformation in chapter 4 and 5, looking at people's 'ethical freedom' to reflect on their privileges and the values they hold, and at changes within the Amsterdam queer movement, arguing that some of these changes are partly rooted in 'ethical moments' (Zigon, 2009), which bring about reflexive processes leading to individual and institutional transformations.

1.4 Queer activism in the Netherlands

1.4.1 Homonationalism

I am discussing the position of racism and Islamophobia in the Netherlands, because they are closely related to the dominant way in which the place of homosexuality, or queerness more broadly, in Dutch society is understood, and the prominent role that whiteness plays in this understanding. As Wekker (2020) describes, in 2007, the Dutch Ministry for Education, Culture and Science, part of a government consisting of the Christian Democrats and the Labor Party, launched a policy document called 'Gewoon homo zijn', which can be translated to 'Just being gay' (Wekker, 2020, p. 171). Wekker is critical of this policy document, which as its goal had the encouragement of discussion about homosexuality between different social groups in Dutch society. She states that with the phrase 'just being gay', a very specific *type* of 'gay' or 'queer' person is imagined; a dominant type that is rooted in particular socio-historical structures, which this policy documents ignores (Ibid., p. 173). In this policy document, according to Wekker, the people that are meant by 'gay' are mainly white homosexual men. Lesbian women are mentioned very little, and there is a big focus on facilitating the conversation between gay people and Muslims, ignoring the fact that

homosexual Muslims exist as well (Ibid., p. 178). All in all, Wekker argues, the policy document is an example of how homosexuality is regarded in Dutch society in general: differences within the queer community – which exists of people from many different cultures –, and the unequal power relations between those different groups, are ignored, making the dominant position of white gay men undiscussed and taken for granted (Ibid., p. 179). An extreme focus on equal rights by the Dutch government, instead of on diversity, enhances this dominant position of white gay men (Ibid.).

As Ferguson (2019) argues for the United States, by this focus on equality, what actually happens is that queerness is pushed into models of heteronormative conformity, related to nationalism and capitalism (Ferguson, 2019, pp. 24-25). The people who belong most easily in these heteronormative frameworks are white gay men, and the people who belong the least – trans people, queer people of color, poor queer people – are excluded (Ibid.). What happens then is that these dominant social categories of queer people are reproduced in order to reinforce certain conceptions about the nation state, which is what Puar (2007) calls ‘homonationalism’. In these conceptions, whiteness, secularism, and liberalism are central (Puar, 2007). I think an important point to mention here is that, as Hage (2000) argues, the centrality of whiteness in conceptions about the nation state should not be understood as only coming from overtly racist people and groups, i.e. white supremacists. Structures of racism are most of the time a lot more subtle, existing in everyday practices (Essed, 1991) and also produced and reproduced by white people who see themselves as liberal, tolerant, perhaps supporters of multiculturalism (Hage, 2000, p. 18). As Hage states for Australian society, which prides itself as ‘liberal’ and ‘tolerant’, this tolerance is rooted in assimilationism, meaning that difference is only accepted if it is assimilated enough according to dominant standards. The difficulty about revealing, and then tackling, the racist structures in these types

of societies, is that the focus on equality and egalitarianism hides these power structures and relations very well (Hage, 2000, pp. 80-87).

Although Hage discusses the Australian context, and Ferguson and Puar talk about the US context, I would argue very similar tendencies can be found in Dutch society, with Puar even mentioning the Netherlands specifically as the US's 'sexual exceptionalism counterpart' (Puar, 2007, p. 120). As I stated before, the Netherlands is a country whose identity is dominated by capitalism, liberalism, and individualism. Tolerance, deliberation, and consensus are seen as key aspects of Dutch society, and freedom of sexuality is often defended by right-wing political parties and leaders as well, which is very different from other national contexts, where the right is openly homophobic (see for example Renkin (2009) on the Hungarian context).

Yet, these discourses of tolerance, and more specifically of sexual freedom, are often used as "discourses of power" (Uitermark et al., 2013, p. 16), in which a certain image of the nation state, and Dutch 'culture' is created, including some people, but excluding others, mainly people of color, migrants, and Muslim citizens (Ibid.). This discourse is what Uitermark (2012) calls 'culturalism': a discourse in which the notion that the Dutch liberal culture should be defended against the 'illiberal' culture, religions, and ideologies of others, is central (Uitermark, 2012, p. 16). Schinkel (2007) talked earlier of 'culturism', which has a similar meaning as 'culturalism', and argued that this type of discourse became dominant in the Netherlands in the 1990s (Schinkel, 2007, p. 86). That this discourse is not only coming from the right, becomes clear through examples that Uitermark, Mepschen and Duyvendak (2013) outline for the case of the Dutch Labor Party. Well-known Labor member Paul Scheffer published an article in 2000 stating that the Netherlands was facing a 'multicultural drama'

(Uitermark et al., 2013, pp. 15-16). In 2013, Labor Party prominent Lodewijk Asscher, who was minister of Social Affairs at the time, announced his new integration policy, in which migrants have to sign a symbolic ‘participation contract’, promising to adhere to the Dutch constitution, with the hope that migrants will be ‘more conscious’ of ‘Dutch norms and values’ (Joop.nl, 2013). In this contract, the equal rights between men and women, and between heterosexuals and homosexuals in Dutch society take a prominent position (Ibid.).

As Hage (2000) argues, a focus on tolerance leads to a focus on assimilationism. The Dutch saying ‘doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg’, which can be translated to ‘just act normal, then you are acting crazily enough’, I think exemplifies this focus on assimilationism: everyone is ‘tolerated’, but does that mean difference really is accepted? And if difference *is* accepted, what kind of difference is accepted and in what forms? Many of my interlocutors talked about the dominance of white gay men in Pride Amsterdam and stated that they are seen as the norm within the Dutch queer community. Whiteness, cis-gender maleness, and perhaps nowadays also male homosexuality, are easy-to-understand categories for the white, cis-gender, heterosexual majority in Dutch society, and are less threatening than people who question those categories. They are categories that could be employed by politicians to promote certain nationalistic ideals (Puar, 2007), and to exclude people who supposedly ‘go against’ these ideals (Uitermark et al., 2013). They are the categories of people who are ‘just gay’.

1.4.2 Homosexuality in the Netherlands and the role of the Cultuur- en Ontspanningscentrum (COC)

As the position of Pride Amsterdam in the Amsterdam, and Dutch, queer movement is crucial, I will extensively come back to the history of the event, its different meanings for

different groups of people, and its embeddedness in the more general socio-political structures of Dutch society which I just discussed here, but also in the political and cultural context of the city of Amsterdam, in chapter 2 and 3. What I will do in the remaining part of this chapter is outline the more general history of homosexuality, and connected activism, and their socio-political status in the Netherlands. Although Pride Amsterdam, which could be argued is one of the most important LGBT events in the Netherlands, might be dominated by white gay men, this is of course not the whole story of the history of queer activism in the Netherlands and Amsterdam.

Soon, I will discuss some historical examples of movements and groups that moved away from the assimilationism approach and that used more radical activist tactics and focused specifically on queer people of color. Since race is such an important aspect of tensions within the Amsterdam queer movement, and current changes within Pride are led by queer people of color, I think it is important to consider this history of mobilization, to contextualize these current tensions and mobilizations, and to understand their foundations. But before I dive into the development of these movements, I discuss the more general history of homosexuality and its socio-political status in the Netherlands. I start my discussion in the 20th century, since the events of those times still influence the queer community and movement today. Before the 20th century, up until 1809, the death penalty existed for ‘sodomy’, but after its abolition, there actually were almost no laws prohibiting homosexual activity in the Netherlands. This changed in 1911 however, when a new law, law 248bis, made homosexual activity between an adult and a minor – which for homosexuals was until 21 years old in contrast to 16 years old for heterosexuals – illegal (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024). As Hekma (2004) describes, the criminalization of homosexual activity led to discrimination and pathologization of people having same-sex sexual relations. Law

248bis was only abolished in 1971 (Hekma, 2004, p. 70).

Already in 1946, the Cultuur- en Ontspannings Centrum (COC), which can be translated as the ‘Centre of Culture and Leisure’, was established. The organization first existed under the name ‘Shakespeare Club’, in order to remain unnoticed, but was renamed COC in 1949, still a name not very clearly referring to the queer community (COC, 2024). From the beginning, the COC has focused on both the organization of social activities for queer people, and on more political fights, like the abolishment of law 248bis, the ending of automatic rejection of homosexuals for the army, for anti-discriminations laws, and for the legalization of same-sex marriage (Ibid.). In 1969, the COC assisted in organizing the very first gay demonstration in the Netherlands, in The Hague at the parliament (Davidson, 2021, p. 39). Interestingly enough, the COC only financially assisted this demonstration and did not openly support the group, since this might have worked against the lobbying work the COC was doing (Ibid., p. 40). According to some of my interlocutors, this financial support by the COC without attaching its name to certain protests sometimes still happens today. Up until the 1970s, Hekma (2004) argues, disagreement existed within the COC whether the organization should focus more on social and cultural activities, or on political matters. From the 1970s onwards, the COC has become a clear political lobby organization, one of the most important organizations in the country when it comes to lobbying for queer rights on different political levels (Hekma, 2004, p. 116).

Among my interlocutors, we can see different views and opinions of the COC, with some of the more radical activists having negative views of the organization, arguing that the COC often ‘plays it safe’. A tension between a focus on equal rights, meaning equal to heterosexual citizens – according to Hekma, the COC is using a focus on assimilationism in

heteronormative society (Hekma, 2004, 117-118) –, and *wanting* to be different from heterosexuals, or what Peterson, Wahlström & Wennerhag (2018) have called a conflict between ‘equality activists’ and ‘more radical left-wing activists fighting against heteronormativity’ (Peterson et al., 2018, p. 10), seems to be at play here.

During the 1970s, the Netherlands was governed by a Labor government. In 1974, a new article was introduced to the Dutch constitution, article 1, which stated that discrimination based on multiple reasons was not permitted. Yet, it was unclear if sexuality was seen as one of those reasons (Davidson, 2021, p. 43). From the late 1970s onwards, a government led by the Christian Democrats, was ruling the Dutch nation state. Anti-discrimination laws were expanded but adding sexuality to these laws was still a topic of debate (Ibid., p. 45). In 1986 the first governmental national policy on homosexuality was introduced, created in collaboration with the COC (Ibid., p. 71). The policy also included the promise of subsidies for the COC (Ibid.). Thus, the relationship between the COC and the Dutch government has been very strong for decades, and the COC is nowadays still regarded as one of the most important lobbying organizations when it comes to queer rights. This powerful role has not been uncontested.

1.4.3 Radical activism and queer of color collectives

As will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, the history of Pride Amsterdam is one of commercialism and tourism, not one of radical activism, and the organization has in general been dominated by white people. In general, the Dutch gay movement and community is relatively depoliticized and not focused on radical mobilization (Duyvendak, 1996). These are important things to know, in order to understand some of the tensions in the queer community today. However, the history of Dutch queer activism is not *only* one of non-

radicalism and whiteness. More radical queer activist groups existed, ones that partly worked together and partly clashed with the COC. Portwood-Stacer (2013) defines radicalism as a political philosophy like this: "its vision for an ideal society involves a drastic restructuring of the fundamental institutions of power" (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 2). Based on this definition, I understand radical activism as activism which actively questions the dominant structures and systems of society, which could be connected to the state, but also to things like dominant normative understandings of how one should live, and the societal structures and institutions built around these understandings. In the case of radical queer activism, there is usually an active questioning of heteronormativity. Often, as we will see in the discussion of the historical example of the Rooie Flikkers, radical activist collectives come up with alternatives for these dominant structures and systems. In addition, queer collectives focusing specifically on queer people of color existed in history, challenging the centrality of whiteness in many other queer organizations and institutions.

In this last section, I will discuss this 'different' history of the Dutch and Amsterdam queer movement, by discussing two collectives: the 'Rooie Flikkers', which was founded in 1975, starting as a student movement in Nijmegen, a city in eastern the Netherlands, before expanding to Amsterdam (Sleutjes, 2017); and Strange Fruit, a queer of color collective founded in 1989 (Colpani & Isenia, 2018). I think it is important to show that the history of the COC and Pride Amsterdam does not portray the full picture of the history of queer activism in the Netherlands. These two institutions are perhaps the most powerful queer institutions in Dutch society, but those power differences between organizations and groups are exactly what leads to certain tensions in the queer movement today. As I will show in this dissertation, the calls for radicalization of queer activism, for moving away from assimilationism, for more recognition of marginalized groups, specifically queer people of

color and trans people, and for a change of Pride Amsterdam in particular, are getting louder and recognized more and more, also by institutions like the municipality of Amsterdam.

These voices have their roots in multiple histories – including the US history of Stonewall – but also certainly in the local histories of the two collectives I will discuss in this section.

Rooie Flikkers

The ‘Rooie Flikkers’ – literal translation being ‘Red Faggots’ – were a small activist group founded in the city of Nijmegen in 1975. Nijmegen, located in the east of the Netherlands, was known for being a city with many left-wing students, and although the COC had a chapter in Nijmegen since 1971, it was in student and youth groups that the members of the Rooie Flikkers, who were mainly white homosexual men, met each other (Sleutjes, 2017, p. 8). While in Amsterdam at that time, many leftist student movements were under the influence of political parties, especially the Communist Party, in Nijmegen, these groups were able to develop more independently (Ibid., p. 9). In the documentary series called *De Roze Revolutie* (‘The Pink Revolution’) made by Michiel van Erp (2021), Rooie Flikkers founder Marty van Kerkhof explained the reason of founding the Rooie Flikkers:

The COC wanted to have nothing to do with homosexual identity. They thought homosexuals were the same as heterosexuals, we are all the same, just a small difference that one man likes men and another likes women. The goal of the COC at the time was assimilation, and then everything will be okay. We did not believe in that, we believed we need to create our own lives. (Marty van Kerkhof in *De Roze Revolutie* Episode 1, Van Erp, 2021, translated from Dutch)

In January 1975, the Rooie Flikkers organized their first big protest. Inspired by activism in Berlin, Rooie Flikkers members Thijs Maasen and Marty van Kerkhof interrupted an

educational evening organized by the COC, which also included the presence of psychiatrist Gerard van den Aardweg, who argued homosexuality was an illness of which people needed to be healed (Ibid., p. 10). Yet, the Rooie Flikkers' protest was met with hostility, also from COC members. Especially the fact that the male Rooie Flikkers members were wearing dresses and nail polish was not accepted by the audience (Ibid.). The Rooie Flikkers were in that sense radical, because they, from their founding, went against the more assimilationist approach that the majority of the gay community at that time, plus the COC, promoted. Instead, the Rooie Flikkers argued that they wanted to go against heteronormativity, and that they actually wanted to be *different* from heterosexuals (Ibid., p. 3). As Sleutjes (2017) describes in the text accompanying a 2017 exhibition organized by the IHLIA, a Dutch LGBTQIA+ heritage organization, this radical rejection of heteronormativity did not make the Rooie Flikkers popular in the broader queer, or gay, community, where assimilationism was the approach most prominent.

Later in 1975, during a meeting of the COC in Amsterdam, a group of students in Amsterdam were inspired by the Rooie Flikkers in Nijmegen and founded the 'Flikkerfront', while later adopting the name Rooie Flikkers as well (Sleutjes, 2017, p. 16). The Amsterdam Rooie Flikkers organized festivals, theatre groups, and choirs (Ibid., p. 24), while in Nijmegen, punkband 'Tedje en de Flikkers' was founded (Ibid., p. 20). While the group started as a radical protest movement, the Rooie Flikkers ended their existence in 1980 as a group focusing more on music, film, theatre, and art (Ibid., p. 28). The Rooie Flikkers were a fringe group, and not representative for the broader queer community at that time. Yet, their existence shows that a more radical history of queer activism does exist in the Netherlands, and that there were groups which questioned the more assimilationist approach institutions like the COC took.

Strange Fruit

‘Strange Fruit’ was a queer of color collective that was founded in 1989, first by mainly Moroccan and Turkish queer youth, but quickly joined by youth with Surinamese and Antillean backgrounds (Isenia, 2023). At first, the collective organized itself as a sub-group of the COC, focusing on cultural activities, education about HIV/AIDS, and activism. Yet, the collaboration with the COC was not without tensions: members of Strange Fruit felt that the COC, an organization dominated by white queer people, was not doing enough, especially around sexual education, to connect with the experiences and environments of queer people of color. In addition, the collective believed the COC was too quiet about racism in the Netherlands (Ibid.). As Colpani and Isenia (2018) describe: Strange Fruit as a collective aimed to *both* criticize heteronormativity and patriarchal structures in people of color communities *and* challenge the domination of whiteness in the general Dutch queer movement and scene (Colpani & Isenia, 2018, p. 216). In 1996, Strange Fruit decided to split from the COC, and to organize and mobilize independently. After losing municipal subsidies in 2003, the collective dismantled (Isenia, 2003).

Strange Fruit actively sought to claim space for queer people of color in a movement and community where whiteness dominated. Together with other queer of color collectives, like Sister Outsider, a black lesbian feminist group which existed from 1984 until 1986, the network provided an opportunity for queer people of color to connect and to find a space to meet and feel at home, which was a feeling that was not always evident within the broader – white – queer community (Isenia, 2013). In addition, these groups showed the importance of stepping away from ‘single oppressions frameworks’ in order to fully understand the experience of queer people of color. The academic and theoretical framework corresponding to this – queer of color critique – states that it is necessary to also look at issues like race and

class to combat oppression and marginalization within, and outside, queer communities (Cohen, 1997). This framework is grounded in the work of mainly black feminist scholars, like Audre Lorde and Kimberlé Crenshaw, with the latter coining the term ‘intersectionality’, which is a central concept in current queer of color collectives and movements like Black Pride and We Reclaim Our Pride; movements which will be discussed throughout this dissertation. The calls for more space and recognition for queer people of color, and trans people, by these movements, which have received more and more visibility in Amsterdam throughout the last few years, are thus not completely new, and the tensions with the more mainstream movement are not either. They should be placed in the history of collectives like Strange Fruit and Sister Outsider, with some members of these collectives also being involved in current movements.

Both the Rooie Flikkers and Strange Fruit were ‘radical’ in the sense that they moved away from the mainstream and questioned and challenged fundamental structures, systems, and institutions of power. While for these two movements, the mainstream was mainly represented by the COC, in my field, it is the Pride Amsterdam Foundation that takes on this role. In the next chapter I will discuss the hegemonic position of Pride Amsterdam, embedding it in the socio-political context of broader Dutch society and of the city of Amsterdam. I hope to have made clear with this last section that tensions in the Amsterdam queer movement today are not completely new, and that conflict around the meaning of the movement and its ‘level’ of radicalism, and around the position of whiteness within the broader queer movement, has been around for a while.

1.5 Conclusion

In this first chapter, I have outlined the socio-cultural-political context of Dutch society, in which my field – the Amsterdam queer movement – is embedded. I have argued that some aspects of Dutch culture, in particular individualism, liberalism, freedom, tolerance, and consensus building, are crucial to take into account when looking at the way in which difference is dealt with in the Amsterdam queer movement, and the way in which conflict in this movement comes about. The political culture of consensus building has created a deradicalized landscape for the Dutch queer movement, and a focus on tolerance has informed a tradition of assimilationism. However, this consensus building should not be taken at face value but should be understood as connected to relations of power, in which certain groups are included in the process of ‘polderen’, while others are excluded. Historically there have been tensions around these relations of power, with the COC representing the most powerful institution, clashing with alternative movements like the Rooie Flikkers and Strange Fruit.

In addition to an analysis of the general Dutch socio-cultural-political culture, I have discussed the connection between Dutch colonial and immigration history and the perception of Dutch identity. The Netherlands has a vast history of colonialism and immigration and built in these histories are structures of racism and anti-Muslim sentiments, in which sexuality takes an important role. Yet, because the general conception of many white Dutch people of themselves and their nation is one of tolerance and ‘color-blindness’, the discussing and tackling of these structures of racism is very sensitive and steeped in emotions.

Individuals and movements pointing towards these structures are often seen as ‘difficult’. These conflicts around race and whiteness can be seen on the smaller scale of the Amsterdam queer movement, which I will come back to in upcoming chapters of this dissertation. In the

next chapter, I will move away from the broader national context, zooming in on the more local context, looking at how my field is embedded in the politics of the city of Amsterdam, and at how the hegemonic position of Pride Amsterdam is connected to these city politics.

Chapter 2: The urban governance of Amsterdam



Figure 1: Canal Parade 2022: participating boat by Heineken, one of The Netherlands' most famous beer companies (photo taken by author, 6 August 2022)

One of the most famous aspects of the city of Amsterdam, and one of the most important reasons why millions of tourists visit the city every year, is its water, and more specifically its canals. The quirky and cute bridges, the majestic tall houses, the small alleys connecting the streets along the water: all of it adds to the charm of Amsterdam. Once every year, the canals form the stage of the most well-known event of Pride Amsterdam: the Canal Parade. For one day, the city center is completely reserved for this event, with loud music – ABBA, Whitney Houston, Lady Gaga – blasting everywhere, with thousands of visitors from all over the world dressed up in colorful clothing full of glitter, and with high numbers of police officers

present aiming to ensure the safety of these visitors, for example by looking out for pickpockets. In contrast to Pride in many other cities in the world, Pride Amsterdam thus sets itself apart by having as its main event not a pedestrian Pride parade or march, but a parade on water, in which around 80 boats participate. The participating boats are a mixture between companies and businesses, governmental organizations, NGOs, media outlets, and smaller activist groups. These groups have to apply in order to participate and every year there are more applications than spots available, meaning that not all applicants are accepted. The participating groups are not necessarily all groups with means, as some of the ‘bigger’ boats (i.e. big companies) have to pay more and therefore partly fund the participation of ‘smaller’ boats (i.e. smaller activist groups). On the day itself, visitors of the event who are not on a boat can watch the parade from the quays next to the canals. During the Canal Parade of 2022, it was difficult for me to find a spot on the quays from which I could see the boats clearly. Eventually I found a place which was probably less popular because it was hidden behind a ‘houseboat’ – a house on water. Yet, I still managed to see what was happening on the canals. I saw the passing of boats of big companies, like Heineken (see the picture above) and Booking.com, but I also waved to my friends Sara and Esther, who stood on the ‘doctors’ boat representing the main hospitals in Amsterdam, and who seemed to be having the time of their lives.

The Canal Parade fits very well in the dominating image of Amsterdam, centering on the canals, and progressive values like (sexual) freedom. Yet, the Canal Parade, and Pride Amsterdam more generally, also faces many criticisms by people from the queer community. The most heard critiques are those blaming the event for being ‘capitalistic’, focusing on consumerism and the participation of multinationals and other companies, instead of on smaller activist queer groups and on the making of space for marginalized groups within the

community. Another critique that multiple of my interlocutors expressed is the scale of the event, and the fact that celebration, rather than protest, is at its core. Some of my interlocutors compared the Canal Parade to Kingsday, an annual celebration in the Netherlands in which the Dutch King's birthday is celebrated, and in which partying and alcohol is central. Finally, some of my interlocutors complained about the involvement of heterosexuals in the Canal Parade. Many of them believe the Canal Parade has turned into a party for heterosexuals, who can "go watch monkeys" – a Dutch expression meaning the observation of people, for example queer people, as if in the zoo. For instance, to my question how they see Pride in Amsterdam, my interlocutor Ellie, who is 25 years old, white, gender fluid, and queer, answers:

To put it very bluntly, I see it as "monkey watching" for people from Drenthe¹. Of course, that's Amsterdam arrogance, to say that. But it's just... People arrive very early to put down their folding chair [to watch the boats]. And it's just expensive. I think if I want to stand on one of those boats, that should be possible. But that's just not possible. (Ellie)

And my interlocutor Anouk, who is 24 years old, white, non-binary, and lesbian, emphasizes the rising number of heterosexuals participating in the Canal Parade, and the prominent role of alcohol in the event, saying:

I think the high number of heterosexuals at events like Pride is not good. I do think it really depends on people's intention to be there. Like, there are family members there... If you're really there to show support, that's very different than if you're just there to watch gay people. [...] I think because the number of heterosexuals is rising, the goal automatically is not showing support anymore. Then it's 'oh, let's go drink alcohol'. (Anouk)

¹ A rural province in the eastern part of the Netherlands.

The fact that the Canal Parade takes place on the canals, although fitting well in Amsterdam's tourism market, brings with it a certain exclusionary character. As I stated above, every year there are more applications for boats than places available, meaning that not everyone can participate. The participation that is still possible, watching from the quays, is rather passive, like my waving to my friends Sara and Esther on the 'doctors' boat. For my interlocutor Nikki, this point made her decide that something needed to be added to the Canal Parade, something which would be more accessible for more people. Nikki is a white gay woman in her late 40s, and the founder of Pride Walk: the protest march taking place in the yearly Pride Week, organized for the first time in 2012. I am interviewing Nikki for the first time on the 24th of March 2022, via Zoom, since she just tested positive for covid. Besides being the founder of Pride Walk, Nikki is the chairperson of the 'Homomonument' foundation since 2012: a foundation related to the national monument, which exists since 1987, in the shape of large pink triangle, commemorating queer people who have been persecuted, which is located next to the 'Westerkerk' (Western church) in the city center of Amsterdam. The monument plays an important role every year on 4 May, which is national World War II commemoration day in the Netherlands. Gay and queer people who were victims of the Nazis during WWII are commemorated at the homomonument on this day. Besides the goal of commemoration, the foundation has as its aim the prevention of LGBTQIA+ oppression nationally and globally (Homomonument, 2024).

Nikki tells me that she felt like the annual Canal Parade was too passive:

So, you need a boat. Or you need friends who have a boat. And nowadays, it is not allowed to sail behind all the official boats, because of security issues. Which means you will stand between 50.000 other people, also heterosexuals, just waving at the boats. It has become like Kingsday but then using pink instead of orange. Yes, my activist heart said no, that is not okay, that you can only participate if you have

money. (Nikki)

Thus, the exclusive nature of the Canal Parade, for example because of the fact that it costs money to participate with a boat, repeating Ellie's earlier criticism, was for Nikki not what Pride should be about, and after contacting the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, the first Pride Walk was organized in 2012, walking from the Mercatorplein square in Western Amsterdam to the Homomonument. Quickly the route changed, because of the big numbers of participants, and eventually Pride Walk became the annual event marking the start of Pride Week, while the Canal Parade became the closing event of the week.

Pride Amsterdam, and the queer community more broadly, is thus closely connected to the city of Amsterdam: the city is its stage, its context, in which groups, movements, and individuals clash, but also create alliances, embedded in certain networks of power. The urban space of the city, like the centrality of the canals, creates certain exclusions, as I described above, with the participation on boats not being accessible for everybody. A march like Pride Walk, in which the streets are central, accessible to all, on the other hand, creates practices of inclusion. However, as we will see in the next chapter, even though a march like Pride Walk might be more inclusive and accessible than the Canal Parade, this does not mean that conflict in these streets does not exist. Politics and space then come together, as Milani's (2015) concept of 'sexual citizenship' emphasizes, which I will come back to in chapter 3. In this chapter, I focus on the networks of institutional power that exist in the city of Amsterdam, analyzed from an urban governance perspective. This perspective goes further than looking at formal political structures and includes analyzing the way in which other institutions and private actors (market actors, civil society actors, NGOs, social movements) together shape the city and its policies (Pierre, 2011, p. 20). Urban governance theory also

looks at how values, norms, and aims shape the way in which cities are governed (Ibid., p. 12). Thus, I understand urban governance as a moral issue and argue that the powerful role of formal institutions like the municipality of Amsterdam should be seen as embedded in relations with non-state actors, like the Pride Amsterdam Foundation and other queer organizations and movements, and that formal political structures are always affected by norms and values.

As Pride Amsterdam is such a central actor in the Amsterdam queer movement, and the biggest LGBT event of the country, in terms of numbers of visitors, money spent on it, and media attention, I will analyze its hegemonic position, discussing its history, and its relation to Amsterdam's city politics. Then, in the next chapter, I will dive more into the *meaning* of Pride for different people. In all my interviews, my interlocutors talked about Pride Amsterdam, and most of them had strong opinions on the event, either positive or negative. Many grassroots queer movements that mobilize independently from Pride Amsterdam do this, or have done this, at least partly, as a *reaction to* Pride Amsterdam, often a reaction to, according to these movements, exclusionary practices happening at Pride Amsterdam. The Pride Amsterdam Foundation, which has been organizing Pride since 2014, is seen as one of the most powerful institutions in the Amsterdam, and Dutch, queer movement, leading to clashes with groups that question this power, similar to the clashes with the COC that I discussed in the previous chapter. As I will argue in the next chapter – chapter 3 –, because of people's different understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project, there are clashes and conflicts around the meaning of Pride and therefore around the position of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation.

In this chapter however, I focus specifically on the relation between the Amsterdam queer

movement – including the Pride Amsterdam Foundation – and Amsterdam’s city politics. I look at the power of the city government of Amsterdam, arguing that this local government should be regarded as one of the most powerful actors *in* the queer movement, in the way I understand the movement: as the broad field of movements, organizations, institutions, and groups concerned with queer people in Amsterdam. I will not only discuss the powerful position of the municipality but also embed this in a more general discussion of the cultural history of Amsterdam as a city of freedom and progressive politics, arguing that throughout time, capitalism and tourism have made many alternative sub-cultures disappear in the form they existed, swallowing them into the neoliberal culture that dominates the city of Amsterdam today. So, while in the previous chapter I focused on the broader national context, the aim of this chapter is to zoom in on my field – Amsterdam and its queer movement – and see how the broader socio-political structures discussed in the previous chapter play out in this field.

First, I will dive into the history of Pride Amsterdam. Then, in the second part of this chapter, I will concentrate on the role of the municipality of Amsterdam, looking specifically at its power to allocate permits and funding, arguing that this power should not be seen only as a matter of rights and money, but as power to morally define what the queer movement in Amsterdam looks like, and how activist groups relate to each other. The dependency of many queer organizations and movements on the money the municipality provides creates a situation in which some queer organizations and movements, especially the smaller ones mobilizing separately from Pride Amsterdam, need to work together with the city government in order to survive.

2.1 How it started: Pride Amsterdam as a depoliticized celebration

On a very cold November day in 2021, I made my way to Café Amstelhoek, a restaurant in the center of Amsterdam, right next to the Waterlooplein square. I am meeting William, one of the founders of Pride Amsterdam. We were introduced through a mutual connection, and I had only been in touch with him through email, so I did not know exactly what he looked like, apart from the pictures I had seen on the internet. Luckily, after standing outside for a few minutes scanning the faces of all the people walking by, a friendly man walked up to me and introduced himself as William. We made our way inside the warm restaurant. Here, we had a conversation of 1,5 hours, which for a large part consisted of William telling me the history of Pride Amsterdam.

As I stated in the previous chapter, while the COC was the most well-known political lobby group for the Dutch LGBTQIA+ community, the organization was prone to criticism from activist groups, who believed the COC was not radical enough. I discussed the *Rooie Flikkers* as an example. The COC did involve itself in political action however. In 1972, the bishop Joannes Gijsen was declared bishop of Roermond, a city in the south of the Netherlands, by the Vatican and Roman-Catholic church. Gijsen was a very conservative man, who expressed anti-gay sentiments. In 1979, he stated in an interview with magazine *Elsevier* that he would not allow ‘practicing’ homosexuals in his church (IHLIA, 2023). These words were reason for the COC to stage a protest, which took place on 14 April 1979 in Roermond, attracting thousands of people (Ibid.). Later that year, in June, the first ‘Roze Zaterdag’ (‘Pink Saturday’) was organized, the annual LGBTQIA+ protest march in the Netherlands, first taking place in Amsterdam, but from 1981 organized in a different Dutch city every year (Ibid.). The Netherlands, although having a relatively depoliticized gay movement, thus does know a history of protest when it comes to the queer community. Although in this dissertation

I am not focusing on these historical movements and events per se, I am mentioning them because they are important in my field as a counterpart to Pride Amsterdam, specifically in the founding of Pride.

The 1970s and 1980s were important decades for the proliferation of gay culture in the Netherlands, and in Amsterdam especially. Although in the 1980s, the gay community was of course hugely affected by the AIDS crisis, these were also the times when the legal rights of homosexual people were extended, and the development of ‘gay life’ in culture, the hospitality sector, and nightlife, was booming. Hekma (2004) argues that during these decades, Amsterdam was, together with cities like London, Berlin, Barcelona, and Paris, regarded as a global ‘gay capital’ (Hekma, 2004, p. 137). It is exactly this point that led to the foundation of Pride Amsterdam, according to William. Or better said, it is exactly the opposite that was happening in the 1990s. According to William, Amsterdam was facing a decreasing tourism market in the 1990s, with the first place where this was noticed being gay tourism. William argues that Amsterdam had a head start, regarding openness and respect for different groups, but that that head start was overtaken by cities like Paris and Barcelona, which earlier in the 1970s were actually very closed for gay tourism, making Amsterdam *the* place at the time for international tourists. He distinguishes Pride in Amsterdam from Pride in other places, making the different culture and ideologies that formed the foundation of Pride Amsterdam clear:

In the United States, Pride developed from anger. Out of political considerations. But we did not have that feeling in Amsterdam. We thought that actually, things are quite open and tolerant here. Not 100%, but a lot more than in those other cities. That was a very important reason why Amsterdam never had a Pride. (William)

Of course, the ‘we’ that William refers to is himself and perhaps his broader circle, although it looks like he presents it here as if ‘we’ means the whole queer community in Amsterdam. The ‘we’ probably also refers to the other men with whom he was leading Gay Business Amsterdam, an organization for gay catering entrepreneurs, and with whom he founded Pride Amsterdam in 1996. A few moments later in the interview, William refers to the COC and Roze Zaterdag, and the meaning of the word ‘Pride’ for him and his business partners at the time:

We did not want a political Pride, we immediately said that. That was because of two reasons. The COC already organized Roze Zaterdag, which was very political. And we did not want to take that away from the COC. We thought, that’s what they are doing, they have a lot of political contacts and media contacts, they know people. [...] So we thought, it should be something new, it should add something. That was very important, we did not want any politics. And we wanted heterosexuals to be included. That was an essential part, that it was a ‘total’ Pride. The name Amsterdam Pride, for us that means that we are proud of the city. Everywhere else in the world, Pride is about the community. But we thought no, it is about the citizens of Amsterdam, and they consist mainly of heterosexuals. And those heterosexuals just do so well, we thought [laughing]. (William)

By ‘political Pride’, William most likely means a Pride in which protest is central. My interlocutors Denise and Agnes, both 62-year-old white lesbian women, and a couple, who have been working with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation as volunteers for years, confirm that the history of Pride in Amsterdam is not one of protest. They compare this to other places in the world:

Denise: That is not our history. Everywhere else, Pride is a protest movement. That thing of Pride is a protest, we did not start that.

Agnes: It has become a lot more political.

While Roze Zaterdag has lost its political character throughout the years, focusing on celebration more than on protest since the early 1990s (Peterson, Wahlström & Wennerhag, 2018, p. 38), apparently it was still seen as *the* political queer movement event for the founders of Pride Amsterdam, making it reason for them to start a ‘non-political’ event, in which celebration and tourism were key. This means that Pride Amsterdam, in contrast to Pride events in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, has been a depoliticized event from its very start, in which commercialism and celebration were central. Agnes is of the opinion that Pride has over the years become *more* political, as the quote above shows. In contrast, many of the younger activists I talked to are of the opinion that Pride Amsterdam has become *less* political and more commercial over the years. For example, Anna, a 30-year-old white bisexual woman, tells me:

Pride is becoming the mainstream, too white. And too conformist, and too little confronting. It’s just a ‘gezellige’² party, and I don’t think we’re at the point in this society to just celebrate a ‘gezellige’ party (Anna)

Anna also says:

People refer to Stonewall, and people of color to Marsha P Johnson, and I think it is correct that we create a movement that refers to this moment in time. (Anna)

Anna here, like some of my other interlocutors, speaks about an understanding of the history of Pride that is not the local Dutch and Amsterdam history, but that is the more global history, in which events like the Stonewall rebellion take a prominent place. Of course, the Stonewall

² As I discussed in chapter 1, ‘gezellig’ is a crucial concept in Dutch culture, with a ‘gezellige’ party meaning a party which is pleasant, warm, in the company of others, and in which confrontation is avoided.

rebellion took place in a local context – in New York City – as well, but, as Manalansan (1997) argues, it is often referred to as a part of global queer history. As I stated in the previous chapter, the local and the transnational are entangled in complex ways for the queer community and movement (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018), and the importance of especially US history for Dutch queer activists should not be disregarded, especially because the Stonewall narrative can act as a source of empowerment, in particular for queer people of color and trans people. At the Black Pride protest of 2023, speaker and fashion designer Laurindo Love claims: “The fact that we are here, has its roots in the Stonewall riots”. And my interlocutor Vanessa, a 25-year-old Surinamese-Dutch pansexual woman, explains for the case of Black Pride:

Black Pride really looks at where it started. And really puts people of color first. Like, we are really the trendsetters. Trendsetters maybe sounds a bit stupid, but it did start with people of color. And many people forget that. (Vanessa)

As Muñoz (2009) argues, the past should be understood as possibility, which people can bring into play to critique the present (Muñoz, 2009, p. 16). In this sense, the past is performative (Ibid., p. 28): it is not something which is set in stone, instead the past is active, which the way in which the narrative of Stonewall is evoked to make claims about the present, and the future – for example the claim that queer people of color and trans people should be at the center of Pride – shows. Yet, these complex entanglements can sometimes lead to activists wanting Pride Amsterdam to *return* to a history it never had.

