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# The Hybrid Researcher: Entering the Field, Ethnography and Research among Dutch Muslim Women from 2009 to 2019

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on ethnography among Dutch Muslim women who chose to practice Islam (whether they were born Muslim, known as 'Newly practicing Muslims,' or they chose to convert, known as 'New Muslims'), which is often considered by the native Dutch population as a religion oppressive to women. This paper is part of a larger project that seeks to understand how these Dutch Muslim women build their identity in a way that it is both Dutch and Muslim, whether or not they mix Dutch parameters in their Muslim identity, while at the same time intersplicing Islamic principles in their Dutch senses of self. This study is based on an annual ethnography conducted in the city of Amsterdam from September 2009 to October 2019, that combines insights taken from in-depth interviews with Dutch Muslimas, observations in gatherings for Quranic and Religious studies, observations in a mosque located in a block of neighborhoods with a high percentage of immigrant and Muslim populations, and one-time events occurring during special times (i.e., Ramadan, the summer, Christmas, and the Burka Ban). This paper has a special focus on the ethnography and the positionality of the author as a researcher who is both an insider and outsider in this specific field and her subjective experiences that could be methodologically relevant for other scholars and ethnographers. This paper will explore the techniques that helped the author enter the field, collect data for this ethnography and the construction of knowledge in this specific field, including the insider–outsider axis, code switching, emotions and assumptions in the field and positionality, which will all be explained in detail. This paper takes the reader on the journey of entering the field and shows them the various techniques that were used to enter the field in order to build report and trust between the researcher and the participants in this study.

**Keywords:** religion; ethnography; qualitative research; Islam; Dutch Islam; religion in Europe; agency; women in conservative religions; religious conversion; Identity; culture; immigration; women in Islam

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## 1. Introduction

> *"It was rough to be a Muslim in the Netherlands . . . no matter what they do, they'll never be Dutch . . . these aren't disenchanted youth. They are well educated, and they have jobs. They feel that they've done everything right, and still they're rejected"* (Nachmani 2010, p. 58)

This paper is a part of a larger study that focuses on a current issue in the academic world and outside: the growing interest in Muslim populations in Europe, and the lives of Muslims in a non-Muslim world. This work is a case study focused on one European country, the Netherlands, and the lives of its Muslim women. The Netherlands has specific sensitivities, affected by the historical and collective memory of the country as one of tolerance, and also historical events related to society and immigration and religion and immigration, and a very interesting religious history that has been characterized by considerable diversity of religious thought and practice.

For this project, I conducted a long-term, annual and multi-site ethnography in the city of Amsterdam and its suburbs over several periods of time lasting one decade. The

first study took place in 2009 (involving both born Muslimas and converted Muslimas who re-discovered their faith) and was pursued thereafter once a year from 2017 to 2020, focusing on converted Muslimas, also referred to as New Muslimas. The Netherlands was specifically chosen as (a) an interesting case study, as a country that absorbed (Muslim) immigration, a country once famous for its multicultural tolerance, but nowadays experiencing a particularly virulent multiculturalism backlash after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the "war of terror" discourse (Van Es 2019) and as a country with an interesting colonial and religious transformation past (Cooper and Stoler 1989; Stoler 1995; Stoler 2010; Besamusca and Verheul 2014), and (b) as a function of my lived experience since I was born and raised in one of Amsterdam's most vibrant and multicultural neighborhoods as a member of a religious minority myself. Even though I did not belong to a formal Jewish community while in the Netherlands, my Jewish identity has always been a large part of my life. During the fieldwork, smaller secondary research questions emerged, one of which will be key to this following paper:

*What are the techniques used to (re) enter the research field when the researcher is both an insider and outsider to the field itself and the research participants?*

In the following paper, I describe how I entered the field in terms of reflexivity, the insider–outsider axis, code switching, positionality, emotions and assumptions in the ethnographic encounter and other factors.

## 2. Methodology and Positionality

My initial interest in the topic of Muslim communities in the Netherlands, with a focus on women and later on female conversion to Islam, dates back to 2007 and 2008 when I was living in Amsterdam between my bachelor and my Master's studies. However, my relationship with this topic dates back to my birth in the winter of 1981, in Amsterdam, to two migrant parents. Growing up in the Netherlands as a child of a Jewish Israeli mother was a strong inspiration for me to study religious minorities, immigration, identity and notions of belonging, since we belonged to a religious minority ourselves and we often questioned the sense of belonginess (to the Dutch society, to Judaism, to Israel). Although we were not observant or religious, during my childhood and adolescence, I often felt my dual (Israeli/Jewish and Dutch) identity and I did not always feel that I belonged. In 2009, I began my graduate studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and went back to the Muslim communities of my hometown to interview born Muslimas from Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds, and then for the first time I met converts to Islam, who participated in women-only events and often befriended the born Muslimas. I began my PhD work in late 2016, but I have never really left the field and have stayed in touch with some of my informants over the years, who then introduced me to other women.

The first steps of this fieldwork started in 2009–2010 and resulted in my Master's thesis, which was submitted in 2011 (Hass 2011). This work served as the inspiration and the basis for my PhD fieldwork, when I re-entered the field again in 2017. In the seven years that have elapsed between the first and (the first part of my) second fieldwork, I have been in continuous contact with some of the informants I met in 2010, and some have become friends. Some women I met in 2010 also took part in the second fieldwork, as it was interesting to see what has changed in these women's lives.

The second fieldwork started in 2016 in cyberspace when I interviewed a few women on Skype, with the intention of meeting them when I went to the Netherlands. I was introduced by an old friend to Myriam (pseudonym), a Dutch Muslima who had converted to Islam about 14 years ago, and had been on the board of a Dutch Converted Muslima's organization. Although Myriam was not one of the directors of the organization, she said would be happy to take me along to one of their meetings and gatherings and I could interview some of the women members and even take part in the organization's activities. She offered to post my message on her network and I was obviously very delighted by that offer. I also re-connected with three women who had participated in my previous fieldwork whom I had asked to take part in the current study.

A major difference between the first and second part of my fieldwork is the presence of social media in my participants' lives. Most of my participants were recruited online through Facebook groups and through the snowball method. Over the years, I have been active on Dutch Facebook groups and Instagram pages of converted Muslimas and have been commenting and liking the post for a few years. I used to correspond regularly with potential participants. In practice, not all of them agreed to participate, but they used to refer me to their sisters, or I could consult with them on matters relevant to my fieldwork. Social media assisted in access to women that I would not have met otherwise, since not all women attend services and Quranic classes, some may be more active on social media platforms, and others may practice their religion individually. To document all these women, I conducted a virtual ethnography in addition to a more traditional ethnography. Thus, in addition to physical spaces, cyberspace where many women engage in websites, blogs, vlogs and forums (with anonymous users), and announce events via email and Facebook became another meeting point for the participants in this study (see more in Hass and Lutek 2018, 2019; Hass 2020a, 2020b). In my previous research (Hass 2011), online platforms were widely used by participants to meet and share stories and experiences, and to teach and learn about Islam. In the current work, the use of cyberspace again had considerable impact on the lives of the Muslim Women I encountered.

