

# 1. Introduction

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In September 2006, the Swiss Socialist Party hosted a round-table discussion about an upcoming national vote on yet another bill aimed at aggravating the conditions required to obtain asylum in Switzerland. At the event, the bill was debated specifically from the perspective of homosexual asylum seekers. Among other things, the new bill (which passed comfortably ten days later) reinforced the principle of *Glaubhaftigkeit* (credibility) in Swiss asylum procedure. This principle requires asylum seekers to present their case convincingly and free of contradictions immediately after arrival in Switzerland. If inconsistencies emerge during the interrogations – especially in regard to the basis of the asylum claim – the chances of being granted asylum are considerably diminished. At the round-table discussion, several practitioners and human rights advocates warned of the disadvantages this principle would create for people who fled to Switzerland based on their sexual orientation, especially in cases in which asylum seekers have been exposed to violence by the authorities in their home country.

At the event, the president of the largest Swiss lesbian organization remarked: “*Viele, die das Wort ‘schwul’ das Leben lang noch nicht in den Mund genommen haben, weil sie sich nicht getraut haben, und dann sollten sie plötzlich Klartext sprechen, oder? Wir wissen alle, die sich selber mal geoutet haben, wie schwierig das ist*” – “Many who have not uttered the word ‘gay’ ever before in their lives because they did not dare to, and then they are suddenly supposed to speak plainly, isn’t that right? All of us who have come out ourselves know how difficult this is.”

This short statement quietly delimits the parameters of this study. “Quietly,” because it does so mainly in terms of absences. The most obvious absence at the round-table was that of queer people who had personally passed through the Swiss asylum procedure. Instead, stories were told *about* them, sometimes based on professional experiences with, but more often grounded in stereotypical assumptions about ‘them.’<sup>1</sup> In the quote above, sexually non-conforming asylum seekers are, for instance, assumed to harbor a “gay” identity ready to be released from the closet as soon as a liberal enough social

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1 Single quotation marks are used to mark commonly used terms, or commonly used terms the author views critically (scare quotes). Double quotation marks are used where specific speakers or authors are quoted verbatim.

context is given. The statement moreover establishes the asylum seeker as a member of a postulated “us”: a global queer community sharing a sexual identity and associated experiences of discrimination. From this, a paradoxical image of Switzerland emerges: On the one hand, Switzerland is implicitly portrayed as an open and liberal country, an ideal home for the global queer family, a place where queer people from outside Western countries naturally desire to live. On the other hand, Switzerland emerges as a xeno- and homophobic place that is not only characterized by asylum practices that are hostile to queer asylum seekers but moreover also by the difficulties that even non-migrant queer people face in the process of ‘coming out.’

The concerns debated in the round-table discussion (and the assumptions expressed therein) are paradigmatic examples of the prevailing discourses around queer migration in Switzerland. Asylum has remained virtually the only arena in which queer migrants seemingly gain visibility. Indeed, there is a growing number of people claiming asylum in Switzerland based on their dissident sexuality who have fled to Europe in the hope of escaping prosecution, incarceration, or even the death penalty in their home countries (Bär 2014). In this regard, I fully agree that there is a pressing need for a revised asylum procedure that takes these threats seriously. At the same time, lesbian and gay activism and scholarship in Switzerland to date has largely failed to critically reflect on the effects and implications of this preoccupation with queer asylum.

The implications of this are multiple and far-reaching. First, tempted by the promise of scandalizing human rights news, gay and lesbian rights advocates often tend to describe queer migrants’ home countries and compatriots in exceedingly stereotypical ways, pitting a modern gay-friendly ‘West’ against a backward homophobic ‘Rest.’<sup>2</sup> Such narratives, though well-intended in favor of queer asylum seekers, represent “strategic shortcuts” (Miller 2005) that problematically situate all sexually non-conforming people within a growing international global gay and lesbian movement jointly working towards liberating lesbians and gays around the world. Second, the preoccupation with asylum automatically leads to a preoccupation with *male* immigrants. For instance, between 1993 and 2007, of fifty-two immigrants who sought asylum in Switzerland based on their homosexuality, only four were women, a bias that has since persisted (Bär 2014, Bertschi 2007). Third, the fixation on queer asylum renders invisible the (significantly