In 1996, the very first Pride Amsterdam took place, organized by Gay Business Amsterdam (WorldPride Amsterdam, 2024). Gay Business Amsterdam organized Pride Amsterdam from 1996 until 2005, after which another organization, called ProGay, took over. Since 2014,

Pride has been organized by the Pride Amsterdam Foundation (Ibid.). Thus, Pride in Amsterdam is not ‘owned’ by a specific organization but can be organized by any group as long as the municipality decides so, providing a permit for this organizing every three to four years. The Pride Amsterdam Foundation – which was first called Amsterdam Gay Pride, but which changed its name to Pride Amsterdam Foundation in 2016 – is a non-profit organization. The Foundation exists of two main bodies: the board and the working organization. While the board mainly has a supervisory role, the organization of Pride is done by the working organization, which works together with multiple ‘committees’ who are responsible for different parts of Pride. Examples of committees are Youth Pride, Women & Pride, Fetish Pride, and Corporate Pride (Pride Amsterdam, 2024).

In 2022, knowing that the next year a new permit needed to be allocated, and after noticing more and more critique and dissatisfaction with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, the municipality of Amsterdam conducted an inquiry on the opinions about Pride by different groups within the queer community. The research report made clear that many people within the community were unhappy with the Foundation and with the way Pride Amsterdam, and especially the Canal Parade, were organized, stating as the main reasons the reasons of critique I mentioned before: the domination of consumerism and businesses, the size of the event, the focus on celebration instead of protest, and with that the domination of heterosexuals (Flowz, 2021). In addition, groups like Black Pride, a movement focusing on the black queer community and on queer people of color, already started mobilizing separately from the Pride Amsterdam Foundation since 2020. In an interview with queer magazine *ExpresZo*, Black Pride founder Naomie Pieter stated that she first tried to organize Black Pride in collaboration with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation:

Two years ago, I founded Black Pride NL. I then went to Pride Amsterdam with the idea to cooperate with them. At that time, they didn't think there was space for Black Pride within Amsterdam Pride. [...] It was too political according to them. There was just no space for that. (Naomie Pieter in *ExpresZo*, 2020, translated from Dutch).

The municipality decided that for 2023, two Pride weeks needed to be organized, one by the original Pride Amsterdam Foundation, still including the Canal Parade, and one by the more activist organization Queer Amsterdam, to which Pride Walk now belonged. In 2024, the same two organizations took the responsibility for the organization of Pride Amsterdam, while from 2025 onwards, Pride Amsterdam will be expanded from two weeks to a month, with the possibility for multiple organizations and groups to organize events during this month (AT5, 2024). For now, it is important to know, like I stated before, that Pride in Amsterdam is actually 'owned' by the municipality of Amsterdam, who outsources its planning and running to a specific organization, or organizations.

Thus, while Pride was originally founded by a group of friends and business partners who wanted to celebrate their pride for the city of Amsterdam, because of the event's size, which comes with things like the importance of funding and security, the municipality has become *the* central actor in the organization of Pride in Amsterdam. In the second part of this chapter, I will discuss the municipality's powerful position in the Amsterdam queer movement in more detail. In this section, I have outlined a brief history of Pride Amsterdam, underscoring how the event has from its very foundation been consciously depoliticized. This depoliticization is something that many of my interlocutors mentioned as a criticism on Pride Amsterdam. For them, Pride should always be consciously connected to politics and protest. This difference in meaning of Pride can lead to conflict between groups of people within the queer community. This conflict in different understandings of the queer movement will be the

central focus of chapter 3.

The way Pride has been organized in Amsterdam since the 1990s, especially the Canal Parade, centering on celebration and consumerism, fits very well in “the socio-economic growth strategy” (Uitermark, 2004, p. 696) of the municipality of Amsterdam. As Uitermark (2004) argues for the squatting movement in Amsterdam, many sub-cultures have been co-opted by the city and its government, leading to what he calls ‘movement meritocracy’, in which the municipality has the power to include and support elements of movements that contribute to its growth strategy and to exclude the elements that do not (Ibid., p. 689). Civil society actors, like social movements, then become a part of the ‘policing’ system of the state, thus the supposed status quo, in which conflict and dissent are actively avoided (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 975). Thus, Amsterdam’s municipality should be regarded as a very powerful actor, in shaping the way movements act and relate to each other. This is the case for the queer movement as well, with movements being dependent on the municipality’s funding, therefore making it possible for the municipality to set certain conditions for receiving this funding. In the remaining part of this chapter, I will argue why and how the municipality should be seen as one of the most important actors within the Amsterdam queer movement. Yet, before I do this, it is needed to provide a more detailed analysis of Amsterdam as a city, its history with sub-cultures, and the way in which it is combining progressive politics with neoliberal ideologies.

2.2 Amsterdam as a city of progressive politics and neoliberalism

On 30 March 2001, the first same-sex marriages of the world took place in Amsterdam, led by then mayor Job Cohen. Amsterdam, although maybe having lost some of its status as ‘gay capital of the world’ in the 1990s, put itself back on the global map as a progressive city, and

the Netherlands as a progressive country, particularly regarding LGBTQIA+ rights. In general, Amsterdam is regarded as a liberal and free city; an image around which a large part of its tourism is built. People from all over the world visit Amsterdam because of its liberal laws regarding sex work and cannabis. To be clear, by ‘progressive’ I mean, for the case of Amsterdam, ‘liberal’. As Uitermark (2009) argues, Amsterdam has lost its character as a ‘just city’, by which he means “a city where exploitation and alienation are absent” (Uitermark, 2009, p. 350). A ‘just city’, according to Uitermark, is mainly about an egalitarian housing market, and opportunities for citizens to democratically participate in the governing of their city, especially related to the distribution of resources (Ibid.). Before the 1980s, Amsterdam could have been regarded as a ‘just city’, however, with the rise of neoliberal ideologies, and especially the privatization of the housing market, Uitermark argues, the label of ‘just city’ is not appropriate anymore for the city of Amsterdam. So, when I speak of Amsterdam as a ‘progressive city’, or ‘progressive politics’, in current times, I speak of liberal politics, i.e. politics focusing on equality of rights, space for and recognition of minority groups, and values like freedom of expression, speech, and religion.

In formal municipal politics, left-wing parties have controlled the city of Amsterdam. The social democratic Labor Party has dominated municipal coalitions and up until 2018, the mayor of Amsterdam – although not elected by the citizens – has always been from the Labor Party (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2013, p. 1572). Since 2018, Amsterdam is led by a mayor from the GreenLeft party: Femke Halsema. In the last few decennia, this domination of left-wing politics has gone together with more and more neoliberalism, driving Amsterdam, as Savini, Boterman, Van Gent and Majoor (2016) call it, “into a peculiar – and probably fragile – state of neoliberalism with progressive features” (Savini et al., 2016, p. 103). I understand neoliberalism as an ideology, rationality, and discourse in which market and economic

interests are placed above state interests, yet in practice, this usually means not a system in which there is no state, but a state that centralizes market interests in its policies (Van Gent, 2013, p. 504). We see this type of combination of neoliberalism with progressive features in other countries as well, for example in Canada, where some groups and individuals express strong criticism on the way in which a progressive value like ‘multiculturalism’ is nowadays directly linked to neoliberal rationalities. Multiculturalism is seen as a way to make Canada as a country attractive on the global economic market – for example by being able to expand export – and with values like productiveness and contribution becoming more important in the discourse of multiculturalism than values like inclusion (Gilbert, 2007). It is this combination, of progressiveness with neoliberalism, that we can see in the Amsterdam queer community as well, especially in Pride Amsterdam, which, as I just discussed, was founded as an event in which business and consumerism have always been central. And it is this combination as well that has generated much of the criticism from groups of queer activists, who believe queer activism is incompatible with this neoliberal progressiveness.

The city of Amsterdam has from its early development been closely intertwined with business and trade, with its economy especially flourishing in the 17th century, because of colonial trade (Bontje & Sleutjes, 2007, p. 19), including slave trade. Yet, with the rise of new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, an alternative, more anarchistic, scene developed in the city as well. Student movements were growing at the University of Amsterdam, labor movements were fighting for workers’ rights, and, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, the squatting movement gained more and more strength (Shaw, 2005, p. 150), taking control of abandoned buildings in the city center and setting up autonomous, anarchist networks and collectives (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2013, p. 1561). As Nicholls and Uitermark describe for the case of ethnic minority politics, in the early 1980s, the municipality of Amsterdam started

establishing a comprehensive system of subsidy funds and advisory councils, consisting of leaders from community networks and organizations (Ibid., p 1562). Thus, as I discussed in the previous chapter, just like the way in which the Dutch national government created an advisory council consisting of people from the queer community, to address the HIV/AIDS crisis (Duyvendak, 1996), the Amsterdam municipality was making use of the political culture of ‘polderen’ as well.

Yet, the 1980s were also a time of economic crisis, and political sentiments in the country were changing, which can be placed in a general global trend of neoliberalism (Uitermark, 2009). Although a housing shortage existed in Amsterdam, squatters were evicted from buildings, often involving violent clashes with the police (Bontje & Sleutjes, 2007, p. 26). In the 1990s, with a boost of the economy, private building construction took off, the city center became attractive again for wealthier inhabitants and developers, much social housing was sold, and alternative squat collectives were pushed to the outskirts (Shaw, 2005, p. 152).

Although many squats disappeared, some squats collectives – especially ones focusing on culture and art instead of housing (Uitermark, 2004, pp. 693-694) – were actually able to survive with the help of municipal funding, now being called ‘breeding places’, or ‘cultural incubators’. Since 2000, the municipality of Amsterdam has its own policy around these alternative scenes, called BroedplaatsAmsterdam, in which the municipality funds the establishment of ‘breeding places’ – i.e. spaces where artist collectives can develop, without the need for profit – by buying property and selling or leasing it at subsidized rates to creative entrepreneurs and artist collectives (Shaw, 2005, p. 161). The chapter within the municipality that is concerned with BroedplaatsAmsterdam provides training to groups and collectives who would like to start a breeding place and every three years, representatives of breeding

places are invited for a conversation with this chapter, in order to discuss whether the breeding place is doing what it is supposed to do – if they are following the strategic plan they have to submit – but also providing the opportunity for the breeding places representatives to share their experience and advices about the breeding places (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2017). Here again, we can see the importance of ‘polderen’ taking place, with the municipality having a controlling role in the development and execution of these breeding places, but at the same time involving the people targeted by these policies to share their thoughts and opinions.

Although this BroedplaatsAmsterdam policy has provided space for some alternative, non-profit, collectives, most of these breeding places are still located at the fringes of the city, plus these collectives are usually built around cultural and artistic goals, and not political ones (Uitermark, 2004). This is similar to the way in which other European cities ‘manage’ alternative scenes, with for example Van Schipstal and Nicholls (2014) showing the importance of ‘selling’ oneself as ‘creative’ and ‘artistic’ for activist squatter groups to receive support from the Berlin city government (Van Schipstal & Nicholls, 2014).

The city center of Amsterdam lost its alternative character where anarchist groups had a place and became a site mainly for the wealthy and tourists, which is a trend that has continued up until recent times, with the current city government starting to consider options of containing the raising tourist numbers.

As I stated above, Amsterdam’s city government has always been dominated by left-wing political parties. However, the systems that left-wing politics relied on transformed. As Nicholls and Uitermark (2013) describe, the structural system of subsidies that many ethnic minority networks relied on in Amsterdam was abolished in 1997, and replaced by a system

in which funding is allocated based on projects and within periodic times (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2013, p. 1564). This is also the system that many organizations in the queer movements are embedded in. Pride Amsterdam is a prime example: until 2022 every three to four years a permit, and the subsidies connected to that, was allocated to one organization that was given the task to organize Pride. Since 2014, it has been the same organization receiving this permit, namely the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, yet, this organization still had to apply for a new permit once the time period of a permit was over. It is thus not a specific organization that receives structural subsidies, it is the *event* of Pride that receives it, and different organizations can compete for it. In 2022, the municipality decided that for 2023, a permit of four years would be allocated to the organization organizing Pride. Yet, because the decision of which organization this would be exactly was delayed, the municipality made 2023 and 2024 ‘transition years’, which in practice meant that two organizations – the Pride Amsterdam Foundation and Queer Amsterdam – were responsible for organizing each one week of Pride (AT5, 2022). From 2025 onwards, the municipality will allocate permits to multiple organizations. Yet still, the institution Pride Amsterdam is owned by the municipality, who decides which organizations can organize the event.

In the next section, I will turn to current times and discuss in more detail the role of the Amsterdam municipality specifically in the queer movement, and one specific situation that arises for some of my interlocutors regarding that role: a situation in which organizations and movements are dependent on the city’s funding and permits, which takes away some of their autonomy. What I hope to have sketched in this section, is the socio-political context that my field is located in, specifically on city level. Amsterdam is a city which has had a continuous culture of progressive politics, but it is also a city that has a vast history of capitalism.

Although in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, alternative scenes outside the capitalist order were

able to develop, these scenes have been pushed more and more to the fringes, making Amsterdam today, especially the city center, a place in which tourism and commercialism dominate. Amsterdam could be regarded as a city in which a certain type of urban governance dominates, namely ‘corporatist governance’, as Pierre (2011, p. 49) calls it. In this type of city, civil society actors like social movements, artist collectives, and NGOs are closely included in urban politics and decision-making, thus following the crucial aspects of the poldermodel. We can see this happening on the level of alternative scenes (‘breeding places’), in which the municipality creates opportunities for artist collectives to exist, and we can also see this on the level of the queer community, with the municipality organizing possibilities for representatives of different groups to have their voices heard. Yet, as I will discuss in more detail in the next section for the queer movement, although there is space for deliberation, the municipality of Amsterdam plays a very crucial role in many aspects of the city, as the fact that artist collectives that are part of BroedplaatsAmsterdam have to submit plans and evaluations to the municipality, shows. The municipality is able to play this role, and to *control* the city, by actually making civil society “an extension of the state” (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 975).

So, just like I stated about the dangers of the poldermodel in the previous chapter, I would argue that in Amsterdam, although there is space for deliberation and having the voices of minority groups heard, the municipality eventually dominates the way in which events are organized and the ways in which groups relate to each other. The municipality of Amsterdam should be taken into account as a central actor in my field – the queer movement in Amsterdam – and the way in which this central actor shapes this field, should be understood as embedded in moral and ethical structures. These structures involve a dedication to deliberation between city governmental institutions and civil society institutions, to diversity

and inclusion, and to the building of broad coalitions. Implications of these structures are that, in order to receive subsidies, movements and organizations need to participate in conversations and inquiries the municipality organizes, to work together and to specifically discuss their methods of encouraging diversity and inclusion in their plans and accountability documents.

2.3 Municipal role in the Amsterdam queer movement

2.3.1 Municipal role in Pride Amsterdam

Amsterdam is a liberal and tolerant city and that is something we are proud of. The people in Amsterdam should have the possibility to be who they are or who they want to be and to decide themselves who they love and how to live their lives. That means that nobody else decides what your gender is and that you deserve space to live with love and freedom. This is something we need to continue to pay attention to and something we as a city need to continue to fight for. Still some people in Amsterdam cannot be themselves without being confronted with violence, discrimination, social unsafety and exclusion. That is why Pride Amsterdam is an important event for the city and for the people in Amsterdam. Every year we express that we do not only respect our differences, but also make them visible and celebrate them. (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022, p. 5).

The text above comes from a policy document published by the municipality of Amsterdam in 2022. The document summarizes the change of the municipal's policy around Pride Amsterdam, with the previous policy being established in 2011. It confirms the self-image of many Dutch people about their country that I discussed in the previous chapter, and of the founders of Pride Amsterdam about Amsterdam as a city: liberal, free, and tolerant. The municipality states that this is something the people in Amsterdam should be *proud* of, which resonates with William's earlier statement about Pride Amsterdam being about pride for the city, not about pride for the community.

Yet, this pride for the city of Amsterdam does not mean there were no tensions between the founding organization of Pride Amsterdam and the city's municipality. William tells me that in the first few years of Pride, his organization experienced some conflicts with the municipality. According to him, these types of conflict still exist today, but the current Pride Amsterdam Foundation chooses to keep these conflicts quiet, whereas William and his partners back in the day did not hide these for, for example, the press. The main irritations William mentions were regarding permits – which sometimes were only granted a week before Pride was supposed to take place –, the many existing rules, and civil servants not understanding the way Pride works. In 2009, Gay Business Amsterdam even sued the municipality of Amsterdam, demanding a 140.000 euros compensation, claiming that the municipality and the mayor of Amsterdam at the time, Job Cohen, were biased in the granting of permits in 2007. Gay Business Amsterdam was responsible for the organization of Pride Amsterdam until 2006. After this, the permit was granted to a different organization, called ProGay. The municipality was unhappy with the collaboration with Gay Business Amsterdam, as they found their tactics with regards to the collaboration with the municipality too 'confrontational'. In 2009, Gay Business Amsterdam thus sued the municipality for rejecting their permit applications (NH Nieuws, 2009), but it did not win this court case (Gay & Night, 2011). Thus, although Pride Amsterdam was founded from a notion of pride for the city of Amsterdam, this does not mean the collaboration with the municipality went completely smoothly, and Gay Business Amsterdam chose to – going against the tradition of the poldermodel – actually publicly reveal these tensions and conflicts, in contrast to the later organizations organizing Pride.

Going back to the policy document from 2022, in which the municipality of Amsterdam

outlines its new Pride policy. In it, there is one important sentence:

For the granting and paying of the subsidies, the municipality states clear conditions for the organizing party, its working methods and organization, but also for the content of the event (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022, p. 3).

This sentence immediately makes the power of the municipality clear: by having control over the money, the municipality is able to set the conditions they like. Although the municipality outsources the organization of Pride, it keeps a controlling role over the organization, stating that in that way, it is able to contribute to certain ‘goals’ the municipality has when it comes to Pride. The goals the document mentions are:

1. The expansion of the visibility of the whole Pride community
2. The promotion of diversity
3. The promotion of inclusion
4. The promotion of emancipation
5. The facilitation of meeting and encounter
6. Attention for marginalized groups that want to be a part of Pride Amsterdam, but are struggling to find a place
7. The prevention of exclusion based on sexuality, gender, or skin color (Ibid., p. 5)

What the municipality means exactly by terms like ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’, and ‘emancipation’ is not explained in the document. In the rest of the document, the municipality outlines in more detail the conditions they set for the organization of Pride. Regarding the program of the event, it states that the organizing party of Pride needs to adhere to the

conditions of organizing events that focus on diversity and inclusion – again, it is not explained what these terms mean exactly –, that the organization concentrates on these concepts in their talks with companies and businesses who want to participate in the events, and that the organization reports back to the municipality about the made choices regarding the program, the finances, and the contact with different groups within the queer community (Ibid., p. 8). Regarding the organizing of outdoor parties during Pride, the municipality demands that the parties are well spread out over the city and that all parties end at midnight. Regarding the Canal Parade, the municipality sets the conditions of boats having to adhere to certain house rules, the need for a plan and ‘script’ written by the organizer and submitted to the municipality – which includes things like the number of participating boats, the route of the parade, and plans for action in case of emergencies –, the need for justification of which boats participate, and the expectation of the organizer to limit the commercial messages of boats (Ibid., p. 9) – which goes against the idea of complete commercialization of Pride, and potentially shows the municipality’s left-wing domination. Finally, the policy document states a couple of demands regarding the organization responsible for organizing Pride Amsterdam. The organization needs to have the knowledge, skills, and experience to organize a mass event like Pride; the organization is expected to actively include smaller, marginalized groups within the community in the organization of Pride and to report to the municipality how they did this; the organization needs to have clear financial policies in place, which are not aimed at profit; the organization needs to be ‘inclusive’ and ‘diverse’ – again, it is not explained what is meant by this –; and the organization needs to work in a transparent way, reporting on and evaluating most aspects of the event (Ibid., pp. 10-11).

The policy document states that from 2023 onwards, a permit for the organization of Pride Amsterdam would be allocated for four years. As I stated before, we now know that this did

not happen, as 2023 and 2024 were regarded as a ‘transition years’, with two Pride weeks taking place organized by two different organizations. A new policy has been presented in 2024, which will be come into force in 2025. From 2025 onwards, Pride Amsterdam will be lasting a full month. In this month, different organizations and groups can apply for permits to organize events, although the events in the final weekend – including the Canal Parade – will still be allocated to one organization, for the timeframe of four years, which is in line with the policy document I just analyzed (AT5, 2024). This dissertation will not focus on Pride after 2024, and we will have to wait and see what the Pride policy 2025 will look like exactly. However, it seems like the municipality will on the one hand partly hold on to its old ways, allocating a multiannual permit for the organization of Pride Amsterdam, while on the other hand taking the criticisms on the Pride Amsterdam Foundation’s ‘monopoly’ to heart, and partly decentralizing the organization of Pride Amsterdam, creating possibilities for smaller queer groups to play a role in Pride Amsterdam. The hegemonic position of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation is thus slowly changing. Still, all these groups will have to apply for permits and funding, write up plans and evaluation reports, and adhere to certain conditions, keeping the municipality of Amsterdam as one of the key players in the organization of Pride Amsterdam. As I will argue in the final part of this chapter, especially for smaller activist queer groups, this creates a situation in which grassroots activist groups are dependent on the municipality and its resources, taking away some of their autonomy. Permits and funding, then, become moral issues, in which the municipality promotes certain values and priorities.

2.3.2 Municipal role in other queer organizations

Look, we need them, they give us money. Or we don’t need *them* [emphasis added], we need their money. But at the same time, we can then be... just a token for them.

And with all the research projects and evaluations that need to be conducted, it is expected that we show up, because they give us money. (Luca)

The ‘they’ that Luca, organizer of Queer Network Amsterdam, a network of queer organizations in Amsterdam, refers to in this quote is the Amsterdam municipality. Just before Luca said this, they stated that they, and their network, are against the interference of formal political institutions in their activism. However, as this quote makes clear, in order to design and organize the events their network wants and needs, it relies on the funding the municipality offers.

Luca’s statement reveals a tension that I came across with more of my interlocutors: the tension between wanting to be an autonomous organization based on grassroots activism, and the reality of being dependent on the funding, and permits, of the municipality of Amsterdam. As I hope to have made clear in the previous section, the municipality of Amsterdam is a powerful actor in the organization of Pride Amsterdam. In this chapter’s final section, I will look at the role the municipality of Amsterdam plays with regards to smaller queer activist groups and organizations, and I will argue that the municipality is one of the most powerful actors in the queer movement. Its powerful position is mainly established by its ability to allocate and divide subsidies and permits. However, I argue, this power is not only a matter of money and rights. The municipality also morally defines the political issues activist groups should focus on and the way these groups should relate to each other. This moral power of institutions like the municipality, was emphasized by Foucault (1990), who argued that official institutions play a crucial role in the dispersion of moral codes – which he understood as consisting of values and rules of action – and the internalization of these moral codes within individuals (Foucault, 1990, p. 25)

2.3.3 Permits and funding as moral issues

The Amsterdam municipality, for the period of June 2021 until December 2023, established six ‘priorities’ regarding inclusivity and the tackling of discrimination, and based on these six priorities, ‘alliances’ of organizations and movements were able to apply for funding (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024). To be clear, this is a different funding program than the funding program specifically for the organization of Pride Amsterdam, that I just discussed. These subsidies are meant for organizations that aim to organize their own events. The six priorities regarding inclusivity and the tackling of discrimination were:

1. Gender inequality in work
2. Visibility and Pride
3. Bicultural LGBTIQ+
4. Anti-discrimination
5. Inclusive remembering
6. Colonial history and continuation

As we can see, the priorities regarding sexuality and queerness were divided into two themes: ‘visibility and Pride’ and ‘bicultural LGBTIQ+’. Some organizations that were part of the first alliance, also participated in the other alliances, for example Black Pride (a movement focusing on the Black LGBTQIA+ community and queer people of color), Papaya Kuir (a lesbotransfeminist collective for latinx refugees and migrants), Sehaq (a queer feminist collective focusing on queer and trans refugees from North-Africa and the Middle-East), and MaroKKueer Zawya (a trans-led collective focusing on the queer North-African diaspora) (Ibid.). The COC Amsterdam organization was part of the alliance ‘visibility and Pride’,

while the Pride Amsterdam Foundation was not part of any alliance and has its own municipal subsidies policy, namely the one specifically about the organization of Pride Amsterdam.

To receive subsidies for this funding arrangement, organizations and movements thus had to form alliances with other organizations and movements, with a minimum of three and a maximum of eight organizations (Overheid.nl, 2024). On its website, the municipality states that the reason for this is to encourage organizations to work together ‘strategically’, in order to have a bigger impact on the city, and to provide organizations with financial security for multiple years and with ‘control’ over the ways in which they want to contribute to the six municipal priorities (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024). For the new funding period, January 2024 until December 2025, the alliance system remained, although the municipal ‘priorities’ changed a bit. The two priorities focusing on sexuality and queerness were combined into one priority called ‘promoting the emancipation of (vulnerable and bicultural) LGBTIQ+ people’, and a new priority called ‘promoting the visibility and representation of all people in Amsterdam’ was added (Overheid.nl, 2024).

As this funding policy shows, the role of the Amsterdam municipality is not one of only providing money and permits. It actually has the power to direct movements and organizations in a certain way, by setting conditions for receiving funding. An organization applying for funding needs to submit a ‘strategic plan’ in which they make clear how they will address the policy priority they want to be a part of and how their activities and events will fit in this (Overheid.nl, 2024). In addition, organizations *need* to work together in order to receive funding in this arrangement, which very much fits within the more general Dutch political culture of deliberation and consensus building. Thus, the municipality not only sets

certain political directions with the policy priorities, it also directs the forms in which organizations organize, namely in alliances. As Luca tells me for their network, when the municipality announced that alliances would now be a condition for receiving funding, it was a matter of need to go along with it, since it otherwise would mean no money. Luca and their network thus took a pragmatic approach, and, Luca tells me, this meant that some groups and organizations that did not receive funding before now were able to be part of an alliance that *did* receive funding. Yet, this receiving of funding comes with conditions that make the work of these organizations less autonomous, as they are held accountable, leading to extra paperwork and expectations like participating in certain activities and research projects the municipality comes up with.

Another area where the municipality plays a powerful role is the world of theatre and art. The Amsterdam municipality funds a specific organization, called the ‘Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst’ (Amsterdam Fund for Art, AFK) which is responsible for the funding of art, music, and theatre collectives in the city (Openresearch Amsterdam, 2024). That the AFK’s funding policy is not only a matter of money but also of morally directing organizations and collectives, becomes clear in my interviews with Boris, who is a 28-year-old white bisexual man. Boris is a theatre-maker from Amsterdam, who is especially known for his production called *Boys Won’t Be Boys*, about questioning the norms around gender and masculinity, and who also is the founder of a production called *Becoming*, in collaboration with theatre CC Amstel in Amsterdam, which consists of multiple shows focusing on specific groups and themes in the queer community. After the success of *Boys Won’t Be Boys*, Boris felt the need to broaden the theme of masculinity for his *Becoming* series, to a broader theme of queerness.

The idea for *Becoming* is to organize several shows, each dedicated to a specific sub-group or

theme of the queer community, like the trans community, intersex community, and the bisexual community. Boris, as an experienced theatre maker, together with CC Amstel, reaches out to specific organizations and groups to create these shows, helping them with the creation process, but also ‘giving the stage’ to them. The overarching goal of the series however is the ‘mixing’ of people and groups. Thus, the idea is that the people who organize one show, and the audience that comes to watch it, also joins the other shows, a goal that partly was reached, at least in the first season, which is the season I researched. In chapter 5, I will come back to Boris and the *Becoming* series, to analyze it as a form of activism in the Amsterdam queer movement, and of building new collaborations and alliances. In this chapter however, I focus on the theatre series to discuss something else, namely the way in which the municipality of Amsterdam, by having the power to allocate subsidies, can morally steer actors, like theatre groups, into certain directions.

Besides his own interest in bringing people and groups together, Boris tells me that the goal of ‘broadening your audience’ is one way in which theatre collectives can receive funding from the AFK. He says:

So, we kind of wrote *Becoming* the way we did because of that. So that, besides the regular theatre productions, you try to address new target audiences. And that you tell stories that are not often told. (Boris)

Thus, the funding that the *Becoming* series and CC Amstel receive from the municipality and the AFK is very much based on this goal of ‘broadening an audience’. It is a big part of the way a cultural organization, like a theatre, can receive funding. On the website of the AFK (Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst, 2024), it is stated that all organizations applying for funding need to create a plan for diversity and inclusion, using the ‘Code Diversity and

Inclusion' for the cultural sector. This code is based on '4 Ps' (Code Diversiteit & Inclusie, 2024), namely 'programme', 'partners', 'personnel', and 'audience' (Dutch word: 'publiek'), meaning that cultural organizations need to have a plan in place to make diversity and inclusion an integral part of their shows, the other organizations they work with, their staff policies, and their audiences. It seems that by 'diversity', the code mainly means the representation of a multitude of groups within staff and audience, while for the case of programme and partners, the code focuses on how, for example, theatre groups can create productions that tell the stories of marginalized groups, and how collaborations between cultural organizations can broaden their audiences (Ibid.).

So, on the one hand, there is a personal motivation for the creation of the *Becoming* series: the fact that Boris wanted to create more space for queer sub-groups, and tell stories that are perhaps not often told in the institution of theatre, and also, as he later mentioned, the fact that a desire for connection and bringing people together is very much part of his own personality. On the other hand, there is an external motivation for the shape of this production: funding. Without funding from the municipality, CC Amstel and Boris could not have created this theatre series the way they have done. This places *Becoming* in the grey area of activism as an ethical practice, in the way it questions social norms, and comes up with alternatives in a creative way, while at the same time being dependent on institutions like the municipality and of course the world of theatre, and therefore needing to adhere to certain rules and expectations of these institutions. This is similar to what I discussed earlier about Luca's queer network, with Luca telling me that because the network receives funding from the municipality of Amsterdam, the members of the network are expected to contribute to certain events and research projects set up by the municipality.

These actors in the Amsterdam queer movement thus have to navigate these tensions between being grassroots organizations and being dependent on municipal funding. We see that the dependency on municipal funding is high, with groups like Black Pride, which started to organize separately from Pride Amsterdam in 2020, and which was regarded by some of my interlocutors as ‘more authentic’ because they at first did not receive funding from the municipality, also eventually becoming part of alliances, in order to receive subsidies – although it must be said that at the time of writing this dissertation, in 2024, Black Pride is not receiving any direct subsidies from the municipality anymore (Black Pride, 2024). By providing funding opportunities, but also by providing space and visibility, the municipality of Amsterdam is able to incorporate movements originally at the fringes, therefore avoiding dissent (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 975). As I will discuss in chapter 5, this incorporation of dissident voices eventually even led to a change of Pride Amsterdam, with groups that actively mobilized against the Pride Amsterdam Foundation being integrated into the institutionalized organization of Pride Amsterdam.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the powerful role of Pride Amsterdam in the Amsterdam queer movement, and its connection to the city of Amsterdam. As the most famous and biggest LGBT event of the city, Pride in Amsterdam is able to shape the way the queer movement is regarded and looked at in the country and abroad. I have stated that, although a more radical past does exist in Amsterdam and Dutch history, Pride Amsterdam has been consciously founded as a depoliticized event, in which celebration and commercialism have been central. This goes against the notion of many of my interlocutors, who believe – often inspired by the US history of the Stonewall rebellion – that Pride should be about protest. Ideological contestations about the meaning of activism thus exist within the Amsterdam

queer movement, which often come to the surface before and during Pride. In the next chapter, I will dissect these different understandings of activism in more detail.

I have embedded my discussion of Pride Amsterdam in an analysis of the urban governance of the city of Amsterdam. Amsterdam is a city in which trade has always been important, and it is a city which has been combining progressive politics with neoliberal ideologies.

Although before the 1980s, these progressive politics also included policies around equal distribution, since the 1980s, this progressiveness should be regarded mainly as liberalism, in which the equality of rights, space for minority groups, and freedom of speech and religion, are central. Throughout the years, the city center of Amsterdam, which at one time was a place where squatting movements and sub-cultures had a place, has become home to the wealthy and tourists, and alternative scenes have been pushed to the fringes. The municipality of Amsterdam, using elements of the poldermodel, has a powerful role in maintaining the alternative scenes that still exist, creating opportunities by providing money and space, but also setting certain conditions for this money and space. For the queer movement as well, the municipality is able to decide what events, movements, and groups fit within the city's (neo)liberal ethos, and which do not, making issues like permits and funding moral issues.

To be clear, what I have *not* meant to do in this chapter, is make a judgment about whether the municipal policies and politics are 'good'. We could potentially say that for the queer movement, Amsterdam as a city is not a bad place to be, with the municipality being relatively progressive and having many opportunities in place for funding, compared to other cities in the world. What my aim of this chapter has been, however, is to argue that the municipality of Amsterdam is a very powerful actor in the Amsterdam queer movement and is a crucial *part of* the movement in the way I understand it, as the broad field of

organizations, institutions, and movements that are concerned with queer people in Amsterdam. The municipality not only has the power to allocate funding and permits to specific organizations, but by having this power, it is also able to set conditions, resting on certain values, for receiving these funding and permits, therefore having a dominant say in how queer organizations and movements are run, how they relate to each other, and what the events they organize look like. The way organizations and movements relate to the municipality is ambivalent: they are dependent on its funding and permits, but they lose a certain amount of autonomy because of this dependency. A tension between idealism and pragmatism is therefore something that organizations within the Amsterdam queer movement have to navigate.

Chapter 3: Pride Amsterdam and different understandings of activism

It is July 30th, 2022. Pride Walk, the protest march which marks the start of Pride Amsterdam starts at Dam square, the central point of Amsterdam's city center. I am watching via a livestream on Instagram, to make sure I can hear the speeches well, joining the walk in person later. Nour from MarokKueer Zawya, an organization dedicated to the queer North-African diaspora in the Netherlands, stands on stage. They say, with a powerful voice: "I remember last year blocking the Pride with all this drama. People telling you are terrorists and supporting Hamas. I now want to stand here and say Free Palestine!"

Let us go back a year. Like Nour said, Pride Walk 2021 was indeed 'blocked'. The group that took over the front position of the march, and that Nour was a part of, calls itself 'We Reclaim Our Pride', and consists of multiple queer groups and individuals, most of them dedicated to anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and anti-colonialism. For a while, the march was stopped. I was walking somewhere in the middle of the Pride Walk that year. It was extremely busy, with thousands of people showing up for the event, a lot more than in previous years. One of the reasons must have been the fact that it was 2021, a covid year, meaning that the Pride Canal Boat Parade, usually the biggest event of Pride Amsterdam, was cancelled. Pride Walk, because it is officially a protest march, and protests were still allowed during lockdowns, was the only event happening that year. In 2021, the Pride Walk protest replaced the celebratory Canal Parade for many people.