Not only did social media make easier my journey in recruiting participants, it also was another field itself. I could follow live-streaming of mosques I knew offline, but also some who were not accessible for me offline. Most announcements for events, (Quranic) classes, workshops and rituals were distributed online and I read and analyzed them too (I elaborate more on this in Section 2, the methodology section).

I was fortunate to experience Amsterdam during special periods such as Ramadan and Christmas (Ramadan, the holy month for Muslims, was often a time for converts to reflect on their first Ramadan, often times before conversion. Christmas was a special time as well, since it is almost a national holiday in the Netherlands. Christmas is celebrated with the family, which often caused a great deal of stress and challenges for some of my participants. Some did visit their parents during the Christmas season, while others avoided this).

Similar to Ruth Behar (Behar 2007, 2014), I did not conduct lengthy extensive field work, but rather traveled as much as was needed to gather data for this project. I identified a great deal with Behar's "running away from home to run toward home" (Behar 2007), since I, like Behar, left one home in my teens and was now returning to that home for research, after making the new place my home, making me an insider and an outsider and being one of the tools that had helped me conduct the following study. Another ethnography that was quite comparable to mine, is Stoica's extensive fieldwork and comparative study between Dutch and Romanian converts to Islam. Considering her background, she is positioned as both an insider and an outsider in her research population (Stoica et al. 2012).

The topic of belonging is explored in depth in my research. Born as well as converted Muslimas stated that they often feel a sense of non-belonging as Muslims in Dutch surroundings, especially when their Muslimness is visible, for example when wearing a hijab or when using terms in Arabic such as *Inshallah*, *Mashallah* or *Bismillah*. The differences as well as the similarities between these groups will be broadly discussed in Section 3.6. As I did not wish to impose my own experience as a double immigrant (in Israel and in the Netherlands) on these women's narratives, so I tended not to inquire about belonging in a straightforward way. Nevertheless, the question of identity and belonging always came up during the interviews, during the participant observations of women's gatherings, and even in Quranic classes where verses from the Quran were discussed in contemporary fashion. Much like Behar's study, this study is also fragmented. Similar to Behar, I travel back and forth from the field. Although her restrictions differed from mine, the hardest one being that her visa was only valid for 2 weeks (Behar 2007, 2014), like her I had a full-time job that did not allow me to be absent for periods longer than a few weeks. Behar described leaving her husband and child behind in order to do her fieldwork in Cuba (Behar 2014), just as Abu Lughoud described her struggles to work in the field, first as a

dutiful daughter when she was still unmarried, living alone in Chicago, and later as a wife and mother in her very reflexive autoethnography (Abu-Lughod 1995, 1998, 2016). In both ethnographies, Abu-Lughoud focused on her similarities with the participants in her study and used them to approach the field in a better way, as I perhaps used my similarities with the women I studied, since I am Dutch like them and feel as though I am an outsider, as some of them may feel as Muslims. As an anthropologist and a junior researcher, I am highly cognizant of reflexive writing and autoethnography. The topic of this work is my own life story in some ways. I am in fact studying experiences similar to what I knew as a child, immigration, as a newcomer in a society, and its related themes of belonging and identity. Autoethnography provides many unique opportunities for researchers to better comprehend their subjects and their own research agendas. For this reason and more, this technique is used by qualitative researchers, mostly coming from a feminist school of thoughts (for more, see Abu-Lughod 1995, 1998, 2016; Creese 2020; Fader 2007; Behar 2014). Yet, to many social scientists who follow traditional positivism, autoethnography remains a highly controversial method due to the predominant focus that autoethnography places on the 'self' of the researcher. In order for me, as a qualitative researcher, to reflect on some of the perceived inherent disadvantages of autoethnography, I will mention firstly that I am well aware of the widespread criticism against autoethnography—namely, that the method tends to put too much emphasis on narratives but not enough on the actual social and cultural structures that make and shape narratives in the first place. In order to negotiate with some of these points, I elaborate on the broad context in which these women are living in. The context of the Netherlands as a country with a specific (religious and colonial) history, that shapes the Dutch society and language to date, has a significant role in shaping the narratives of the Dutch Muslim women presented in this work.

Abu Lughod describes the limitations of being a Muslim Arab woman who studies Arabs and as such only meets a certain stratum of the population, from a certain class in society that corresponds to her status (Altorki and El-Solh 1988). As an insider, I benefitted from a number of advantages that provided me with greater accessibility to the field, as well as an understanding and familiarity with the historical and political background of life in the Netherlands and abroad. It is clear to me that these very advantages could also have been a shortcoming to me in situations where, in a place that is familiar to me, my identity as a Dutch Jewish Israeli woman could attract too much attention (Motzafi-Haller 1997) and could influence how I see certain things or prevent me from seeing other things, or how the field relates to me (Altorki and El-Solh 1988). The techniques that helped me enter the field and collect the data for this ethnography, which involved the insider–outsider axis, code switching, emotions in the field and positionality, will be explained in what follows, after the methodology section.

### 2.1. Methods Used

In addressing the topic of this research and the research questions that arose, ethnographic methods were the most appropriate, since they not only provide insights into what people say or say that they do, but into what they actually say and do in a particular location (Malinowski 1930) and their personal experiences as a Dutch Muslim woman at the moment of conversion or the re-discovery of their faith. In other words, similar to my previous fieldwork in 2009, using ethnographic methods revealed the development and realization of these women's identity that consisted of a national identity, an ethnic identity, a socio-economic identity and a religious identity. These methods provided me with first-hand exposure and interactions with Dutch Muslimas as a religious minority in their non-Muslim community and as an ethnic minority in their Muslim community such as mosques and Quranic classes. The only place where they are a majority is in cyberspace, in closed and open Facebook groups and on anonymous forums aimed at exactly these women. In this journey, I became acquainted with issues such as belonging (to the Dutch national fold), identity (religious, cultural and ethnic identity), the quest for a pure Islam,

and the wish to disconnect from cultural influences of religion vs. culture (called *religie vs. cultuur* in Dutch).