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- 2 Throughout this study I use the term ‘West’ to refer to dominant discourses around ‘culture’ and development that cut the globe in half, sometimes horizontally into North and South, sometimes vertically into West and Orient (I use ‘Orient’ rather than ‘East’ as a tribute to Edward Said’s work (1978)), and sometimes conflating the two, resulting in a ‘West’-and-‘Rest’ logic. All of these discursive divisions work to maintain the political, economic, and cultural hegemony of Northern America, Western Europe, and Australia/New Zealand over the South and Orient. Queer postcolonial scholars are increasingly discussing discourses juxtaposing in opposition to each other a gay-friendly ‘West’ and a homophobic ‘Rest’ under the term ‘homonationalism’ (see Chapter 3.4.3). Jasbir Puar (2006), who coined the term, chiefly refers to state-related actors deploying such discourses to justify imperialist moves and a politics of exclusion against certain countries and their (migrant) people. Paola Bacchetta and Jin Haritaworn (2011:134) have distinguished three types of homonationalist discourses: (1) Homonationalism as performed by state-related actors; (2) homonationalism as performed by non-state actors (as under discussion here); and (3) *homonationalist* discourses, which the authors understand as transnationally produced and globally circulating neocolonial, orientalist, sexist, and queerphobic discourses.

larger number) of queer migrants who enter the country as 'regular' immigrants. At the same time, the discourses around asylum only *seem* to make queer asylum seekers visible. As Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez and María do Mar Castro Varela remark:

In publications or public debates about lesbians and gay men, everyday lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual migrants and refugees almost exclusively appear as multi-cultural accessories or as problem cases. It is problematic when refugees and migrant women are only mentioned in the context of issues like asylum but remain unmentioned in discussions about other issues such as sexuality, relationship, education or general politics. CSD<sup>3</sup> posters often refer to the 'multicultural' character of the community. But where in the queer movement is the theoretical engagement with black feminism and the writings of queer migrants? Engagements with concepts like Gloria Anzaldúa's or Cherrie Moraga's 'Queer of Color,' which frame racism, colonialism and anti-Semitism as constitutive elements of Western society, have hardly received any attention to date. In this way, lesbian women living in exile or in the diaspora are objectified. They are represented as transporters of ethnicized collectives. The complexity of their individual lives remains unacknowledged. (Castro Varela and Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2000:103-104, my translation)

The present study addresses this persisting discursive absence of queer migrants' lives and concerns by engaging with biographical narratives of queer migrant women in Switzerland. More specifically, it addresses queer women who, as adults, have moved their everyday lives to Switzerland wholly or partially, permanently or only for a certain period of time, and who are perceived as racialized Others, or *Ausländer/Ausländerinnen* (literally 'outlanders,' foreigners), based on social markers such as language, surname, skin color, body language, clothing, and so on. Seeking to avoid framing sexualities or sexual identities as ahistorical or universal, the term 'queer' is thereby employed analytically to address women who explicitly identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer; women who identify themselves with non-Western sexual identities such as *tomboy* in Indonesia or *pengkid* in Malaysia; women whose sexual practices do not align with their sexual identities (such as women who entertain same-sex relationships but identify as heterosexual); or women who do not frame their sexualities in terms of an identity at all. In terms of gender identity, this study focuses on self-identified women, but in the process of seeking interviewees deliberately left the concept of 'woman' fuzzy at its edges. While eventually all research participants explicitly self-identified as women (rather than trans people, for instance, a term that was not used as a self-descriptor in the sample discussed here), many participants navigated both femininities and femaleness as well as masculinities and maleness.

The questions guiding this research address both individual and structural aspects of queer migrations: How does sexuality shape queer women's migrations, considering different phases of migrating such as taking the decision to leave; taking the actual journey to the new place (and maybe journeying back again, or back and forth at varying

3 CSD = Christopher Street Day, the annual commemoration of the Stonewall riots in New York that are purported to have triggered the global gay movement (but see e.g. Massad 2007).

intervals); and creating one's place in the new surroundings? How do these migrations in turn shift queer migrant women's perceptions of their sexualities? How do they negotiate hegemonic sexualities in Western Europe such as normative heterosexuality or the figure of the 'lesbian'? How do imaginations of migrant and hegemonic sexualities interplay in the discursive delimitation of dominant and 'other' sexualities? How are these discourses implicated in nationalist and exclusionary moves, and what are the effects of such discourses and moves on queer migrant women's lives? Within this area of interest, the study pursues three main objectives:

*Differentiating the image of immigrant women in Switzerland by making visible queer migrant women.* Due to recent shifts in immigration and asylum policies and procedures, a growing number of queer migrant women have been entering Switzerland. However, there is scant knowledge about this 'group' of immigrants. In Switzerland there are few designated spaces for queer immigrant women (such as organizations or events specifically addressing this subject position), and this was even more the case when this research was started in 2005. Both lesbian and diasporic communities are marked by mechanisms of exclusion, which often render queer migrant women absent from, or invisible in, these spaces. Further, political debates, media reports, as well as migration research in Switzerland are invariably organized around the assumption that migrant women are heterosexual. This manifests for instance in the persistence of stereotypical images that victimize migrant women as dependent housewives, oppressed daughters, or trafficked prostitutes. By engaging with queer migrant women's narratives, this study complicates the image of immigrant women in Switzerland and raises awareness about their realities and concerns. The guiding question with regard to this objective is: How do migration biographies, perspectives, and everyday experiences and practices of queer migrant women in Switzerland (re)produce and/or disrupt existing discourses around migrant women in Switzerland?

*Gaining an understanding of transnational configurations of sexuality and processes of identification.* The multi-layered discursive absence of queer migrant women stands in paradoxical contrast to their corporeal presence in Switzerland. This forces them to negotiate multiple landscapes of exclusion and to reappropriate and reinscribe real and imagined spaces and places in order to create a sense of belonging. This study analyzes these complex processes of identification and appropriation, focusing particularly on how queer migrant women navigate conflicting loyalties in the daily 'doing' of their identities and in their efforts to create and reconfigure the space called 'home.' The guiding question with regard to this objective is: What is 'home' to queer migrant women, and how do they create belonging? Within this field, further guiding questions are: How do queer migrant women perceive their sexuality to have been implicated in, and shifted through, their migration? What strategies do they devise to manage the exclusions they face based on their multiply marginalized positionality, especially as queers, immigrants, and women? What do these marginalizations mean in terms of their membership in their families of origin, in their diasporic communities, in the Swiss lesbian community, in their workplace, in their sports team, in their reading group, or in their home?

*Analyzing the production and disruption of sexual norms.* At the same time, this is not so much a study about 'them' as it is an examination of configurations of 'us and them.' Western sexual norms and identities are as much a result of postcolonial and transnational configurations of desire as are non-Western sexualities; indeed, the two must be understood as mutually constitutive (Stoler 1995). My interest lies, on the one hand, in analyzing the mechanisms of these co-constructions and examining the ways in which these interdependencies shape and regulate queer migrant women's biographies, self-conceptions, and everyday experiences and practices. On the other hand, I am interested in how queer migrant women's presence and practices necessarily disrupt normative ideas about same-sex sexuality – and, more concretely, about 'lesbians' – in Switzerland. This is not to suggest that there has ever been such a thing as a discrete Swiss context with a 'pure' Swiss concept of female same-sex sexuality or lesbianism growing from within which is now being upset by queer migrants. Rather, following Doreen Massey's concept of space (2005) as "simultaneity of stories-so-far," my analyses are guided by the idea that the ways people in Switzerland have thought about and practiced sexuality have always already been entangled with global relations of power and transnational circuits of desire. The guiding question concerning my objective here is: How are queer migrant women's self-conceptualizations and practices enabled and disciplined by dominant discourses around sexuality in Switzerland, and how do their self-conceptualizations and practices in turn reiterate or subvert these discourses?

In engaging with the subject position and experiences of queer migrant women in Switzerland, this study has mainly drawn on three bodies of scholarship. At the same time, it has also extended these literatures by addressing some of their knowledge gaps. The first is geographies of sexualities, which examine the spatialities of sexualities and the sexualization of space. Here, however, queer geographies have often disregarded cross-cultural and transnational formations of same-sex intimacy and heteronormativity, which continues to hold true especially for German-speaking geography. Second, this research engages with and contributes to queer migration studies. This emerging scholarship explores the interlinkages between migration and sexuality, but has produced scant ethnographies addressing queer migrant women, and none in Switzerland. Lastly, this study converses with feminist migration research in Switzerland, which has largely remained organized around the assumption that migrants are heterosexual. This study enriches this scholarship by applying a queer perspective on migration, demonstrating how sexuality structures the migration experience (of *all* migrants), and how, in turn, migration shapes sexual norms.