Because it was so crowded, I did not know We Reclaim Our Pride's 'intervention' was happening while I was in the march, and I did not think too much of it that we were standing still for a while, something which often happens in protest marches. However, in the

following days, I read about the event, and saw pictures of it, on social media. A statement was issued by the official Pride Amsterdam Foundation, distancing itself from the We Reclaim Our Pride organization, stating the organization was not allowed to take over the front position and that it did not agree with ‘certain things that were said’ by the activists (Pride Amsterdam Foundation, 2021). Later, by interviewing people from We Reclaim Our Pride, one of the official organizers of Pride Walk, and others who were present at the march, I have understood that the statements that were mainly taken offence at were the pro-Palestine and anti-Israel statements, explaining Nour’s claims on stage a year later. We Reclaim Our Pride replied with a counter-statement, claiming that the reason the march was stopped for a while, was because the police and the Pride Amsterdam Foundation wanted We Reclaim Our Pride to leave the protest. We Reclaim Our Pride’s statement accused the Pride Amsterdam Foundation of ‘pinkwashing’ - using the promotion of LGBTQIA+ rights as a strategy by states and companies to improve their own status (Schulman, 2011) – , stating that as a group, it wanted to make a stand against ‘white and able-bodied domination’ in the Amsterdam queer movement and community (We Reclaim Our Pride, 2021).

We Reclaim Our Pride’s ‘intervention’ during Pride Walk 2021 is a great case for exploring a multitude of questions related to activism, which is the aim of this chapter. What different notions and understandings of activism exist within the Amsterdam queer movement? How can these differences be explained? What potential conflicts can these differences lead to? And how can we understand these differences as informed by moral beliefs, structures, and practices? As I stated in the introduction, I understand ‘the Amsterdam queer movement’ as the field of organizations, social movements, political parties and institutions (e.g. the Amsterdam municipality) that are concerned with queer people in Amsterdam and the Netherlands. In this chapter, I will argue that a crucial type of difference between groups,

organizations, and movements that is produced within this field is based on different understandings of queer activism, and that these different understandings are often expressed through views of Pride Amsterdam. I argue that these different understandings are informed by moral views of what activism and queer liberation should look like, connected to interpretations of the past and the future of queer activism, and often (re)produced in relation to Pride Amsterdam: the biggest LGBT organization and event in the Netherlands and Amsterdam, in terms of people participating in it and money spent on it.

Certain binary understandings exist within these notions of activism. The main binaries I will discuss are ‘single-issue activism’ versus ‘queer activism’, ‘activism in the streets’ versus ‘activism within institutions’, and ‘activism linked to capital and the state’ versus ‘independent activism’. These binaries should not be seen as separate, but as linked to each other, and informing one another. These binary understandings are often used in discourse when organizations, movements, and individuals talk about their own activism and the activism of others, making the Amsterdam queer movement, and particularly Pride Amsterdam, a space in which ideological contestations exist, about the meaning and purpose of queer activism, with some forms of activism being seen as ‘truer’ or ‘more real’ queer activism than others (Conway, 2023), thus involving, using a Foucauldian term, the production of different kind of ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 2001). However, these binary oppositions are, as is the case with most binary oppositions, simplified. I will argue that the way activism is understood and carried out actually often blurs the boundaries of these binary understandings and involves combinations of supposed oppositional ideologies and practices.

This chapter is grounded in scholarship around morality, intersectionality, and politics. In addition, I use Milani’s (2015) concept of ‘sexual cityzanship’ – written this way to

emphasize the queer nature of the concept –, which is aimed at encapsulating the relation between sexual politics and space, connected to different meaning-making processes (Milani, 2015, p. 433). Milani looked at an event which took place at Johannesburg Pride in 2012, where a group called the One in Nine Campaign staged an ‘intervention’, performing a ‘die-in’ protest, to commemorate all black queer women and gender non-conforming persons who have been killed in South-Africa because of their gender identities (Ibid., p. 432). Although enacted out of very different reasons, the One in Nine Campaign’s and We Reclaim Our Pride’s protests are similar in the form they took: as interventions during Pride marches. The concept of sexual citizenship makes clear how different understandings of activism – activism in collaboration with the state versus activism that disrupts – are connected to spatial elements as well.

Following from my more institutional discussion of Pride Amsterdam in the previous chapter, in this chapter I will first dive into some of the conflicts and tensions around Pride Amsterdam and its meaning taking place in the Amsterdam queer movement. I do this because these conflicts and tensions immediately reveal differences in people’s understandings of queer activism. Then, to show how these different understandings are contentious, and how these differences are related to morality, I will focus on the case of We Reclaim Our Pride’s ‘intervention’ during Pride Walk 2021. Using interviews I conducted with participants and organizers of these movements and organizations, observations I have done at events of these movements and organizations, and analyses of statements, speeches, websites, and (social) media posts by these movements and organizations, I will explore how the participants of these movements and organizations hold different moral interpretations of the queer movement, and how the relation with *other* organizations and movements inform these interpretations.

Thus, I will argue that, within the Amsterdam queer movement, understandings of activism are informed by different moral frameworks that people hold – values, beliefs, the behavior following from these values and beliefs, and the cultural and institutional norms around them – and that these different understandings and practices are relational to *other* understandings and practices, which can lead to conflict and tensions within the broader queer movement. Then, in chapter 4, I will continue this exploration of the relationality of different understandings of activism, but zooming in on how it is connected to the production of moral-political subjectivities and categories of people. This current chapter really looks at the field of Amsterdam queer activism itself, carried out by different organizations and movements, in particular connected to big events like Pride Amsterdam, and smaller grassroots movements, and the way these differences can lead to conflict and tension. In chapter 5, I will argue how these moments of conflict and tension can however also produce ‘ethical moments’ (Zigon, 2009), in which people are forced to reflect on their values, political beliefs, and moral judgments, which can eventually inform new collaborations and change.

3.1 What should Pride mean?

As I outlined in chapter 2, Pride Amsterdam has been organized by the Pride Amsterdam Foundation since 2014. The most important figure in the Pride Amsterdam Foundation is managing director Lucien Spee, who has been in charge of the staff group since 2014. Spee, who has a background in international business, and has worked as an organizational expert, already started working with Pride in 2011, after he, as he says himself, “noticed some things that could be done better” at the Canal Parade of 2010 (Hofman, 2018). With his background, Spee transformed Pride Amsterdam into a professionalized organization.

In August 2022, Spee came under fire, after an interview with him was published in newspaper *NRC*. In this interview, Spee discusses the collaboration between Pride Amsterdam and organizations focusing on queer people of color and trans people. Reflecting on an earlier statement Spee had made in the press, in which he claimed that the Pride Amsterdam Foundation's solidarity is 'often forgotten', he stated:

We are attacked by certain groups, but we actually always show solidarity. We share our money with other groups. We give 25.000 euros to the organization of Pride Walk. That is by the way sponsorship money, because the municipality does not have funding for that. Almost 350.000 euros of sponsorship money goes to the community. (Lucien Spee in Sedee, 2022, translated from Dutch)

To a question regarding the fact that some organizations do not want to work together with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation (for example, Black Pride), Spee replies:

It takes two to tango. Our door is always open. But you do have to want to take that step [...]. Some people just hate white men. Then it is over, I can't do anything about that. (Lucien Spee in Sedee, 2022, translated from Dutch)

The sentence "some people just hate white men" has proven to be especially controversial in Spee's interview, with multiple queer movements and organizations reacting to it. We Reclaim Our Pride – the movement I will extensively come back to in this chapter – issued a statement on Instagram, claiming that Spee's words "enhance the structural exclusion of marginalized LGBTQIA+ communities, silence critical people, and show a huge lack of self-reflection by the managing director" (We Reclaim Our Pride, 2022, translated from Dutch). In addition, the statement says:

The monopoly of the Pride Amsterdam organization and position of power of Lucien Spee, the silencing of critical people, and the lack of space for the marginalized (BIPOC) LGBTQIA+ members of the community are examples among many incidents which have led to dissatisfaction within the LGBTQIA+ community about the chairmanship of Lucien Spee and with that also the board of Pride Amsterdam. (We Reclaim Our Pride, 2022, translated from Dutch)

By referring to historical and structural marginalization of certain groups within the queer community, plus the lack of space for these groups nowadays, the statement focuses on differences in power, with Lucien Spee symbolizing the dominance of white gay men within Pride Amsterdam. We Reclaim Our Pride sees the Pride Amsterdam Foundation as having a ‘monopoly’ in the Amsterdam queer movement, stating that this dominant position silences the voices of people outside this monopoly. Lucien Spee argues that the Pride Amsterdam Foundation has “always shown solidarity” and uses the fact that the Foundation provides money for ‘the community’ as proof for this solidarity. However, for groups like We Reclaim Our Pride, more than money, solidarity would mean the addressing of power imbalances within the community.

Some of my interlocutors have worked together with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation or have been approached by the Foundation to collaborate with them. Luca, a 27-year-old white non-binary queer person, who is the founder of Queer Network Amsterdam, a network of queer organizations in which Black Pride and activists involved in We Reclaim Our Pride are active, has negative experiences with this:

Pride Amsterdam, the current organization, says that they are reaching out and that we don’t accept. And they ask us to help. But they ask us to help and to become part of a committee without receiving money for it. And to work with their budgets and their chosen locations. So actually, they don’t give any freedom, and then they say ‘we asked you but you never want to participate’. (Luca)

Luca seems to question the sincerity of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation and argues that collaboration with them is only possible on the organization's terms, which they regard as a 'lack of freedom'. Thus, for Luca, the 'solidarity' that Lucien Spee talks about, i.e. providing funding, is not enough. Movements like Black Pride were born from dissatisfaction with the collaboration with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. As I already referred to in the previous chapter, in an interview with online magazine *ExpresZo*, Black Pride founder Naomie Pieter explains that two years before Black Pride's first event in 2020, she already tried to start a Black Pride *within* Pride Amsterdam, but:

There was no space for Black Pride within Amsterdam Pride. It was too political for them. There was no space for that. (Naomie Pieter in *ExpresZo*, 2020, translated from Dutch).

The collaboration with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation was thus experienced as difficult by people like Naomie Pieter, making her eventually mobilize separately and found her own organization, Black Pride. These experiences of both Luca and Naomie suggest that if you as a group or individual do not fit within the Foundation's terms, collaboration is difficult. In contrast, Pride Amsterdam founder William, who is now part of the cultural committee within Pride Amsterdam, tells me:

We are never bothered by the main organization. They are not going to tell us you can't do this, you can do this. [...] And the board, that is above that, we almost never see them. (William)

So, William experiences the collaboration with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation differently, but this might have to do with the fact that the events his culture committee is organizing, fits within the Foundation's view of what Pride should look like. As Conway (2023) argues for Pride in Hong Kong, Pride is a space for ideological contestations, about different 'regimes of truth', which he understands in the way Foucault defines it: as socially constructed understandings of truth, embedded in power relations, in which certain actors, like the state, media, and commercial companies, have a hegemonic position in influencing which discourses are dominant and understood as 'true' (Foucault, 2001). Conway argues that in many societies today, these regimes of truth are shaped by capitalism, and that this is the case as well for Pride events (Conway, 2023, pp. 738-739). Yet, Conway also states that Pride events are not completely absorbed by the logics of capitalism, and that protests and demonstrations at Pride events are moments of struggle between different regimes of truth (Ibid.).

Di Felicianantonio (2016), looking at the case of Pride events in Italy, states that the narrative of Pride being completely depoliticized, mainstreamed, and commodified, is short-sighted, as it overlooks Pride events in the Global South, which often are very politicized and contentious, and Pride events in Global North's peripheries (Di Felicianantonio, 2016, p. 97). Di Felicianantonio mentions the USA, Germany, and the Netherlands as countries where perhaps this idea of depoliticized Prides, especially in the capital cities, is true, but that we should consider other places as well (Ibid., p. 104). Yet, I would argue that in Amsterdam as well, which Di Felicianantonio would perhaps call a 'Gay Mecca' (Ibid.), the story of a completely depoliticized Pride is too simple. Yes, Pride Amsterdam has been founded as a non-political event, in which consumerism, commercial activity, and celebration have been central from the start. However, as I will argue in this chapter, by looking at the case of the movement We

Reclaim Our Pride, there have been moments of confrontation and struggle in Pride Amsterdam as well. As Uitermark and Nicholls (2014) and Lamusse (2016) argue, based on the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, these are the moments of ‘politics’, in which assumed consensus is questioned and in which it is revealed that ‘consensus’ usually means the exclusion of certain people and bodies who do not fit within a certain regime of truth: “Politics is an interruption of that order” (Lamusse, 2016, p. 53). While Rancière understands these moments of politics as spontaneous moments in which people suddenly mobilize, I follow Uitermark and Nicholls (2014) in their notion of politics as a process, in which we should look at the role of (urban) space and the relations in this space (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 973).

Thus, while politics is a reaction to assumed consensus, it should not be seen as existing separately from this status quo (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 973). We can see this clearly in the case of the Amsterdam queer movement. Movements like Black Pride have been founded *in reaction to* the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, while previously having tried to work together with the Foundation. As became clear in the previous chapter, the municipality plays a powerful role in shaping the queer movement in Amsterdam, and grassroots movements as well often need to work together with the municipality in order to survive financially. Yet, the municipality has also reacted to dissatisfaction among many queer activist groups with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation and has created the opportunities for a change of Pride. All in all, the status quo and the reaction to this status quo are not separate entities. These actors are entangled in complex ways. ‘Politics’ can be expressed in relatively spontaneous moments – like We Reclaim Our Pride’s action during Pride Walk 2021 –, yet, they are the outcome of longer processes of mobilization, in which relations between different actors in a city are crucial.

As I discussed in chapter 1, criticism on the Dutch political culture of consensus exists, stating that oftentimes, this political culture actually marginalizes dissident voices, and that consensus is based on the deliberation between elites (Duyvendak, 1996; Seidman, 1997). We Reclaim Our Pride's statement about Lucien Spee's interview echoes this critique, by stating that the Pride Amsterdam Foundation and Lucien Spee have 'monopoly positions' and are 'silencing critical voices'. The domination of white gay men within the Amsterdam queer movement, and especially within the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, is a crucial point of criticism for many queer activists, and a reason for groups like Black Pride to organize separately from the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. Celebration and whiteness have been at the core of Pride Amsterdam for a long time, potentially hidden by a notion of 'consensus'. These dominations, and assumed consensus, are questioned more and more, with people arguing that Pride should mean something *else* than 'just' celebration, namely that Pride should be centralizing protest. We Reclaim Our Pride's 'intervention' during Pride Walk 2021 was a clear call for this different meaning of Pride.

3.2 We Reclaim Our Pride

We Reclaim Our Pride (WROP) is a group consisting of multiple queer organizations, movements, and individuals, that started mobilizing already before Pride Walk 2021. As the name suggests, WROP was founded as a critical reaction to the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. Thus, the existence of WROP is relational, which their Instagram biography makes clear: "Bring Pride back to the fight for our liberation, instead of a commercial party. We can't be free until we're all free". Pride Amsterdam is seen as a 'commercial party', while WROP believes Pride should be about protest and fighting for liberation, therefore positioning themselves as different from Pride Amsterdam. During 2021's Pride Walk, after taking over the Walk's front position, members of WROP yelled slogans and carried signs with anti-

capitalist (“not your marketing strategy”), anti-police violence (“police violence is not an accident”), anti-IND³ (“stop deporting queer refugees”), and pro-Palestine (“you can’t pinkwash occupation, #FreePalestine”) texts, reflecting the commitment to including multiple struggles and causes in one movement (We Reclaim Our Pride, 2021).

I have interviewed – separately from each other – two members of We Reclaim Our Pride, who both participated in, and helped organizing, the 2021 Pride Walk demonstration: Layla and Ellie. Layla is a 23-year-old bisexual Dutch-North-African cis-gender woman, and Ellie is a 25-year-old white Dutch gender-fluid person. In addition, I interviewed Nikki, a 48-year-old white Dutch gay woman, who is one of the organizers of Pride Walk, and board member of the Homomonument – a memorial site in the Amsterdam city center dedicated to the commemoration of persecuted queer people – foundation, and the couple Denise and Agnes, both 62-year-old white Dutch lesbian women, who have been active in the organization of Pride Amsterdam for years and who were walking in one of the front groups of Pride Walk when WROP took over the front position. So, my reconstruction of this event, and people’s perceptions of it, is based on the accounts of these five people, who were all physically present but belonging to different groups and organizations, plus press statements and pictures released by the Pride Amsterdam organization and WROP. In addition, I have asked most of my interviewees to reflect on the event, with some of them having participated in Pride Walk 2021, and some of them not. From the latter group, some of them did know about the event, and some of them heard about it from me for the first time. By discussing WROP’s ‘intervention’ in Pride Walk 2021, I hope to shine a light on how activism can be understood differently by groups and individuals, why these different understandings become particularly

³ The Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service. This institution decides which refugees and migrants are allowed to stay in the Netherlands and which ones are not. The IND has been criticized for years by several queer groups for not taking queer refugees seriously and for using Western viewpoints on queerness.

contentious, and how the understandings of these differences are steeped in morality.

I meet Ellie in a café on one of the campuses of the University of Amsterdam. They are an enthusiastic person, immediately starting to talk in a lively manner. Ellie tells me that they lived abroad for a number of years, for their studies, and how when they returned to the Netherlands, they actively searched for ways to ‘make their life queer’, thus joining groups and organizations like a queer book club, a queer skate club, a queer choir, and a queer boxing club. It was through the latter that they became involved in We Reclaim Our Pride in 2021. Besides wanting to support their friends, their main reason to join the WROP protest was to criticize the, in their opinion, commercial character of Pride Amsterdam. They explained to me how that day, 7 August 2021, developed for them:

We gathered in the Oosterpark⁴, when the Pride Walk had already started. My task for the day was to stand on the lookout, on the corner, to see when they would be coming our way. So, when they were coming, I had to say, guys they’re coming, and then we all appeared from the park. The group all the way at the front of the march was Dykes on Bikes, which are all old *‘potten’* [dykes], and they were all very angry. They were thinking like, what are you doing here? [...] Behind them were all the walking people. There was one person who was like ‘cool, join us!’. And there were police, who were first very aggressive, but when the people of Pride Walk were saying that we could join it was okay. [...] And the Walk was actually really fun. It felt very cool, like we were actually there. (Ellie)

So, WROP did not join the Walk at the meeting point in the Martin Luther King park, in the south of Amsterdam, where everyone else joined, but took over the front position at a later point in the march. According to Ellie, this was both a tactical and an ideological choice. The front position of Pride Walk had for a long time been taken by a few specific groups, namely

⁴ A park in the eastern part of Amsterdam.

Dykes on Bikes – a group of lesbian women on motorbikes –, the Pride Amsterdam Foundation board, and the Zero Flags project, which is an organization carrying the flags of countries where homosexuality is in the criminal code. It would have been likely that WROP taking the front position would not have been accepted would they have tried to take it the ‘polite way’. Second, Ellie explains, since WROP is about ‘reclaiming space’ – a frequently used saying by queer movements, often meaning the claiming of (public) space where certain groups have historically been excluded –, taking over the front position unexpectedly, made that message stronger, thus using space to convey political meaning-making (Milani, 2015). We can say that WROP used the aspects of activism as an ethical practice that Dave (2012) describes: it questioned social norms, inside and outside the queer community, especially related to capitalism, racism, and colonialism. It came up with alternative messages to Pride Walk’s messages, which in their eyes were not focused enough on the questioning of these norms, by connecting issues of sexuality to ‘other’ types of struggles, like racism, classism, and ableism. And finally, it used creative practices, like taking over the front position of the Walk, to do so.

In critiquing Pride Walk, and by stating how their message is *different* from the supposed messages dominating Pride in Amsterdam, WROP conveyed their understandings of what queer activism should look like and focus on and connected their practices of activism to that. The fact that the order in which groups walk in Pride Walk matters – with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation board as taking one of the front positions – shows how space takes on a central role in WROP’s intervention. One of my interviewees who was walking in the front of the march told me that WROP was more than welcome to participate in the Walk, but that they were not allowed to walk *in front*. The fact that WROP took exactly this position, at one point also sitting on the ground, suggests the coming together of politics and space,

which Milani (2015) calls (sexual) citizenship. WROP spatially disrupted an event that had been taking place in a certain form for years, and that was approved by state institutions like the municipality and the police, which explains the controversy the intervention evoked.

Ellie's feelings about the Walk were relatively positive, apart from the reaction of Dykes on Bikes and the police. When I asked Nikki, one of the main organizers of Pride Walk, about that day, she was very eager to talk about it. According to her, the actions of WROP reflected exactly what Pride should be about, telling me that she started organizing the Pride Walk in 2012 exactly because of the need of a more democratic, horizontal event during Pride. While the Canal Parade is good for international visibility of Amsterdam, she says, the aim of Pride Walk is that everybody can participate and join in. Nikki received a phone call on the morning of the day Pride Walk 2021 was taking place, with the announcement that WROP would take over the front position of the Walk. Security asked her if she was okay with this, and she confirmed. Nikki was one of the people Ellie mentioned, who welcomed WROP with open arms, even using a megaphone to shout things like "Reclaim our Pride!" and "Let's celebrate Pride together!". In contrast, according to Nikki, the members of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation board, were less welcoming:

They don't really get it. They think alternative leftist people... It doesn't fit in their view, because they themselves vote VVD or D66⁵. Let's say it like that, let's talk about political culture. I understand that because of that, they [WROP] are not heard, and I know they want a voice, and that is what Pride is about. (Nikki)

⁵ The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy and the Democrats 66 Party. Both (neo)liberal political parties in the Netherlands, with VVD being on the right-wing end of the spectrum and D66 being a moderate or center party.

So, Nikki already points towards some tension between Pride Amsterdam and WROP during the Walk. However, the main conflict developed afterwards. On 10 August 2021, three days after Pride Walk, the Pride Amsterdam Foundation board released a statement on Facebook, in which it distanced itself from We Reclaim Our Pride. In this statement, the WROP protest is referred to as a ‘counter demonstration’. The statement also expresses that because the Pride Amsterdam Foundation decided, in conversation with the municipality of Amsterdam and the police, to act in a ‘de-escalating way’, which meant that they allowed WROP to continue walking with them, it “may have appeared to people that this was one demonstration organized by Pride Amsterdam, while in reality, these were two separately organized demonstrations” (Pride Amsterdam, 2021). Finally, the Pride Amsterdam Foundation’s statement distances itself from certain things that have been said by WROP, which the Foundation refers to as discriminatory and exclusive (Ibid.). The statement does not include which slogans these were exactly, but like I stated before, according to my interviewees, it is likely that it refers to the pro-Palestine statements that were made by WROP participants.

The Pride Amsterdam Foundation’s statement is an attempt to separate itself from WROP, using language like ‘counter demonstration’ and ‘two separate demonstrations’. Nikki, who worked closely together with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation as one of the organizers of Pride Walk for years, was not happy with this statement, and even told the Foundation’s board that, in her eyes, releasing this statement was a bad idea, since it meant taking positions, and abandoning WROP. Yet, the board still released the statement. On 12 August 2021, We Reclaim Our Pride replied with their own statement on their Instagram page, describing it as “a statement from our side after the lies of Pride Amsterdam” (We Reclaim Our Pride, 2021). In this statement, WROP claims that they never intended to organize a counter demonstration, and that it only aimed to join the walk as a block. WROP refers to

Pride Amsterdam as being an “exclusive and colonized bubble which is reconfirmed by separating us from the walk, asking the police to form a line behind us and pressuring us to walk fast and take a different route” (Ibid.). In addition, the statement contained a list of points WROP wishes to address, including the IND’s “inhumane asylum policy”, “ethnic profiling used by the police” (Ibid.), the use of language by Dutch political parties about inclusiveness, but not putting this to practice, and the use of pinkwashing by the Israeli government. Finally, an explanation of the difference between anti-Zionism and antisemitism was included in the statement (Ibid.).

By claiming that their demonstration was never meant as a counter demonstration, WROP is attempting to negotiate with and transform dominant ideologies and institutions in the Amsterdam queer movement. Instead of completely rejecting the Pride Walk, WROP uses Pride Walk’s structures to express its messages. In addition, WROP does not reject the notion of Pride, one of the most powerful institutions within the queer movement in the Netherlands, altogether. Instead, it argues that Pride should be *transformed*.

WROP thus tries to create a “new world”, as Muñoz (1999) calls it, by using existing structures, discourses, and ideologies (Muñoz, 1999). Muñoz makes the distinction, based on the taxonomy of French philosopher Michel Pêcheux, between three ways in which people interact with, and are formed by dominant ideologies and ideological practices: identification, in which a subject aligns with dominant ideologies; counteridentification, in which a subject rejects dominant ideologies and places itself in opposition to it; and disidentification, in which a subject neither aligns with nor rejects dominant ideologies, but instead attempts to transform dominant ideologies by simultaneously working with and against them (Ibid., p. 11). It seems that activist groups like WROP do not place themselves in complete opposition

to dominant ideologies of queer politics in Dutch society, in which institutions like Pride Amsterdam play a central role. Instead, they try to negotiate with these dominant ideologies and to transform them in order to become more inclusive. Muñoz understands the concept of disidentification in this sense as a ‘survival strategy’ for minority subjects (Ibid., p. 5). Yet, this is not a simple and straightforward strategy, and Muñoz describes the struggles that come with identity formation, in which people always partly identify with ideologies, frameworks, and styles of activism, and partly always counteridentify or only in part identify with these ideologies, frameworks, and styles of activism. As we will see later in this chapter, in section 3.5, there are often internal struggles, and thus ambivalence, within individuals between personal values and political views, which come with emotions and feelings.

WROP also *spatially* exposed different meaning-making processes of activism (Milani, 2015), as the group made a physical distinction between their type of – disruptive – activism and the activism of for example the Pride Amsterdam Foundation board, supported by the police, which was now not able to walk in the front position anymore. WROP’s intervention eventually helped setting a transformation of Pride Walk in motion, thus suggesting how conflict between different notions of activism can create new forms and relations of collaboration. Before I discuss this transformation in more detail in chapter 5, I will examine the tensions between WROP and the Pride Amsterdam Foundation in 2021 more closely, arguing that these tensions can partly be explained by different understandings – and moral views and relations attached to those – of activism, specifically related to binary views of activism like ‘single-issue activism’ versus ‘queer activism’ and ‘activism in the streets’ versus ‘activism within institutions’, and with different notions of ‘politics’ becoming salient and contentious.

3.3 Commercialization of Pride and queer activism

The critique of the commercialization of Pride that WROP expressed in their protest and in their statement, is one that is not specific to the Netherlands or Amsterdam. In other countries, similar critiques can be found. Roderick Ferguson (2019), when describing the queer movement in the United States, states that the queer movement (or ‘gay movement’) started to be closely linked with capitalism and neoliberalism since the 1970s and 1980s. The emancipation of the white gay man was seen as located in capitalism and assimilationism (Ferguson, 2019, p. 110), and ‘other’ queer people, especially queer people of color, poor and working-class queer people, and trans people, were a threat to this potential for emancipation. This led to a separation between ‘gay’ issues and issues related to race, class, and gender, therefore making the US queer movement a ‘single-issue movement’ (Ibid., p. 111).

Similar developments can be found in the Dutch queer movement, with the most dominating messages being based on an idea of assimilationism, i.e., an idea of having equal rights to heterosexual citizens (Wekker, 2020, p. 164). According to Wekker (2020), the gay movement in the Netherlands has been dominated by white gay men, not directly threatening heteronormative structures, but trying to fit within these structures. One aspect of this is that the gay movement, and in particular Pride Amsterdam, has been interwoven with commercial activity (Ibid., p. 168). In my interview with William, co-founder of Pride Amsterdam, he confirmed that Pride Amsterdam has indeed from the very start been closely intertwined with business. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Pride Amsterdam was founded in the 1990s as a way to encourage (gay) tourism in Amsterdam, and finds its roots in Gay Business Amsterdam, a foundation meant to promote gay businesses and organizations in Amsterdam. Over the years, this connection to specifically *gay* business was loosened, and Pride Amsterdam has been collaborating more and more with big multinational companies, like

Booking.com, which is one of Pride's main sponsors, and companies like T-Mobile, Delta Airlines, and TikTok, which have participated with their own boats in the Canal Parade. Although these companies do have to adhere to certain conditions to be allowed to participate, like having LGBTQIA+ inclusive policies (Pride Amsterdam Foundation, 2023), many of the people I interviewed question the participation of these businesses, suggesting they would take away space from 'the community'. In my interview with Charlie, who is an artist of 30-something years old, and who is bi-gender, black, and living in the Netherlands since about ten years, originally from the Caribbean, they say:

What is Pride really about? Is it about visibility of the queer movement? Or is it one big advertisement show for companies who want to show off with their boats? For me it doesn't make any impact. I compare it with Christmas: is it really about... Or is it just about selling stuff? (Charlie)

In contrast, the people I talked to who have been involved in the organization of Pride Amsterdam defended the participation of these companies by stating that their sponsor money is needed, especially for the Canal Parade, which has grown into a mass event, meaning that private security is needed, besides the security the police offer, which costs a lot of money. In addition, the money these bigger companies pay for their participation partly funds the participation of other boats, particularly those of smaller queer organizations and businesses.

WROP is a reaction to Pride's commercialization, as their Instagram biography states, thus expressing their activism in a relational way, as *different from* the discourse, narratives, and politics dominating, in their eyes, the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. WROP is based on queer activism, in which struggles are linked to each other. As I discussed in the introduction, queer activism in this case does not only express political dedication to fighting marginalization

because of sexuality and gender, but also includes fights like anti-racism, anti-ableism, and anti-ageism. Some social scientists and activists state that queer activism can go beyond connecting struggles that people *within* the queer community face, and that coalitions can be built with people and groups who potentially do not belong to sexual or gender minorities, but who are excluded from heteronormative, neoliberal structures in other ways (Cohen, 1997, p. 440). Cohen (1997) provides the example of single mothers on welfare, who do not fit within the heteronormative, neoliberal ideal of the white middle-class heterosexual family (Ibid., p. 449), thus arguing that the binary ‘straight’ versus ‘queer’ is too simplified to understand how queer activism can also include heterosexual people who are positioned on the fringes of heteronormative society (Ibid., p. 452).

Hence, in contrast to single-issue activism, which focuses solely on the struggle of queer people coming from their position as a sexual or gender minority, queer activism ties together a myriad of causes its activism aims to fight for. The slogan “We are here, we are queer, refugees are welcome here!” which I have heard at multiple protests, illustrates this connection of causes very well. The difference between single-issue activism and queer activism can also be seen in the way in which a movement like WROP literally calls itself ‘queer’, while the Pride Amsterdam Foundation almost never uses this term but instead describes Pride as an event for the ‘LGBT community’ – although it must be said that at the time of finishing this dissertation, so after my fieldwork ended, the acronym ‘LGBTQIA+’ is also sometimes used on the website of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation.

Ellie, who helped organizing the WROP protest during the 2021 Pride Walk, connects the aims of WROP to their understanding of the word ‘queer’, when they tell me:

Queer is not something just about sexuality, it is much broader. It is anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, pro-Palestine, anti-racist, I can list a number of things. So, in a certain way, Gay Pride⁶ represents a form of homonationalism. There is nothing against the existence of gay marriage, but it does not stop there, and I think people have different ideas about when the struggle ends. [...] And I think that that is the ‘reclaim’, to say we are not done at all. (Ellie)

So, for Ellie, the word ‘queer’ is about sexuality, but also about race, gender, colonialism, and capitalism. In contrast, the emphasis on ‘LGBT’ by the Pride Amsterdam Foundation reflects its understanding of Pride and its activism as connected very specifically to sexuality and gender identity, thus as single-issue activism, in which values like equality and acceptance are central (Ferguson, 2019). The term ‘queer’ is employed by some of my interlocutors to separate oneself from the single-issue activism of organizations like the Pride Amsterdam Foundation and to make clear that queer activism is not only about ‘LGBT’ issues.

Dev, a 21-year-old cis-gender queer Indian Malaysian man, who has been active in a queer activist group focusing on LGBTQIA+ discrimination, and who has participated in Black Pride events, tells me:

If you are a queer person of color, discrimination is worse than when you’re just a person of color [...] There are so many more things than the facts that we now have gay marriage and can celebrate Pride. And the ideal queer movement for me is an intersectional movement. (Dev)

Both Ellie and Dev refer to the word ‘queer’, and Dev here advocates for intersectionality as needing to be central in queer activism, specifically using the concept to describe his ideal

⁶ They mean Pride Amsterdam by this. Between 2006 and 2014, the organization organizing Pride was called ProGay, and between 2014 and 2016, the organization was called Amsterdam Gay Pride.

queer movement, reflecting his commitment to political intersectionality which recognizes differences in the amount of discrimination different groups face. Both also mention gay marriage and Pride in the same sentence. Dev evokes these two examples to argue that the fact that gay marriage and Pride exist does not mean that all queer people can live free and happy lives. Ferguson (2019) states that a focus on gay marriage within the queer movement exemplifies the liberal, single-issue, assimilationist gay movement, often focusing on equal rights, which means equal to heterosexuals. Ellie, by evoking the concept of ‘homonationalism’ – meaning a form of nationalism in which certain forms and subjects of queerness are included, based on normative notions of race, class, and religion (Puar, 2007) –, potentially attempts to picture Pride Amsterdam as (re)producing these normative notions, in which whiteness, middle- and upper-classness, and secularism dominate. By stating that gay marriage and Pride are not enough to achieve queer liberation, Ellie and Dev try to strengthen their argument for the necessity of connecting struggles, while at the same time suggesting that the current Pride Amsterdam Foundation is not doing this enough.

Evans and Lépinard (2020) argue that the concept of ‘intersectionality’, although having existed for a while already in social movements like the queer and feminist movements, is recently used more and more as a form of identity in these movements (Evans & Lépinard, 2020, p. 1). As I discussed in the introduction, according to them, there are three main uses of ‘intersectionality’ in queer movements. First, the concept of intersectionality can be used as a way of identifying a movement, of creating a collective identity, making it therefore also possible for movements to differentiate themselves from other movements. Second, intersectionality can be understood as a necessity for creating successful coalitions between groups within movements, since focusing on intersectionality means looking at different issues that play a role for different groups of people. Finally, intersectionality can be used as a

strategy to ensure inclusivity within movements, and therefore to also being able to present yourself as an inclusive movement (Ibid., p. 5). In my interviews, it is especially the first use that I came across, with some of my interlocutors utilizing it as a signifier to identify their activism in a certain way. Often, intersectionality was used as a term to differentiate their understanding of activism from ‘other’ understandings of activism. For example, Dev tells me, what I ask him what he thinks about movements like Black Pride, which have mobilized separately from institutionalized organizations like Pride Amsterdam:

I don't think that's hypocritical or counter-intuitive, because if they don't mobilize, there won't be attention for those issues. You know those people who say 'I'm not racist, I don't see color'. In my opinion that's a form of racism, that is color-blind racism. And that's still racism. You need to recognize those issues to tackle those issues, if we want to live in a society that is always open, that is always intersectional. (Dev)

Here, Dev again uses the term intersectional, now to describe the ideal society for him, arguing that people who do not focus specifically on issues like racism, therefore who do not centralize intersectionality in their activism, are complicit in the continuation of things like racism. Thus, intersectionality is then employed by Dev to discursively signify his understanding of queer activism, and to differentiate this understanding of ‘other’ understandings of activism. To be clear, this does not mean that my interlocutors simply use ‘intersectionality’ as some sort of buzz word. Many of them explain the idea of paying attention to the intersection of issues like race and sexuality when they argue for the importance of intersectionality in queer activism, and the necessity for movements to commit to actively making the most marginalized groups within their movements more visible, therefore also using the term in the third way that Evans and Lépinard (2020) describe: as a way of creating an inclusive movement. Kaya, who is an international student in the

Netherlands, originally from the United States, and who identifies as a bisexual person of mixed race, even mentions Kimberlé Crenshaw, who is the critical race scholar who coined the term intersectionality in 1989, when she explains to me how without a focus on intersectionality, the queer movement would be dominated by white people:

“Yeah, it’s Kimberlé Crenshaw all over again, right?” (Kaya)

In addition, quite a few of my white interviewees, and also some of the younger gay men, expressed an awareness of their positions, which are privileged in certain ways. For example, Pedro, who is a 21-year-old international student from Brazil, living and studying in The Hague, and who identifies as a white Latino gay man, tells me he has recently put effort in understanding how as a man, ‘even’ if he is gay, he is still part of the patriarchal system, which means that some of his female friends are less comfortable around him than they would be around women. Pedro seems to be very aware of the privilege he harbors as a cis-gender man, and gets very annoyed with gay men who, according to him, only focus on the fact that they are gay, therefore facing oppression in one way, but not realizing their privilege as cis-gender men. In the next chapter, I will dive deeper into this category production of ‘types’ of people and activists within the queer movement, and the moral expectations that come with these categories. For now, I hope to have highlighted how the concepts of ‘queer’ and ‘intersectionality’ are used by people within the queer movement as a way of identifying their understanding of activism, and with that of differentiating this understanding of activism from ‘other’ understandings of activism, especially activism that solely focuses on fighting oppression related to sexuality, i.e. single-issue activism.