Over the years of ethnography, I followed 44 key participants as they went about their daily lives and jobs in their private domestic sphere, their neighborhoods, shops, places of worship and virtual communities, mainly on Facebook and Instagram. I conducted biographical interviews and follow-up interviews with the 44 key participants. Biographical interviews are a powerful tool for exploring the ways in which contexts and situations shape human agency and how humans act upon the world around them (Wengraf 2001).

This project involved a multi-site (Coleman and Von Hellermann 2012; Marcus 1995), long-term ethnography conducted in the city of Amsterdam and its suburbs over several periods of time lasting one decade. The first part took place in 2009 (focusing on converted Muslimas and born Muslimas who re-discovered their faith) and thereafter once a year from 2017 to 2020 (focusing mainly on converted Muslimas). The data were collected and analyzed using various qualitative methods. I conducted more than 40 in-depth interviews, and participated in Quranic classes, gatherings, lectures and workshops. The ethnographic study combines insights from over twenty observations, including participant observations in gatherings for Quranic and religious studies, observations in a mosque located in a group of neighborhoods with a high percentage of immigrant and Muslim populations, as well as observations in Islamic dress shops in various neighborhoods in Amsterdam and one-time events and workshops. The third source of information was cultural artifacts such as invitations to events, gatherings, distribution materials, photographs, memes, paintings, and posters, exhibitions in museums, websites and material culture (textiles and clothing). To gain a better understanding of Islamic dress and culture, I also conducted museum ethnography in the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam, a museum devoted to global cultures that have ties to the Kingdom of the Netherlands' colonial past, at the Amsterdam Historical Museum, and at the Museum of Islamic Art in Jerusalem. In my research, alongside more traditional ethnography, I chose to make use of online/virtual (cyberspace)-based ethnography and to conduct in-depth interviews with various stakeholders. According to Androutsopoulos (2008), online ethnography is multifaceted and does not purport to be "complete ethnography." However, the key to success lies in its integration with other methodologies (Androutsopoulos 2008). For example, interviews may offer insights that are not accessible through systematic observation in online space, while observations may reveal aspects of a structure that is difficult to perceive in an interview. The combination of the two methodologies may provide a clearer picture of reality.

The studies reported in this thesis were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Hebrew University. All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in this study and agreed to a taped interview. The informed consent for the interviews was usually received by email, after a short introduction of my research plan was sent, along with an informed consent form I had prepared, according to my university's ethical standards. "I would like to participate" (*het lijkt mij leuk om mee te doen*, Dutch) or any version of this response, was used as the informed consent to participate. One or two participants wished to see my research proposal before agreeing to participate, and a few more said they needed to consult with their husbands. Most of them came back to with a positive answer and we would go ahead and schedule the interview. Before the start of the interview, after the introduction, I would ask again if the woman sitting opposite me agreed to be recorded, so I could listen to her, rather than summarize and write while she was speaking. All agreed and 100% of the interviews were recorded. Interviews were held and transcribed in Dutch and sent to all participants for review: these interviews were conducted in Dutch, transcribed in Dutch and large parts of each interview were translated into English and integrated into the ethnography. The informed consent for the participant observations was received as follows: in small gatherings, such as Quranic classes and workshops. I would be invited by one of my interlocutors who would be a participant in these events, then I would ask the speaker, teacher, or leading woman of these groups if I could attend the meeting(s) as a researcher.

Once I got permission from her, she would ask the rest of the group (groups of between 5 and 12 participants). In all cases, all participants agreed and some also asked to be included in this study and thus also participated in the interviews. In events open to the public (announced on social media or elsewhere), I would attend without asking for consent, since the events were open to the public, frequently with me needing to buy a ticket in order to attend, and in some cases had hundreds of participants and many speakers.

Research tools: This research is based on 44 semi-structured interviews that included questions concerning the national, social, religious, cultural and personal experiences of Dutch Muslim women, whether converted or born into Islam.

In this research, I amassed both the snowball method sampling and purposeful sampling, following Patton's argument about "a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources" (Patton 2002; Ashqar-Sharary and Abu-Rabia-Queder 2020).

Most interviews lasted between 120 and 180 min and were conducted in Dutch. As an interviewer, I often felt that the participants were eager to cooperate in this study, as most stressed the importance of having their voices heard and wanting to address a few matters ranging from fighting stereotypes on how they are often perceived as oppressed, the fact that their conversion was their own initiative, rather than a demand from a significant other, as often perceived, and the feeling of belonging (or not belonging) to Dutch as well as Muslim communities. Here, it is worth reflecting on some potential power relations between the researcher (me) and the participants. As researchers, we must always be aware that we come to the field and specifically to the interviews with an academic resume, we have read and written about this topic and we are experienced interviewers, while our participants might only want to share their stories. My way of trying to soften possible power relations, was the inclusion of the participants in the process. First, I sent the transcription in Dutch back to the participants, and when I got comments, or requests to delete or add information, I would do that and save a new version (I would file as "after X") and use for the analysis. Not everyone opted to return with changes—some just thanked me for a written "souvenir" from our encounter. Some participants (some more than others, depending on their free time) were also involved in the analysis.

Some participants met me more than once or twice, and some even invited me to come along to their daily activities as a walk in the forest, picking their kids up from school, doing groceries . . . the first interview would always be in a more formal setting, chosen by each interviewee (libraries, cafés, station halls, university class rooms and their own living rooms were the most popular chosen settings). For a second (and third) interview, I would always suggest a less formal setting, and to their choice, we would usually do something active, that was hard to tape (for example, a walk in the forest, park, a city walk).

The analysis sought to identify the leading themes and subthemes that arose in research and which describe the relations among these themes systematically. By theme, I refer to all citations reflecting the same phenomenon/idea. Direct quotations from the interviews concerning the participants' experiences, opinions, and beliefs, as well as the thoughts that structured them were selected, and an initial examination of the emic component (the personal and subjective experience) was accomplished by comparative analysis of the interviews and analysis of the themes. The analysis was based on thematic relations (Braun and Clarke 2006), arising from the field and revealed by the interlocutors who constructed the knowledge during our interviews, and who later helped with identifying and formulating outstanding themes, as part of the feminist approach I wish to advance in this paper, as well as in the larger project. Once analysis of interview data was completed, it was expanded to include analysis of categories and meanings extrinsic to the research (etic component) (see more in: Shkedi 2003) and resulted in four published papers (Hass and Lutek 2018, 2019; Hass 2020a, 2020b). The interview was semi-structured and consisted of questions that were not formulated from previous readings and previous analyses, but were very open (first question was usually 'tell me about yourself', later on followed questions about the conversion process in the case of the New Muslimas or

the rediscovering of the faith as in the case of the born Muslimas. Each interview took its own turn according to what the participant chose to share and the questions that arose spontaneously.