My motivation for undertaking this research was twofold. One motivation was my perception of the Swiss lesbian community as an exceedingly white space and 'invisibilization machine' of non-white queer women. This invisibility made me wonder about the situation and experiences of queer migrant women in Switzerland, particularly of women who have come to Switzerland as adults and do not have access to the social networks of people who have grown up in Switzerland, and who often do not speak any local language at first. I suspected that upon closer inspection, the purported global 'rainbow family' was not going to turn out to be as inclusive and safe as its idealized image might suggest. This unease met with my horror at the intensifying systematiza-

tion of the exclusion of 'foreigners' in Switzerland. Over the few years leading up to this study in 2005, exclusionary laws, policies, and practices in the realms of immigration, asylum, civil law, social welfare, health insurance, and specifically anti-Muslim laws had been implemented with increasing speed and severity. This development was further fueled by undifferentiated migration and social scientific scholarship, media reports, and everyday conversations, which all easily passed under the radar of what was commonly understood as (blatant) 'racism.' Amidst all this, I began to wonder how queer migrant women experience and negotiate these everyday racisms and the stereotypical, heterosexist images of migrant women upon which they are based.

Yet when I started this research in 2005, I was unable to locate any self-declared queer migrant women activists or activist groups in Switzerland who were explicitly conducting an identity politics from this intersectional subject position. I interpreted this perceived scarcity of such activism not in terms of an absence of issues worth politicizing (or, as some early critics of this project would have it, in terms of an absence of a significant enough number of queer migrant women in Switzerland for such activism to come into being), but instead suspected it to be a result of structural exclusionary processes that work to invisibilize this intersectional positionality.<sup>4,5</sup> While this conclusion reinforced my decision to work on the topic, it at the same time raised major ethical questions. I was facing the feminist dilemma: On the one hand, I wanted to raise attention to a possible problem zone, a blind spot of intersectional discrimination, a process of invisibilization. On the other hand, in the almost-absence of an identity politics being performed from this subject position, my investigations threatened to create the very 'group' they sought to portray, with the attendant problems of defining a political subject and identity. These ethical concerns were aggravated by the outsider perspective I was about to take on this 'group' from my own positionality as

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- 4 As recent Swiss critical race scholarship has shown, queer women of color have been part of the queer/feminist movement and of Black/migrant activism for a long time. However, in the years leading up to this study, their intersectional positionalities tended to be invisibilized within these movements. This mechanism persists to this date: As Romeo Koyote Rosen, who identifies as Afro-German queergender Transform, describes a point in their biography: "*In der Schweiz bin ich eine lesbische Aktivistin. In den Vereinigten Staaten bin ich eine Schwarze lesbische Aktivistin*" – "In Switzerland I'm a lesbian activist. In the U.S. I'm a Black lesbian activist". And later: "*Ich werde von binären Transpersonen, die sich auch politisch, sozial und rechtlich für Trans Themen engagieren, nicht als Schwarze Transform wahrgenommen*" – "Binary trans persons who also engage in trans issues politically, socially, and legally do not perceive me as Black Transform" (Rosen 2019:295,301). In 2004, Rosen founded the activist platform *sündikat*, together with other queergender persons of color. I became aware of this group due to their event *off\_pride* in 2009, an alternative event to the commercialized Zürich Gay Pride. However, it was not until later that I came to know *sündikat* as an intersectional queergender platform that specifically also addresses people/queers of color. Prior to this, I had perceived *sündikat* as a platform mainly addressing genderqueerness (albeit with an explicitly intersectional and inclusive policy).
  - 5 A related example for the invisibilization of people of color is the case of Black women who were public figures in Switzerland in the past, but who were subsequently 'forgotten' in an act of collective amnesia and hence erased from the history of women in the Swiss public sphere (dos Santos Pinto 2013).

a white Swiss ethnographer. Furthermore, the scarcity of an according activism rendered it impossible for me to follow some critical postcolonial scholars' proposition to closely collaborate with advocate groups when researching marginalized subject positions (Essed 1991, Charter of Decolonial Research Ethics<sup>6</sup>).

I hence wanted to 'make visible' queer migrant women's experiences while at the same time acknowledging that, given the persistently colonial order of things, this would eventually remain impossible in many ways. As Sara Ahmed (2000:55-56) argues, white feminist ethnographers cannot simply 'give voice' by including quotes of 'other' women in a text or by simply declaring them to be 'research partners' or 'co-authors' rather than 'research objects.' This would mean to conceal the existing power relations and attendant privileges that eventually often allow the white ethnographer to gather together the ethnographic document, perform the analyses, and earn its merits. At the same time, Jasbir Puar (2002a:125-126) argues that for privileged feminist ethnographers to 'stay home' – that is, deciding against conducting research on marginalized positionalities – is not a neutral decision, either.