3.4 Which politics fit in Pride?

3.4.1 'The political'

One of these 'other' understandings of activism I found in my interview with Denise, a 62-year-old white lesbian woman, and who has been active with her partner Agnes as volunteers in Pride Amsterdam for years and is now involved in the Zero Flags Project: a project drawing attention to countries where homosexuality is in the criminal code. I interviewed the couple in their lovely home in the west of Amsterdam, where they live together with their dogs. Denise sees the connection of struggles in a different way. As I already referred to in the previous chapter, when I asked her about her opinion on WROP and its intervention in Pride Walk 2021, which she witnessed from close by as Zero Flags was one of the front groups in the march, she states:

It was not an exclusively gay demonstration. It was more a political demonstration, for example also anti-Israel, pro-Palestine, and there were more things that have nothing to do with Pride. [...] This was a demonstration about everything that these people stand for. [...] I found that a bit unfortunate, and yeah, you are kind of undermining the Pride then. (Denise)

Two very interesting things can be said about this quote. First of all, for Denise, anti-Israel, pro-Palestine activism does not belong in Pride Walk. For her, these issues are not about 'gayness', which is completely the opposite of how Ellie understands 'queerness'. Ellie even told me they believe the Palestinian flag is a queer flag. So, for them, the pro-Palestine movement is entirely interwoven with the queer movement, whereas Denise understands these as separate. Interestingly enough, Layla, a 23-year-old cis-gender bisexual Dutch-North-African woman, who also participated in the WROP protest, expressed her reservations

about some of the pro-Palestine statements made, as well:

At one point it was about Gaza. And I am trying to see the connection. For example, if you're talking about the situation in the Netherlands and about refugees and the way the IND deals with LGBT people, I can see that connection. I understand that. With racism, I also understand it. Then I think, okay, you're Moroccan and you're gay, then you're double fucked, to say it like that. Also because of the way other queer people, white queer people, interact with you. I understand that connection. [...] But some things, like about Gaza, that was something I encountered with We Reclaim Our Pride... Then I was thinking, now we are digressing. The Palestine discussion, the Palestinian question, we have to discuss it, but I don't see the connection to discuss that now. [...] The Israeli occupation and the Palestinians, I understand that you're talking about that. But at some point, people just started shouting 'Gaza, Gaza!'. I understand what they're trying to do, but... (Layla)

So, even within WROP, people might differ in opinion about the way in which the struggle for Palestinian liberation should be included in their protest, with Layla believing critique of the Israeli regime, which she described in another part of the interview as using 'pinkwashing', is needed, but simultaneously thinking that some people in WROP lost the connection to queerness. This shows that the binary between 'single-issue politics' and 'queer activism' is not as simple as it may seem, and that within queer activism, connections with certain struggles can be understood differently from connections with other struggles.

Secondly, Denise creates an opposition between a 'gay demonstration' and a 'political demonstration', with classifying WROP as the latter. The word 'political' is crucial here, since Pride Walk is advertised as the protest march of Pride Amsterdam, and many people, including Denise, use the walk as a moment to raise awareness for, for example, people living in countries where homosexuality is in the criminal code. Yet, it seems like Denise perceives this as a different kind of politics than the politics WROP stands for, suggesting that the single-issue politics that Ferguson (2019) talks about, is sometimes equated with apoliticality.

These single-issue politics, often focusing on equal rights, fit within the (neo)liberal worldview dominating the US society – and as I discussed in chapter 1, I would argue this worldview dominates Dutch society as well –, and is therefore more ‘acceptable’ and ‘respectable’, making it ‘less political’. WROP on the other hand represents the less ‘acceptable’ and ‘respectable’ politics and is therefore seen as ‘more political’.

These notions of the role of ‘the political’ in the queer movement make different understandings of activism contentious, since people have very different interpretations of what ‘the political’ means and make moral judgments of what political struggles have a place in the queer movement, making clear that moral frameworks and politics are closely connected (Fassin, 2012, p. 9). In addition, ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ seem to not only refer to the types of political struggles that should or should not be included in the queer movement, but also to the level of conflict that should be allowed at events like Pride Walk. As Mouffe (1999) argues, politics always involves conflict, which she sees as a positive thing, as long as the conflict is seen as between adversaries, who do not agree with each other but who do both accept each other’s rights in the realm of democracy. She calls this type of conflict ‘agonism’ (Mouffe, 1999, p. 755). Yet, as I discussed in chapter 1, Dutch political and social culture is very much grounded in a belief in consensus building, which makes the acceptance of agonism in this culture difficult.

Denise holds particular views about what kind of politics should be included in Pride Walk and what politics should not, suggesting that the queer politics, and activist tactics, that WROP carried out could even work against the fight for queer liberation, stating that WROP was ‘undermining’ the Pride. In my interview with Thomas, a 22-years old white bisexual

man, he expressed a similar sentiment:

Let me start by saying that I find it very clumsy, I mean... amateurish is perhaps too heavy of a word, but that's kind of what you can see... The way they [WROP] handled it. Because I think they have some valid points. So, if they just handled it in a different way, then they maybe could have achieved more than they did now. So, I can imagine that Pride, the official Pride [Pride Amsterdam Foundation] is distancing itself from that. (Thomas)

Even though Thomas is not necessarily critiquing the intersectional and queer politics WROP stands for, he believes the tactics of the activist group are 'awkward' and potentially 'unprofessional'. People thus not only hold moral notions of which political struggles should be included in Pride and which ones should not, but also about the way in which these politics are addressed in practices. Dutch political and social culture is very much built around notions of 'not acting too crazy', 'not being too disruptive', and 'polderen', meaning the concentration on deliberation instead of groups openly opposing each other. Denise's and Thomas' views of WROP as 'unprofessional' and 'too political' fit very well in these elements of Dutch socio-political culture, with WROP being seen as going against this culture.

3.4.2 'Activism' as harming emancipation

The different understandings of the queer movement and the role of 'the political' in this, becomes extremely clear when we look at an opinion piece published in Amsterdam newspaper *Parool* in August 2024. The piece, written by Pride Amsterdam founders Ernst Verhoeven, Peter Kramer, and Siep de Haan, focuses specifically on the use of Palestinian flags at Pride events in Amsterdam, which, according to the three men, 'have nothing to do

with LGBTQ emancipation’ (Verhoeven, Kramer & De Haan, 2024). In the text, the authors make a distinction between ‘activism’ and ‘emancipation’, arguing that the purpose of Pride is the latter, which can be reached through visibility. Verhoeven, Kramer and De Haan state that the presence of ‘politics’ or ‘activism’ – with the Palestinian flag as the symbol of these politics and activism – might scare off companies who have acted as sponsors and business partners of Pride Amsterdam. Finally, the authors argue that the municipality is responsible for the separation between ‘rainbow emancipation’ events like Pride and ‘political activism’, stating that ‘politically motivated activists’ should have their ‘own’ week in which they can organize events, separate from Pride Amsterdam (Ibid.). The fact that this opinion piece was written by the founders of Pride is not very surprising, as I showed in the previous chapter how Pride in Amsterdam has from its start been organized as a consciously depoliticized event. It seems like, in line with Ferguson’s (2019) analysis of the queer movement in the US, Verhoeven, Kramer and De Haan hold the view that ‘emancipation’ of LGBTQ people is best reached if they are accepted by (heterosexual) broader society, in which neoliberal actors and values are prioritized. This reveals a tension within the Amsterdam queer movement around what queer, or LGBT, liberation means, but around also what type of political strategies are needed to achieve this liberation (Milani, 2015, p. 445). These two issues are of course closely linked. Assimilation into heteronormative society requires different political tactics and strategies than the complete transformation of heteronormative society, after all.

3.4.3 Types of politics that do not fit in intersectional and queer activism

The moral judgments of the types of politics that *are* accepted in queer, or LGBT, activism and the types of politics that *are not* are not only a matter of groups like WROP being seen as ‘too political’ by powerful actors like the founders of Pride. It also works the other way around, with groups focusing on intersectional and queer activism making clear that certain

types of activism are not ‘right’ in their eyes. Right before Pride Walk 2022 – then still organized in collaboration with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation –, it was announced that a political group called ‘De Roze Leeuw’ (‘The Pink Lion’) was planning on participating in the march. De Roze Leeuw is an organization dedicated to the improvement of the position of homosexuals, lesbians, and bisexuals, focusing – according to their own website – on the ‘responsibility’ of these homosexuals, lesbians, and bisexuals themselves (Stichting De Roze Leeuw, 2024). The group explicitly states to represent the ‘LGB’ part of the community, therefore consciously excluding trans people, but also intersex people, and asexual people. On their Instagram page, the organization has posted posts in which they explicitly separate the ‘LGB’ from ‘TQIA+’ (Stichting De Roze Leeuw, 2023), and other statements in which especially trans people are criticized. The ‘Q’ of queer is also left out, reflecting again how not everyone sees their activism as ‘queer’. When De Roze Leeuw announced their participation in Pride Walk 2022, the Pride Amsterdam Foundation was criticized by queer activists, stating that De Roze Leeuw is a conservative and transphobic organization, and that Pride Amsterdam should not allow the group to participate in Pride Walk. Stichting Homomonument, which is the organization responsible for organizing Pride Walk, of which my interlocutor Nikki is the chairperson, eventually released its own statement:

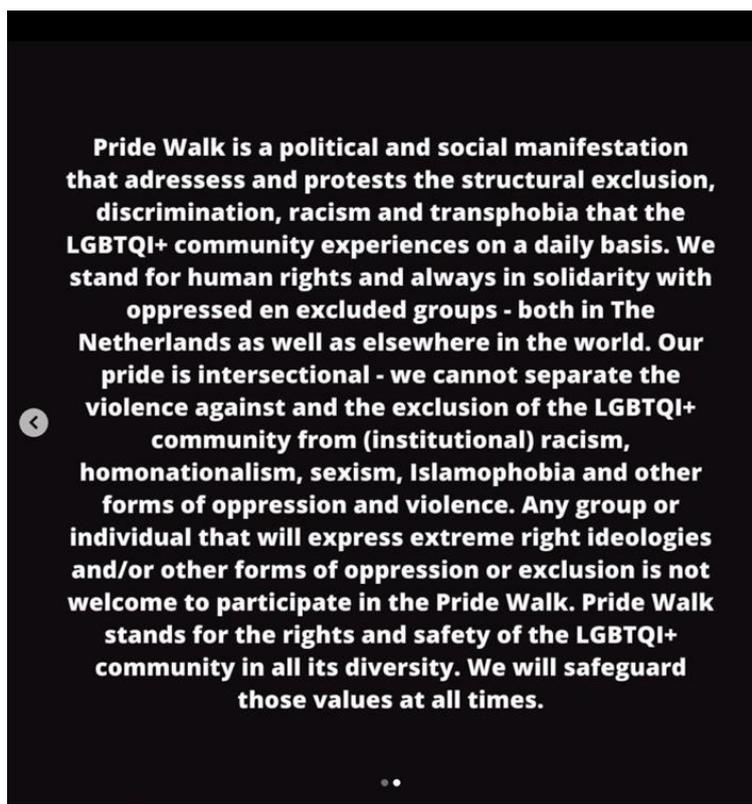


Figure 2: Statement released by Stichting Homomonument on Instagram, 22 July 2022 (Stichting Homomonument, 2022)

Although the statement does not refer to De Roze Leeuw explicitly, it was released during the time in which there was a lot of commotion around De Roze Leeuw's participation in Pride Walk and it seems likely that this statement was a response to this commotion. The statement makes Stichting Homomonument's position very clear, marking Pride Walk as 'political' and 'intersectional' and stating that groups that are oppressive and exclusionary are 'not welcome' at Pride Walk – although concrete actions for this were never announced. On 30 July 2022, De Roze Leeuw released its own statement, in which they referred to Stichting Homomonument's statement, arguing that by releasing this statement, Stichting Homomonument created an unsafe environment for the group, stating that the organization had given into pressure of 'Woke', 'Antifa' and 'extreme-left activism' (Stichting de Roze Leeuw, 2022). After deliberation with the police, De Roze Leeuw decided that it was unsafe for them to

participate in Pride Walk 2022.

This incident makes clear that very different political views exist within the Amsterdam queer community, and that sharing a ‘queer’ identity – with definitely not everyone calling themselves queer – does not mean unity. Groups like De Roze Leeuw, which focus on a very specific part of the queer community, have very different political views and views of activism – in which single-issue politics and assimilation are central, with a focus on being ‘accepted’ by heteronormative society – than groups like We Reclaim Our Pride and Stichting Homomonument, which emphasize the cruciality of intersectionality in activism, and state that it cannot separate this activism from ‘other’ political fights against issues like racism, sexism, and Islamophobia. Although the statement does refer to the ‘LGBTQIA+ community’, and not only uses the word ‘queer’, it very consciously included the letters ‘TQIA+’, in contrast to De Roze Leeuw. The fact that in its statement, Stichting Homomonument speaks of ‘values’ makes clear that these different political views are a matter of *morality*, making that the political and moral are inherently linked (Fassin, 2012, p. 9), particularly in activism, which is why I argue that the political and the moral are very much interwoven in the Amsterdam queer movement.

My interlocutor Tara, a white pansexual woman, who used to be chairperson of ASV Gay, the main LGBTQIA+ student organization in Amsterdam, and who is still active in the organization, participating in Pride Walk several times, suggests:

Within the queer community we are not automatically in favor of the same policy regarding refugees [...]. I think there should be space for other opinions, since your sexuality does not necessarily matter for your political preference. If we start to connect certain political standpoints to the queer community, that can also mean we will be excluding people, even though they are queer. (Tara)

While WROP's Ellie and Zero Flag Project's Denise seem to have opposed understandings of the type of politics that should have a place in the queer movement, Tara here suggests that these differences should be able to exist, since 'being queer' is not connected to any particular political views and values, in her opinion. Yet, like I discussed before, for Ellie, queerness *inherently* means a certain type of politics, namely anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-sexist politics, suggesting that queer activism *without* these politics is not 'actual' queer activism. Thus, the concepts of 'the political' and 'politics' seem to play an important role in the contentiousness existing in the Amsterdam queer movement, with people and groups holding different notions of what (a)politicality means, what types of politics should be included in the queer movement and what types of politics should not, and the level of confrontation and conflict that is accepted. These different notions are relational, with people understanding their activism as similar to, or different from, other people's activism, which can lead to tensions and conflicts. As I will explore in more detail in the next section, this relationality includes the production of subjectivities, in which people create certain understandings about themselves as activists, and about others as activists.

3.5 Moral understandings of activists

'Respectability' is a concept that Ferguson (2019) describes as a 'civic ideal', together with things like belonging to the nation state, and participating in the free market (Ferguson, 2019, pp. 24-25). For him, these ideals have been used to mainstream the queer movement, and to create a divide between activists who fit within, and promote, these ideals, and activists who try to connect queer activism to other struggles, and queer people who do not clearly fit within these ideals, especially queer people of color, and poor queer people (Ibid.). In November 2021, I was present at an event called 'The Activist Bar', where activists of different organizations and movements came together to discuss what activism means to

them. Mandy, co-founder of Black Pride, recalled a moment in the summer of 2020, after the major Black Lives Matter protests. A group of representatives from these protests was invited to speak to Mark Rutte, the Dutch Prime Minister at the time. Mandy decided to refuse this invitation. Someone else who *did* go to this conversation, then told her that it might have been a good decision of Mandy not to go, as she might not have been ‘the right person’ to have this conversation with the Prime Minister. At The Activist Bar, Mandy told us that she found this very painful to hear, because it makes it seem like she is not ‘able’ or ‘suitable’ to talk to someone like the Prime Minister – *the* symbol of the system –, in contrast to other people apparently. She stated that her activism, mainly taking place in the streets, is seen as ‘less respectable’ by other activists.

This example brings up the binary ‘activism in the streets’ versus ‘activism within institutions’, which quite a few of the activists I have talked to raised. For example, Taylor, a 33-year-old non-binary queer Dutch-Surinamese person, who is a theatre maker from Rotterdam, but who is active in the Amsterdam world of theatre as well, tells me they believe that although demonstrations are useful, eventually you need to be a part of the political institutions to ‘really’ change something:

As long as you’re not in The Hague⁷... And then I don’t mean on the Malieveld⁸, but I’m talking about the places where decisions are made. (Taylor)

⁷ Although not the capital city, The Hague is the city in the Netherlands where the government, parliament, and ministries are located. The city is therefore understood as the political center of the Netherlands.

⁸ A big field of grass in the city center of The Hague. It is used for events like festivals, but it is also *the* location for the organization of big demonstrations.

Although Taylor later says that they believe demonstration is important as a universal right, they seem to be pessimistic about what small scale protests can achieve when it comes to political change and tells me they believe ‘actual’ protests are things like participating in governmental institutions and requesting subsidies and funding. Mandy’s example of exactly *not* wanting to go to The Hague, illustrates how different notions of activism are related to how people understand ‘the political’ and not only what political messages are seen as more respectable or fitting within civic ideals than other types of politics, but also how different types of *doing* politics and activism are understood. Mandy is seen by others as someone who mainly does her activism ‘in the streets’ instead of ‘within institutions’, and according to her there is a hierarchical way of thinking about activism, with many people seeing activism in the streets as ‘less respectable’ and maybe ‘less serious’ than activism within institutions, thus involving moral judgments about the worth of these types of activism. As ‘polderen’, in which people talk to each other to come to compromises to solve conflicts, is such a crucial aspect of Dutch culture, the rejection of Mandy to take part in this ‘polderen’, by not wanting to talk to the prime minister, and instead centering her activism ‘on the ground’, was seen by some as ‘radical’.

Yet, this experience of differences in moral worth of types of activism, and the tension between activism in the streets versus activism within institutions can also work the other way around. My interview with Floris, a 30-year-old white gay man, illustrates this. On 10 January 2022 I’m meeting Floris at the city library of Amsterdam. Although it is the middle of the winter, the weather is lovely, so we decide to conduct the interview outside, while enjoying the rare sunshine. Floris works for the IND: the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service. This institution decides which refugees and asylum seekers are allowed to stay in the Netherlands and which ones are not. The IND has been criticized for

years by several queer groups for using Western frames and viewpoints on queerness. Floris' work includes judging the asylum applications of queer refugees and asylum seekers.

Floris' partner Ruben is extremely involved in queer activism, and is, as Floris himself puts it, an advocate of 'hard activism', while Floris sees himself as someone who likes to change things from the inside, and as a 'conformist'. This sometimes leads to clashes in their relationship. Floris, because of his relationship with Ruben, and his friendships, moves in 'street-activist' circles, but feels like an outsider in those circles, mainly because of his work for the government. He describes this as an 'internal struggle', stating that the 'hard activism' Ruben advocates for is extremely important but struggling with his own role in this. When I asked him why he struggles with that, he said:

Kind of because I work for the government. That is a factor that makes it difficult. Like, when I'm part of a demonstration and people are shouting 'fuck the police' for example. I work together with the police. That makes it very difficult, plus the fact that I'm not sure if I agree with shouting 'fuck the police'. (Floris)

Again, Floris' work for the government makes him feel like an outsider in activist circles. His internal struggle includes him debating whether he should continue his work for the IND:

That's what I struggle with as well, what I want for the future. Working for the government gives a lot of stability, which is nice for now. But do you then actually stand for something? When you work for the government? Or do you do what is common? Do you just do what is politically correct? (Floris)

Floris's internal battle about the type of activism he believes in, and the values he bases these views on, shows the ambivalence of the issue of identification within activist groups.

Muñoz's (1999) concept of disidentification highlights this ambivalence, showing how this concept is not only about the ways in which activists negotiate with dominant ideologies and institutions – sometimes perhaps because of practical or strategic reasons – but also how this negotiation becomes a 'state of being' within activists, in which there is not a complete identification with dominant ideologies, but also not a complete counteridentification.

People's political stances are not always easy and straightforward, and individuals like Floris can experience a form of 'splitting' in their subjectivity because of the tensions between their moral codes.

The examples of Mandy and Floris show how moral views and judgments of activism can become extremely personal. They also show how these views and judgments work in two ways: while Mandy feels looked down upon because of her 'street activism', Floris feels like an outsider within activist circles because of his work for the government and his more 'conformist' preference for change. In addition, both their positions complicate the binaries of 'activism in the streets' versus 'activism within institutions'. Floris seems to inhabit an uncomfortable position between these two opposites. Mandy later started organizing an alternative Pride, Queer Amsterdam, funded by and organized in collaboration with the Amsterdam municipality, thus moving a bit towards institutional activism. Pride Walk as an event is also situated somewhere in the grey area of these binaries. Yes, it is a demonstration, taking place in the streets of Amsterdam. Yet, it is also part of the very institutionalized Pride Amsterdam Foundation, or better said, it was. Pride Walk became part of the Queer Amsterdam Pride, which took place for the first time in 2023. I will discuss this new Pride in chapter 5, but for now, my aim is to complicate the binaries that are frequently used in

discourse and understandings within activism and argue that they are actually often nuanced.

Several activists I interviewed criticized the fact that Pride Amsterdam is funded by the municipality of Amsterdam. Some of my interviewees regard the fact that the Pride Amsterdam Foundation partly relies on subsidies and sponsor money as a sign of ‘inauthenticity’, and see We Reclaim Our Pride and Black Pride as ‘more authentic’ because they – at the least in the beginning – did not receive any funding from the municipality and were therefore seen as ‘more independent’. However, Black Pride, at least for a period between 2021 and 2023, also received subsidies from the municipality, namely as being a part of the BIPOC LGBTQI+ alliance, which included movements and organizations that focus on queer people of color and queer refugees (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024). In addition, another group called Queer Network Amsterdam, which consists of multiple queer organizations focusing specifically on queer people of color and trans people, and of which Black Pride and some organizations involved in We Reclaim Our Pride are a part, has also received funding from the municipality. This suggests that it is not the fact that the Pride Amsterdam Foundation receives municipal funding *per se* that underlies people’s criticism of the organization. Potentially, it has more to do with the money the Foundation receives from companies, which is seen by many of the activists I talked to as ‘capitalistic’, which they regard as incompatible with queer liberation or even the concept of queerness in general.

At the same time, there seems to be a contradiction between ideology and practicalities at play. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Luca, co-founder of Queer Network Amsterdam, talked to me about the necessity of their network to work together with the municipality of Amsterdam, since they are dependent on their funding, while at the same time being against the interference of formal political institutions, showing the nuanced reality of binary

understandings like ‘activism linked to capital and the state’ and ‘independent activism’.

Queer Network Amsterdam and the organizations that are part of this network simply need municipal funding if they want to survive and organize events, especially because they do not receive money the way the Pride Amsterdam Foundation receives a lot of their funding, through sponsor money from companies. This means that although ideologically, movements and organizations might want to organize completely independently from external political institutions like the Amsterdam municipality, practically they sometimes have to work together with these institutions in order to survive. This shows how activists’ moral and ideological notions of queer activism are always embedded in everyday circumstances, activities, and practicalities, which can sometimes clash with the values and beliefs these activists hold (Nielsen, 2023, p. 206), and can sometimes lead to moments of ‘double morality’ (Heywood, 2018, p. 57), in which activists have to, at least partially, break the moral codes they believe in.

The example of how the actions of We Reclaim Our Pride were perceived by different people, of Mandy’s refusal to talk to the Prime Minister and the way this was seen by other activists, and of Floris’ experience of being an outsider in certain activist circles, point to a certain way in which morality plays a role in activism. Morality in this sense is not only about the norms and values people hold which can make them want to join certain movements and mobilize, or morality based on certain universal ideals, like the expectation of helping others. Morality also plays a role internal to activism, in the way people understand their own position within activism and the position of others. People produce subjectivities (Lépinard, 2020), of others and themselves, by aligning themselves with types of activism – “a process of political identification with and an attachment to a collective subject” (Lépinard, 2020, p. 40), in this case the queer movement –, and placing themselves in opposition to other types of activism,

by seeing certain activism, and activists, as more ‘authentic’, ‘respectable’, or ‘serious’, than other activism and activists, and by relating in particular ways to powerful (queer) institutions, like the Pride Amsterdam Foundation and the municipality of Amsterdam. The production of – political and moral – subjectivities is thus always relational, and therefore embedded in power relations (Bond, Thomas, Diprose, 2020), and involves moral judgments. In the next chapter, I will dive deeper into this production of different political subjectivities, looking at how symbols like the rainbow flag, and discursive categories like ‘white gay men’, are constructed to convey moral judgments about particular political subjectivities.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored four questions related to the queer movement in Amsterdam: What different notions and understandings of activism exist within the Amsterdam queer movement? How can these differences be explained? What potential conflicts can these differences lead to? And how can we understand these differences as informed by moral understandings, structures, and practices? I have argued that different understandings of activism, embedded in people’s different moral frameworks – values, norms, beliefs, judgments –, exist in the Amsterdam queer movement, partly based on binary notions like ‘single-issue activism’ versus ‘queer activism’, ‘activism in the streets’ versus ‘activism within institutions’, and ‘activism linked to capital and the state’ versus ‘independent activism’. In addition to people having different notions of the role of ‘the political’ in the queer movement and of what ‘the political’ means exactly, the way in which people, groups, movements, and organizations position their activism according to these binaries can give rise to contentious situations in which different understandings of activism can lead to conflicts between movements and organizations, like the case of We Reclaim Our Pride and Pride Amsterdam during the Pride Walk of 2021 illustrates. Yet, I have also argued that in

practice, these binaries are usually more nuanced and complex than is sometimes suggested and can be seen more as spectra. Activists and movements move along these spectra, sometimes having to combine supposed oppositional practices and ideologies, and often trying to transform dominant frames, structures, and institutions by actually making use of these frames, structures, and institutions.

In addition to people's norms and values which make them join certain movements and use certain activist practices, I have argued that the queer movement in Amsterdam can be understood as a moral-political project also because it involves the production of political subjectivities embedded in moral relations. People, groups, and movements have different ideas about the moral worth of types of activism and activists and attach moral conceptions – e.g. related to 'authenticity' and 'respectability' – to these, in which they understand themselves *in relation to* others – people, movements, institutions like Pride Amsterdam – and the other way around. This moral production of subjectivities can again lead to conflict and friction, since it often includes people's judgments about what activism and which activists are 'better' or 'more authentic' than other activism and activists.

Connecting this chapter to the previous chapters, I hope to have shown that although the Dutch queer movement has historically been relatively deradicalized and Pride Amsterdam has been consciously founded as a depoliticized event, the Amsterdam queer movement should not be seen as a 'non-political' space. Instead, it is a space in which ideological contestations exist about the meaning and purpose of the queer movement, with events like Pride giving momentum to these contestations, sometimes leading to conflict. In chapter 5, I will discuss how these moments of conflict can also produce moments of ethical reflection, creating fragmentations in existing power relations and space for new alliances and

collaboration. Yet, before I come to this, I will in the next chapter first dive deeper into the issue of subjectivity production, and the production of boundaries around these subjectivities, with which I made a start in this chapter, in my discussion of understandings of ‘the true queer activist’. In chapter 4, I will discuss in more detail the moral expectations and obligations, and the emotional reactions, that come with these subjectivity productions. In particular, I will look at the rainbow flag as a symbol reflecting different moral-political subjectivities, and the ways in which a category like ‘white gay men’ is constructed and interpreted to highlight differences in these moral-political subjectivities, which come with moral judgments and attached emotions.

Chapter 4: Symbolic categories: the rainbow flag and ‘white gay men’ as reflecting different moral-political subjectivities



Figure 3: The progress flag on a house in Amsterdam (photo taken by author, July 2022)



Figure 4: The progress flag on the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (photo taken by author, July 2023)

“Keep your damn hands off my flag!”⁹ (Nieuwsuur, 2021). This is the response Hans Verhoeven, a well-known Dutch gay activist, who in addition owns a store where he sells different types of LGBTQIA+ flags, gave to a question asked by the journalist of Dutch news program *Nieuwsuur* about what he thinks of the progress flag: the rainbow flag currently used by most official institutions like universities, schools, the municipality, and other state institutions, in Amsterdam and across the Netherlands, and which can be seen in the pictures above. By “my flag”, Verhoeven means the original rainbow flag, *the* symbol of LGBTQIA+ community since the previous century – first introduced in 1979, in the United States, but

⁹ Translated from Dutch: “Blijf verdorie met je poten van m’n vlag af!”

which over time has become a global symbol (Bitterman, 2021; Hauksson-Tresch, 2021). Throughout the decades, there has been an increase in expressed critiques on this original rainbow flag, not only in the Netherlands, but globally, mainly focusing on how the rainbow flag has been used more and more by commercial companies – often called ‘rainbow capitalism’ or ‘rainbow washing’ (Bitterman, 2021, p. 125) – and on how the flag might express Eurocentric understandings of queerness, in which the flag is seen as a sign of ‘Western modernity’ (Laskar, Johansson & Mulinari, 2016, p. 194). This last point I noticed in my own fieldwork, where during the Pride Walks organized as part of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, a specific organization always walked at the front of the march: the Zero Flags project. This project, chaired by Hans Verhoeven, who I have just mentioned, focuses on creating awareness about countries where homosexuality is in the criminal code, carrying the flags of all countries where this is the case during Pride Walk, next to all the flying rainbow flags. In a very visible way, the ‘progressive’ rainbow flag is placed in opposition to the flags of ‘unprogressive’ countries. Finally, as Nagle (2023) argues: the supposed global universality of the rainbow flag hides power differences between the Global North and Global South, and the type of politics the flag represents – politics of visibility and equal rights – might not be the type of politics important to queer people in all national and local contexts (Nagle, 2023, p. 97).

In the last few years, a change in the ‘original’ rainbow flag has unfolded in the Netherlands, with the ‘progress flag’ becoming more and more popular in Amsterdam. This flag contains, in addition to the original rainbow stripes, black and brown stripes representing queer people of color and people living with or having died from HIV/AIDS, a pink, blue, and white triangle, or arrow, representing the trans community, and nowadays sometimes also a yellow and purple circle, representing the intersex community. This change of the flag is not a

neutral development, but is contested, with people having very different views of the flag, often with emotional sentiments attached to these views, as Verhoeven's response already illustrated. My interlocutor Thomas, who is a 22-year-old white bisexual man, emphasizes a feeling of loss when he talks about the growing popularity of the progress flag over the original rainbow flag:

Thomas: Regarding this theme, I might be a bit more conservative... I like the rainbow flag better than the progress flag.

Chris: Okay. And why do you think it might not be a good idea to change the flag?

Thomas: Yeah, then I come to the feeling I had the first time I saw the progress flag. I didn't recognize the rainbow flag anymore. So, for me, the meaning of the rainbow flag was lost, because I didn't recognize it anymore. (Thomas)

Laskar, Johansson and Mulinari (2016) argue that flags like the rainbow flag are 'floating signifiers' and 'boundary objects', meaning that they have different meanings in different social contexts, and that these meanings are never fixed, but always flexible and open to change (Laskar et al., p. 196). These different meanings are influenced by people's social locations, related to dimensions like race, class, gender, age, and local context (Ibid., p. 194). However, I argue in this chapter, the different rainbow flags, and the views people have of these, are *also* symbols reflecting deeper tensions around different understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project, with these understandings often connected to people's social locations, but not always completely and straightforwardly.

Flags – for example national flags – involve notions of belonging, in the sense that they produce feelings of 'being at home' in a community, like a nation, and a *politics* of belonging, meaning the political ways in which specific boundaries around who do and do not belong to

this community, thus involving ideas and practices of in- and exclusion, are constructed (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197). Through the daily uses of the national flag – for example on public buildings –, Billig (2010) argues, citizens are reminded, in a banal and unobvious way, of the nation they belong to, therefore reproducing the existence of nations, and the culture that comes with this nationhood. Psychological research has shown that people attach emotions to national flags, which can either be positive or negative (Muldoon, Trew & Devine, 2020). In addition, although national flags can present a notion of togetherness, the symbol often ignores conflicts that play a role between groups within a nation (Laskar et al., 2016, p. 196). If we look at the rainbow flag, something similar can be found. The rainbow flag is supposed to represent a united queer community and movement, in which many differences and conflicts exist. And as we will see in this chapter, it seems like there is not one rainbow flag that straightforwardly unites the full queer movement.

The different interpretations of the rainbow flag, and the contestations that exist around it, are, I argue, ultimately an issue of the production of different moral-political subjectivities, in which people align themselves with a certain flag representing in their eyes a particular political project, which they see as the ‘right’ political project. For many of my interlocutors, the progress flag represents intersectional activism. As I have argued in the introduction of this dissertation, for the studying of a social movement, I understand intersectional activism as activism in which movements recognize that multiple dimensions of people’s lives, like race, gender, sexuality, and class, intersect, creating specific locations and experiences, embedded in structures of power. This means that within a social movement, some groups of people face more discrimination than others. In an intersectional movement or organization, space is consciously created for separate organization of different groups, in order to create more representation and inclusion (Evans & Lépinard, 2020; Roth, 2021).

As I discussed in the previous chapter, several of my interlocutors understand their activism as ‘queer’, in contrast to single-issue ‘LGBT’ activism, which is often focused on liberal values like equality of rights and acceptance by broader society (Ferguson, 2019). Some activists and movements commit to both queer activism – in which the connection of multiple political causes is central – and intersectional activism – in which there is a belief that a movement itself should not ignore difference between groups within the movement, but should recognize this difference, actively making space for more marginalized groups. The original rainbow flag reflects the liberal single-issue understanding of activism, through a political belief in universality and unity (Laskar et al., 2017), with the flag meant to be representing everybody in the queer community, whatever their social locations are. A flag can then become a signifier for people of a specific political subjectivity, grounded in their values and beliefs, and to which they attach emotions and moral judgments. Notions of who and what issues do belong to this political subjectivity and who and what issues do not, create certain boundaries around these subjectivities, and potentially a collective identity attached to it. As McGarry and Jasper (2015) argue, this attachment is emotional. Verhoeven’s and Thomas’ quotes about their attachments to the original rainbow flag show this involvement of emotions, with both of them seeing this flag as ‘their’ flag and with them understanding the rise of the progress flag as a threat to ‘their’ flag.

I discussed in the previous chapter the different views of activism that exist in the Amsterdam queer movement, expressed by particular movements, organizations, and activists, and how these different views are embedded in moral frameworks, in which people have certain views of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ queer activism and activists. This chapter dives deeper into these moral judgments of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ activism and activists and is about how people construct categories of themselves and others, based on different social locations – and the power

relations that come with these –, but which on a deeper level reflect different moral-political queer subjectivities.

Multiple queer theorists have already pointed towards differences in queer activist communities. Maskovsky (2002) emphasized the importance of looking at class when we study queer politics. As he states, the queer community in the United States has transformed from a diverse activist movement – mentioning the Stonewall rebellion as an exemplar – into a presumed homogeneous community, in which the middle-class white gay is the main political subject (Maskovsky, 2002, p. 269). These are the subjects that fit in the US neoliberal culture, making the gap between these subjects and lower-class queer subjects bigger and creating the danger of erasing poverty from queer studies (Ibid., p. 266). A symbol like the rainbow flag, which has become a commodity within the neoliberal system, then may especially represent these subjects that fit within this neoliberal system. Cohen (2004), who I have mentioned a couple of times before, stresses the need for queer politics to not only make distinctions between heterosexual people and queer people, but to also take into account differences between powerful groups within the queer community – for example white gay men – and marginalized people outside the queer community – for example heterosexual poor people of color –, thus emphasizing dimensions of race and class (Cohen, 2004, p. 29). While these scholars have shown us the cruciality of intersectionality when we study social location and power in marginalized (queer) communities, my focus in this chapter lies on differences in values, beliefs, and political commitments – thus on distinct interpretations of the queer movement as a moral-political project –, producing different moral-political subjectivities. These moral-political subjectivities are informed by people’s social locations – which are created through the intersection of dimensions like race, class, gender, nationality, and sexuality –, but, I argue, this is not a matter of a one-on-one relationship (Yuval-Davis,

2006), meaning that people's moral-political frameworks do not necessarily directly follow from their social locations. As I argue throughout this dissertation, based on Foucault's (1997) and Zigon's (2009) understandings of ethics, people possess a certain amount of 'ethical freedom', in which they are able to reflect on their social locations and the power that comes with these, on their values, beliefs, and commitments, and on the practices they attach to these values, beliefs, and commitments.