Research Population: The subjects of this ethnography were 44 Dutch Muslim women, whether born into Islam or converted to Islam at adulthood (after age 18). Their demographic characteristics are described below: Of all the participants, 30 were converted Muslimas and 14 were born Muslimas with ethnic roots (mostly in Turkey and Morocco but also in Suriname, Somalia, Indonesia and elsewhere). Of the converted Muslimas, most were white native Dutch; a few were ethnically Indonesian, Surinamese, and Brazilian, Colombian, Hindi and others. Most of the converted Muslimas came from a Christian household, five considered themselves coming from an atheist upbringing, and two came from a Jewish background. Most resided in Amsterdam and in the suburbs of the city and ranged in age from 18 to 45. Twenty-five were married or in a committed relationship (leading to marriage) during the ethnography, six were divorced and the rest defined themselves as single (most of them looking for a relationship leading to marriage).

Most of the younger participants were enrolled at the time of interview in one of the Netherlands' institutions of higher learning; those aged 30 and above all had a BA or an MA, a few were PhD candidates and two were post-doctoral researchers. Most worked full time at regular salaried jobs (some were independent, small business owners, physicians, academics, social workers, policewomen and others). Their socio-economic backgrounds varied considerably. Some grew up in a single-parent household with siblings, some in-immigrant families, some came from well-known wealthy Dutch families, but most were middle class children of established Amsterdam families or women who came to the city as students and stayed after obtaining their degrees. The identities of all participants presented in this work were anonymized and their names changed accordingly. Some are presented with their age and ethnic background (for example, 'converted Muslima'). A few participants stated that they would authorize quotes but not any other information (age, ethnic background) to avoid identification, in spite of the name change. In these cases, I used quotes, but eliminated any other identifying information.

### 2.2. The Netherlands, a Dutch Case Study

The Netherlands has specific sensitivities, affected by the historical and collective memory of the country as one of tolerance, along with historical events related to society and immigration, religion and immigration, the Netherlands was guided by the pillarization model through most of the 20th century. Pillarization (*verzuiling*, Dutch) is the division of a society into groups based on a shared philosophical or socio-economic core, such that groups are isolated to a certain extent. This can be achieved by setting up institutions based on various societal groupings, including schools, associations, parties, trade unions, broadcasters, newspapers and hospitals. This system changed in the 1960s, with the rise of the welfare state, the youth revolution, rapid de-confessionalization and the sexual revolution, women's emancipation and women's rights (*Dolle Mina*). Although this model is no longer applied, there are still remnants of the pillar division. One example is the terminology that distinguishes between individuals who were born in the Netherlands (*autochtoon*) and those who were not born in the Netherlands (*allochtoon*). Within the term *allochtoon*, further distinctions are made between Western and non-Western *allochtonen*, where the former implicitly represents closeness to Western civilization, while the latter refers to groups that are considered disadvantaged or less integrated into 'modern' societies. As a consequence, some claim that the pillarization model exists to this day between Muslims and non-Muslims in the Netherlands (Besamusca and Verheul 2014; Vroon 2014).

Within this framework, Muslims are often framed in a stereotypic way as 'oppressed', as non-modern subjects who are likely to be opposed to modern Western developments, such as female and gay emancipation and sexuality (Vroon 2014; Van Es 2019; Stoica et al. 2012), who also would like to have (and, in some cases, have) their own hospitals, schools, media and political parties, just like in the days of the pillarization system. Importantly

as well, the Netherlands has a colonial past which resulted in massive immigration to the country from Suriname and the other Dutch Antilles and Indonesia (for more on the Dutch colonial past and slave trade see: (Cooper and Stoler 1989; Stoler 1995; Stoler 2010) Additionally, the country has gone through more recent forms of immigration. In the 1960s various industries needed more workers than were available in the Netherlands. Therefore, multiple corporations recruited them from countries such as Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Tunisia, Turkey and Morocco. This is one of reasons for the rise in the number of Muslims, but it also resulted in the growth of the number of Christians (Bakker 2014; Besamusca and Verheul 2014). After 1973, when the recruitment of foreign workers was halted, the number of Muslims nevertheless grew further because of the immigration of wives and children of these workers. Since the beginning of the 1990s, a large number of Muslims have also entered the Netherlands as asylum seekers and under family re-unification policies (Bakker 2014; Besamusca and Verheul 2014). This, combined with negative ideas in the Western hemisphere regarding Islam, the combination of waves of post-colonial immigration, and the rise of Islamophobia, have historically contributed to the development of a dichotomy and the difficulty of reconciling Dutch and Muslim identities. In short, many scholars argue that Muslimness is associated with being Moroccan or Turkish, and is not yet a "Dutch" identity. Islamic scholars, whose opinions may change over time, consider that their knowledge of the Quran is superior to the traditions of many of the immigrant-born Muslims in the Netherlands (Vroon 2014). Born Muslimas who attend a mosque or Quranic classes often refer to themselves as being "cultural Muslima" (ibid.), i.e., even though they come from Muslim families, they do not know much about their religion and for example did not learn how to pray at home. In my previous research these Muslims were dubbed "Newly Practicing Muslims," who often encountered similar challenges as new Muslims, since they had to learn the basics of the Islamic faith (Hass 2011). In my fieldwork as well as in other field works in scholarships, the women's groups, Quranic classes and lectures at the mosque welcomed converts and born Muslimas as well as non-Muslim women (Vroon 2014; Stoica et al. 2012). In other words, these groups were always diverse, and comprised of women from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, different stages of (religious) practice and were open and welcoming towards non-Muslims.

### *2.3. Ethnography in Amsterdam—Reflections on Doing Ethnograpfy at "Home"*

Van Gogh's colorful paintings, Rembrandt's lights and shadows, the crowds going shopping, the locals and tourists enjoying a cold beer on a sunny day in the city's cafés, the smell of pot, the bicycles, the fries, mayonnaise, *stroopwafels*. Amsterdam is the capital and most populous city in the Netherlands. Its status as the capital is mandated by the Constitution of the Netherlands, although it is not the seat of the government, which is The Hague. Amsterdam has a population of approximately 851,373 within the city proper, 1,351,587 in the urban area and 2,410,960 in the Amsterdam metropolitan area. The city is located in the province of North Holland in the west of the country but is not its capital, which is Haarlem. The metropolitan area comprises much of the northern part of the Randstad, one of the larger conurbations in Europe, with a population of approximately 8 million. It is said that the city is one of the top 10 most visited cities of Europe and the whole world. It is famous for the Van Gogh Museum, the Anne Frank house, the Rijksmuseum, the Albert Cuijp Market, the Concert hall, the Nine Streets for shopping and lunch, the Jordaan area for dinner and drinks and the Red-Light District. However, in the city there are other smaller parallel worlds. As a Jewish girl, I am well acquainted with the city's Jewish community (even though growing up, I was not a part of it) and as an anthropologist I am familiar with some of the Christian and Muslim worlds. Since this work is about Muslim women in the Netherlands, I will not discuss the Christian communities in Amsterdam, since these are varied and very different from each other. Muslim Amsterdam is a phenomenon a regular tourist might not even notice. Clearly Muslims hang around in the city center, shop at the Kalverstraat and Leidsestraat, change trams at the Leidseplein,