Against the backdrop of this representational dilemma, I attempted to put to use methodological and analytical instruments that promised to enable me to "welcome those voices that refuse to speak 'with' the one who knows," (that is, with the white ethnographer), as Sara Ahmed (2000:64) suggests. In the following excerpt, Ahmed refers to a letter that Huggins et al. wrote to Diane Bell, in which the authors criticized Bell, a white feminist, for falsely declaring Topsy Napurrula Nelson, an indigenous woman, as her alleged 'co-author' of an article, falsely creating the impression that the two women had authored the article on a level playing field:

Such a welcoming of those who refuse assimilation would be about opening up the possibility of a knowledge which does not belong to the privileged community, and hence which contests the boundaries by which that community is formed. It would mean accepting the limits of the knowledge that one has already claimed. It would mean unlearning the response to those dissenting voices which can hear those voices only as hostile. It would also mean reading the letter by *Huggins et al.* as a gift to white feminism. If white feminism could begin to receive that gift, and speak to those others who will not be assimilated into an epistemic community, then a dialogue may yet take place. (Ahmed 2000:64, emphasis original)

When designing the study, I thus sought methodologies and methods that I believed may be put to work against the colonial practice of framing racialized people as research objects, at least to a certain extent, through making room for subaltern counter discourses (see Chapter 4). As I was writing, I tried – certainly not always with success – to reflect on and address the problems arising from representing the Other, for instance by including lengthy interview passages in the original language in order to allow for alternative interpretation; by including my own questions in the transcripts where applicable; or by explicitly reflecting on how the fact that biographical narratives are always co-productions of two very specifically positioned interlocutors can

6 Decoloniaity Europe: Charter of Decolonial Research Ethics, <https://decoloniaityeurope.wixsite.com/decoloniaity/charter-of-decolonial-research-ethics>, downloaded on May 22, 2020.



be considered in the analysis of interviews. This latter reflection importantly included thinking about the effects of my own being a woman and lesbian within my field of study. While this fact frequently opened doors and created a sense of mutual interest and understanding between myself and my interlocutors, it also bore the risk for these alleged commonalities to remain unquestioned and hence to become automatically interpreted from the white researcher's perspective. Indeed, a lack of a critical perspective on alleged commonalities may result in a 'whitening out' of the vastly different ways in which people do, or do not, understand themselves as gendered and sexualized beings. Further, a lack of reflection on assumed commonalities in terms of gender and sexual identities and practices may hinder insights on how the experience of racialization (or lack thereof, on the part of the white ethnographer) represents a crucial limit to the assumed intersubjective understanding between 'lesbians' (see Chapter 4).

This book is structured as follows: The first part, which comprises Chapters 2 to 4, establishes the historical, theoretical, and methodological context of the study. Chapter 2 describes the social, political, and economic context and hence the discursive field the interviewed queer migrant women entered when arriving in Switzerland. Specifically, it traces the development of discourses, policies, and practices in Switzerland around immigration on the one hand and female same-sex sexuality on the other. Furthermore, this chapter provides an overview of the (scant) existing research on queer migration to Switzerland. Chapter 3 lays the study's theoretical foundation. First, it expounds the understanding of space that has both guided the conceptualization of this study and emerged through it. This is followed by an introduction to the research fields of queer migration studies and geographies of sexualities respectively, focusing on the contributions within these research areas that this study has drawn on and extended. Chapter 4 offers methodological reflections and describes the sampling process.

The second part of the study, Chapters 5 to 10, comprises the data analysis. Chapter 5 explores how queer migrant women perceive their sexualities to have shifted through their migration to Switzerland and examines the ways in which these processes of identification are tied into dominant discourses around sexuality in Switzerland. Chapter 6 is concerned with family matters. It first analyzes queer migrant women's relationships with their families of origin and then explores how sexualities and national, ethnic, and cultural identity become co-constructed within the space of the family. The second part of the chapter engages with queer migrant women's discourses and practices around reproduction and queer family foundation. Chapter 7 examines queer migrant women's ways of relating to their diasporic communities and compatriots, exploring how sexualities are negotiated in these spaces. Chapter 8 addresses the issue of sexual citizenship. Specifically, it engages with queer migrant women's experiences with state legislations, policies, and practices and scrutinizes how these mechanisms produce and discipline migrant sexualities. Chapter 9 explores the role of work in queer migrant women's migration biographies and examines work and the workplace as sites of identification. Finally, Chapter 10 reflects on the urban and the rural as scales of identification, examining how queer migrant women imagine the urban and the rural, and how they experience urban and rural lives.