The rainbow flag is thus a symbol that illustrates a multiplicity of moral-political subjectivities. These subjectivities are political, in the sense that they concern people's alignments with particular political projects and collectives (Lépinard, 2020), with these projects and collectives involving notions of who belong and who do not, and thus practices of in- and exclusion (Krause & Schramm, 2011, p. 118). And they are moral because these political alignments are grounded in people's values, beliefs, and the norms around them, and because they involve people making judgments about which political projects and collectives are 'right', and which ones are 'wrong'. In addition, because these alignments are grounded in people's values and beliefs, they also involve people's expectations of others within political projects and collectives, highlighting the relational aspect of morality (Lépinard, 2020, p. 13). I thus see political subjectivities as inherently connected to the moral in the case of subjectivities production in the Amsterdam queer movement. In the first part of this chapter, I will continue exploring the case of the rainbow flag and discuss the different meanings and interpretations attached to it, and analyze how these meanings and interpretations reflect different moral-political subjectivities.

In the second part of this chapter, I will connect this production of moral-political subjectivities to the issue of category production, with categories, similar to the rainbow flag,

acting like symbols which reflect deeper tensions around understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project. I look at the ways in which people understand themselves and others according to these categories, and the judgments, expectations, and obligations they attach to these understandings. The questions I ask are: How do participants of the Amsterdam queer movement construct categories of people within this movement and how do they create, sustain, and blur boundaries around these categories? And what moral expectations and obligations come with this category production?

The category I will focus on is that of ‘white gay men’ – and to a lesser extent ‘white lesbian women’ –, as I noticed during my fieldwork that these categories, of relatively powerful groups in the Amsterdam queer movement, are used by multiple of my interlocutors, with many of them connecting the category to opinions regarding power, privilege, and political beliefs. I argue that several of my interlocutors – some of them white gay men themselves, and some of them non-male queer people, white and non-white – construct and use these categories to express a dissatisfaction with people who they see as privileged but who do not speak out politically, who do not support people within the queer community who are less privileged, and who are people that understand the political project of activism from a standpoint of single-issue politics instead of intersectional and queer politics. Power relations underly the construction of this category, namely the fact that white gay men relatively possess more privilege in the broader queer community than many other groups. Yet, the main point I will try to make is that the meaning of the category ‘white gay men’ goes *beyond* these social locations and attached power relations and is used to make moral judgments about views of the queer movement as a moral-political project, and of practices of queer politics.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, this does not mean that interpretations of queer politics and activism are not contextualized by people's social locations. However, what I am trying to do by making the distinction between people's social locations and people's alignments with particular understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project, is to show how these two issues are not *the same*. Some of my interlocutors presented the category of 'white gay men' as a straightforward, delineated category, by for example presenting the category like it is assumed I understand what they mean by it, saying things like "those white gay men, you know", assuming I know what they mean by 'those'. However, like all discursive categories (Jones, 2009), the category of 'white gay men' is actually quite flexible and its boundaries fluid, meaning that people can (sometimes) escape this category, even if they do belong to the privileged social location of the white gay man. These flexible and fluid boundaries show how people are not completely defined by their social location and that they have the 'ethical freedom' of reflection that Foucault (1997) and Zigon (2009) describe, to reflect on their own social locations and consciously align themselves with moral and political understandings of activism which might not directly contribute to their individual interests and privileges, illustrating that the Amsterdam queer movement is not simply a static movement in which different 'identities' clash, but an open-ended, ever-shifting movement, in which 'differences' between people, namely in their understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project are open to change and transformation.

4.1 The rainbow flag as a ‘floating signifier’



Figure 5: The original rainbow flag (LACDMH Blog, 2022)

The ‘original’ rainbow flag, by which I mean the flag first presented in 1978 and taking its current form in 1979, was designed by multiple activists and artists, among which US artist Gilbert Baker, who was asked by first openly gay US politician Harvey Milk to come up with a new symbol for the queer community. Before, the gay movement in North America and Europe used the symbol of the pink triangle: a reclaiming of the symbol that was used by the Nazis in WWII, in which homosexual men were forced to wear this triangle on their clothes in concentration camps (Bitterman, 2021, p. 118; Nagle, 2023, p. 84). As Baker describes in his memoir: “A Rainbow Flag would be our modern alternative to the pink triangle. Now the rioters who claimed their freedom at the Stonewall Bar in 1969 would have their own symbol of liberation” (Baker, 2019). A rainbow flag for Baker thus symbolized freedom and liberation. Together with artist Lynn Segerblom, Baker designed the rainbow flag, eventually containing six color stripes, from top to bottom: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. These six colors all have their own meaning: red stands for life, orange for healing, yellow for sunlight, green for nature, blue for serenity and purple for spirit (LACDMH Blog, 2022). The rainbow flag for Baker represented hope and universality, stating in his memoir that the

rainbow is a universal symbol, found in different histories and cultures all over the world (Baker, 2019).

In 2017, the city of Philadelphia, in the United States, introduced a new flag: the Philly Pride flag. Besides the original rainbow colors, this flag contains black and brown stripes, to more visibly represent queer people of color and to acknowledge the crucial role queer people of color played in the fight for queer liberation (Deane, 2021). Based on this Philly Pride flag, the ‘progress flag’, designed by American graphic designer Daniel Quasar, was introduced in the United States in 2018:



Figure 6: The Progress Flag (BBC, 2021)

The progress flag adopted the black and brown stripes of the Philly Pride flag, and in addition added a triangle with blue, pink, and white colors, representing the transgender community.

The black and brown stripes on the progress flag, in addition to representing queer people of color, also represent people living with or having died from HIV or AIDS. In recent years, a circle in the triangle is frequently added, representing the intersex community. Finally, the additional stripes and colors are not just stacked upon the original colors, but designed as a

triangle, or, as Quasar themselves calls it, an arrow. According to them, this arrow represents the ‘progress’ that the flag is supposed to depict: “The arrow points to the right to show forward movement [...] and illustrates that progress [towards inclusivity] still needs to be made” (Quasar in Victoria & Albert Museum, 2025).

Although in Amsterdam the ‘original’ rainbow flag is still very much present at Pride events, mainly among the general public, the progress flag has become the main flag used by official institutions like the municipality, universities, and state departments. The fact that these institutions use the progress flag is most likely influenced by the pushing of the boundaries of inclusivity, done mainly by queer activists, with activist groups like Black Pride and We Reclaim Our Pride drawing attention to the marginalization of queer people of color and trans people within the broader queer movement. However, now that these powerful institutions have adopted the progress flag as their main flag, they reinforce a certain understanding and discourse around queer inclusivity, in which there is specific recognition for groups that have historically been less visible within the community and broader society.

I spoke about the flag with all my interlocutors. Among the younger queer activists, the general perception is that the development of the progress flag becoming the dominant flag in Amsterdam is a good phenomenon. For example, Tara, who is a 22-year-old white pansexual woman, says:

Yes, I think it is a good development. I think it is necessary to provide visible space to groups who traditionally have been undervalued. And I think this flag shows that we are aware of that and that we all want to work on that. (Tara)

And Charlie, who is a 30-something bi-gender Black-Caribbean person, tells me:

This new flag is more diverse. A lot of people didn't feel represented in the LGBT community. And now they are more visible. For example the trans community. And yes, anti-racism is also visible. You know, people forget that there is racism in the LGBTQ+ community as well. It's not like we are all part of the same group and it's all rainbows. (Charlie)

Yet, not everybody in the Amsterdam queer community is happy with the growing popularity of the progress flag and certain disagreements about the rainbow flag exist within the Amsterdam queer movement, sometimes with very emotional responses attached to them, which Hans Verhoeven's quote – "Keep your hands of my damn flag!" –, and Thomas' feeling of loss when looking at the progress flag, already illustrated. What are these disagreements based on?

4.1.1 The progress flag as representing intersectional activism

"It represents inclusivity and diversity all over again" (Kaya)

This reply by Kaya – who is a 20-year-old international student studying in both Amsterdam and The Hague, originally from the United States, and who identifies as bisexual and of mixed race – to my question about what she thinks of the progress flag reflects the general sentiment among many of my interlocutors. They believe the addition of the black and brown stripes, the colors of the trans flag, and the circle for the intersex community, was necessary to make sure these groups of people would be included more within the broader queer

community. For them, the progress flag symbolizes a commitment to intersectional activism, in which there is a recognition of differences in the discrimination of different groups within a movement, and the conscious commitment to centralize the most marginalized groups and make the movement more inclusive.

For some of my interlocutors, the belief in the ‘correctness’ of the progress flag is connected to certain expectations and requirements:

If you now see that flag [the original rainbow flag], then you think okay... At someone’s house it’s okay. But at a bar or something, then you think is this a statement or something? (Boris)

The fact that Boris, the maker of theatre show *Becoming* – and I will discuss this theatre show in detail in the next chapter – thinks places like bars are making a statement when they are *not* using the progress flag suggests that an expectation exists that the progress flag is now the dominant flag that should be used. Other interlocutors expressed similar sentiments, stating that they often question the use of original rainbow flags. For example, Adam, a 24-year-old white gay man, says:

I notice with myself that when I see an original rainbow flag, that I think “did you do that on purpose?” You know? Like did you know about this or were the progress flags just not available where you wanted to buy them? (Adam)

Boris even suggests that the original rainbow flag has some connotations like ‘conservatism’ – note that in Thomas’ quote earlier, he described himself as ‘conservative’ about the issue of

the rainbow flag as well – or sometimes even ‘right-wing’. Although Boris mentions these connotations, he reflects on them as well:

Boris: The rainbow flag is now framed as some sort of party flag. If you put up that flag you’re saying, this is not a protest, it’s a party.

Chris: Yes, you mean the original rainbow flag?

Boris: Yes, that is now a “wappie”¹⁰ flag. Some sort of extreme-right rainbow flag. And that is a bit unfair because in principle it’s a nice flag. It’s not like it’s suddenly some sort of Nazi flag.

Boris here suggests two things: that the original rainbow flag is seen as a ‘party flag’, thus centralizing ‘celebration’ instead of ‘protest’, and that it for many people represents conservativeness, or even extreme-right political views, even though Boris does not agree with that. Other interlocutors expressed similar notions, stating that although they do not think it is fair, they still get an uncomfortable feeling from seeing the original rainbow flag instead of the progress flag, especially at places like bars, cafés, and official institutions. Not all my interlocutors who describe themselves as leftist activists and who believe intersectionality should be a foundational part of the queer movement, are a fan of the progress flag, however. Anna, who is a white bisexual woman in her thirties, tells me she thinks the progress flag has become a product of capitalism already, just like the original rainbow flag, taking over Pride in Amsterdam. So, although the progress flag represents intersectional activism for some people, others think the fact that it is the main flag now used by institutions like companies and governmental organizations, makes the flag feel less

¹⁰ Dutch. The word “wappie” is very difficult to translate but is used as a negative label by mainly leftist people to describe right-wing people, usually people who believe in conspiracy theories, who are anti-vaxxers, or who have other strong ideas that these leftist people believe are unrealistic. The word originates from the 1990s, and although the exact origin is unknown, it was then used to describe drunk or stoned people (Onze Taal, 2024). The word became especially popular during the covid pandemic, to describe people present at anti-covid measures protests and who did not want to get vaccinated.

authentic. In our interview over Zoom, Anna explains to me that at the same time that the progress flag was introduced in the United States, a Puerto Rican activist, Julia Feliz, designed the New Pride Flag, which color-wise looks very much like the progress flag, but which has a different design:



Figure 7: The New Pride Flag (newprideflag.com, 2022)

Anna even has the New Pride Flag at home, holding it up to her camera to show me. For her, it is important to use this New Pride Flag, instead of the progress flag, because she believes it is again queer people of color who are marginalized, while a flag designed by a white person has now become the most popular flag in the Netherlands. Thus, it is not only the design of the flag itself that plays a role in people's feelings about and attachments to it, but also the artists behind the flag. Anna at the same time was also wary about discussing the flag with me at all, in fear of the disagreement within the queer community being used by right-wing groups as a way of discrediting the queer community.

So, the rainbow flag takes on different forms and meanings for different activist communities, and even within communities of people that might subscribe to similar ideas of activism,

disagreements exist. The rainbow flag is thus a ‘floating signifier’ (Laskar et al., 2016), a term coming from Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who stated that certain signs – and I understand a flag here as a sign – do not have fixed meanings and are therefore ‘empty’, signifying that there is a constant struggle between discourses that try to determine the meaning of these signs (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). There are however moments, which Laclau and Mouffe call ‘nodal points’, in which a meaning of a sign is fixed within a particular discourse, which they discuss in relation to political currents and discourses, in which the drawing of boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ is crucial, which particularly can be seen in populist discourses (Howarth, 2015, pp. 10-13). I am not talking about populism in this dissertation, but the concept of ‘floating signifier’ when it comes to the rainbow flag, I think, illustrates well the flexibility of its meaning, the contestations around these different meanings, and the boundaries that are created around a specific meaning, connecting people within particular activist communities.

4.1.2 Contextualization of the flags’ meanings

While for many of my interlocutors, the progress flag, or the New Pride Flag, reflect their commitment to intersectional activism, in which there is specific recognition and visibility for marginalized groups, others expressed the feeling of finding the progress flag ‘unnecessary’. For some, this was because the original rainbow flag already represents the full community, which is the same idea Hans Verhoeven expressed in his interview with *Nieuwsuur*. Besides the rainbow flag, multiple flags exist representing specific groups within the queer community, like the lesbian flag, bisexual flag, transgender flag, and asexual flag (LACDMH Blog, 2022). In Verhoeven’s eyes, these flags can be used by sub-groups for specified representation and visibility, while the original rainbow flag represents the *whole* community, and the adding of specific groups to it will make that other groups are excluded from it again

(Nieuwsuur, 2021). Yet, these sub-group flags only focus on sexuality and gender identity, therefore not explicitly emphasizing the notion of intersectionality – which also includes attention to dimensions like race and health – that the progress flag does. In addition, the specific flag that you almost never see at any Pride events in the Netherlands is the gay flag, also called the ‘men loving men’ flag:



Figure 8: The Gay Flag (Grand Rapid Pride Center, 2024)

This flag was introduced for the first time in 2018 on social media platform Tumblr, so a long time after the original rainbow flag, with the precise creator unknown. The flag is supposed to represent people who are attracted to people of the same gender, which in principle can be people from any gender, but it is primarily seen as the flag representing men who are attracted to men (The University of British Columbia, 2024). The fact that the flag was introduced decades after the rainbow flag might explain its relative invisibility at Pride events. Yet, other flags representing specific sub-groups, like the intersex flag or the asexual flag, *are* very much used, with most of them also designed much later than the rainbow flag. It seems like the original rainbow flag *is* the gay men flag (Medhurst, 2024), and a specific flag is not needed for them. As I discussed above, Maskovsky (2002) argued that for the US context, the middle-class white gay man fits within the dominant neoliberal culture and

therefore has become the principle political subject in the queer movement. In chapter 1, I concluded that the Netherlands as well is dominated by a neoliberal culture, and middle-class white gay men fit the most within the systems of power at play in this society, like patriarchal, racial, and class systems. Specific flags are especially important for sub-groups who are fighting for more visibility (see for example Clary, Goffnet, King, Hubbard & Kitchen (2023) on the transgender flag as a symbol of support for trans people). Gay men, especially white and middle-class gay men, are – relatively – quite visible and recognized in Dutch society, which might make that they feel less of the need to carry a specific ‘men loving men’ flag. Within the queer community, gay men embody the mainstream and the universal, while ‘other’ groups of queer people may wish to carry the flags of their specific groups and identities, since these groups and identities are less visible and recognized in the broader queer community and movement, and in broader Dutch society. As my interlocutor Skyler states: “The rainbow flag is fine, but it really is associated with the gay movement”.

In addition to understandings of the flag being informed by the sub-groups people belong to and the amount of marginalization these groups are facing, people’s national and local contexts inform their understandings of queerness, and with that their understandings of the rainbow flag, as well. Manalansan (1995), in his study of Filipino gay men living in New York City, shows how certain narratives that are often presented as global and universal narratives of queer liberation, like the Stonewall rebellion, actually do not play such an important role for the Filipino diaspora in their queer identities (Manalansan, 1995). This is similar to what Laskar et al. (2016) and Nagle (2023) argue about the rainbow flag: that it is a symbol originating in the context of the Global North and that the meaning of the flag might be different in other global contexts. My interview with Robin, who is originally from Trinidad with mixed origin, and who identifies as a gender non-conforming lesbian, suggests

this contextual influence as well. They tell me why they have issues with the black and brown stripes of the progress flag:

I grew up in a society in which all my friends were people of color, all the LGBT people I knew were of color. So, for me it feels weird to add a specific black and brown stripe, since my first experiences with being queer were always connected to people of color. I don't see them as separate things. I understand the context from which these stripes came from, in Philadelphia, for the recognition of specific groups there. But I think that often symbols are adopted [...] without really asking people.
(Robin)

Understandings of the rainbow flag are thus very context dependent, as Robin's feelings about it illustrate. The progress flag is a symbol which for some people in the Amsterdam queer movement represents their commitment to intersectional activism. The specific representation of for example queer people of color illustrates for them this commitment to intersectional activism, while the original rainbow flag, which does not include this specific representation, can, in the name of unity, sometimes hide differences between people, and with that also power inequalities. The queer movement in the Netherlands knows a depoliticized history, in which specific groups, particularly white gay men, have had a dominating position (Wekker, 2020). The specific visibility of marginalized groups, like queer people of color, on a symbol like the rainbow flag can then draw attention to differences in marginalizations and oppressions between groups within the queer community. For other people, like Robin, however, queer people of color are foundational to their view of the queer movement, growing up in Trinidad, which is why they associate the original rainbow flag with a queer movement in which queer people of color are central. Thus, although the rainbow flag is a global symbol for the transnational queer community, it takes on very different meanings in different national and local contexts (Laskar et al., 2016), and it

should be kept in mind that I am focusing on the Dutch and Amsterdam context specifically.

Different ‘regimes of truth’ exist in different national and local contexts. As Foucault (2001) argues, these ‘regimes of truth’ express certain socially constructed understandings of the ‘truth’, in which institutional actors, like state actors, have a hegemonic position in influencing which discourses are seen as ‘true’ (Foucault, 2001). In the case of the progress flag in Amsterdam, the fact that most official state buildings wave the progress flag instead of the original rainbow flag, means that the message that this flag carries, in which there is a specific attention to differences within the queer community, is reproduced, making that this message is becoming more and more seen as the ‘true’ way of fighting for queer liberation. Yet, as I have just discussed, even though this message which the progress flag reflects might have become dominant in Amsterdam, different opinions and understandings of the flag are still alive among people inside the queer movement, meaning that contestations of dominating ‘regimes of truth’ exist *within* a local context like Amsterdam. And as I have tried to argue so far, these commitments to different flags reflect commitments to different types of politics and activism, steeped in moral judgments of what type of politics and activism is ‘right’ and what type of politics and activism is ‘wrong’.

People have particular expectations from others within the community, and the use of the progress flag is by some understood as a moral obligation. On the other hand, there are emotional attachments to the original rainbow flag as well, which Verhoeven’s quote at the beginning of this chapter already made clear. Casado, Tavares, Guerra and Sousa (2023) show the importance of ‘intended legacies’ among older gay and lesbian activists in Spain, meaning the desire to ‘leave something behind’ when one dies. Among their participants, intended legacies that were mentioned included the desire to have contributed to a better

world, to have helped new generations of queer activists, but also to be remembered, or to ‘leave a mark’, and to have younger generations of queer activists acknowledge the things they have done for the movement (Casado et al., 2023). This might explain why there are some gay men from an older generation who feel like something is taken away from them by the introduction of the progress flag. For some of them, the original rainbow flag might represent the fight they have fought, and the rejection of this flag – especially when it is replaced by a flag which implies to be more ‘progressed’, suggesting that the people using the original rainbow flag are ‘behind’ – can then be very painful. Hans Verhoeven is from this older generation – he was born in the 1960s – and is a relatively established gay man in the broader community, being involved in the Pride Amsterdam Foundation as an organizer and ambassador, and being one of the founders of Europride in the 1990s, which eventually led to the creation of The European Pride Organisers Association, which now owns the license of Europride, an event that is organized every year in a different European city. In addition, Verhoeven is the owner of multiple gay enterprises in the city of Amsterdam (Pride Amsterdam, 2024). Verhoeven thus belongs to a relatively privileged group in the current Dutch queer community, as a white gay man who is a successful organizer at Pride Amsterdam. For him, the addition of black and brown stripes, and a pink and white triangle, might potentially not be ‘necessary’ to feel represented by the rainbow flag.

Yet, although Verhoeven’s social location probably plays a role in how he sees the rainbow flag, there are also white gay men from Verhoeven’s generation that are proponents of the progress flag, for example Rick van der Made, who used to be editor in chief of the *Gaykrant*, a well-known Dutch online news website reporting on news related to the queer community. In Dutch newspaper *Parool*, Van der Made makes a direct reference to gay activists from an

older generation:

For many people the original rainbow flag embodies enough diversity. And that's okay. It is not without reason that it has been the symbol of our community for years. It is very understandable that many people, especially the activists who have been involved from the very beginning, feel like they have to say goodbye to this flag and that they have difficulty with this. (Van der Made, 2022, translated from Dutch)

Yet, Van der Made states that he, as a white, gay, cis-gender man, is still very much in favor of the progress flag. He explains that he has a stable position in the Netherlands, in contrast to for example transgender people or bisexual people and that he believes it is important and necessary to make space for these more marginalized groups. For him, the progress flag is indeed a sign of 'progress':

The progress flag for me is a symbol of evolving understanding, dynamics, and thus progress. I would really like to propagate that. (Van der Made, 2022, translated from Dutch)

I agree with Alm and Martinsson (2016), who argue that the rainbow flag is not merely a symbol and representation of a community that already exists, but that the flag actively *creates* community (Alm & Martinsson, 2016, p. 220), or maybe better said: communities. As my interviews suggest, the different flags add to creating political communities and subjectivities with different understandings of the meaning of the flag, and about which flag is morally accepted, and which one is not, sometimes leading to tensions with emotions attached. Movement symbols, like the rainbow flag for the queer movement, and their meanings, change throughout time, and with that understandings of queer politics are

constantly transforming, renegotiated, and never fixed (Flesher Fominaya, 2019, p. 431).

Going back to the two types of ‘difference’ I discussed in my introduction – difference in social location and interests, and difference in understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project –, it seems like the different views of the rainbow flag are not only about the first type of difference, but also very much about the second type of difference, reflecting different understandings of politics and activism, with the original rainbow flag reflecting a belief in universality and unity, and the progress flag expressing a commitment to intersectional activism in which difference between groups is emphasized. Of course, social location and especially the attached issue of power play a part in the way people understand the rainbow flag. The fact that the gay flag is almost nowhere to be seen in Amsterdam, in contrast to other flags representing different groups within the queer community, suggests that for some gay men the rainbow flag *is* the gay flag. This explains why for some white gay men it feels ‘unnecessary’ to change this flag, while for other groups it exactly feels necessary to change it, in order to make the flag a symbol representing them as well.

For some white gay men, as one of the most established and powerful groups within Dutch society, specific visibility on the flag might not necessary, or even go against their ideal of ‘unity’ and ‘harmony’. However, Van der Made’s words in his newspaper column, and the commitment to the progress flag by multiple of my interlocutors who identify as white gay men, show that white gay men can still *politically* and *morally* believe in the need for specific visibility of other groups, which the progress flag consciously does. Thus, social location alone does not explain the different views of the rainbow flag, and we need to take differences in understandings of politics and activism, based on particular norms, values, and moral judgments, and with that the creation of moral-political subjectivities, into account.

Someone's social location affects their values and political commitments and beliefs, however, social location should not be conflated with values and political commitments and beliefs, as Yuval-Davis (2006) already stated in her article on the politics of belonging. Although they are related, people are not completely defined by their social location and possess a certain form of ethical freedom to reflect on their morality, embedded in the historical and political structures of power within a given locality. These self-reflections can lead to overt choices and actions, like Van der Made's choice to write an article for the newspaper, or the choices and actions some people within the Pride Amsterdam Foundation took to change the way Pride looks like in Amsterdam, which I will discuss in detail in chapter 5.

Yet, as we will see in the second part of this chapter, self-reflection can also exist in people's thoughts, not always with clear actions and choices necessarily following this self-reflection. As I stated in my introduction, this is why for the issue of self-reflection I use the concept of 'ethical freedom' instead of 'agency' in this dissertation. Whereas 'agency' is often associated with actions people perform (Laidlaw, 2002, p. 324), 'ethical freedom' is not *only* about action, but also emphasizes the internal thought processes people go through, which are of course in this case discursively expressed, because of the methods of this research. In the next part, my aim is to show that the way in which my interlocutors produce discursive categories, like the category of 'white gay men', demonstrates this ethical freedom, with the category having malleable boundaries, allowing people who belong to the social location of 'white gay men' to reflect on their social locations and the privileges that come with these, and to potentially change their moral-political views and practices of activism.

4.2 Category and boundary production

A symbol like the rainbow flag thus reflects deeper contestations within a local movement like the Amsterdam queer movement, in which different political subjectivities are produced. That some interlocutors say they get an uncomfortable feeling from the original rainbow flag, that they see the use of the original flag as a ‘statement’, and that there is a certain expectation of institutions and people to use the progress flag, but that at the same time judgments of inauthenticity of this use of the progress flag by official institutions and especially businesses exist, illustrates how something as symbolic as a flag actually reflects deeper aspects of conflict and tension within the movement and community, around questions of what kind of political subjectivities are regarded as ‘right’ and what kind of subjectivities are regarded as ‘wrong’. The fact that some white gay men, like Hans Verhoeven, feel like something is ‘taken away from them’, plus the fact that the original rainbow flag might be seen by some gay men as the gay flag, says something about power relations within the community, with white gay men for a long time being the most dominant group, and this position being questioned and challenged more and more.

This category of ‘white gay men’ is a category I came across many times during my fieldwork and especially during interviews. Here, I want to argue that, similar to the rainbow flag, the category of ‘white gay men’ is used in a generalized and symbolic way to convey an understanding of a certain political subjectivity. Notions of who has power within the queer movement underly this understanding, which is related to historical dominations within big organizations and events like Pride Amsterdam, and historical marginalizations of certain groups within the queer community. To be clear, with the word ‘symbolic’ I do *not* mean that this power inequality does not exist ‘in reality’. Queer people of color, queer women, and trans people face more discrimination and marginalization than white, cis-gender, gay men.

What I am also not trying to say is that white gay men do not face marginalization at all. Of course, white gay men experience forms of discrimination in a heteronormative society. However, what I am trying to explore in this chapter is how *within* the Amsterdam queer movement certain categories of people are constructed that function as *moral* understandings and beliefs about forms of political subjectivity.

I am analyzing this category production using Korteweg and Triadafilopoulos's (2013) approach to the construction of categories in their article on Dutch parliamentary debates on integration and the consequential integration policies in the Netherlands. They combine intersectional theory and theory on boundary construction to analyze how parliamentary debates on integration produced a category of ethnic minority women that was narrowly defined as Muslim women. The production of this category then had consequences for how 'problems' of integration were defined and how these 'problems' should be addressed (Korteweg & Triadafilopoulos, 2013). Of course, this is a very different case than my case of the production of the category 'white gay men'. Whereas in the case of Korteweg and Triadafilopoulos, it is the construction of a category used to convey certain norms and beliefs around the position of minority subjects in a society, in my case, the opposite is actually taking place. I am looking at how a category of a hegemonic group, within the context of the queer movement, is produced, instead of a marginalized group. Still, I think the combination of intersectional theory and theory on boundary construction can shine a light on this case as well.

I ask the questions: How do participants of the Amsterdam queer movement construct categories of people within this movement and how do they create, sustain, and blur boundaries around these categories? And what moral expectations and obligations come with

this category production? Analyzing my interlocutors' discourse, I argue that intersectionality, in which a certain combination of social locations is emphasized, is employed to convey understandings of privilege and of 'right' and 'wrong' political subjectivities. 'White gay men', and to a lesser extent 'white lesbian women', function as categories to express understandings of people who are viewed as privileged but who do not speak out politically, who do not support people within the queer community who are less privileged, and who understand the queer movement as a moral-political project from a standpoint of single-issue politics. The expectation of these people to speak out politically and show support with people within the queer community who are less privileged is higher than for people who are not seen as belonging to these categories, and it is sometimes regarded as an 'obligation' for the people in these categories to get politically involved and show solidarity with marginalized groups within the queer community. Yet, I will argue, using theory on boundary construction (Zolberg & Woon, 1999; Jones, 2009), these categories should not be seen as static and rigid. The categories particularly express understandings of certain political subjectivities, not only of social locations, meaning that maybe not all white gay men belong to the category 'white gay men', and that complications and nuances of this category are possible. Before I analyze this category production using interview and observation material, I will first briefly outline some conceptual underpinnings, based on subjectivities production, intersectional theory, and theory on boundary construction.

4.2.1 The production of (moral and political) subjectivities

The 'category production' that I am talking about could potentially be perceived as a purely linguistic issue. However, this is not the main approach I take in this dissertation. I am focusing on the production of subjectivities, of people themselves and of others, and the way power, ethics and discourse relate to this production. Why I am talking of 'categories' is

because I want to highlight how this production of subjectivities is very much an issue of the production of *a group* of subjectivities, with people putting a label on these groups and using these labels as discursive categories to signify certain understandings of power and activism. As I discussed in the introduction, Foucault understood the production of subjectivities as embedded in historical structures and as a process that people themselves conduct (Kelly, 2013, p. 513). This shows how within the production of subjectivities, people are not simply regulated by these historical structures, but that they themselves actively play a role in the process of subjectification. However, of course, these two aspects cannot be seen as separate, and they always work in tandem and influence each other.

For me, it is mainly Lépinard's (2020) understanding of political subjectivities that is important. She states that, for her case within the feminist movement, political subjectivities are produced, by people aligning themselves with certain forms of political projects and collectives, by therefore rejecting other political projects and collectives, and by constructing certain understandings of *other* people based on these alignments and rejections. This shows how the political and the moral are completely interwoven in this process of subjectivities production, as people's political alignments are grounded in their moral frameworks – values, beliefs, behavior – and involve people's judgments about their own and others' political alignments. These judgments are not only a matter of reflection – which I call 'ethics' (Zigon, 2009) –, but are also closely connected to issues like emotions, desires, and social processes (Lépinard, 2020, p. 41), which is why I talk here of the broader concept of 'morality', which also includes norms, values, and practices people hold and make without consciously thinking about them (Zigon, 2009).

I argue that within the Amsterdam queer movement, the category of 'white gay men', and to a

lesser extent ‘white lesbian women’, signifies a particular form of subjectivity production, in which moral understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project, and judgments of how people do and do not fit in these understandings, are expressed. A specific intersection of ‘axes of difference’ (Korteweg & Triadafilopoulos, 2013) – race, sexuality, and gender – is then employed to convey these understandings and judgments. Yet, the boundaries around this category are more fluid and nuanced than they may seem on the surface. It is this combination of intersectional theory and theory on boundary construction that I think can be very useful for the analysis of the category ‘white gay men’.

4.2.2 Intersectional theory and boundary production

Korteweg and Triadafilopoulos (2013) researched the ways in which immigrants in the Netherlands are constructed as subjects and the consequences this construction has for integration policies. For this, they analyzed parliamentary debates, therefore looking at discourse used in formal politics and the way in which this discourse created one particular category, namely that of the ethnic minority woman, with this category signifying a particular understanding of immigrant women, namely as Muslim women. Attached to this notion of ethnic minority women as Muslim women were specific moral understandings. The ones the authors mention are that women are seen as the key for ‘good’ integration, since they are the ones influencing the next generation, which as the authors state, is a very strongly gendered understanding (Korteweg & Triadafilopoulos, 2013, p. 110). Second, the subject of the Muslim woman is generally constructed as a woman who is oppressed, and who therefore needs to be helped (Ibid.). As Korteweg and Triadafilopoulos state, the construction of the category ethnic minority women, and the meaning this category has, had consequences for the way in which integration policies were shaped and targeted (Ibid., p. 122).

Of course, my case is very different from Korteweg and Triadafilopolous's case. However, the combination of intersectional theory and theory on boundary construction I think can be very useful for my research as well. As Korteweg and Triadafilopolous state, the question is how "multiple axes of difference" (Korteweg & Triadafilopolous, 2013, p. 110) assemble – therefore using intersectional theory – to construct particular categories of people, *and* how these categories then inform understandings who do and do not belong in a particular community – taken from theory on boundary formation (Ibid.). For my case, I thus look at how the axes of race, sexuality, and gender come together in the construction of the category 'white gay men', and how this category is then used to say something about belonging within the political project of the queer movement. What I think is the interesting aspect of this category production is the fact that it is about a category that is supposed to signify a *powerful and dominant* group. Much of the literature on category and boundary construction is about how marginalized and minority subjects are categorized by hegemonic groups, and about consequential practices of in- and exclusion, like in much of the work on category and boundary production regarding immigration and integration, in which 'belonging' is often understood as being regarded as full citizens of a nation state. In contrast, my case is about how notions of privilege and reactions to power inequalities are used to construct a particular category and the boundaries around it. The process of category production comes with power, and those processes of categorization, as Bourdieu (1991) argued: "make and unmake groups" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 221). It is exactly the power and privilege of white gay men that make the way this category is constructed. At the same time, the use of the category also 'gives' people the power to morally say something about this category.

4.3 White gay men

Kind of the white gays. This is really kind of a concept. Like a typical group of white gay boys, who kind of... I am not sure where it comes from, if it comes from the media. [...] And that is really about white gay boys who do speak out about the fact that they are gay, and that it is important to create equality in that aspect. But who also express racist or transphobic things. (Adam)

The Walk is not really to blame, but it is about the people they attract. They attract a large group of white, gay men who, how should I say it... Who for example do not recognize the right to exist for trans women. And who have internalized homophobia. And it is of course not up to me to say something about that, but you do see that they determine the narrative, what is allowed and what is not. But also, the exclusion of lesbians, that is quite well-known. Because of the group they attract, just those middle-aged, white gay men. Who really like to walk around with leather caps once a year. (Layla)

These two quotes come from two of the first people I interviewed – separately from each other – during my fieldwork: Adam and Layla. Adam’s quote is a reply to my question whether he ever saw or experienced something which he believes should not have a place in the Amsterdam queer movement. Layla expressed critique on the role and position of white gay men in the Amsterdam Canal Parade and Pride Walk. It was these two interviews that made me attentive to the use of the category ‘white gay men’, as it had not been a central topic of my fieldwork thus far. In later interviews with other interlocutors, I started to notice more and more the use of this category, not only by people outside this category, but also by white gay men themselves, like Adam. When I asked Adam however if he believes he himself belongs to this category, he resolutely said no, even though he does identify as white, gay, and a man. This I found striking, and it made me realize that the use of the category ‘white gay men’ is about a lot more than identifying literal white gay men.

4.3.1 Privilege and power

So how is this category of ‘white gay men’ constructed and what does it signify? As Korteweg and Triadafilopolous (2013) state, the coming together of multiple ‘axes of difference’ can construct a category with particular moral understandings and judgments attached to this category. For the category of white gay men, it is the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender that is important. Although some of my interlocutors occasionally talked about ‘gay men’, none of them spoke simply of men, meaning that the fact that these men are gay, is important. My interlocutors are for example generally not talking about bisexual or pansexual men. The dimension of generation or age was sometimes mentioned as well, for instance by Layla, who talked about ‘middle-aged white gay men’. However, many of my interlocutors who use the category ‘white gay men’ did not refer to generation or age at all, and for example Adam, as his quote shows, talked about ‘white gay boys’, suggesting that he includes younger white gay men in this category as well. So, although the concept of generation is an important addition to the category ‘white gay men’ for some of my interlocutors, it is not as generally shared as the importance of race, sexuality, and gender.