attend events, and go to libraries and museums, but most of the active mosques are located in the city's "periphery", in the East, Old West and New West of the city. Saturday and Sunday are the city's busiest days when locals and tourists walk, bike and shop on the city's main arteries whereas, in a parallel world, Muslims are gathering in mosques and Islamic cultural centers (see also in Vroon 2014; Stoica et al. 2012). Lectures, Quranic classes, workshops and events are usually held on Saturdays and Sundays. These are the days when most working people are free, and since children are off from kindergartens and schools, they often join their parents in activities at the mosque or cultural center, since these centers provide a family and child-friendly environment with toys, food and snacks and videos. The brothers and sisters can enjoy a meal between lectures, visit the library or bookstore, and the sisters can try out new fashionable Islamic clothing, perfume and cosmetics in the women's shop or in set up stalls. I knew that I had an identification with the participants in my study, with the born Muslims who are second or third generation in the Netherlands, since I had an immigrant background as well, but also with the New Muslims who are, in my eyes, figurative immigrants, who before, during and after conversion, must confront the experience of being a newcomer in a community.

Ortner's description of a field that is hard to enter (Ortner 2010) was in the back of my mind during the re-entrances to the field. Although Hollywood studios, as discussed in Ortner's work, and mosques in Amsterdam are certainly not similar in any way, they are both examples of a field that is hard to enter. Perhaps if my identity were different, let us say converted Dutch (Vroon 2014), European with a non-Muslim background (Bartels 2005; Buitelaar 2006; Sealy 2017; Van Nieuwkerk 2014) or born Muslim (Alyedreessy 2016; Ashqar-Sharary and Abu-Rabia-Queder 2020), I would perhaps feel more comfortable. With my Jewish, and especially Israeli identity, I felt like an inferior, or as a reluctant bridge builder. As an anthropologist who had learned from her teachers how important observations are (Brink-Danan 2010; El-Or 2006; Kravel-Tovi 2014, 2015; Stadler 2007, 2009, 2013, 2015), especially in the context of understanding what religion means to people by attending rituals, I decided I must try to integrate participant observations, as I attended events, workshops and (Quranic) classes with my interlocutors.

At the beginning of this study, I conducted open interviews, without any structured questions, but then I realized that I had to adapt my research method accordingly and I formulated a few questions that were important for me to explore following my research question(s). Even with these questions in my head (and in my notebook and on my tablet that I took with me to the interviews), the result of most interviews was a conversation that formed uniquely during every single interview. Ortner underscores the need for flexibility between the initial research program and what actually happens (Ortner 2010). Her challenges when studying Hollywood forced her to find a creative way to get information about the field.

Ortner also points out in her chapter that the researcher faces new challenges when the interviewees are used to being studied and giving interviews. When I did my first fieldwork in 2009, I became acquainted with works by the first generation of Dutch Islamic scholars. I focused on sociologists and anthropologists as many of these are Dutch researchers; one is a converted Dutch Muslima. It occurred to me that slowly a group of Muslims studying their own communities was taking shape: one example is the British-Saudi scholar Mona Alyedreessy who studies conversion and de-conversion to Islam (Alyedreessy 2016), another example is the Dutch Muslim scholar Margaretha van Es who studies the politics of belonging of Norwegian Muslim women and (breaking of) stereotypes and self-representations of Muslim women in Norway and in the Netherlands (Van Es 2016, 2019).

Ruth Behar writes in her book An Island called Home about her journey as an anthropologist running away from home (in the USA) to run toward home (her first home of Cuba) while she was doing field work in other Spanish speaking (Catholic) communities: "Naturally, I too was expected to go to Church- in Anthropology one must do as the natives do. I learned to recite the rosary in Spanish and soon became expert at falling to my knees when the priest raised the Host at the culmination of the Mass. Everyone assumed I was

Catholic; after all, I was from Cuba and spoke Spanish fluently. Being accepted made me afraid to call attention to my Jewish difference". (Behar 2007, p. 14)

During ethnography, I felt the same but I differentiate between in-depth interviews and participant observations, as Ortner did in her methodological article about ethnography in Hollywood (Ortner 2010). Specifically, during interviews, my Jewish identity was always present and at times was a significant part of the dynamics in the interviews (since the participants would often end up interviewing me towards the end of the interview). During workshops I attended in community centers, university classrooms and mosques, I did not feel the need to expose my Jewish Israeli identity, since most of these events were open to the public (sometimes with pre-registration by mail, so anyone who would Google my name would see it is the Jewish, and my affiliation with the Hebrew University). Often, I would attend these events (mostly lectures and workshops where I listened, took notes on the content, and the social dynamics) with one of my interlocutors and I was seen as their guest.

> *"It was cowardly of me, but I chose to keep quiet about my identity. I told myself I wasn't a religious Jew, that it didn't matter if now and then, for the sake of Anthropology, I cross-dressed as a conversa, a hidden Jew, a secret Jew. But I wasn't at peace"*. (Ibid., p. 14)

Similar to what Behar describes in this quote, I was not always at peace either. Sometimes in a 100+ participant lecture, I would feel that I was an imposter. Still, I was invited by women who frequently went to these meetings. One of my informants used to say that if the audience had known that I was Jewish, they would not have minded at all because "everyone is welcome" and there is always hope that this lecture and other events would encourage me to convert to Islam. Here, I really identified with Behar, Myerhoff and Fader (Behar 2014; Myerhoff 1994; Fader 2007) in that I was both an insider and outsider.