## Postscript: Raceless Racism in Switzerland

When I set out to research the situation of queer migrant women in Switzerland in 2005, race as a relevant historical building block of the Swiss nation and racism as its persisting manifestation were difficult issues to raise in Swiss public discourse, and scholarly literature on contemporary racism and on the histories and effects of Switzerland's implication in the colonial project was insular. 'Race' and 'racism' commonly tended to be framed as something that had once happened in Germany but was now overcome, and as something that now only existed in places outside Europe, such as particularly in the U.S. or in South Africa (Purtschert 2011). In 2014, when I was finishing up my PhD thesis – which this book is based upon –, these narratives were beginning to reveal cracks. Swiss anti-racist movements were strengthening and diversifying due to the foundation of new organizations like *Bla\*Sh*, *Berner Rassismusstammtisch*, *INES*, *Afrolitt*, or *Collectif Afro-Swiss*, who explicitly address racism in Switzerland in the context of its connectivities to Swiss coloniality. Further, scholarly publications mapping racism in Switzerland and its impacts on racialized people targeted by it were about to be published (e.g. Boulila 2019a and 2019b, Efonayi-Mäder et al. 2017, Espahangizi 2015 and 2016, Lavanchy 2015, Michel 2015, 2016, and 2019, Naguib 2016, Wa Baile et al. 2019). These investigations into contemporary racisms in Switzerland are in an intense conversation with the equally emerging Swiss postcolonial scholarship (e.g. Purtschert 2019, Purtschert et al. 2012, Purtschert et al. 2016, Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015, Schär 2015). This field of study was originally mainly dedicated to retracing the Swiss history of 'colonialism without colonies' by excavating Switzerland's manifold implications in slavery and colonial trade (e.g. David et al. 2005, Fässler 2004, Zangger 2011). More recently, postcolonial scholars have also begun to analyze the historical discursive construction, consumption, and exclusion of the exoticized, racialized colonial Other. Indeed, it is against this figure of the exotic Other that the figure of the Swiss white, autonomous, enlightened Self emerged that then became the subject of exclusionary Swiss nationalisms. Postcolonial scholars also analyze contemporary continuities of Swiss coloniality, examining "how colonial and postcolonial constellations are currently negotiated, reproduced and re-encoded, and how these are related to contemporary forms of racism" (Purtschert et al. 2016:287).

This critical perspective sits uneasy with the dominant Swiss self-perception of always having been a 'colonial outsider' (Purtschert et al. 2016:293). As Noémi Michel argues, this self-perception

has nurtured discourses of 'exceptionalism,' particularly of a conviction that the history of race has been – and still is – extraneous to Switzerland. [...] It is also the root of the current 'restrained recognition of Swiss forms of racism' in which racism is reduced to individual intentions and refers to explicitly violent or verbal acts that are disconnected from broader structures and histories. (Michel 2015:422, quoting Purtschert 2012:112)

In other words, Switzerland has a tendency to "understand itself as a place *where 'race' has no history*" (Michel 2019:96-97, emphasis original, my translation). As Michel writes elsewhere, the Swiss politics of postcoloniality hence continue to privilege the conviction that there has never been a colonial past in Swiss history, concluding that "[s]uch a denial facilitates the production of raceless racism and hinders the public voice of

individuals whose bodies and names are visibly marked by the long history of the construction of race as a category of difference" (Michel 2015:411).

This emerging perspective on 'race' and 'racism' in Switzerland allows for a retrospective reading of the context within which the research discussed here was undertaken as a space-time of 'racism without race,' in which racism is normalized but denied. This critique is part of a larger line of argument in European critical race studies, postcolonial studies, and the queer/people of color critique that exposes contemporary Western Europe as colorblind (e.g. Balibar 2004, Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, El-Tayeb 2011, Essed 1991, Goldberg 2006 and 2009). For instance, in her analysis of ethnicity in postnational Europe, Fatima El-Tayeb analyzes dominant narratives that frame Europe as "a space free of 'race'" (El-Tayeb 2001:xv). She argues that this figure of raceless Europe "is not only central to the way Europeans [or, we may specify, the Swiss] perceive themselves, but has also gained near-global acceptance" (ibid). This is remarkable, considering that the very concept of race originated in Europe; that race-based politics permeated the colonial and fascist eras; and that the ghosts from these eras continue to haunt contemporary European politics to this date.<sup>7</sup> Instead, these discourses firmly locate contemporary racism, and resistance to it, in the U.S.