Similarly, the dimension of class was not explicitly included in the category ‘white gay men’ by most of my interlocutors. Two of my interlocutors did speak specifically about class, namely 28-year-old Boris – who identifies as white, male, and bisexual – and 25-year-old Sam – who identifies as white, gender non-conforming, and generally attracted to male types. Both Boris and Sam grew up in working-class families, with Boris stating that he believes the white ‘under-class’ as he calls it, is often forgotten and ignored. Sam talks specifically about experiencing a certain ‘discrepancy’ between their sexual and gender identity and the economic class they grew up in:

I grew up in a lower class. And I experience certain struggles with that. Education, and education level is also included in that, I am the first one in my family who is going to university. [...] I'm experiencing a discrepancy between these things. Because I know that my mother is very accepting of me, but it does all go over her head. That makes it difficult to discuss certain things with her. (Sam)

Boris and Sam thus speak of class as important for their experiences as queer people, yet they did not explicitly refer to it when using the category of 'white gay men', and the dimension of class was also not discursively included by my other interlocutors who use the category of 'white gay men'.

Although it is specifically the *combination* of 'white', 'gay', and 'men' that is important for the construction of a category signifying a privileged, powerful group, the dimension of 'whiteness' *was* used more on its own as well, for example by queer people of color like Dev – who is an Indian-Malaysian queer man who moved to Amsterdam a few years ago for his studies – to express the need for specific spaces for queer people of color:

I think with the queer POC¹¹ movement, with queer people of color, that is a very important sub-community. When I was at an event of Colored Collective¹², I felt so different than during my whole membership at ASV Gay¹³. Because I really needed that space, to show that there are so many more queer people in the Netherlands who are not white. Because at ASV Gay almost everybody is white. (Dev)

The concept of whiteness within the queer community was also stressed at a panel discussion I was present at, during the 'Week Against Racism', where Sharona Lautoe of the Black

¹¹ People of Color

¹² An organization focusing on creating safe spaces for queer people of color.

¹³ The main LGBTQIA+ student organization in Amsterdam.

Trans Art & Joy Fund¹⁴ spoke of white people being present at ballroom events they organize. Ballroom is a sub-culture in the queer community which originally started in the United States by African-American and Latino queer people, in which competitions are organized, with people competing with a mix of drag, dance, modelling, and lip-syncing:

What I find challenging is when your safe space is compromised. When you don't want to leave, because it's a space you created, and now someone is coming in. A lot of us have seen the upheaval of attention for ballroom when Pose¹⁵ came out. There were classes everywhere and at the balls, people come in without being educated and being entitled. Stepping in a space like stepping in a theatre, to watch people perform. Not knowing that ballroom is that deep. That has been a challenge for me. Because I side-eye, and sometimes more, the white people that sit in the front row, along the runway, and not giving any energy. Just sitting there, watching. It's difficult sometimes to say, 'hey you, you need to sit your ass in the back and wait, until the room is filled to know where you're sitting'. Know who the space is for. (Sharona Lautoe, co-founder Black Trans Art & Joy Fund, at panel 'Claiming Joy, a Queer and Intersectional Talk', Pakhuis de Zwijger, 17 March 2022)

Both Dev and Sharona are talking about spaces for queer people of color, and how specific spaces for these people are needed because of white dominance in many queer spaces. Here, it is the dimension of race that is mentioned to say something about power and dominance in the queer community.

On 29 April 2022, I travelled to the city of The Hague to interview Pedro, an international student from Brazil studying in the Netherlands. In a very quiet library, we spoke in whisper about his views on power and privilege within the queer community. For Pedro, it was not necessarily whiteness that he emphasized as an issue, but he focused specifically on gay men,

¹⁴ An organization focusing on supporting Black Trans people, in particular artists.

¹⁵ A popular TV show that was released in 2018, about the ballroom culture in New York City in the 1980s and 1990s.

without mentioning race. Pedro, who identifies himself as a white Latino gay man, tells me the negative experiences he has had with other gay men:

When it comes to the gay male community, a lot of times, it's you know... It's a complicated space, I find, because of course there is this whole idea of we are all a community, and we talk about the gay community and people say those things. But then there is also that culture of no fem, no black, no weight, no fat. And it's... To what extent is that a preference and to what extent is it discrimination against those groups? (Pedro)

Although Pedro does not speak specifically of *white* gay men, he does talk about racism, sexism, and fat-shaming within the male gay community. In addition, Pedro himself tries to be very conscious of the fact that he is a man, which he thinks not all gay men do:

I think this is an issue with gay men. That you know, they give more importance to the gay than to the man [...] Like sure, I'm gay and I experience discrimination because of that. But I'm still a man. (Pedro)

Pedro here expresses frustration with gay men who according to him are not consciously aware of their privilege as men. In his previous quote, he stresses the existence of discrimination in the male gay community, which is similar to Adam's and Layla's understandings of the category 'white gay men', which they see as men who emphasize their gay identity, but who do express racist or transphobic things.

Dev, Sharona, and Pedro thus talk about whiteness and about male dominance within the community, and their quotes illustrate ideas about the existence of privilege within the queer

community, and thus the existence of power relations, sometimes resulting in discrimination. The category of ‘white gay men’, which I will focus on from now on, therefore in the first place expresses notions about power and privilege. Being white and being a cis-gender man brings forms of privilege along in Dutch society in general. Like I stated before, of course white gay men face forms of discrimination that heterosexual men do not face. However, I am focusing on the internal social process of the Amsterdam queer movement and community, and *within* this movement and community, white gay cis-gender men possess forms of privilege that other queer people do not. As Ferguson (2019) argues for the queer movement in the United States, it has for a long time been the rights of white gay men that were central in the movement, and ‘other’ queer people, like trans people, and queer people of color, were sometimes seen as a threat to these rights. Wekker (2020) states for the Netherlands specifically that white gay men have dominated the queer movement and that it was assimilation into heteronormative society that was seen as most important. As racist and sexist systems are in place in Dutch society, this means white gay men enjoy certain privileges that non-white and non-male queer people do not enjoy.

Thus, the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender is employed by some of my interlocutors to construct a category in order to express certain frustrations with power inequalities within the queer community. However, as I stated before, there might be more at play in the use of the category ‘white gay men’, as it seems that some literal white gay men attempt to escape this category, suggesting that the boundaries around this category are less rigid than they may seem, and that people possess the freedom of (self-)reflection – ‘ethics’ – that might make boundary crossing possible. In the next section, I will focus on these deeper layers of meaning-making within the construction of the category ‘white gay men’ and argue that besides expressing notions of privilege and power, the category signifies a moral

understanding and judgment of a certain kind of political subjectivity, involving a process of boundary making, in which people make moral judgments on who do and who do not belong to the category.

4.3.2 Boundaries and political subjectivities

Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that there are three levels on which the issue of ‘belonging’ can be analyzed: first, the level of social locations, meaning how social and economic positions like gender, race, and class can have implications on who do and who do not belong to a particular community; second, the level of identifications and emotional attachments, meaning the ways in which people understand themselves and others and the emotions they attach to these understandings; and third, the level of ethical and political values, meaning the ways in which people judge and value certain social locations and identities, and the moral views of what the boundaries of certain communities should look like (Yuval-Davis, 2006, pp. 200-204). As Yuval-Davis states, social locations and narratives around identities are often used in these moral frameworks, *but* there is no one-on-one relationship between social locations, identities, and the moral and political values and beliefs people hold (Ibid., p. 203), and they should not be conflated. As I stated before, when I asked Adam, who identifies as white, gay, and male, if he regards himself as part of the category ‘white gay men’, he said no. I asked him later if there are certain sub-communities within the queer community with which he identifies. At first, he says he does not feel connected to gay men more than to other queer people. Yet, he then reflects on his own answer and says:

If I am looking at the people who I hang out with, those are a lot more gays than lesbian women, or trans people. So maybe unconsciously... But I also know that there rests a stereotype on white heterosexuals, or on white gay boys, you know, like those white gays. And that is why I am more conscious of it, or I try to be more conscious

of it, that I do not only identify as gay, but more as a part of the LGBTQ+ community.
(Adam)

Again, Adam reflects on the category ‘white gay men’, stating that certain stereotypes rest on the category, stereotypes that he wants to escape. Thus, for Adam, the category ‘white gays’ involves more than what it literally says: the words ‘white’ and ‘gay’ together express an understanding of people who care about gay equality, but who are not concerned with other types of (in)equality. Besides using ‘white gay men’ as a concept, it seems that Adam wants to escape the category himself, utilizing understandings of community and solidarity as a way of building his identity. Pedro, who identifies as a man, gay, and white Latino, also tries to escape the negative category he constructs of ‘gay men’, by emphasizing his effort to be conscious of his privilege as a man in a patriarchal system:

I’ve always... Especially recently, I’ve been putting a lot of energy into understanding like, I’m a gay man, and I understand that my female friends are more comfortable around me than they would with a straight man, but they are still not fully comfortable around me. And I feel like understanding that thing of like when women say all men, it also includes gay men. Maybe not in the same sense, but it’s still... Still, we’re members, still part of that system. (Pedro)

Adam and Pedro both reflect on the privileges they might possess as white gay men, and thus on their positions within the broader queer movement. They also are very aware of the stereotypes that rest on the category ‘white gay men’, namely the political subjectivity attached to it implying a focus on single-issue activism, or even apoliticality. Pedro tells me that he became more reflective on his position through conversations with female friends, suggesting that the criticism on ‘white gay men’ by other groups within the queer community

can create moments of ethical reflection. Van der Made's comment in newspaper *Parool* that I discussed in the first part of this chapter, on how he, as an older white gay man, through advancing insight, has realized how important the progress flag – and the intersectional activism that it represents – is, illustrates this reflection as well. People thus possess the freedom of ethical reflection, which in turn can lead to change and transformation. This change and transformation will be the central theme of chapter 5.

Zolberg and Woon (1999) state that the construction of categories comes with defining the boundaries of these categories that make clear which people do belong to this category and which people do not. My interlocutors have clear ideas of what type of people belong to the category 'white gay men', namely men who they identify as white and gay, who do not consciously try to be aware of their privilege as a white gay man, and who either are not politically involved at all – focusing more on partying perhaps – or who are politically outspoken about gay liberation, but who either express discriminatory things about other people within the queer community or who do not show active support for these more marginalized groups. They are white gay men who might speak out politically about the importance of equal rights for homosexual people, expressing a commitment to liberal, single-issue politics, but who do not actively pay attention to the marginalization of other queer people, and who do not commit to activism which connects multiple political causes, which many of my interlocutors regard as 'real' queer activism. These notions of these men's *political subjectivities* thus form the general boundaries around the category of 'white gay men'. Yet, as Jones (2009) argues, categories and their boundaries are always part of a process, meaning that these boundaries can change. He refers to this issue as “an inchoate process of bounding” (Jones, 2009, p. 180), by which he means that the boundaries around a category are never finished or fixed, and that these boundaries are constantly (re-)negotiated

(Ibid.).

If the boundaries of the category ‘white gay men’ are created by people’s notions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ forms of political subjectivities, this means they are informed by people’s moral understandings of activism, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is an issue in which many differences exist. But of course, people are not born with their moral understandings of activism, and throughout time, these understandings can change. In the next chapter, I will focus on the concept of ‘ethical moments’ in which I elaborate on this issue of morality transformation. What I aim to emphasize here is that *because* the category of ‘white gay men’ is used to morally say something about political subjectivities, and therefore about moral understandings of the queer movement, and because these understandings can change, the boundaries around the category ‘white gay men’ are not fixed. In addition, understandings of privilege and power have changed over time as well, with white gay men in general Dutch society having a more privileged position than say 40 years ago. Although I am not focusing on how the category of ‘white gay men’ was constructed and used in the past, it is likely that the understandings of the category have changed over time, which is connected to more general social processes of power relations.

Yet, as Jones (2009) illustrates with the concept of ‘the paradox of categories’, even though we know that categories are socially constructed, and that their boundaries are flexible and open to change, the way in which people use categories in language can suggest hard boundaries and closed categories, which, in the case of the Amsterdam queer movement, can lead to conflict and tension, with for example some white gay men feeling attacked or like something is taken away from them. As I discussed in the first part of this chapter, a symbol like the rainbow flag, representing the gay movement, can become a very emotional issue, as

Hans Verhoeven's quote of "keep your damn hands off my flag!" (Nieuwsuur, 2021) illustrates. Besides the flag being an emotional issue because of historical relevance, these feelings of being attacked can also come from the fact that its use is regarded as expressing a certain political subjectivity. The different flags are not simply artifacts, but they are ways of political subjectification: of aligning oneself with certain political projects, values, and views (Lépinard, 2020). This is similar to the construction and employment of the category 'white gay men', which is used to morally say something about understandings of activism and which political subjectivities one aligns with. Just like the progress flag for many of my interlocutors represents the intersectional activism that they regard as the 'right' type of activism, with the original rainbow flag representing single-issue activism, and sometimes even conservatism, in their eyes, the category 'white gay men' is used to express a rejection of activism which is *not* intersectional activism, and which does not invest in other types of political fights, therefore not committing to 'queer' activism. The distinction that I highlighted in chapter 3, between on the one hand intersectional activism and queer activism, and on the other hand single-issue LGBT activism, thus seems to be at the foundation of the construction of the category 'white gay men'. In this process of producing different moral-political subjectivities, I noticed my interlocutors have very specific expectations of particular subjectivities. In the final part of this chapter, I will zoom in further on the issue of moral-political subjectivity, and explore the ways in which certain expectations, obligations, and emotions are attached to this issue.

4.4 Expectations, obligations, and emotions

As Lépinard (2020) argues, political subjectification is a process in which people morally align themselves with particular political beliefs and actions (Lépinard, 2020, p. 41), and therefore comes with certain expectations. I noticed that for some of my interlocutors, they

had very specific expectations from white gay men, and that because of their privilege, white gay men are almost obligated to politically speak out about the marginalization of other queer people, and most importantly to show support with these more marginalized groups.

However, it is a very specific type of politically speaking out that is expected from these white gay men. For example, my interlocutor Luca, who is a 27-year-old white non-binary queer person, and who is the founder of Queer Network Amsterdam, a network consisting of multiple queer activist groups in Amsterdam, makes very clear what kind of political subjectivity is *not* accepted according to them:

For example, Pride Walk. Maybe that's activist in the eyes of white gay men, but in general it is just a march where people drink a lot of wine. [...] And then they portray We Reclaim Our Pride as criminals who want to damage Pride Walk. Then they are saying 'okay you are allowed to walk, but behind the flags of the countries where homosexuality is in the criminal code¹⁶'. But that is not activism. All those white gays walking with the flag of Uganda... Check your fucking privilege. [...] Look, many countries have the death penalty for homosexuality. And then there is a white gay man from De Pijp¹⁷ who thinks that's all very sad, but who then two weeks later is probably in Africa himself to discover the world. (Luca)

Luca, in an angry and frustrated way, here identifies a particular form of activism – activism focusing on countries where homosexuality is in the criminal code – that they associate with the category 'white gay men' and that they regard as 'non-activism'. They seem to attach a notion of hypocrisy to the category 'white gay men', by stating that although these men carry the flags of countries where homosexuality is in the criminal code, they are not aware of their privilege to travel the world. Of course, it is not the case that all white gay men travel the

¹⁶ They mean the Zero Flags Project by this. This organization, chaired by Hans Verhoeven, focuses on drawing attention to countries where homosexuality is in the criminal code, by walking with the national flags of these countries during Pride Walk. During Pride Walk 2021, the Zero Flags project was one of the organizations walking at the front of the march: the position that We Reclaim Our Pride wanted to take over.

¹⁷ A neighborhood in Amsterdam, which is characterized by high levels of gentrification.

world, and we could strongly question whether white gay men are able to openly travel to all countries. What I hope to show with Luca's quote, however, is how they use the category 'white gay men' to express frustration with a certain type of political subjectivity, a subjectivity that they define as adhering to a 'wrong' kind of activism.

Luca also connects the category 'white gay men' to 'drinking wine', and 'partying', which is something more of my interlocutors do, for example Sam, a 25-year-old white gender non-conforming person:

Yes, white men. There I'm using that word again [laughing]. They might have the idea 'we're done right? Now it's a party'. (Sam)

Sam here talks about white men in the queer community who believe an event like Pride should be a party, because for them activism is not needed anymore, therefore defining 'partying' as 'non-activism'. The words 'we're done right?' suggest that Sam believes these white men are particularly concerned with the issue of equal rights, seeing the fact that gay people in the Netherlands do in current times have most of the same rights as heterosexual people as a sign of 'completion' of the fight for LGBT liberation. Again, the critique of these white gay men seems to be a critique of liberal, single-issue, politics, in which equality of rights is central. Interestingly enough, Sam had to laugh when saying the words 'white men', reflecting on the fact that they use the category a lot. Some of my other interlocutors also reflect on their use of the category, for example Skyler, who is 24 years old, white, non-binary, and bisexual, and who states, when arguing that white gay men are the ones dominating the queer movement, that their argument might be a bit 'stereotypical'. Thus, some of my interlocutors do critically reflect on their use of the category 'white gay men'.

4.4.1 White lesbian women

So far, I have discussed how some of my interlocutors construct and use the category ‘white gay men’ to define a particular political subjectivity that they morally see as a ‘wrong’ political subjectivity. Most of my interlocutors speak of ‘white gay men’ to identify this ‘wrong’ political subjectivity. Some interlocutors specifically talked about the marginalization and exclusion of lesbian women, for example Layla, in her quote I discussed in section 4.3. In addition, Wekker (2020), in her discussion of the hegemony of white gay men in Dutch state policies, also explicitly mentions the exclusion of lesbian women in these policies (Wekker, 2020, p. 178). At the same time, the category ‘white lesbian women’ was constructed and used by a couple of my interlocutors to refer to a relatively privileged group within the queer community, and to morally say something about power and particular political subjectivities.

For example, Taylor, who is a 33-year-old black non-binary queer person, when answering my question if they believe struggles and protests should be connected, says:

Oh, hell yeah. But again, that is the core of being marginalized. If you don’t tackle that, then you are lucky that you are a white gay man. Maybe even a white gay woman, or whatever. Because then you are kind of the norm, and that is it. Everything that is not gay man or gay woman, for example if you are non-binary, well, then you have a problem. And that is queerness for me. Queerness is fighting the norm.
(Taylor)

Taylor here focuses again on the privilege of white gay men, who they see as ‘the norm’. Yet, Taylor suggests that ‘white gay women’ might possess this privilege as well. Nina, a 27-year-old white pansexual woman, is the only one of my interlocutors who very specifically uses

the category ‘lesbian women’ and connects moral judgments of a particular political subjectivity to this category:

I think it is very important that if you have experienced injustice yourself that you do not just stand up for yourself, but also for others who might experience inequality in a different way. I say it like that, because it is something that I notice a lot with lesbian friends of mine, who do not stand in solidarity with trans people. Then I think, if you look back at the history, how people fought for gay rights, and everything that happened before that... How can you find it so self-evident that you can be with a woman yourself, but that you think like ‘oh trans people, I do not know if that much money should be spent on trans care’? Then I think, this fight was fought for you by these people, how can you... So, I find solidarity almost more important for people who also experienced some form of marginalization. Because then you have to be able to feel that. (Nina)

What is very interesting about Nina’s use of the category ‘lesbian women’, is the specific expectations that she has of these women. Even though (white) lesbian women have faced, and are still facing, forms of discrimination, sexism, and marginalization that white gay men do not face in Dutch society, Nina constructs a category, consisting of lesbian women, who nowadays potentially are more privileged than other people in the queer community, and who therefore have a stronger power position than, for instance, trans people. Just like the way other interviewees talk about white gay men, Nina associates this category with a lack of solidarity with more marginalized groups within the queer community. As she states, she cannot understand this lack of solidarity exactly *because* this category of lesbian women has faced discrimination and marginalization in the past.

In addition, she makes clear that for her, solidarity in the queer community is almost a requirement. She expresses this notion of requirement first of all by emphasizing that people who are particularly marginalized today, like trans people and queer people of color, have

been very significant in the history of queer liberation: an understanding that many of my interviewees have expressed, often referring to the Stonewall rebellion in New York City. People who potentially are in a more privileged position today, should remember the efforts of these activists and should ‘reciprocate’ this solidarity. Secondly, Nina links this requirement of solidarity within the queer community to the fact that people in the community should be able to ‘feel’ the marginalization of others because of their own history of marginalization, even if her individual lesbian friends might not have experienced this marginalization themselves. Her notion of marginalization thus refers more to the *category* ‘lesbian women’ than to these specific individuals. The showing of solidarity by more privileged people within the queer community with people belonging to more marginalized groups, is understood as a *moral requirement* or *obligation* by Nina.

4.4.2 The ‘right’ political subjectivity

I notice that when we are talking about racism in the LGBTI community, that the conversation stops when people are saying “yes, but were all gay right? I understand how it is to be discriminated against, I understand that, we’re all just human”. We are, but I get discriminated against because of my skin color. So, I need you to understand me, and I need you to tell me “Shit, I understand. You’re not just discriminated against because you’re queer, but also because you’re black.” And how do these things work together? And that is what I miss in our community. (Naomie Pieter in *De Roze Revolutie*, Episode 2, Van Erp, 2021).

This quote by Black Pride co-founder Naomie Pieter in Michiel van Erp’s documentary series about Dutch queer activism, called *De Roze Revolutie*, indicates certain needs and expectations Pieter has from more privileged people within the queer community. She needs these people to understand that because of the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender, she

faces different forms of discrimination than other people in the community, and that not all discrimination should be seen as the same. It is the expectation of showing support and solidarity with more marginalized groups within the queer community that some of my interlocutors define as the ‘right’ kind of political subjectivity for groups who possess relatively more privilege, like white gay men and white lesbian women. Nina, when talking about white gay men, thinks it is needed for white gay men to ‘take a step back’ in the queer movement, and therefore to provide more space for historically marginalized groups within the queer community. It is this ‘taking a step back’ that Adam also identifies as his own preferred way of showing political support, for example at a Black Pride protest he attended in 2020:

Because you don’t want to claim space that is not yours or put yourself in the center of attention. So, I remember I was constantly aware of that, like thinking about what is appropriate, and how do I show that I am there, without taking up too much space. (Adam)

Adam also tells me about some of his friends critiquing another friend of theirs, who according to them did not adhere to this notion of ‘taking a step back’ as the right way of showing political support:

I heard from friends who were also at Black Pride that they had some criticism on another friend of theirs. She is white and she was going to several Black Lives Matter demonstrations, and also Black Pride. And they were critical of the fact that she was always wearing very notable clothes. They had the feeling that she was going there in order to be photographed, and that happened a lot and then she would post those pictures online. So that feels like showcasing yourself, instead of being there for someone else. (Adam)

The elements some of my interlocutors expressed that they associated with the ‘right’ kind of political subjectivity for more privileged groups like white gay men and white lesbian women, thus include being present at demonstrations specifically focused on historically marginalized groups like queer people of color, but without putting yourself in the center of attention. To be aware of the space you take, and to make this space as minimal as possible. I was present at the Black Pride protest in 2020 myself, and I observed quite a few white protesters turning down requests of journalists to be interviewed. This seems to be an example of ‘not taking up space’, while still being present to show support. My interlocutor Vanessa, who identifies as a queer person of color, tells me:

My friends and I are often talking about... What should be the position of white people in Black Pride? And I find it super important that there are there, that they support. I also think that it is necessary, to give that support, because maybe otherwise you won’t reach... How do you say that... The bigger audience. But there is such a fine line... I think white people might need to take the position to pass on the baton to people of color. To be like ‘hey, I have this platform, I achieved a lot here as a white person. And because I am white, I have privileges that make that people maybe listen to me sooner, that they believe me, or that they understand where it comes from.’. But to then use that platform to say: ‘I have this platform, I now give the microphone to you, please take the floor’. I think it becomes a problem when white people make a statement themselves, as if it is their experience as well. I think you then take away the microphone again, from people of color. Yes, I feel like there needs to be a platform to let people of color speak. (Vanessa)

When I then asked Vanessa how she experienced the presence of white people at Black Pride protests, she says:

I feel like at Black Pride, everybody is welcome. And there were many white people. And it was actually really nice as well, to see that people show support. But it would be problematic if Black Pride was organized by mainly white people. Then you would be like, what is happening here? Just like in many companies, when they have a

‘diversity team’ that is very white. Then I think, this is not right. But the simple presence of white people is support. (Vanessa)

Vanessa talks about space, and about how she sees the presence of white people at Black Pride as support, but that it is important that these white ‘allies’ do not take up too much space, and that the central group should be queer people of color. This is the type of political subjectivity for people who have more privilege – because of their race, sexuality, and gender – that is morally regarded as ‘right’ by many of interlocutors.

Boris, who is a white bisexual man, and who is the creator of a theatre series called *Becoming*, which consists of multiple shows specifically focusing on a sub-community within the queer community, tells me that it depends on the show to what extent he himself would play a big role. For example, for the show that focused specifically on queer people of color he says:

On those nights, I don’t think I should be the host. That’s quite clear. I can be there and I can maybe say something like ‘hello everyone, this is *Becoming*, there are also other shows, but now I pass on the microphone’. (Boris)

Here, Boris seems to do exactly what Vanessa expects from white allies: using his platform to let queer people of color speak. Interestingly enough, at one of the shows which was focused on feminism, Boris *did* play the role of host, and was more involved in the show itself, which was requested by the feminist podcast hosts that were the main characters in the show. This show was mainly visited by white women, and apparently it was understood that there, Boris could take on a more central role. It might be the case that, even though for the category

‘white gay men’, it is the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender that is employed to construct this category, the dimension of whiteness plays a particularly important role in these understandings of privilege. Taylor, who is a Surinamese-Dutch 33-year-old non-binary queer person, speaks of whiteness specifically when they talk to me about the necessity of creating space for queer people of color at demonstrations:

We are still in the Netherlands, and I have nothing against Dutch people. For me it’s really about a Eurocentric capitalistic system, that is the devil. It is not the white person, it is the white energy, the whiteness of it all. Whiteness is an energy that everybody suffers from. (Taylor)

So, as I discussed earlier as well, whiteness as a dimension is quite often used on its own as well, to convey notions of privilege, and to say something about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ political subjectivities. In chapter 1, I examined the issue of racism in the Netherlands, and the paradoxical context of being a nation in which much racism exists, rooted in a history of colonialism, but in which the general self-perception among white Dutch citizens is one of living in a liberal, progressive, and ‘color-blind’ country. It might be that because of this, the issue of whiteness is of particular importance for people within the queer movement when they talk about marginalization and power inequalities. What is very specific about the category ‘white gay men’ is how the intersection of *multiple* axes of difference is employed to morally express understandings of power and privilege, and of expectations and obligations of more privileged groups.

Finally, Taylor’s quote very clearly illustrates my argument by stating that their issues are not with white people as people, but with ‘whiteness’. Therefore, I argue, categories of ‘white people’, ‘white lesbian women’, and in particular the category of ‘white gay men’, are not

rigid categories. The boundaries of the moral-political project of belonging that takes place in the construction of these categories are of course related to social locations and privilege, but are especially about certain values, beliefs, and practices of queer politics (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 209). Exactly because these categories are constructed to say something about political subjectivity rather than only about social location, people, through the process of ethics, i.e. through reflection on their privileges, and through connecting their understandings and practices of activism to this awareness, are able to cross the boundaries of this category, meaning that literal white gay men can escape the category ‘white gay men’.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the ways in which symbols and categories are used within the Amsterdam queer movement to represent and convey moral understandings about different political subjectivities. I argued that the different views of the rainbow flag illustrate these different moral-political subjectivities, with the progress flag for many of my interlocutors representing their commitment to intersectional activism. People have expectations of formal institutions and places like bars, to use this progress flag, and have negative feelings about the use of the original rainbow flag, thus making moral judgments about ‘other’ political subjectivities. A symbol like the rainbow flag involves emotional attachments as well, and the moral rejection of for example the original rainbow flag can inform emotional responses by people aligning themselves with this flag.

The rainbow flag thus shows the multiplicity of political subjectivities within the Amsterdam queer movement. In the second part of this chapter, I looked at how the category ‘white gay men’ is symbolically produced and used by my interlocutors to morally say something about a specific political subjectivity. Even though in discourse, the category is often used in a rigid

way, its construction and employment are part of a much more complex process. I have argued that the category ‘white gay men’ is constructed through the intersection of three ‘axes of difference’ – race, sexuality, and gender – and that this category in the first place is used to say something about privilege and power relations within the Amsterdam queer community. Since white gay men possess certain forms of privilege because of their race, sexuality, and gender, they relatively hold a more powerful position within the queer community and within broader society. This is not to say that white gay men do not face forms of discrimination and marginalization in heteronormative society. However, *compared to* more marginalized groups within the queer community, like trans people and queer people of color, white gay cis-gender men stand higher in the hierarchy of privilege.

Besides the use of the category ‘white gay men’ to comment on privilege and to express certain frustrations with power inequalities, I have argued that the category is constructed to morally say something about understandings of activism and political subjectivities. By the category ‘white gay men’ – and to a far lesser extent ‘white lesbian women’ – a particular moral-political subjectivity is meant, namely that of relatively privileged people who either do not speak out politically at all, or who focus on their own interests – often committing to single-issue politics– but do not show active support with more marginalized groups within the queer community or even express racist or transphobic things. Many of my interlocutors have the strong expectation from white gay men, because of their more privileged position, to actively support more marginalized queer people, and it is the people who do not meet those expectations that belong to the category ‘white gay men’.

So, although the category is used to firstly say something about social locations, and with that certain privileges and power positions, it is, on a deeper level, also reflecting understandings

of the queer movement as a moral-political project. This means the category is about more than literal white gay men, suggesting that the boundaries around this category are relatively fluid. Some white gay men are able to ‘escape’ the category by showing the ‘right’ type of political subjectivity, which includes things like physically showing up at protests for more marginalized queer people but not taking up too much space, by using their privilege to provide a platform for these more marginalized groups, and by not making themselves the center of attention. It is then notions of intersectionality, community, care, and solidarity, that make ‘boundary crossing’ possible and that show the constructed nature of the boundaries around the category ‘white gay men’. Even though power structures play a very important role within the Amsterdam queer movement, creating different social positions and hierarchies of privilege, within these structures, people also possess a certain amount of ethical freedom to reflect on these power inequalities, and to form their practices of activism according to these reflections. This ethical freedom of reflection can then inform new collaborations and transformations within the movement, which will be the focus of the final chapter.

Chapter 5: New collaborations and possibilities for a collective political subjectivity

I am looking forward to Queer & Pride Amsterdam 2023. The event is a symbol of the open and tolerant city we want to be. We celebrate the freedom to be yourself, to love who you love, but we also fight for equal rights for the whole rainbow community. We draw attention to different groups that are forced to fight harder for representation, recognition, emancipation and security. That is why I am very happy that these organizations came to this new collaboration. I hope that the input and energy of all organizations make Queer & Pride Amsterdam a space where all people feel welcome and recognize themselves. I want to thank all organizations for their dedication. (Touria Meliani, alderwoman for inclusion and anti-discrimination policy, municipality of Amsterdam, 14 December 2022, translated from Dutch).

These are the words of the Amsterdam municipality's alderwoman Touria Meliani, from a press statement released in December 2022. As I touched upon in previous chapters, Pride in Amsterdam has changed since 2023, with two Pride weeks organized that year. In 2021, the municipality of Amsterdam hired a research organization called 'Flowz' – an organization with experienced discussion leaders, hired because of its specialization in working with governmental institutions and NGO's, especially ones needing to develop strategies because of change within these organizations (Flowz, 2021) – to arrange discussions with spokespersons from different queer organizations and movements in Amsterdam, to find out what they think about the way Pride Amsterdam is organized, which foci the event should have, and which people should be organizing Pride. The summary of the research does not include the exact names of the groups that participated in these discussions, yet, from the interviews I have conducted, I know groups like the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, and Queer Network Amsterdam (which comprises multiple organizations, focusing specifically on queer people of color and trans people, partly consisting of people who organized We Reclaim Our Pride and Black Pride), participated in these talks. The Flowz research report states that among almost all participants of the discussions, there was a general understanding that Pride

Amsterdam has to change. It has to be more inclusive, organized bottom up by ‘the community’, and concentrating on protest. Many participants feel like ‘celebration’ and ‘partying’ should be a part of Pride, but that the emphasis on these aspects is too dominating right now. In addition, many participants believe Pride should be organized less centrally and feel like the way Pride is organized right now brings with it the concentration of power in the hands of one small group of people.

These are the issues the groups more or less agreed about. However, the Flowz report states that there are also issues about which there was disagreement between the participants of the research. For example, the existence and role of the Canal Boat Parade: the biggest event of Pride Amsterdam, in which companies, organizations, and individual groups sail through the canals of Amsterdam, cheered on by people standing on the quay. The organization of Pride Amsterdam determines which boats are allowed to participate. A minority of participants believe the boat parade should be abolished altogether. They think it is outdated and is not serving the interests of ‘the community’. For them, Pride Walk should replace the boat parade as the main event of Pride Amsterdam. A small majority thinks the boat parade should remain to exist, but that big changes in it are necessary. Changes that are mentioned include an abolishment of the participation of big international companies and only giving space to a small number of national companies that are specifically connected to the queer community. Second, the idea of a committee whose role it is to check the amount of ‘pinkwashing’ by these companies, was suggested. Smaller changes that were mentioned include making big companies fund boats of ‘minority groups’, without this being public knowledge, and the establishment of a minimum percentage of boats that should be dedicated to BIPOC¹⁸ organizations, and trans organizations. A small minority of organizations believe the boat

¹⁸ Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

parade is fine as it is and sees the participation of bigger companies in this parade as a good thing, as these companies provide a lot of sponsor money which can be used for other Pride events (Flowz, 2021).

All in all, the results of the inquiry were enough reason for the municipality to introduce a change of Pride Amsterdam, with Pride in 2023 and 2024 being organized by two organizations: the original Pride Amsterdam Foundation, still responsible for organizing the Canal Parade, and Queer Amsterdam, a new organization comprised of people who were active in movements like Black Pride and We Reclaim Our Pride, and which now included Pride Walk, the protest march which has been organized as part of Pride Amsterdam since 2012. For 2025, the policy around Pride has changed again, with Pride now lasting for a full month, with different parts being organized by multiple organizations. This dissertation will however not focus on this change in 2025, as my fieldwork was conducted mainly in 2021 and 2022. However, I will discuss the change of Pride in 2023, as I think this change says something about how conflict – for example the intervention of We Reclaim Our Pride in Pride Walk 2021 I discussed in chapter 3 – can eventually shape new collaborations and relations of solidarity.

Therefore, in this final chapter, I will analyze these new collaborations, focusing specifically on the organization Queer Amsterdam and a theatre production series called *Becoming* as an alternative form of activism in which the building of collaborations between different groups is central. I try to answer three questions: how do conflicts and tensions produce new collaborations within the Amsterdam queer movement? How can alternative forms of activism, like theatre, produce new collaborations within the Amsterdam queer movement? And finally, in a movement in which so many different social locations, interests, values,

beliefs, and understandings of activism exist, is the creation of a collective political subjectivity, in which the countering of power hegemonies and heteronormativities and a fight for queer liberation are central, possible?

I will argue that conflict, or ‘politics’ (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014; Lamusse, 2016), in which assumed consensus is questioned, has created reflexive ‘ethical moments’, as Zigon (2009) calls it, among different actors, informing a change of Pride, and of relations within the Amsterdam queer movement. In these ‘ethical moments’, people have the ‘ethical freedom’ (Foucault, 1994) to reflect on their moral frameworks – values, beliefs, judgments, and behavior – and to potentially change these.