## 3. Discussion—Taking on a Feminist Approach

In this section, I will broadly discuss the tools that helped me enter the field and that could be of relevance to other researchers, in the way that knowledge is constructed in the context of this specific field, with its specific history and context as well as the identities met in the dialogues that emerged during ethnography, mainly the identities of the researcher and the identities of the interlocutors. Here, it is important to note that as a researcher, my epistemology derives from a feminist approach. Many years ago, during my Master studies in Anthropology with a specialization in Gender Studies, I took a methodology class called 'Doing feminist research'. During this class, I learned a technique that I immediately connected to—the sharing of the interview transcripts with the interlocutors, with the fundamental assumption that we are equals, the interviews are their stories and that, even after the interview, they can change things (as sometimes happens when one sees the letters written black on white). As a researcher, I do not have exclusivity on this knowledge and therefore it was also important for me to include my interlocutors in the transcription and analysis process. It was offered to all, but few wanted to continue. For some, our interview was a one-time thing. Multiple different forms of "feminism" at play here—national (Dutch) that we all share, the interlocutors (Muslim) and the author's own (mine) (Jewish/Israeli). The words feminist or feminism were not used during the interviews per se, but often brought up by the interlocutors, and it was used in regards to demanding equality in Dutch society, in Islamic practice (it was often explained to me that Islam already holds feminist approaches)—this was often backed up by sources in the Quran or by referring to Khadija, the mother of Islam, the first wife of prophet Muhammad, who is a flickering example of a strong, independent woman who was a business woman as well. Furthermore, in "insider anthropology" conducted by anthropologists in their own communities, many take a feminist anthropological approach, actively interrogating the power dynamics at play within and around the communities they study. In *Schmoozing with My Sisters: At-Home Ethnography in Brisbane's Jewish Community*, Creese reflects on her own experiences as a feminist and insider anthropologist in Brisbane's Jewish community. The essay discusses

the negotiation of the dual roles of insider and scholar, and the ways in which feminist epistemological approaches work within this negotiation (Creese 2020).

In this regard, Fader also uses reflections on her fieldwork and on her own history to theorize some of the dilemmas of ethnographic research in a community with which she shared history and ethnic identity, but not faith (Fader 2007), similar to my experience. The most prominent difference between me and my research subjects was our different faiths. Fader in 2007 suggests that fieldwork in non-liberal religious enclaves, or fundamentalist communities, creates particular opportunities and challenges, especially for an anthropologist who shares a similar background or has the potential to be a convert (Fader 2007). In this regard, I have to agree with Creese, who argues "*that feminist anthropology aims to give research participants more agency to create their own representations; insider anthropology can open and sustain a relationship where this agency may flow cooperatively. Insider anthropology encourages the reflexivity that feminist anthropology requires to transcend differences of power, belief, class and politics; feminist anthropology encourages the anthropologist to interrogate and advocate to address the power imbalances within the norms of their community. In such work, one can see reflected the challenge and the privilege of the insider at-home ethnographer; to be reflexive, responsive, engaged and intimately connected, and ultimately a part of both the worlds of home and the academy*" (Creese 2020, p. 11).

It is argued that (qualitative) researchers who study narratives strive to listen and to represent those they study. However, they must recognize their role in shaping the ethnographic encounter, which is based on emotions and assumptions that goes both ways between the researcher and the research subjects. As a qualitative researcher, I recognize myself in Luttrell's (2000) argument that researchers listen and make sense of what they hear according to a particular theoretical framework, including ontological, epistemological, cultural frameworks, and must be aware of the context of unequal power relations in the field (Luttrell 2000). In the subsection that follows, I will try to elaborate on those matters:

Researchers, especially those who use qualitative methodologies, often position themselves as 'insiders' and feel neither inside nor outside, but rather are midway between the two, which Breen called 'the researcher in the middle' (Breen 2007). She argues that the insider–outsider dichotomy (also broadly discussed by Ortner in her work on Hollywood and access to a challenging and secretive field (Ortner 2010)) is simplistic and that the distinction is unlikely to adequately capture the experience of all researchers. This experience is often conceptualized on a continuum, rather than as an either/or dichotomy (Ibid). In what follows in the next subsection, I reflexively explain how by using Breen's notion of the middle, since I believe that my role as neither an insider-researcher nor outsider-researcher maximized the advantages in my field. In my encounters, I could alternate from insider to outsider, back and forth, and stay in the middle during interviews and other interactions. What helped me be both an insider and outsider was the use of what is known as code switching (Gardner-Chloros 2009) during all my interactions with respondents. I will elaborate more on this technique in Section 3.3.

### *3.1. Hybrid Identities—The Researcher and the Subjects*

In terms of their identity, most participants in this study first and foremost felt Muslim, and only then Dutch, or Dutch and Moroccan (or Turkish, Somalian, Hindi, etc.). The quest for pure Islam, disassociated from cultural influences was stressed both by born Muslimas (who often criticized their parents and grandparents for mixing customs and religion) and by the converted Muslims. However, identity is also negotiated differently by Muslim women from different backgrounds. Converted Muslimas from a native Dutch background would often bring their Dutch identity to the forefront when they felt it was needed, for example when engaging in "talking back" strategies (Hass 2020b). Converted Muslimas from other backgrounds and born Muslimas had something in common that connects them to another identity, which was not only Dutch and Muslim, but also Moroccan, Brazilian or Indonesian. What these women and I had in common was our immigration narrative.

Most of my participants were not immigrants themselves (except for one who emigrated from the Netherlands to a Muslim majority country). They were born in the Netherlands, but in many cases their parents or grandparents had been immigrants and the immigration narrative was present in their identity as well as in the stories they told me. Also, in the cases where there were not any migration narratives present, the convert to another religion figuratively migrates from one world to another, from past identities to current and future identities. The following quote expresses the immigration narrative present in three generations (grandmother, mother and grandchild, who became Muslim):

> *"My grandmother didn't feel that she could be herself in the Netherlands. It was a very strange and uncomfortable time for her. She was not even allowed to eat rice, only Dutch food. My mother and I inherited this feeling of being displaced and uprooted. We have never really felt at home, so maybe that's why my interest in other cultures and religions has always been so strong."* (interview with a Converted Muslima, August 2019)

The topic of belonging in the context of identity was explored in depth in this research. Born Muslimas as well as converted Muslimas stated that they often felt a sense of non-belonging as Muslims in Dutch surroundings, especially when their Muslimness was visible, for example when wearing a *hijab* or when using terms in Arabic such as *Inshallah* or in cases when they had an Islamic or Arabic sounding name (some converted Muslimas choose to change their birth given names to Islamic names).

> *" . . . I do feel at home here (in the Netherlands), I am Dutch, only I'm not always seen that way . . . as if I don't belong here . . . "* (Converted Muslima, 37 years)

Also born Muslimas often stressed that they felt that they were not accepted in Dutch society. They were born and raised there, they possessed the correct local accent, they had acquired a higher education and were successful in the professional world, but some felt deep inside that they were not entirely home in the Netherlands. Islam and the (global as well as the local) Muslim community gave them a home, a place to be themselves. This home can be a physical home (for example in the local mosque, in online engagements with members of the Muslim community around the world, or when the converted Muslima starts her own family), but is certainly also a home on a spiritual and emotional level when belonging to a global Muslim community, the *ummah*, and everything this entails. Born and converted Muslimas stressed that they felt that they were not fully accepted or members of Dutch society. The born Muslimas often had an Islamic or a foreign name, they spoke a different language than Dutch at home. They were born and raised in a double environment that was often Moroccan or Turkish and Muslim at home, Dutch in other aspects of life such as at school, the university, at work, among friends, and often during leisure time activities.