The absence of discourses around race, or discourses geographically 'displacing' race, do not, however, signify an actual absence of racism in Europe (or Switzerland). Instead, "the ideology of 'racelessness' is the process by which racial thinking and its effects are made invisible." It is an "active process of 'forgetting'" that precludes the possibility of addressing racism (El-Tayeb 2011:xvii,xxiv). Within this framework of 'forgetting,' migrants, especially including native speakers of European (or local Swiss) languages who are perceived as non-white, remain eternal newcomers. They are forever 'just arriving' (and hence forever potentially leaving soon again), and subject to constant defamiliarization within European nations. This dynamic persists regardless of the period of time that has passed since these migrants (or their ancestors) have actually 'arrived,' which in the case of an immigrant's (grand)children spans generations, or in the case of European Roma, several centuries. As El-Tayeb sums up:

'[P]olitical racelessness' does not equate experiential or social racelessness, that is, the absence of racial thinking, rather, it creates a form of racialization that can be defined as specifically European both in its enforced silence and in its explicit categorization as not European of all those who violate Europe's implicit, but normative whiteness, allowing to forever consider the 'race question' as externally [...] imposed. The result is an image of a self-contained and homogenous Europe in which racialized minorities remain outside permanently. (El-Tayeb 2011:xxviii)

The context of this study hence has to be understood as one in which racism is openly condemned and the terms 'race' and 'racism' are avoided,<sup>8</sup> while at the same time racial-

7 Note, for instance, that in Switzerland the German term for 'race' (*Rasse*) was widely used until the 1970s (Germann 2016), in contrast to other European countries, where the term was tabooed in the post-war era.

8 Noémi Michel (2015) provides a powerful example for the avoidance of the term 'racism' in Switzerland. She argues that in the wake of the vehement debates around the infamous poster by the

ization is in fact systematically exerted. Or as Noémi Michel writes specifically for the Swiss context: “Despite the fact that ‘race’ is tabooed, it continues to be effective, which means that social meaning and hierarchization continue to be produced through racializations” (Michel 2019:91, my translation). This taboo encompasses “institutional spaces, public debates and interpersonal relationships” and effectively nips an open discussion about racism in Switzerland in the bud. The context of the fieldwork of this study is a space-time, then, in which members of the white Swiss mainstream society commonly deny the existence of racism in Switzerland or being racist while at the same time acting in racist ways and establishing and executing laws, policies, and practices that are exclusionary of racialized people. It is a space-time of structural and subliminal rather than open racism (although blatant racism exists, too, and might in fact be strengthening again), which, however, intervenes in all areas of racialized peoples’ lives, such as housing, education, work, mobility, immigration, asylum, culture, political participation, social welfare, health, friendship, relationship, family, and reproduction. In short, it is a space-time in which race and racism are denied but actually normalized.

The notions of ‘race’ and ‘racism’ also do not figure prominently in Swiss migration studies, either. This scarcity of critical engagements with the concepts of ‘race,’ ‘racism,’ and Swiss coloniality in Swiss migration scholarship again ties into the larger context of mainstream Western European migration scholarship. As Alana Lentin contends in her comprehensive analysis of European sociological migration studies, this field of research “elides, neglects, or denies the role of race in the construction of the boundaries of Europeanness” (Lentin 2014:69). She criticizes the current mainstream “minority research” as being preoccupied with “ethnicity, migration, assimilation, integration, multiculturalism, transnationalism, diversity” (ibid:80, see also de Genova 2010). Yet it is this kind of “minority research” that receives the lion’s share of institutional and financial support as well as public and academic recognition in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Lentin argues that in this line of scholarship,

discussions of more suitable terminology, such as ethnicity, construed as more descriptive, less divisive and hence more constructive, is a strategy that neglects the continuing significance of race. Precisely because the preferred terms are presented as neutral and universal, race is implicitly neglected while, dissociated from their racialized roots, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘culture’ are ahistorically constituted. (Lentin 2014:89)

The same tendency prevails in much of Swiss mainstream migration scholarship. Here the concept of ‘racism,’ if mentioned or reflected on at all, tends to be considered not to fit the Swiss context and is hence often – mostly silently – replaced by the notions of ‘ethnicity’ or ‘culture,’ which implicitly evoke ideas of racialized difference without explicitly applying biologicistic categories (Michel 2019:93). In other instances, ‘race’ is

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right-wing party *Schweizerische Volkspartei SVP* showing a bunch of white sheep standing on a Swiss flag kicking out a black sheep, “the sheep has now become a trendy signifier for race: it allows anyone to evoke issues related to race without explicitly mentioning it” (ibid:422).