In addition, I will discuss the theatre production series called *Becoming*, as an innovative way of practicing queer activism and creating relations of cooperation. Using Haarstad’s (2007) concept of ‘collective political subjectivity’, I argue that in both this theatre activism and in Queer Amsterdam we can see moments of collectivity within the Amsterdam queer movement, and that difference takes a prominent position in this collectivity, regarded as something that should be celebrated and that actually connects, instead of divides, people within the queer community. Tension and conflict in the Amsterdam queer movement can function as ways of building these connections and new relations of collaboration and creating change, namely, among other things, a move away from single-issue LGBT activism to intersectional queer activism, in which a conscious politicization of Pride Amsterdam and the Amsterdam queer movement more broadly can be seen. These tensions and conflicts will always exist, but I argue that this is not necessarily a sign of complete polarization, or of the failure of building a collectivity. Instead, we could see these tensions and conflicts as indications of changing power consolidations and hierarchies of privilege, and of a movement

always transforming and progressing. Referring to Chantal Mouffe's (1999) concept of 'agonistic pluralism', we could say that instead of a focus on the dominant model of consensus and deliberation in Dutch culture, a recognition of conflict and an emphasis on difference, in which conflict is not understood as a relation between enemies, but as a respectful relation between adversaries – which Mouffe calls agonism – can help us understand the building of collectivity, and transformations of powerful institutions, within the Amsterdam queer movement, better (Mouffe, 1999).

5.1 Queer Amsterdam

5.1.1 A queer Pride?

Pride Walk, after WROP's 'intervention' in 2021, started to transform already in 2022. The first time I interviewed Nikki, one of the main organizers of Pride Walk, was in April 2022, so after Pride Walk 2021, but before Pride Walk 2022. She then told me that she believed that in the future, the march needed to be organized in collaboration with the people involved in WROP. When I met her again for a second interview, in August 2023, I asked her how this unfolded in 2022. Nikki explained that after Pride Walk 2021, she invited some of the people involved in WROP at her home, to talk about what happened and discuss how Pride Walk could change in the future. Nikki was a bit nervous about this meeting, but as she told me:

The meeting started nervously, but when they left, we were all hugging each other.
(Nikki)

In this meeting, according to Nikki, a multitude of things were discussed, among which the desire of WROP for space for the most marginalized groups at the front of the walk, instead

of reserving this space for the board of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, or the Zero Flags project. In 2022, a start with realizing this desire was made, by making members of Black Pride and We Reclaim Our Pride, plus other members of queer activist groups, speakers on stage. On WROP's Instagram, Pride Walk 2022 was promoted, using the motto "Queer liberation, not rainbow capitalism!" (We Reclaim Our Pride, 2022). In addition, the Instagram post included a reference to the Stonewall rebellion as the beginning of Pride, and argued for a Pride in which struggles regarding sexuality and gender are connected with struggles related to racism, sexism, and class (Ibid.).

Yet, Pride Walk 2022 was still organized in collaboration with the same Pride Amsterdam Foundation that has been organizing Pride since 2014, although Nikki told me that this collaboration in practice meant that the Foundation provided the money, but that she had to do all the organizing herself. The relation between the Pride Walk committee and the Pride Amsterdam Foundation was crumbling at this point, Nikki tells me:

This entailed a lot of difficulties. Because I was kind of banned from Pride Amsterdam and had a conflict there. They told me: "where is your community feeling and you are now organizing Pride with the opponent. Then figure it out. You should be happy we give you money". [...] I found it intimidating. I believe Pride Amsterdam also published some articles in the newspapers, I don't know if you saw those? With titles like "Put trans organizations together and they argue like cats and dogs. They hate white men". All things that are not true. And that for me was a crossed line. If this organization talks about the community in this way, then it does not represent the full community, then something needs to change. (Nikki)

In this same summer, in 2022, the municipality of Amsterdam started to approach organizations and people to ask whether they potentially were interested in organizing Pride Amsterdam in the future, since the permit for Pride – which is allocated to a specific

organization by the Amsterdam municipality every three to four years – was coming to an end in 2022. Nikki and her Pride Walk committee decided to apply for this permit, leaving its alliance with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, and eventually founding Queer Amsterdam, a new organization, with its board consisting of people like Nikki, Naomie Pieter – co-founder of Black Pride – and Sorab Roustayar, organizer at Fite Qlub – a platform dedicated to the BIPOC queer community –, who was also involved in We Reclaim Our Pride. Because there was not a lot of time, the municipality decided to make 2023 a ‘transition year’, in which one big permit was granted, calling Pride 2023 ‘Queer & Pride’, which in practice meant a two-week Pride event: one organized by Queer Amsterdam, and one organized by the ‘original’ Pride Amsterdam Foundation. On the website of the municipality of Amsterdam, these two weeks are described as follows (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2023):

22-28 July: Queer Amsterdam: the first week is all about queerness: in all shapes and sizes, in all colors and forms. Values like social justice, anti-discrimination, and (inter)national solidarity form the common thread in the program.

1-6 August: Pride Amsterdam: in the second week, the main attention is for emancipation, culture, sport, celebration, and meeting each other. The Pride will be concluded with the world-famous and unique Canal Boat Parade on 5 August and the closing party on Dam Square (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2023).

In addition, the municipality website states that Pride “stands for ‘being who you are and loving who you want’ and that remains the same. However, the way in which people understand Pride and give meaning to it is different for everyone” (Gemeente Amsterdam,

2023). After the municipality's research report, it was clear that different people, groups, and organizations have different understandings of what Pride should look like and what it should focus on. For 2023, the municipality 'solved' this issue by organizing two Prides and providing funding for two organization to do so: Queer Amsterdam and the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. While the description of the week organized by Pride Amsterdam remained relatively the same as previous years, the description of the week organized by Queer Amsterdam emphasizes the word queer, a word which is almost never used on the website of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, where 'LGBT', and sometimes LGBTQIA+, is the common term, as I already described in chapter 3, arguing that for many of my interlocutors, the word 'queer' reflects their commitment to activism which connects multiple political causes, whereas 'LGBT' politics can be seen as following a single-issue framework of activism. 'Queer' as a term is understood by many of the activists I talked to as describing more than just sexuality or gender identity. It is a way of understanding politics, activism, and political subjectivity, as Ellie's – who participated in WROP's protest during Pride Walk 2021 – quote in chapter 3 earlier suggests, in which they argue that queer includes anti-capitalism, anti-sexism, and anti-racism, and the conscious connection of these multiple political fights. Queer Amsterdam throughout the Pride week it organized emphasized this message of queer activism.

5.1.2 Pride and the future

Nicholls and Uitermark (2013) describe how certain power consolidations can transform, stating that when fragmentations in elite relations develop, parts of these elites can break off their existing alliances with other elites and change to other alliances. Then, when an opening has already been created in these power consolidations by these fragmentations, certain 'critical events' can inform the production of new relations of power (Nicholls & Uitermark,

2013, pp. 1559-1560.). In Pride Amsterdam, there were already fragmentations brewing beneath the surface, with for example the organizers of Pride Walk being unhappy with their collaboration with the board of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. Then, WROP's ethics, meaning their "critique, invention, and creative practice" (Dave, 2012, p. 3) during their 'intervention' in Pride Walk 2021, created a moment in which organizers like Nikki reflected on what Pride Walk means and what it should look like, eventually leading to a transformation of Pride Walk, and creating alliances with 'outsiders' like WROP, and becoming part of Queer Amsterdam in 2023, carrying out the message of intersectional and queer activism WROP stands for.

Of course, WROP's action did not solely lead to the transformation of Pride in general, and we must not overlook other organizations' and movements' role in this, like Black Pride, which already started mobilizing separately from Pride Amsterdam in 2020. In 2023, Black Pride started collaborating with Queer Amsterdam, with its own stage on Dam Square, the same square where the Black Lives Matter protests happened in 2020. On 27 July 2023, I attended the Black Pride program, where there were a few hundred people present, which might have been more if the weather would have been better. The organizers of Black Pride came on stage, with two of them, Clarice Gargard and Naomie Pieter, delivering speeches, arguing that the fact that Black Pride is now a headliner in the Queer Amsterdam program, taking place on Dam Square, the most famous square of Amsterdam, is groundbreaking. In her speech, Clarice focused on 'the future'. She stated:

When you have been erased in the past [...] you cannot be ensured there is a place for you in the future. [...] We must claim the future for ourselves, and this stage represents a gateway. [...] Welcome to the future, which is hella black and hella queer. And you are welcome here! (Clarice Gargard, Black Pride organizer)

Muñoz (2009) argues that queerness inherently involves a utopian element, which especially for minority subjects can provide a sense of hope (Muñoz, 2009, p. 97). Gargard's discourse centering 'the future' illustrate this hope in a better world. While centering the future, the past is evoked to empower people within the queer community, especially historically marginalized groups like queer people of color and trans people. During Black Pride, many references to the Stonewall rebellion were made. These references and narratives can be used to strengthen the claim of these marginalized groups for more recognition, as it was queer people of color and trans people who played a crucial role in this rebellion. So, movements like Black Pride are not aiming for a completely new Pride, trying to do away with the past. Instead, they are using *certain* discourses, ideologies, practices, and structures, and their underlying values, while critiquing and rejecting *others*, thus adhering to the ambivalence of disidentification to produce this 'new world' (Muñoz, 1999).

Queer Amsterdam expresses this simultaneous use of existing ideologies and structures and the production of new ideologies and structures very clearly in the flags and posters that were used in the city center of Amsterdam as promotion material, not rejecting the notion of Pride altogether, but (re)claiming the meaning of it:



Figure 9: Poster used as promotion material for Queer Amsterdam: "A new vision of Pride" (photo taken by author at Damrak, Amsterdam, 22 July 2023)



Figure 10: Flags used as promotion material for Queer Pride: "This is what Pride can look like" (photo taken by author at Leidseplein, Amsterdam, 22 July 2023)

These posters show the relationality between different groups within the Amsterdam queer movement. Queer Amsterdam frames its understanding of its organization by emphasizing how it *differs from* the way Pride Amsterdam looked like in the past. The text 'This is what Pride can look like' conveys a judgment of what Pride should mean according to the organizers of Queer Amsterdam, therefore making clear that the way Pride has been organized by the Pride Amsterdam Foundation is the 'wrong' way of organizing Pride in their eyes, focusing too much on commercialism, and too little on the recognition and visibility of marginalized groups within the community, and the connection of multiple political struggles. The focus on 'a new vision' again centers the idea of the future and of change, making clear

how Muñoz's notion of utopia could be seen as ethical: it involves the reflection of activists on certain moral practices, values, and norms, and the creative invention of new practices, values, and norms (Dave, 2012). This 'new world' is not supposed to exist completely separately from the 'old world', but the 'old world' is seen as needing to be transformed.

5.2 Moral breakdown and ethical moments

As I stated before, multiple groups and movements, like Black Pride, have contributed to the transformation of Pride Amsterdam. This transformation is a process, and not the direct result of one specific event. However, particular events and moments can contribute to change.

These events do not necessarily have to be major societal changes but can take place on a smaller scale as well. WROP's 'intervention' in Pride Walk 2021 could be seen as a moment of 'moral breakdown', as Zigon (2009) calls it, forcing people to reflect on their values, beliefs, and behavior, sometimes leading to personal change in these values, beliefs, and behavior – which are moments that can be characterized as 'ethical moments' (Zigon, 2009).

As I argued in the introduction of this dissertation, it is especially for the study of change that I believe a distinction between morality and ethics is very useful, for which I follow Zigon (2009). In this distinction, morality refers to the norms existing in a certain society and culture, and the values, beliefs, and judgments, people hold and make, oftentimes without consciously thinking about them. Ethics on the other hand, consist of people's conscious reflection on their morality and their behavior following this morality, which, as Zigon argues, often comes about when norms, values, and beliefs, and the ways in which these norms, values, and beliefs are legitimized in societies and communities, are actively questioned and challenged (Ibid., pp. 258-261).

The way Pride Walk had been organized for years, and the values and practices it carried out

by for example letting the board of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation walk in the front of the march, instead of representatives from the most marginalized groups within the queer community, was questioned by WROP, ‘revealing’ certain norms – i.e. having the people highest in the organizational hierarchy lead the march, encouraging forms of exclusion – around Pride, on which individuals were able to reflect. Nikki’s already uncomfortable feelings with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation were confirmed by WROP’s action, making it clear for her what she values as important within the queer movement, and deciding to actively change the practices and discourses of Pride Walk, centering intersectional and queer activism.

Another event that multiple of my interlocutors mentioned as a moment that made them reflect on the world around them, on their own moral codes, values, political beliefs, and their political actions, is the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 and the Black Lives Matter protests that arose after this event. Although the ‘intervention’ of WROP during Pride Walk 2021 was a ‘moral breakdown’ happening on a relatively small scale, an event like the murder on George Floyd was a major societal disruption, a ‘moral shock’ (Jasper, 1997) we could say, that made many people reflect, also outside the Amsterdam queer movement of course. The first Black Pride demonstration took place in the summer of 2020, and for many of my interlocutors – mainly the ones that identify as white – being present at this protest was a way of showing their solidarity with the black community. When I asked Adam, who is in his early twenties, and who identifies as white, male, and gay, how he knew about the first Black Pride protest in 2020, he tells me:

I think I just came across it on Instagram. And I found it very important at that time anyway, at that time the Black Lives Matter movement was very big. So, in that time period, I was like I want to do something, but I didn’t really know how. I registered as

a volunteer for an organization [...] but I didn't hear anything, and then I read about this protest, so I thought, I want to go there in any case. Then that's the place to show yourself. And to show that you think it's important. (Adam)

For Adam, the Black Lives Matter movement made him (more) aware of certain oppressions and power relations, making him 'wanting to do something'. The Black Pride protest for him was a way of expressing his support and solidarity with the black community in Amsterdam. More interlocutors mentioned the murder on George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed as factors that made them want to join the Black Pride protest in 2020. Like Nina, who is a 27-year-old white pansexual woman:

Chris: And why did you want to join [the Black Pride protest in 2020]?

Nina: I think because Black Lives Matter was a really important topic back then.

And Anna, a 30-year-old white bisexual woman, says:

So that first time [of the Black Pride protest], in 2020, was like 1,5 months after the murder of George Floyd and the Black Live Matter movement had a real boost in the Netherlands. And then a few of my friends were going, and they also pointed this out. (Anna)

This is of course not to say that these interlocutors would not have joined the Black Pride protest if the murder on George Floyd had not happened, but it does make clear that particular moments make people reflect on their moral and political values, contributing to their actions following these reflective ethical moments.

Of course, an event like the murder of George Floyd means something different for white people wanting to show their solidarity than for black people and other people of color.

Taylor, who has Surinamese roots, tells me what that moment meant for them:

When he [George Floyd] was shot in the pandemic, my whole personal focus shifted... I was forced to go back to my own pain and to the way I am felt by the world. So, I don't care about those other things. I know it's all capitalist bullshit.
(Taylor)

The 'capitalist bullshit' that Taylor refers to here is Pride, and Pride Walk specifically, which they regard as 'Western-European colonial ways of celebrating'. The murder of George Floyd was a very emotional event for Taylor, making them reflect on what is and what is not important. Taylor joined an event organized by Black Pride, a 'Black Queer Healing' event, which they experienced in a very positive way. To have specific spaces where black queer people can come together is very important according to Taylor. For them, Pride and Pride Walk thus did not offer those spaces. While Denise, a 62-year-old white lesbian woman, and board member of the Zero Flags project, which used to have a front position in Pride Walk, carrying the flags of countries where homosexuality is in the criminal code, tells me she believes the participation of queer people of color in Pride Walk is very important, but that "it is something different than a Black Lives Matter protest", the founders of Black Pride make the direct connection to the Black Lives Matter movement. During the Black Pride program at the Dam Square in the summer of 2023 – at that time organized as part of Queer Amsterdam –, co-founder Naomie Pieter in her speech made a direct reference to the Black Lives Matter protest which happened on the same square three years earlier. For many black queer people, these movements are very much intertwined.

A combination of events, factors, critiques and actions, by multiple organizations and movements, but also broader societal structures and moments of ‘moral breakdown’ (Zigon, 2009) like WROP’s ‘intervention’ and the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed, influenced the way Pride was seen by more and more people in Amsterdam, including people within the municipality, encouraging a cry for the change of Pride, eventually leading to the foundation of Queer Amsterdam. The organization of Queer Amsterdam Pride did not go without its own struggles, with for example a last-minute change of chair. Still, the organization managed to put together a whole week of events, activities, and demonstrations.

The existence of Queer Amsterdam is again complicating certain binary understandings in discourse around activism, by working together with institutions, like the municipality and the police, and by being funded by the municipality, while at the same time being born from the grassroots, street activism of WROP, Black Pride, and other movements. In addition, while Pride Amsterdam has been criticized, by WROP, and also by many of the activists I have talked to, for being ‘a party’, parties are also included in Queer Amsterdam and Black Pride, therefore complicating the opposition between ‘celebration’ versus ‘protest’. Vanessa, a 25-year-old Surinamese-Dutch pansexual woman, and participant of Black Pride, explains this nuance for the Black Pride protest taking place in 2021:

It was a celebration more than it was a protest. And I think we were kind of done with the idea of another protest, especially after Black Lives Matter, which was a very intense summer, also for me mentally. And I think for more people of color. We were like, we want to see the good sides now. And of course, Black Pride was still about negative things in society, because we cannot see that separately. But it was also nice to just be together and think, this is what we *do* [emphasis added] have. This is a community, and we can be proud of that, we are allowed to celebrate that and to share and celebrate that love. Instead of just thinking we need to change something. That was part of it, but it was also, okay, we are allowed to just be. (Vanessa)

Thus, Vanessa sees celebration per se not as something negative and emphasizes the way in which celebration can highlight the value of community, connecting this value to the emotion of pride. It is the way Pride Amsterdam has revolved around celebration in the past, especially during the Canal Parade, which some of my interviewees view as a ‘party for heterosexuals’, that is criticized by many of the activists I have talked to. Several interviewees compared the Canal Parade with King’s Day, one of the biggest annual events in the Netherlands during which the king’s birthday is celebrated, and which is characterized by festivals, parties, and the consumption of alcohol. Vanessa’s statement about celebration suggests that celebration has a place in movements like Black Pride, but that this celebration is different from the celebration central to the Canal Parade, and that it is always connected to protest as well.

As I stated before, in 2024, Pride in Amsterdam was again organized in part by the Pride Amsterdam Foundation and in part by Queer Amsterdam. From 2025 onwards, a whole Pride month will be taking place, with multiple organizations being able to apply for subsidies to organize events. We will have to wait and see how Pride develops in Amsterdam in the future. Yet, what I have aimed to do so far is analyze how moments of conflict and ‘moral breakdown’ have generated ‘ethical moments’ of reflection, in which actors have the ethical freedom (Foucault, 1994) to reflect on their moral codes, values, and political beliefs and practices, creating space for change and new collaborations, of which Queer Amsterdam is an example. This has produced new forms of collectivity among queer groups.

We could say that we can see the pluralist politics that Moufffe (1999) argues for are taking place in the Amsterdam queer movement: a politics in which conflict and collaboration is both taking place. These politics acknowledge power differences and exclusions, which are,

according to Mouffe, often hidden by a commitment to a politics which centers consensus and universalism (Mouffe, 1999, p. 757), which is the dominant model of politics in Dutch society, as I discussed in chapter 1. This dominant model of consensus building can explain the negative responses by some people to WROP's radical practices at Pride Walk 2021.

However, as I hope to have shown so far, the Amsterdam queer movement is not only a space of conflict, but also a space of collaboration and collectivity, in which people have the freedom to reflect and change their morality. Before I come to discussing this collectivity in more detail, I will discuss another example of new collaborations and new forms of activism, namely in the world of activist theatre.

5.3 Activist theatre

Boris is an old friend of mine, who I have known for about 12 years, as we attended the same secondary school. Coincidentally, I bumped into him on 25 November 2021, while on my way to The Activist Bar, the event I mentioned earlier in chapter 3. The Activist Bar was organized by Pakhuis de Zwijger, a cultural center in Amsterdam, that has its main location in the city center. However, the event took place at their smaller location in Amsterdam-Zuidoost, an outskirt neighbourhood of the city. The original purpose of The Activist Bar was to invite a group of representatives from several activist organizations and movements, ranging from climate, human rights, and gender, to queer movements, and to place each of them at separate tables, so that visitors could rotate and talk to all of these representatives one by one, using a 'speed date' format. Yet, when Boris and I arrived at the event, it became clear very quickly that almost none of the visitors had shown up, meaning that there were about twelve activists present and only four visitors. It was an extremely cold and rainy November evening, plus the Dutch government was about to announce a new covid lockdown, including an evening curfew, the next day. It is likely that people decided to stay

home because of these factors. The event's organizers decided to change the format of the evening. Instead of the speed dating concept, all activists and the four audience members, including me, were asked to take place at one big table, having one big discussion.

Boris was invited at The Activist Bar as one of the activists. He is 28 years old and identifies as a white bisexual man, and he is a theatre maker, who creates theatre series around topics of gender, masculinity, sexuality, and queerness. His most well-known theatre production, called *Boys Won't Be Boys*, includes stories by people about their relationship with masculinity and the label 'man'. After The Activist Bar had ended, Boris and I walked to the metro station together, debriefing about the evening. We started talking about my research, which is when we found out that we have very similar interests, which I explore through sociological research, and Boris explores through theatre. He told me about *Becoming*, a new theatre series he had just started, and how he hoped to provide a stage for marginalized groups within the queer community with this series, while at the same time encouraging connection and solidarity between these groups. I was very intrigued by the *Becoming* series, and I promised Boris I would come visit some shows. We also agreed on me interviewing Boris a month later.

5.3.1 Theatre as activism

On 27 December 2021, Boris visited my house for our first interview. By then, I had unfortunately not been able to visit any of the *Becoming* shows yet, since the Dutch government's covid lockdowns meant that after the first show, all other shows had to be postponed. Luckily, later in 2022, I was able to visit four shows (**Becoming: An Activist; Becoming: Trans & Loved; Becoming: Healing; and Becoming: Glitter**). Using my observations at these shows, plus my interviews with Boris – I interviewed him for a second

time in August 2022 –, I aim to discuss theatre as a form of activism, and of *Becoming* as attempting to complicate the binaries ‘activism in the street’ and ‘activism within institutions’, and ‘activism connected to capital and the state’ and ‘independent activism’.

I will argue that *Becoming* can be seen as ‘artivism’ (Lemoine & Ouardi, 2010; Borrillo, 2021), understood as an instrument in which aesthetics and politics are combined in order to empower civil society, often with a utopian feature (Borrillo, 2021, pp. 154-155). I will also argue that this theatre as activism does not come without tensions and conflicts, which can be related to exactly the fact that *Becoming* sits between the oppositional ends of the binaries ‘activism in the street’ versus ‘activism within institutions’ and ‘activism linked to capital and the state’ versus ‘independent activism’, thus occupying an ambivalent position, just like many other queer grassroots movements, as I discussed in chapter 2 and 3. At the same time, *Becoming* uses practices that produce openings in institutionalized worlds like the world of theatre and encourages new collaborations and relations of solidarity between queer (activist) groups, in which difference has a place and is not something that is avoided.

I do have to make note of caution before I continue. I was only able to include part of the first season of *Becoming* in my fieldwork, and my interviews with Boris were during the same time. After I left my field for the first time, in September 2022, another season of *Becoming* was about to start, and it was also renewed for another season in 2023-2024. Although I did conduct my second interview with Boris after the first season had ended, which meant I was able to ask him to reflect on the season and talk about what things might change in the new season, I have not been able to attend these new seasons, so it is likely that things have changed since the time I conducted my fieldwork. However, that is how fieldwork goes, especially in fields like social movements and activism, in which things are constantly

changing, meaning that we cannot research everything. I still believe my fieldwork material about *Becoming* is rich enough to add an interesting angle to my discussion on activism, morality, ethics, and collectivity, but it is important to keep in mind that the theatre series has in the meantime evolved.

The flyer of *Becoming*'s first season looked like this:

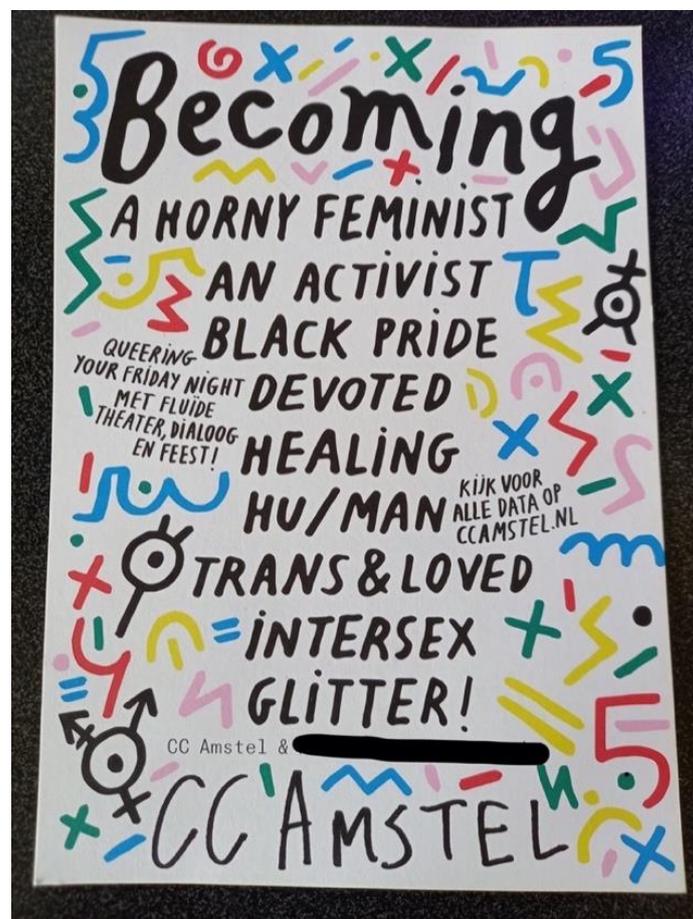


Figure 11: The flyer of season 1 of *Becoming* (photo taken by author)

As I discussed in chapter 2, the *Becoming* series is the product of a collaboration between Boris and the CC Amstel theatre, which is located in the south of Amsterdam. The goal of the *Becoming* series is twofold, which very much overlaps with one of my research interests for

this dissertation, namely the exploration of a potential combination of space for difference with connection between different groups. On the one hand, the *Becoming* series is meant to literally provide a stage, and therefore an opportunity for visibility and recognition, for specific sub-groups of the broader queer community, in particular groups that are not the most visible groups of the queer community in mainstream society (e.g. the trans community, queer people of colour, the intersex community). On the other hand, Boris hopes that these sub-groups, and the audiences of the individual shows, will ‘mix’, as he calls it himself:

Boris: The overarching goal of the year is, that we hope that when people come to one show, they also come to another show, one that they might be less directly connected to. [...] And the idea is that this mixing of people is nice.

Chris: Yes, that is what I wanted to ask: why? Why do these groups need to mix?

Boris: Well, I think people can learn a lot from each other. That you’re feeling that you’re not that different than it may seem. Kind of, standing strong together. That if you support each other’s causes, that that makes it very strong. And that’s what I also like about the alphabet soup basically, that you have each other’s back. And not that it’s like gays and lesbians are two completely different groups.

Chris: Yes.

Boris: Because I think, in reality, that is kind of the case, that these groups move very separately. But I think that’s a bit... Yeah, what do I think about that? A bit uninteresting. I think it’s nicer to meet each other, and to learn, and to bridge our differences.

Thus, Boris believes it is important that groups meet each other, learn from each other and try to come closer together. In *Becoming*, the ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ of difference is thus combined, with the show on the one hand emphasizing difference and creating space for this difference, while on the other hand encouraging the creation of some form of community, in which differences are ‘bridged’. Interestingly, Boris reflects on his own answer, showing the tension that exists within this project of combining space for difference with connection

between sub-groups:

I don't know... Now that I think about it, it's weird as well. Because it's also fine when a sub-group just wants to be together as a sub-group. [...] You could also say as a theatre, hey sub-group, you can do whatever you want. And not force them to mix with another sub-group. Because maybe people don't want that. But I think it's because it's in a theatre, and a theatre wants to attract a broader audience, and have something educating, something about connection, and to connect the city. Because the municipality loves that [laughs]. [...] And I notice that the theatre audience likes that, that they want that, yes. (Boris)

Again, the theatre, its audience, and the municipality, are mentioned as reasons for wanting and needing to centralize 'connection' and 'mixing' in the *Becoming* series, besides Boris' own personal interest in this, showing how *Becoming* partly was born from an independent curiosity in this matter, and partly from the necessity to work together with institutions and the state in order to turn this curiosity into a theatre production. During the four shows I have attended, I started to recognize people in the audience, either because they organized another show themselves, or because they were an audience member at multiple shows. At the final show of the season, **Becoming: Glitter**, in which people from the different shows came together to create one last show, Boris asked the audience who had attended a *Becoming* show before, and almost all hands went up. Thus, it seems like the goal of people visiting multiple performances was reached, at least partly.

5.3.2 How 'mixing' involves conflict

This 'mixing' also happened *within* shows. For example, at the **Becoming: Trans & Loved** show, two trans organizations were invited to create a show together: The Transketeers and Papaya Kuir. The Transketeers consists of three white trans men from a relatively affluent

part of the Netherlands. On the other hand, Papaya Kuir is an organization for trans Latinx refugees and migrants in the Netherlands, who face very different circumstances than The Transketeers. Still, these two groups managed to connect with each other over the trans experience, sharing very personal stories around parenthood, music, and art. In my follow-up interview with Boris, he told me that the collaboration between these two groups worked really well and that friendships between the members were formed.

Lugones (1987) coined the term “world”-travelling, by which she meant the attempt to understand each other’s ‘worlds’, the experiences people have within these worlds, and the way in which you yourself are perceived in these worlds (Lugones, 1987, p. 17). This “world”-travelling Lugones sees as playful, since it involves a receptiveness to surprise, and an openness to transforming personal views (Ibid.), thus to ethical reflection. Yet, this “world”-travelling is not a simple practice, and spaces in which it is encouraged, like *Becoming*, deal themselves with certain tensions that come with this “world”-travelling.

In *Becoming*, the connecting of sub-groups comes with tensions and conflicts, especially related to wanting to create a ‘safe space’ on the one hand, and a learning space in which people from different groups meet each other, on the other hand. Boris says that it is not possible for him to guarantee a safe space in the theatre:

Because the goal is that people meet each other and learn something from each other. That means that they don’t know everything about each other yet, so they will definitely say something wrong. And that is difficult. (Boris)

This tension between mixing and creating a safe space thus comes with the goals of *Becoming* as a theatre series. In addition, Boris tells me he sometimes struggles with the ‘amount’ of activism within his theatre shows. He explains this in more detail for his *Boys Won’t Be Boys* show:

I notice with *Boys Won’t Be Boys*, at the start I was very activist. Not that I’m not activist anymore, but now it’s like everyone can participate. And then it gets a form of... I’m above the participants. Because I have the money, and I manage the money, and I can choose who participates in which show. So, at first, we had the goal to be an activist movement *and* a theatre show, but we realized that that is a lot of work. So, then I was like, okay, I will do the show, and if others want to meet up for activism, that’s okay. [...] And I think when you make the expectations higher than you can live up to... I find that the scary thing about activism, that when you say, we are activists about this subject, then you have to pick up everything that has to do with that subject. Because otherwise you’re doing it wrong. And that’s just not possible for an activist. For a human. I think many activists have burn-outs. And I already did that once, a burn-out, I’m not going to do that again. (Boris)

Here, Boris touches upon an aspect of activism more people I talked to referred to, especially when it comes to intersectional and queer activism: that you cannot do everything, but that as an activist, it is often expected from you to think about, or connect, everything. In his fear for ‘doing activism wrong’ – showing the importance of morality and emotion –, Boris decides to stick to what he knows best: making theatre.

Although Boris here seems to make a distinction between activism and theatre, I would argue that shows like *Boys Won’t Be Boys* and *Becoming* are engaging in a form of activism themselves without being a ‘traditional’ social movement, namely through ‘artivism’. Borrillo (2021) argues that artivism can produce subaltern counterpublics and make groups and people who are potentially not very visible and recognized in broader society, visible, through the act of performance (Borrillo, 2021, p. 156). Muñoz (1999) also employs the concept of

counterpublics, understood as “different subaltern groupings that are defined as falling outside the majoritarian public sphere” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 149). Through negotiating with dominant ideologies and frameworks, these counterpublics can be proposed and tried out (Ibid.). The *Becoming* series, through transforming dominant frames around sexuality and gender, and through negotiating with powerful structures and institutions like the theatre, attempts to produce these counterpublics, literally creating space for them (Ibid., p. 148), namely on stage. This can lead to friction and tension, for example in the endeavor to combine the production of a safe space with the production of a space in which people can learn and make mistakes, or because Boris sometimes found it difficult to find a balance between giving groups complete freedom to do what they want and his own status as a very experienced theatre maker. Yet, these alternative forms of activism, in which theatre and politics are combined, can also lead to new collaborations and opportunities, like the example of the partnership between the Transketeers and Papaya Kuir suggests, two groups which later also became active in Queer Amsterdam.

Becoming, similar to Queer Amsterdam, inhabits a position between binary oppositions, by on the one hand ethically questioning certain norms and dominant frameworks and institutions – for example the fact that the world of theatre in the Netherlands has predominantly been a space of whiteness – while at the same time working together with these frameworks and institutions, although trying to come up with alternative ways in which these frameworks and institutions can work. Activism within the Amsterdam queer movement, of which *Becoming* is an example, in this sense involves tension, contentiousness, and conflict, but also transformation, collaboration, belonging, and finally collective political subjectivity, which will be the focus of the final part of this chapter and dissertation.

5.4 Difference and collective political subjectivity

5.4.1 Universalism versus pluralism

I am very much for unity. But... And I have to say this correctly. There is a moment for unity, there is a moment and a time. And sometimes I need to first resist, in order to come together more closely. I would love to go to a world in which we all sing 'Kumbaya', but we are not there yet. We need to fight for that. (Naomie Pieter in *De Roze Revolutie*, Episode 2, Van Erp, 2021, translated from Dutch)

This quote comes from an interview with Naomie Pieter – co-founder of Black Pride and board member of Queer Amsterdam – in the documentary series *De Roze Revolutie* ('The Pink Revolution') by director Michiel van Erp. Naomie's answer was to Van Erp's question asking whether we will ever be finished with fighting, and if an ideal future can also be achieved with a focus on building unity instead of on resistance. Naomie's answer reveals her understanding that this 'unity' – if this is ever a possibility at all – can never be achieved without resistance, including conflict, first. For this resistance, differences in social locations are emphasized, which Black Pride for instance does by stressing the impact of race on the queer experience of specific queer subjects. On the other hand, Van Erp states that the constant fight and resistance makes him sad, and that he would like to see more of a united front within the queer movement, with this contrast between Naomie and Van Erp reflecting different understandings of the queer movement, grounded in different values, and potentially cultural norms – with radicalism and agonism being not typical in Dutch society –, thus in different moral frameworks. In addition, both Naomie and Van Erp seem to make a distinction between 'resistance' and 'conflict' on the one hand, and 'unity' and 'community' on the other hand.

The appeal to social justice, and the ways in which social movements fighting for this justice understand it, has often been approached in two distinct ways. The approach of ‘politics of universalism’ is based on the value and belief that people are worthy of equal rights and treatment because of equal citizenship. In contrast, the approach of ‘politics of difference’ believes that individuals or groups should be recognized not on the basis of their ‘sameness’ to everyone else, but on their specific identity and uniqueness (Young, 1990; Taylor, 1994). These understandings are rooted in a broader, long-lived, debate about universalism versus pluralism, going back to discussions of autonomous personhood, the ‘politics of equal dignity’ and ‘equal human potential’ put forward by Kant, or ‘equal honour’ and ‘dignity for all’, like Rousseau proposed (Taylor, 1994, pp. 41-49). The debate around understanding recognition based on commonality or difference can be very clearly seen in feminist theory and activism, with feminists critiquing the notion of universalism – and its connected issues of impartiality and rationality, finding its roots in the Enlightenment – by arguing that often ‘universalism’ does not *really* mean ‘universalism’, but instead it means the perspective of the dominant group: men (Dean, 1998, p. 145). Like Lépinard (2020) describes, critique *within* feminism by feminists of color makes a similar point: differences between women are downplayed to focus on what feminists have in common, but often this means ignoring power relations within the movement (Lépinard, 2020, p. 87). Parker’s (1991) argument is similar, stating that coalitions between white activists and activists of color often means that power differences between these groups are actually hidden, not bridged (Parker, 1991, p. 1195). Earlier in this chapter I referred to Mouffe (1999), who states that in societies in which the model of deliberative democracy is central, focused on building consensus, rationalism, and universalism, power differences are concealed, while conflict can actually reveal these power differences (Mouffe, 1999).