The converted Muslimas, on the other hand, actively searched for another identity and belonging, a new home, but after conversion felt that they no longer belonged to Dutch society (in comparison to the feeling of belonging to the Dutch national fold in the past, yet experiencing a certain restlessness).

> *" . . . This is the Netherlands; you no longer belong here, but you can participate. I do feel Dutch, so when someone calls me: Fatima! Then I just say: "No, I am Nienke de Vries". This name, de Vries, in that respect, is as Dutch as it gets, if you ask me . . . "* (Converted Muslima, August 2018)

The converted white Muslimas knew the feeling of once belonging to the majority mainstream society and now being a (religious) minority, and the converted Muslimas from other backgrounds, often stressed the feeling of a double estrangement. They felt different because they had a Latin name or an Asian look, and now their (visible) Muslimness makes them feel even more different, like a double other. In a strange way, taking on the religion of the other in order to feel belonging, makes converts at times feel that they are estranged from their past and background, and that they are "othering" themselves from society, but are gaining a feeling of belongingness to a new community. What they all have in common

is that for all of them, being Muslim makes them feel that they do not belong (even if some felt that they belonged in a previous lifetime).

The discourse on identities resulted often in the interviews taking on a different approach towards the end of the interview when the roles are were often reversed, where the interviewee becomes the interviewer and the researcher becomes the object of research. I will elaborate on this further in the next section.

### 3.2. Insiders and Outsiders—The Hybrid Researcher

There is a general consensus among academicians that the recruitment of informants can be potentially difficult when the researcher does not occupy the position of an insider (Breen 2007). This is largely because the researcher must first establish trust and rapport with the group or community (Breen 2007; Ortner 2010). Not all researchers report that that they struggled with recruiting participants. In some cases, the position of being neither an 'insider' nor an 'outsider' to the research domain proves to be both a help and a hindrance in gathering data (Breen 2007). For a researcher who is an 'insider' or a 'native' anthropologist (Cerroni-Long 1995) who is themselves a member of the community who are the subject of the research, might be expected to 'know' insider's information, such as in Creese's case—as a Jewish woman, she was expected, in the Jewish community she studied, to know the standard of *halakha*, such as *negiah*, the fact that as a female, she could not shake hands or hug a male who is not her husband (Creese 2020). As she argues, when undertaking anthropological research as an insider, drawing on cultural connectivity and authenticity to enrich one's work, this same authenticity also articulates the norms of one's behavior. Navigating the challenge of completing holistic and robust fieldwork within a gendered cultural framework can thus be a difficult task for the insider anthropologist (ibid.).

Kasstan, also a Jewish ethnographer doing fieldwork 'at home', describes in his work how doing ethnography at home, or across homes, and thus moving across homes and worldviews during field work demonstrated how his own position(ing) in the field, to a certain extent, reflected degrees of difference and distinction between sub-groups in the Orthodox and so-called 'ultra-Orthodox' Jewish population of the United Kingdom (Kasstan 2016).

Inspired by my colleagues who described their positionality and insiderness in their research field, in what follows, I elaborate on my position as a Dutch Israeli Jewish secular researcher and how my hybrid identity was beneficial, but also a barrier and an obstacle to recruiting participants and in gathering other data such as participant observations in places where it was difficult for me to enter as a non-Muslim (mostly mosques). In my research group, I qualify as an insider, since I share the gender, ethnicity, nationality and language of my interlocutors. However, I do not share the religion of most of my participants and that is one area where I felt that I was an outsider during fieldwork. Being a woman obviously gave me the opportunity to interview women (since most of the women I study adhere to strict segregation based on gender) and it also gave me the opportunity to address certain topics such as motherhood, femininity, the female body, gender roles, relationships and family ties when interviewing women like me. As Williams Crenshaw (1994) argued, the researcher's gender is of prime importance when conducting in-depth interviews. It is claimed that most in-depth interviews in the sociology of sex and gender involves researchers and respondents of the same sex, or occasionally, women interviewing men (Williams Crenshaw 1994). Many of these studies use "same-sex" interviews based on the assumption that rapport is more easily achieved in these contexts. Greif and Pabst (1988) reported that in their study of divorced mothers and custody issues, the female researcher was assumed to make the mothers in this study feel more comfortable in sharing information about their lives. (See also more in (Williams and Heikes 1993) on the importance of the researcher's gender in in-dept interviews and ethnographic encounters).

Vroon also argued that her gender was an integral aspect of her ability to enter the field of Dutch converts to Islam (Vroon 2014). Similar to my study, a male researcher could

not have conducted her study since the women involved practiced strict separation of the sexes during some of their meetings, and men were not allowed. I believe that a greater recognition and a better understanding of their choice of Islam was an incentive for many participants to allow me to gather the data that inform this thesis. More to the point here is that Vroon's decision to weave her argument into the museum tour illustrates the shifting the insider–outsider perspective that also characterized my fieldwork. Below, I discuss my positionality within the Muslim women's groups I participated in.

As an insider, similarly to what Creese argued as what was expected of her to already know (in her case, keeping some distance from a male who is not her husband) (Creese 2020), it was also expected of me to 'know' certain things. As a Dutch person, it was expected of me to know certain aspects of Dutch society and key personages who came up during interviews. It was also expected of me to know words in Arabic, certain religious practices (for example, the five pillars of Islam) and daily religious practices such as prayer and halal food. Luckily, I knew these things—some of them were part of my upbringing and coming of age in the Netherlands, others I had learned and discovered from my Muslim neighbors and friends when growing up in Amsterdam's multicultural neighborhoods, and others I learned as a student in anthropology of religion and as result of a long and extensive fieldwork.