- 9 Philomena Essed and Kwame Nimako, who have scrutinized the Dutch “minority research industry,” confirm Lentin’s finding that this field of study features “limited perceptions or the denial of racism,” and indeed “lack[s] a comprehensive understanding of racism” (Essed and Nimako 2006, quoted in Lentin 2014:80–81).

implicitly understood in narrow terms, as mainly addressing people visually marked as Black (although what comprises this Blackness mostly fails to be defined). Lentin takes issue with this alleged color-codedness and reminds scholars who promote this perspective that race under Nazism was not purely color-coded, either. At the same time, Lentin (2014:91) rejects the frequent reduction of the notion of 'race' in Europe to the Nazi Shoah, which is used as the allegedly 'obvious' (hence unquestioned) reason to justify the discontinuation of the use of the term. She instead calls for "a race critical approach that is attentive to the persistence of coloniality in contemporary raciologies," within which race functions as a "fundamental theoretical frame through which to historicize and decode the effects of migration in Western European societies" (Lentin 2014:69-70).<sup>10</sup>

In Switzerland, the recent upsurge of exactly this kind of activism and scholarly work on racism is indeed beginning to demonstrate the usefulness and significance of the concept of 'race' for the Swiss context. This work frames racism as the production and subsequent exclusion of racialized or, as I sometimes write in this book, ethnized, or 'othered,' subjects. Racialized Others are, however, not the only product of processes of racialization. The main intended effect of 'othering' people is instead the production of the *Self* (the fiction of the autochthonous Swiss), which can only come into being through its delimitation from, and simultaneous exclusion of, the racialized Other. Racism in this sense signifies "any practice that, intentionally or not, excludes a 'racial' or 'ethnic' minority from enjoying the full rights, opportunities and responsibilities available to the majority population" (Richards 2003:xiv, referring to Goldberg 1993). Hence, critical race critique addresses varied mechanisms of discrimination against a wide range of people who become identified as 'foreigners' in Switzerland, including, for instance, people of African descent, Tamils, Kosovo Albanians, Roma, or people perceived as Muslims.

I have included this postscript on the connectivities between the notion of 'race' and Swiss nation-building because the emerging Swiss critical race scholarship powerfully pinpoints queer migrant women's experiences in Switzerland. Indeed, the impact of racism on racialized people, who become constructed and excluded as 'foreigners,' and especially the way in which discrimination based on race and ethnicity intertwines with exclusions based on heterosexism and sexism, were at the very core of the narratives of the queer migrant women I interviewed. The critical race perspective has hence brought more clarity and analytical power to the analysis of the data generated in the context of this study. At the outset of this research, I had been caught up in vain attempts to somehow discern between people who were 'ethnized' and people who were 'racialized,' as this was what many European migration researchers seemed to be doing at the time – implying that the first exclusionary move (to 'ethnize' someone) is not quite as

10 Alana Lentin (2014) directs her critique explicitly at *sociological* migration research, juxtaposing it with *anthropological* inquiries into migration. The latter she assumes to have been forced to redress its role as the "handmaiden of colonialism" (ibid:70) and hence to be more aware of colonial persistencies today. I am doubtful about this clear demarcation but understand it as an analytical move by the author.

bad as the second (to 'racialize' someone) because it 'only' concerns people's 'culture' and not their 'phenotype' or 'genes,' and so on, and because it allegedly affects different people. (But in what ways exactly are 'racialized' people different from 'ethnicized' people? (How) do their experiences differ? How can visibilities, phenotypes, or genes be delimited from one another? Etc.) The insight that Switzerland self-identifies, and becomes identified, as a space without racism has further clarified why Swiss migration scholarship tends to locate 'ethnicized' people in Switzerland, while the presence of 'racialized people' seems almost an impossibility.

In light of the critical race perspective, Swiss and more generally European migration research will hence have to engage more thoroughly with the concepts of 'race' and 'racism,' focusing on the perspective of the people affected, and reflecting on the mechanisms, histories, and persistences of postracial silences in Switzerland and in Europe. As critical migration scholars, we also need to become more self-reflective with respect to our usage – or avoidance – of the notion of 'race.' And we especially also need to keep examining the ways in which race continues to be othered in Swiss and European migration scholarship and ask about the origins and effects of this erasure.