So, these theorists have criticized taking politics of universalism as the starting point for recognition, since often, the universalism that is promoted, is actually particular, excluding other particular positions. Yet, the value of universality can be understood in a different way as well.

“A universal can be filled with particulars, but a particular should never be universalized.” (Menon, 2015, p. 129)

This is a quote from an article written by Professor of English Madhavi Menon, who writes on queer theory. In this article, Menon argues that *true* universalism accepts that we are different, living divided lives, but that these differences should not be understood as coherent identities, or what she calls ‘ontological categories’ (Ibid., p. 122). Instead, universalism opposes these notions of coherent identities that place people and groups in opposition of each other. The danger is then not universalism, in which we see difference *as* universal, but the promotion of a specific particularity, or identity, *as* universal, which is the danger about which feminist scholars like Dean, Lépinard, and Parker warn us. However, the opposite that is then often proposed, ‘politics of difference’, has the danger of essentializing these differences, Menon states, in which differences are understood as coherent identities, which is the criticism often directed at ‘identity politics’. Menon argues for a universalism that acknowledges differences and therefore does not pretend that we ‘are all the same’, but in which differences are also not essentialized. She follows the French philosopher Alan Badiou in stating that it is impossible for one particularity to become universal, and that it is exactly this impossibility that is universal (Ibid., p. 130). Menon calls this universalism ‘queer universalism’, with queer meaning the refusal of understanding differences as coherent identities (Ibid., p. 134).

Queer theory's main aim is to deconstruct binaries and categories, to problematize these categories and to demonstrate the unstableness and constructiveness of identity (Gamson, 1995, p. 394), and therefore stands in opposition to identity politics. Yet, as Gamson (1995) states: because of the extreme focus on deconstruction, queer theory and politics risk ignoring concrete violent social structures that affect certain groups, and thus risk ignoring intersectionality (Gamson, 1995, p. 400). Other scholars have therefore argued that a certain level of identity politics might be necessary to achieve recognition for historically marginalized and made invisible groups (Young, 1990), with Fraser (1998) calling this 'politics of recognition' (Fraser, 1998, p. 98). Dean (1996) has stated that identity politics has different phases, with one being the one that Menon (2015) warns us for, in which identities are seen as fixed (Dean, 1996, p. 73). However, Dean argues, there is also a phase that sees identities as constructed, through interrelationships with each other, through which a 'we' can be formed (Ibid., p. 52). However, although a category like 'women' can then be seen as constructed through political action, there is still a risk of privileging the experiences of certain women over others (Young, 1997, p. 21), which is what Menon would call the universalization of a particular (Menon, 2015, p. 129).

The balance between deconstructing identity categories and emphasizing these categories in order to make structures of discrimination and oppression visible, is thus a complex issue. In this dissertation, I have argued that in my field, the way in which my interlocutors understand their activism is not *only* the way in which queer theory understands it, namely as the deconstruction of identity categories. In the intersectional activism that many of my interlocutors adhere to, there is also space for emphasizing specific identity categories, as it is seen as needed in order to highlight differences in social locations and certain marginalizations. As Gamson (1995) argues, using the concept of 'queer dilemma', both

stabilizing and destabilizing identity categories are necessary for different reasons, with stabilizing needed to call attention to very real forms of oppression and marginalization, and destabilizing needed to go against tendencies of assimilation into heteronormative society (Gamson, 1995). Menon (2015), as I have discussed, argues that a politics in which identities are not essentialized and understood as coherent, but which does acknowledge difference, can be the type of politics which could solve this dilemma.

In this dissertation, I have focused on difference as a central aspect of the Amsterdam queer movement: differences in social locations and interests but also differences in understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project, and with that the production of different political subjectivities, and the moral contestations and conflicts that flow from these differences. Although I have argued that these contestations and conflicts have also led to ethical moments in which people and institutions have transformed, the question might remain: with all these differences, is a collective political subjectivity in any way possible in the Amsterdam queer movement? In this final part, I want to turn to this question. In a social movement like the Amsterdam queer movement, how can differences be acknowledged, potentially even be celebrated and be understood as a basis of coming together, without essentializing these differences into coherent identities with the risk of people or groups opposing each other? How can people with very different social locations, interests, experiences, and power positions, come together to fight against a heteronormative society and the oppressions and exclusionary practices that come with this society? How can difference and collectiveness go together?

5.4.2 Collective political subjectivity

Haarstad (2007) argues that the creation of a collective political subjectivity – a political project that can connect a broad range of actors, with different interests in order to fight against certain power relations existing in a capitalist world (Haarstad, 2007, p. 57) – has become more and more difficult in (post-)modern times and that the challenge has to do with the need of being sensitive towards difference on the one hand, and the organization of broad collectives on the other hand (Ibid.). Haarstad states that this is an issue of scale (Ibid.), as he, as a scholar of human geography, mainly looks at the possibilities of global social movements, across national differences, and other local contexts. I would argue that this tension between a focus on difference and a focus on broad collectivities also plays a role *within* local contexts, with the Amsterdam queer movement being a case of this tension.

Lépinard (2020) states that feminism is a political project creating a political community sharing particular goals, ideals, and values, but that the way in which those goals, ideals, and values are understood and defined differs between feminists (Lépinard, 2020, p. 11). I would argue that within the LGBTQIA+ community, this might even be more the case than within feminism, with the letters of the community already emphasizing difference. The word ‘queer’ is an attempt to deconstruct these identities, but not everyone within the community feels comfortable with this word, let alone call their activism queer. As I have shown in this dissertation, it is not only difference in social location, and thus power and privilege, that plays a role within the queer movement, it is also difference in moral understandings of activism that is central. These differences produce conflicts and tensions, with people making moral judgments of their own subjectivities within the movement and of the subjectivities of others. Does this mean that no collective political project can be created within the Amsterdam queer movement? I want to follow Haarstad (2007) in his notion of a ‘multi-

scalar political subjectivity' to argue that this collective political project might in some way still be possible, and of which Queer Amsterdam and the *Becoming* theatre series can be seen as examples. Haarstad states that the idea of a multi-scalar political subjectivity follows five principles:

1. The main objective of a multi-scalar political subjectivity is to break up concentrations of power and to create a more equal world. In order to do this, a certain form of power must be called upon, namely 'associational power', which can bring together and mobilize subjectivities in particular moments and for particular struggles. This means that there is no singular, overarching struggle, but numbers of struggles, with some people uniting in one fight and opposing each other in another (Haarstad, 2007, p. 70).
2. The collective political subjectivity has no stable core, but it is "a plural, networked subjectivity that never settles in a stable form, but which continuously shifts strategies and scales of operation" (Ibid.).
3. Its politics cannot be expected to be 'pure', and compromises sometimes need to be made. (Ibid.)
4. There is a constant tension between governing differences for strategic purposes and making sure that local specificity is not forgotten about. This tension cannot be solved and there will always be contestations (Ibid., p. 71).
5. The constant debate about values, goals, and tactics should be seen as a strength, but another strength is to encapsulate those local visions within a broader idea. The main task of a multi-scalar political subjectivity is "not to articulate a clear formulation of these visions, but to open and manage a political space where this imagery may emerge" (Ibid.).

Of course, these five principles are ‘ideal principles’ and I would not argue that Queer Amsterdam and *Becoming* are fulfilling all five perfectly. However, I think they are coming close to following some of the principles. Queer Amsterdam was born from the collaboration of different activists and collectives, taking the form of a ‘network’, and partly encouraged through the ethical reflection of powerful people like Pride Walk’s organizer Nikki, adding to fragmentations within elite institutions like the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. Although Queer Amsterdam is an official organization, with for example a board, the organization was born from grassroots activism, and these subjectivities initially came together because of a belief that the powerful position of the Pride Amsterdam Foundation needed to be countered, and that the powerful position of particular groups, like white gay men, within Pride Amsterdam needed to be questioned, in order to create more space and visibility for historically marginalized groups and draw attention to their specific experiences and interests.

Within Queer Amsterdam, specific events are organized for specific groups, like a conference on sex work, a Black Pride stage program, and a dinner for the transgender community. Yet, Pride Walk takes a prominent position in Queer Amsterdam, where different subjectivities come together, making use of associational power, and mobilizing side-by-side. Within Pride Walk it is not one specific political struggle that is central, but it is exactly this plurality of political struggles, of interests, and of different subjectivities that forms a collective political subjectivity.

This does not mean that all types of activism are accepted at Pride Walk, however. As I discussed in chapter 3, using the example of the commotion around the participation of Stichting De Roze Leeuw, a conservative association that consciously only focuses on the emancipation of ‘LGB’ people – therefore excluding for example transgender people –, the

organizers of Pride Walk do have a moral vision of what types of queer activism have a place in the Walk. It is intersectional activism that is morally defined as ‘right’ activism, and it is this belief in centralizing intersectionality, and thus the emphasis on the value of difference and the inclusion of this difference, that connects subjectivities within Queer Amsterdam, making intersectionality a form of collective movement identity (Evans & Lépinard, 2019). The activism of groups like Stichting De Roze Leeuw, which consciously excludes a part of the queer community, does not fit in this collective movement identity.

As Haarstad’s fourth principle states, in the creation of a collective political subjectivity there will always be a tension between giving space to difference on the one hand and making sure these differences do not hinder the formation of a collectivity. This can be difficult. For example, my interlocutor Luca, who is the founder of Queer Network Amsterdam – a network consisting of different queer groups in Amsterdam – tells me that Queer Network Amsterdam was not able to sign the statement released by We Reclaim Our Pride after its intervention in Pride Walk 2021:

We were not able to form a statement as a network. Even though people from our network needed help. [...] Maybe because people didn’t have all the information. But because of that people have felt really alone. Organizations were like, ‘I wasn’t there so I can’t sign it’. (Luca)

In this case, the network character of Queer Network Amsterdam, with so many different groups and organizations, all with their own interests, hindered the creation of a collective political subjectivity. As Haarstad states, these types of tensions and contestations will always exist, meaning that a collective political subjectivity is not always possible.

Yet, I would assert that *Becoming* is a clear example of how Haarstad's fifth principle can be interpreted. *Becoming* as a project does not communicate one specific political message, but provides the space where values, politics, and views on queerness can be shared and talked about, and where people can learn from each other's experiences and views. Of course, *Becoming* as a project is steeped in the moral understanding that it is important for different groups and people to meet and learn from each other, but a specific political vision is not produced by *Becoming* itself. Instead, it supplies a – literal – stage for different subjectivities to share their local experiences and views. Again, this does not come without tension, for example around the question of whether *Becoming* should be a 'safe space' or whether it should be a space where everyone can say everything, potentially hurtful things, because they want to learn. These tensions will always exist in the project of building a collective political subjectivity while being attentive to differences.

I would thus argue that the creation of a collective political subjectivity within the Amsterdam queer movement *is* possible, and that we can see it happening. This collective political subjectivity is created *on the basis of* difference, not 'in spite of', with a belief in centring intersectionality – understood as a recognition of how multiple dimensions of people's lives intersect, creating different experiences, oppression, and privileges, and as movements actively including marginalized groups – as a collective identity. This collective identity is not grounded in a belief in universalism, but in a belief in emphasizing and celebrating difference, while actively attempting to make space for this difference, with a sensitivity to power relations and inequalities. This intersectionality as a collective identity of queer movements is not specific to the Amsterdam queer movement, with for example Labelle (2020) showing how intersectionality is practically used by the queer movement in Québec, Canada, to enhance inclusivity, and Egner (2019) describing how American and

Canadian social movements which intersect the dimensions of sexuality and disability create a collective identity around this intersection, emphasizing difference instead of assimilation into dominant cultures and discourses. A commitment to difference will always come with tension and moments of conflict, but these moments can inform people's ethical reflection on their moral codes, which can then aid this creation of a collective political subjectivity.

People are not 'stuck' in their morality. As Foucault (1994) states:

“For what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious practice of freedom?”
(Foucault, 1994, p. 284)

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the ways in which conflicts and tensions in the Amsterdam queer movement can inform new collaborations, fragmentations of power consolidations and institutions, and ethical reflections on moral codes, values, and political beliefs. I have argued, grounded in Zigon's (2009) anthropology of morality, that together with slower processes of change, moments of 'moral breakdown', like WROP's protest during Pride Walk 2021, and the murder on George Floyd in 2020, can create 'ethical moments', in which people have the freedom to reflect not only on their own privileges and power, but also on the morals they have, and the practices they connect to these. This reflection can add to transformations of powerful institutions like Pride Amsterdam, and new collaborations between different groups within the queer movement. An organization like Queer Amsterdam does not reject an institution like Pride altogether but instead attempts to change its meaning.

In addition, I have argued that both Queer Amsterdam and *Becoming* can be seen as examples of the creation of (moments of) collective political subjectivity, based on a commitment to

intersectional and queer activism, which are founded on the belief that differences in people's experiences should be emphasized, instead of 'overcome', and that multiple political struggles should be connected. The Amsterdam queer movement is a moral-political project, in which many different understandings, values, views, politics, experiences, and interests exist, sometimes leading to conflicts. These conflicts should however not be seen as a 'failure' of the movement. They can inform the ethical reflection of people, the creation of new collaborations, and the production of instances in which collectivities can be formed to counter certain power consolidations, while at the same time providing the space and time for specificity, pluralism, difference, and locality.

Conclusion

On 22 July 2023, around noon, I arrive on the Dam Square, in the middle of Amsterdam's city center, for the annual Pride Walk. This is the first Pride Walk organized in collaboration with Queer Amsterdam, after the organizational committee left its alliance with the Pride Amsterdam Foundation. The march makes its way through the city, and ends at the Museum Square, one of the most well-known squares in Amsterdam, as it is the home to the famous Van Gogh museum and Rijksmuseum, which attract hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. Naomie Pieter – co-founder of Black Pride and Queer Amsterdam – appears on stage, getting ready for her speech. With a powerful voice she shouts:

We are at the helm, and we are proud of it! That we are finally allowed to be here. We need to stop pointing fingers to other countries, there are things wrong in the Netherlands as well. This is why we're here. To give a signal to politics, companies, institutions, media, and society, that our Pride is intersectional and that that is the way to freedom. The future is not basic human rights but being free! (Naomie Pieter at Pride Walk, 22 July 2023, translated from Dutch)

Naomie's words are confident and optimistic, and at one point even give me goosebumps. As I stated in my introduction, I feel great affinity with the queer community and part of my interest in this research topic of course came from a political commitment to the project of queer liberation and to the fight against racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Naomie's speech made me feel like that political ideal, in which the recognition and visibility of marginalized groups is growing, was becoming a tiny bit more realistic.

As hopeful as I felt on that day in 2023, as sad I felt when I read two media articles on news website AT5, which reports on news specifically from the city of Amsterdam, a year later.

First, on 14 July 2024, an article was published in which it was reported that Queer Amsterdam as an organization decided to withdraw from organizing Pride Walk that year. The article referred to a post published on Queer Amsterdam’s Instagram account a few days earlier. In this Instagram post, Queer Amsterdam declared that Israeli national flags were not welcome at Pride Walk 2024 (AT5, 2024). This post led to public outrage, and it was eventually even discussed in the municipal council, with the leader of the local VVD¹⁹ party stating that this statement is antisemitic. Mayor Femke Halsema declared that it is ‘unacceptable’ for organizers of demonstrations to censure its participants – i.e. to exclude certain flags (Ibid.). The upheaval led to Queer Amsterdam sending an official letter to AT5 on 13 July and organizing member Peter de Ruijter apologizing on behalf of the organization and stating that the sentence “no Israeli flags allowed” was mainly meant as a political statement by Queer Amsterdam, in support of Palestinian liberation, and against ‘Zionistic practices’ (Ibid.). Yet, one day later, on 14 July, Queer Amsterdam announced its withdrawal from organizing Pride Walk that year. In a statement, the organization said:

We made this decision due to the recent upheaval around what flags are or aren’t welcome at the Pride Walk and the different interests, wishes and approaches from various institutions involved. To be clear: we did not wish to prohibit or ban any flags. As we said, our wording in a previous post was unfortunate. But we cannot wholeheartedly welcome or support all flags in this political climate. We think it is important to compromise, but not to the extent that we lose sight of who we are and what we stand for. (Queer Amsterdam, 2024)

That year, Pride Walk was organized completely by the Homomonument organization, which had been organizing Pride Walk since its very beginning. Queer Amsterdam as a month full

¹⁹ The People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy – a political party on the right part of the political spectrum.

of events did still take place that summer.

The second article that left me with a sad and disappointed feeling was published on 2 December 2024 by AT5. The headline read: “Ex-volunteers: ‘Unpleasant atmosphere’ and ‘amateurism’ at Queer Amsterdam” (AT5, 2024). The article states that multiple individuals who used to volunteer for Queer Amsterdam spoke to the news agency about their negative experiences with the organization. All these people wanted to remain anonymous, so the article does not include any names. The ex-volunteers stated that the atmosphere in Queer Amsterdam was unpleasant because of many tensions and conflicts, and that the board members of the organization are ‘incapable’ (Ibid.). These experiences made the volunteers leave the organization. One volunteer even claimed that Queer Amsterdam did not comply to municipal rules about receiving subsidies, and that “too much money remained in the pockets of board members” (Ibid.). AT5 says it approached Queer Amsterdam for a reply to these claims but that there was no response.

Naturally, it must be kept in mind that news articles can be exaggerated and sensationalized. And of course, I cannot check whether the feelings expressed by these ex-volunteers were widespread among other volunteers. In addition, the question whether Queer Amsterdam’s statement about excluding Israeli flags at Pride Walk 2023 was ‘morally correct’ is not for me to answer. Yet, I do think it is important to include these two incidents in this conclusion, even though they happened after my official fieldwork was over. I ended my previous chapter on quite a hopeful note, arguing that Queer Amsterdam is an example of how conflicts like We Reclaim Our Pride’s ‘intervention’ during Pride Walk 2021 have informed new relations of collaboration, moments of collective political subjectivity, and a conscious politicization of Pride in Amsterdam. The incidents I just discussed do not undermine this argument, yet they

do show how transformations within a social movement like the Amsterdam queer movement will most probably never reach an end destination, and that conflicts and tensions will always continue to exist. These conflicts and tensions could be simply because of relative organizational inexperience, which might be a big part of the story in the case of Queer Amsterdam. Social groups and movements that for a very long time have been marginalized, and that now finally have their voice heard more and more, receiving the needed resources to organize on a bigger scale, might make certain mistakes that organizations like the Pride Amsterdam Foundation, which has had years and years of organizational experience, know how to avoid. However, more generally, as I already stated in chapter 5, following Haarstad (2007), the building of a broad social movement, in which the project of building a collective political subjectivity in which an emphasis on difference is foundational, will always involve conflict. Different people will have different interests, values, beliefs, and opinions, and these interests, values, beliefs, and opinions can clash.

Thus, even though the two news articles left me with a feeling of disappointment – and of course an organization like Queer Amsterdam should be held accountable for its actions – it was also a clear reminder of my own argument I tried to make in this dissertation: that conflict is an inherent part of social movements, and of social life more generally, and that moral-political projects like the Amsterdam queer movement will always be in flux, changing and transforming, which ultimately, I believe is a good thing. After all, this constant change is what has led to the recognition and emancipation of many historically oppressed and marginalized groups, and to institutions implementing more policies and practices of inclusion.

The main question central to this research was:

What moral and ethical contestations and conflicts around ‘difference’ exist within the Amsterdam queer movement and how do these contestations and conflicts inform the building of collaboration and collectivity within this movement?

In *chapter 1*, I have laid out the socio-cultural-political context that my field – the Amsterdam queer movement – is embedded in. I argued that the Netherlands is a country in which values of liberalism, individualism, consensus-building, and commercialism dominate, rooted in histories of imperialism and Protestant religion. These values have made Dutch culture a culture in which radicalism and agonism are rejected, and in which people who do challenge certain norms, political structures, or institutional cultures in a direct and agonistic way, are seen as ‘difficult’, leading to a relatively depoliticized institutional landscape, and also a relatively depoliticized queer movement, although exceptions of historical radical queer organizations do exist. In addition, I have argued that racist structures are built into Dutch society, rooted in decennia of colonialism. Yet, because of the self-perception of many Dutch people of living in a country which is liberal, open, tolerant, and ‘color-blind’, the discussing, challenging, and changing of these structures is difficult and full of tension and emotion, also within the Amsterdam queer movement.

In *chapter 2*, I have zoomed in on the local context, making the direct connection between my field and the socio-cultural-political landscape of the city of Amsterdam. Similar to the national context, Amsterdam is a city in which commerce, trade, and capitalism have dominated for a long time. At the same time, the city has a history of space for alternative

sub-cultures, like squatting groups, and has always been governed by left-wing, progressive political parties. Yet, over time, these left-wing politics have mainly become politics in which a combination of progressive values are combined with neoliberal policies, with alternative sub-cultures either having ceased to exist, or having been subsumed into these neoliberal policies. The history of Pride Amsterdam, the biggest LGBT event of the city and country, shows this neoliberal domination. The event has been consciously founded as a depoliticized event, in which celebration and commercialism have been central. The municipality of Amsterdam uses the event to highlight the ‘progressive and liberal’ character of the city, and, by having the power of allocating permits and funding, and by setting certain conditions for receiving these permits and funding – based on certain values –, has a powerful say in how queer events and movements are organized in the city of Amsterdam.

After these two contextual and structural chapters, I have in *chapter 3* focused on the first part of my main question, looking at ‘difference’ related to understandings of the Amsterdam queer movement as a moral-political project. I have argued that different understandings of activism within the broader Amsterdam queer movement have generated conflicts and tensions, using the ‘intervention’ of We Reclaim Our Pride during Pride Walk 2021 as an example of these conflicts and tensions. I stated that multiple binary oppositions play a role in the different understandings of the queer movement as a moral-political project. The main binaries I discussed were ‘single-issue activism’ versus ‘queer activism’, ‘activism in the streets’ versus ‘activism within institutions’, and ‘activism linked to capital and the state’ versus ‘independent activism’. The way people understand their activism reflect different *moral-political* interpretations of queer, or LGBT, activism, grounded in people’s values, political beliefs and commitments, judgments, and the cultural and institutional norms around them. Whereas interlocutors who describe their activism as ‘queer’ commit to activism which

connects multiple political causes, big powerful organizations like the Pride Amsterdam Foundation describe their politics as LGBT, often committing to single-issue activism, in which liberal values like equality of rights are central. In addition, many of my interlocutors believe that the Amsterdam queer movement should be an ‘intersectional’ movement, meaning a movement which recognizes the ways in which multiple social dimensions like gender, race, sexuality, and class intersect, creating different experiences for different social groups, and with that power inequalities. An intersectional movement actively tries to make its movement more inclusive, by making space for the most marginalized groups.

Queer and intersectional activists criticize single-issue LGBT activism and believe that ‘real’ queer activism is activism that does not only focus on political struggles related to sexuality and gender identity but connects these struggles to political fights mainly around race, but also around class, and around oppressions of people in other parts of the world. These different understandings of activism produce different political subjectivities embedded in moral relations, and involving people’s judgments about ‘good’ or ‘bad’ activism, understanding their activism *in relation to* other people’s activism.

In *chapter 4*, I have dived deeper into this production of moral-political subjectivities, by looking at the question how objects like the rainbow flag, and discursive categories like ‘white gay men’ are used in a symbolic way in the Amsterdam queer movement to represent and convey moral understandings and judgments of different political subjectivities. I argued that the different versions of the rainbow flag— with taking the original rainbow flag and the progress flag as the main flags discussed – represent different political subjectivities, with the progress flag seen by many of my interlocutors as more inclusive than the original rainbow flag, and as representing their commitment to intersectional activism. People make judgments

about the different flags, and thus about different political subjectivities, with certain expectations and emotions attached to these symbols.

Similar to the flag representing particular political subjectivities, a category like ‘white gay men’ is constructed and used by multiple of my interlocutors to express moral understandings and judgments about a particular political subjectivity, namely one of a relatively powerful and privileged group of people who either do not speak out politically at all, or who only focus on their own interests – often committing to single-issue politics. The category is constructed by combining three ‘axes of difference’ – race, sexuality, and gender – to say something about power inequalities within the movement and community – thus about social locations – but, beyond this, to say something about political subjectivities as well. Exactly because the category is used to make moral judgments about political subjectivities, its boundaries are relatively flexible and fluid, meaning that ‘literal’ white gay men are able to escape this category, by reflecting on their privileges and values – through ‘ethical freedom’ – and by committing to the ‘right’ type of queer political subjectivity, which for many of my interlocutors means a commitment to intersectional and queer activism.

Finally, in *chapter 5*, I have focused on the issue of ethical freedom, and the ways in which this freedom has informed changes and transformations within powerful institutions like Pride Amsterdam and created new collaborations between different groups and moments of collective political subjectivity. I took the example of We Reclaim Our Pride’s ‘intervention’ during Pride Walk 2021 to show how this moment of conflict made people reflect on the norms, values, and political commitments an institution like Pride is based on. This has informed a transformation of Pride in Amsterdam, with the organization of Queer Amsterdam, which focuses on intersectional activism, in which marginalized groups are at

the center, and queer activism, in which the connection of multiple political struggles is central, becoming one of the main organizations organizing Pride. Together with ‘slower’ processes of change – like inquiries done by the municipality and already brewing fragmentations among elites – a moment of ‘moral breakdown’ like WROP’s protest, can add to the transformation of an institution like Pride.

In addition, I have analyzed the theatre production series *Becoming* as an example of building collaborations and solidarity between different groups within the queer movement, through theatre as activism. I argued that both Queer Amsterdam and *Becoming* are illustrations of building (moments of) collective political subjectivity within the Amsterdam queer movement, in which there is a commitment to intersectional activism and in which difference is seen as a key element of this activism, instead of something that should be ‘overcome’. Even though the building of collective political subjectivity will always be full of conflicts and tensions, these conflicts and tensions at the same time inform transformations of power relations, collaborations between different groups, and increased visibility and recognition of historically marginalized groups. The confronting, challenging and questioning of normative structures, by individual activists, movements, and organizations have set a transformation of the Amsterdam queer movement in motion, steering the movement into a consciously politicized movement, in which intersectional and queer activism are becoming more dominant.

I can now come to a discussion of the general arguments I have tried to make in this dissertation, and the potentially more general relevance of these arguments. The Netherlands as a country, and Amsterdam as a city specifically, form, I believe, very interesting contexts for studying difference and conflict within the queer movement. The Netherlands has a

reputation as a liberal, tolerant, open country, with many Dutch people seeing these aspects of an inherent part of Dutch culture (Wekker, 2020). Regarding the queer community, these values have been expressed through, among other things, the Netherlands being the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. Amsterdam as capital city, although in current times having lost its number one position on travel agencies lists of ‘most gay friendly city’, has for a long time topped these lists, and is still globally seen by many people as a ‘gay mecca’ (Di Feliciano, 2016). Yet, this reputation does not mean it is all peace and quiet in the Amsterdam queer movement. Conflicts take place in this movement, and I think it is important to study these conflicts, and to not ignore them under the guise of ‘queer people in Amsterdam having it relatively easy’. Of course, much variation exists in the oppression of queer people between different national contexts. Yet, queer marginalization also exists in the Netherlands, meaning that a social movement exists fighting against this marginalization. This broad movement is comprised of many sub-movements and organizations, of people with different social backgrounds and interests, and of different ideas of what this movement should look and like and fight for exactly, sometimes leading to conflict within the movement.

I have argued that for studying difference, conflict and collectivity within Amsterdam queer movement – which I understood as the field of organizations, social movements, and institutions that are concerned with queer people in Amsterdam and the Netherlands – it is fruitful to make a distinction between two types of difference. First, there is difference in social location, meaning that people and groups, through the intersection of dimensions like race, gender, class, and sexuality, have different social experiences, connected to inequalities in power, privilege, and marginalization within broader society, and within social movements. Second, there is difference in understandings of queer, or LGBT, activism and politics, and

the practices following these understandings. I argue that the Amsterdam queer movement should be understood as a ‘moral-political project’, meaning that it – the issues it should focus on, the goals it should reach, but also the forms it should take and the practices it should carry out – is understood in different ways by different people, and that within this field, different ‘moral-political subjectivities’ exist and are produced. This production is always a relational process, in which people understand their own interpretations of activism in relation to the interpretations of others, coming with moral judgments about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ activism, and thus ‘good’ and ‘bad’ activists. These moral judgments should also be understood as embedded in a socio-political-cultural context, with, in the context of the Netherlands, norms and values like ‘consensus building’, ‘de-politicization’, and ‘color-blindness’ affecting the way in which people understand the queer movement and judge activists.

The moral and the political are thus completely interwoven in this field, in the sense that movements, organizations, institutions, and individual activists align themselves with particular political beliefs and commitments, creating understandings of what activism within the Amsterdam queer movement should look like. These alignments and understandings are embedded in people’s moral frameworks, which I, grounded in a Foucauldian interpretation of morality, understood as people’s values, beliefs, judgments, and the norms around them, with these values, beliefs, judgments, and norms informing certain behavior. The political and the moral should therefore not be seen as separate, but as connected, within a social movement like the Amsterdam queer movement.

Of course, these two types of difference – difference in social location and difference in understandings of the queer movement as a ‘moral-political project’ – are connected to each

other. As intersectional theory argues, the intersection of dimensions like race, gender, class, and sexuality has very real consequences of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. These experiences can inform people's beliefs of what the goals of a social movement should be and what the forms and practices of a social movement should be. However, I believe it is important to make the analytical distinction between the two types of difference, since too often, conflict within the queer movement is presented as coming from the first type of difference, with 'identity politics' being seen as the reason for fragmentations within progressive leftist political movements. Yet, what I found in my research, is that many conflicts within the Amsterdam queer movement are not only about difference in social location and interests, but also about different moral-political interpretations of activism within this movement, especially between a commitment to, on the one hand, radical, queer, and intersectional activism and, on the other hand, liberal, LGBT, single-issue activism, being salient. Difference within the Amsterdam queer movement thus goes *beyond* difference in social location, interests, or 'identity'.

Besides making the distinction between these two types of difference, I have argued that, for studying difference and conflict within moral-political projects like the queer movement, it is analytically productive to make a distinction between morality and ethics, as it helps researching change within this moral-political project, illustrating that moral-political projects are not static, but constantly transforming and in flux. For making this distinction, I have followed Zigon (2009). Morality, as I stated above, I understood as people's values, beliefs, judgments, the norms around them produced in a particular socio-political-cultural context, and the behavior following from these values, beliefs, judgments, and norms. Oftentimes, people do not consciously think about this morality. Ethics in contrast, I have understood as people's *conscious* reflection on their morality, with these 'ethical moments' potentially

brought about by moments of ‘moral breakdown’, which can be moments of conflict. This conscious reflection can result in people making changes to their moral frameworks, sometimes leading to transformations within movements and institutions, like Pride Amsterdam, or the municipality of Amsterdam. What this illustrates, I argue, is that people are not ‘stuck’ in their moral frameworks, and that they have the *ethical freedom* to self-reflect and to change their values, beliefs, judgments, and behavior. This ethical freedom also makes that people are not defined by their social locations and individual interests. For example, individuals who belong to a socially more powerful group, have the freedom to commit to values and political beliefs that might not necessarily promote their own individual interests.

To thus answer the first part of my main question: contestations and conflict within the Amsterdam queer movement are brought about by *both* differences in power, privileges and marginalizations, *and* differences in understandings of the queer movement as a ‘moral-political project’. These different understandings are political, because they concern people’s alignments with interpretations of the queer movement which they believe align with their particular political beliefs and commitments, and with these alignments involving notions of who belong and who do not and connected practices of in- and exclusion. They are moral because they are grounded in people’s moral frameworks. They are also ethical, because the contestations and conflicts following from different understandings of activism can make people reflect on their moral frameworks, potentially change them, sometimes leading to changes within the movement and within institutions.

When we then look at the second part of the main question, we could ask the question whether differences and the conflicts flowing from them, completely fragment the movement,

or whether they can also inform collaborations and collectivity. A lot of people who I have mentioned my dissertation topic to – friends, family members, but also strangers – were very interested in the topic. They did not shy away from sharing their own thoughts and opinions and told me they believe the topic is ‘very important in current times’. This was not always easy, since, as many social scientists will know, your expertise as a scholar is not always appreciated and people believe they know as much about the topic as you do, in contrast to scholars working on topics in, for example, the natural sciences. I am in this case not talking about experience experts, i.e. queer activists themselves. It was also people who do not see themselves as part of the queer movement or community who were eager to talk to me about their opinions on the topic. Even though this can sometimes be difficult, I am at the same time very happy that the topic of my dissertation triggered so many conversations with people, as it shows how it is an issue that speaks to people, and as these conversations helped organizing my own thoughts on the research. Especially among leftist people, I noticed a great concern about fragmentations within progressive communities and movements, particularly since the Netherlands as a country is moving in a direction in which (far-)right sentiments are becoming more and more prominent, with the current government being dominated by right-wing political parties. Yet, people also found it difficult to come up with a solution. The question remained for many of them: how do we create cohesion, solidarity and a united front, without losing attention to differences in privileges, marginalizations, and experiences between groups of people *within* this united front?

I have argued that within a moral-political project like the Amsterdam queer movement, moments of conflict – moments of ‘moral breakdown’ – can inform people’s reflection on their moral frameworks, and their understandings of activism based on these moral frameworks, sometimes leading to changes within the movement. Through the analysis of

conflicts taking place in Pride Amsterdam, I have discussed how these conflicts have informed fragmentations within institutional elites, and how these fragmentations have actually helped creating new relations of collaboration between different groups of people, and a move towards intersectional activism within the Amsterdam queer movement, in which differences between people are not hidden but emphasized, creating more space for historically marginalized groups. In addition, in new organizations like Queer Amsterdam, moments of collective political subjectivity, in which a network of different groups come together to fight for the broader goal of queer liberation, are taking place. We could thus say that ‘difference’ is not something that stands in opposition to ‘collectivity’. On the one hand, difference in social location and experiences can actually form the basis of a collective movement identity and, on the other hand, difference in understandings of activism can inform changes and transformations in a movement like the Amsterdam queer movement, pushing the movement to being more inclusive and consciously political.

I started my introduction to this dissertation by explaining my initial interest in the question of how to combine difference and collectivity as a broader question for the left, in countries where right-wing political parties and movements are becoming more and more prominent and popular. I hope to have added to the existing literature on the issue of building ‘chains of equivalence’, i.e. moments of alliance building between people from different backgrounds joining forces for a bigger goal and for countering powerful institutions and normative social structures (Mouffe in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 971), by looking at how (moments of) collective political subjectivity are created in the Amsterdam queer movement, through conflict and reflection. Yet, if I allow myself to picture an ideal broad leftist movement, I hope we can even go further than these moments of collective political subjectivity, or ‘chains of equivalence’. In my ideal movement, there would not only be the building of

alliances between different groups of people to create a strategic broader political movement – which will always include a bit of healthy conflict – in order to fight against the rise of the right. There would also be a sense of community within this broader movement, in which people care for each other and feel a responsibility to each other. Lugones (1987) argued for the value of “world”-travelling, in which we have an openness to each other’s lifeworlds and experiences, through which we can become full subjects to each other, and even love each other (Lugones, 1987, p. 17). Lépinard sides with queer theorists such as José Muñoz in their understanding of political community being possible on the basis of imagining ideals, new worlds, and potentialities (Lépinard, 2020, p. 242). As I discussed before, Muñoz (2009) argues that ‘queerness’ has a utopian element, in which hope for a better future is always central. It is “critical dissatisfaction” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 189) that can free the path for “collective potentiality” (Ibid.).

Although ‘critique’, on power consolidation, inequalities, and injustice, can form a basis for moments of collective political subjectivity, this critique alone is not enough to create a political community. For this, care and love for each other, the feeling of shared responsibility (Lépinard, 2020, p. 214), and the imagining of a future should be central. The path to collective potentiality will be full of fragmentations of elites and institutions, transformations of power relations, and therefore tensions, conflict, and disagreements, and there will most likely never be an ‘end destination’. Yet, this does not mean that the building of – moments of – collectiveness and community within leftist progressive movements is impossible. We should be, as Dave (2012) states, based on the work of Das Gupta (2006), “treating organizational conflict in activism not as a sign of failure that we should hide in the interest of unity, but as a sign of the critical vigor involved in any collective action rooted in the ethics of the possible” (Dave, 2012, p. 125).

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