Abu Lughod described the limitations and challenges of being an outsider and an insider in a study she conducted in a Bedouin community in the Sahara Desert in Egypt. She talks about how limited accessibility and recognition were defined through her relationships with the interviewees and how this was affected by the fact that she was a young, single, half-American girl studying in a distant country alone and under undefined circumstances (Abu-Lughod 1998; Altorki and El-Solh 1988). As an anthropologist who engages in ethnography, I am an insider with respect to my Dutch identity. Although I share the language, accent, nationality and cultural heritage of most of my interlocutors, I am an outsider in their religious sphere. I am not Muslim, nor did I convert to a religion, but I study Muslims (born and converts to Islam). During the interviews and participant observations, my insider–outsider position was for most part present. When talking about issues concerning growing up in the Netherlands, the acquisition of higher education, reflections about the (Dutch) job market, I identified with my insider's position. Slang, and inside jokes only the Dutch would understand, made me feel that my identity in this field was clearly an advantage. I wondered whether my non-Dutch colleagues (even the ones studying in the Netherlands) would share the same feelings if they were to study a similar topic. I was not quite sure. I also felt that I was an insider when the participants talked about feeling that they did no belong, feeling that they were a minority, fearing Islamophobia. I myself was part of a (religious and cultural) minority in the Netherlands and I also faced fears of anti-Semitism. I could also easily relate to a topic defined by several of the participants. Specifically, even though they are Dutch, born to Dutch families, and they chose Islam rather than being born into it, some considered themselves to be more privileged than their (born) Muslim brothers and sisters. In other cases, my outsider's position was highly visible: even though I know a lot about Islam, have been involved in this field for over a decade, know some basic Arabic and live in a city with a high Muslim population, a place where Islam is part of the public sphere, I am not Muslim myself. Most of the participants knew all of this (my identity was always transparent, but some thought that I was a Muslim Dutch like them although I was studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem). I was often asked whether I would consider converting to Islam. I understood where this question was coming from, especially on the part of participants who did not study anthropology or theology; they assumed my interest in Islam was a step towards converting. I never said no, but rather tried to give a vague and respectful answer. I took the position of "never say never" since I had seen a great deal of the beauty of Islam and Muslim communities, but I was not ready to join them. Vroon and Fader also described this phenomenon in their ethnographies: Vroon was a converted Muslima herself (but perhaps not passing as one in her physical appearance) and was often asked by

the interlocutors who did not know she was a Muslim, if she would consider converting (Vroon 2007, 2014). Fader described that the Hassidic women she met and worked with often assumed she was on the way to becoming or already was a returnee to the Jewish faith. Many women observed changes she made to her dress, covering her hair upon marriage, learning Yiddish, studying Hebrew, and her efforts to participate in ritual life more generally (in order to be respectful and gain access) and assumed that she wanted to become observant (Fader 2007).

> *" . . . Dutch women are very popular, but how do you find the right man . . . people are now using online platforms a lot to get to know people, I think that's a very good idea . . . to get to know someone that way . . . (silence) . . . But you live in Israel? In Jerusalem? How is it to live there?"* (Converted Muslima, aged 37, August 2018)

The quote above demonstrates how towards the end of the interview, the interviewee (who talked about potential ways to meet a partner) suddenly changes the subject and started asking me questions. This is the exact moment that the interview roles get reversed and the interviewer (me) becomes the interviewee. I believe this phenomenon is very unique and does not happen in every ethnography. However, in this specific case, with my specific background and with the topics discussed during the interviews, I was not surprised at this outcome. In another example, I share notes from my field journal about the interviewer becoming the interviewee:

> *" . . . The last 10–15 min we were talking about my life in Israel. I did not transcribe this part. During this conversation, she was asking the questions and I was being interviewed. Among other things she asked me whether I was a Muslim too (as a fellow Dutch living in Jerusalem) and then she asked if I would consider to convert too one day. She asked me how life looks like in Jerusalem and asked me some general questions about Israel. Said she'd like to visit one day . . . "* (notes from my fieldwork, August 2018)

> *" . . . The interview is coming to an end . . . we're talking about travel and airlines now. M is expressing an interest to visit Israel and Jerusalem one day and asks me about the flight from Amsterdam to Tel Aviv and the food being served on board at KLM* vs. *ELAL."*. (Notes from my fieldwork, October 2019)

In my case, in addition to s my gender, my national identity was key to this study: I pass as Dutch (Goffman 1978) even though I am an Israeli Jewish researcher affiliated with an Israeli university. Since I was born and raised in the Netherlands, I possess the right habitus (Bourdieu 1977) of a Dutch woman as well. I speak fluent Dutch, complete with the local Amsterdam accent, which automatically places me as a local, in spite of my 'exotic first name' (not all recognize it as a biblical name). My 'other' identity, the Israeli one, makes me on the one hand an outsider, but on the other it gives me a perspective of what it is like to be foreign in the Netherlands, which is something the participants and I feel we have in common. The born Muslima participants in this study have parents with another background, who speak less Dutch than they (their children) do, who could not help them with their homework when they were in school just like me. The converted Muslimas often feel "less Dutch" and not entirely part of the Dutch national fold after conversion (Vroon 2014), especially after they *come out* (Van Nieuwkerk 2014) with a headscarf and Islamic clothing, showing everyone that they are Muslim. During interviews, my interlocutors talked to me about their experiences of feeling that they do not belong and being a religious minority in a Judeo-Christian tradition. They asked me whether I struggled with finding enough Kosher food as they often struggle with Halal (depending on the city or neighborhood where they live). Some women change their (first) names upon conversion and they report that their Muslim/Arabic name makes them feel like they have been 'othered'. Since my name is Hebrew, Biblical and foreign in Dutch society, they often tell me they know I would understand these feelings. These points in common and the mutual understanding of not always being able to feel belonging shaped the way the interviews were experienced. The interviews were long (approximately 2 h), very intimate and difficult themes were brought up. Most of the interviews did not end at 120 min, but

became a series of interviews between myself and the respondent, sometimes with the respondent's family. As often happens, at the end of the interview, the roles are often reversed, where the interviewee becomes the interviewer and the researcher becomes the object of research. I am often asked whether I miss the Netherlands, after being abroad for so many years, and what it is like to live in Israel, if I feel belong in Israel and in the Netherlands, if I have Muslim friends and, as mentioned above, if I would consider converting to Islam (at the end of the project or before). Vroon reported that she was also asked whether she would convert, although she was a converted Muslima herself, but not a visible one, since she did not wear a headscarf at the time of the ethnography (Vroon 2007, 2014). The converted Muslimas and I also shared the fact that we come from a quite privileged place in society: we are Dutch and can pass as Dutch. Here, it is important for me to note that almost all the converted Muslimas reported that after putting on a *hijab*, they were heckled on the street with remarks such as "go back to your country" or were (stereotypically) called "Fatima". Some of them 'talk back' and respond that they are in their own country, they and their parents and grandparents were born here. The situation is different for born Muslimas, since going back to "your country" refers in this ethnography primarily to Morocco and Turkey. Some told me in tears that they would never feel Dutch and would never feel part of Dutch society. Thus, my position as an insider gave me some amount of access to these women and their stories in terms of language, accent, a similar cultural background and upbringing in the same time and space (Amsterdam and its vicinity in the 1980s and 1990s). However, I do agree with Stoica, who argues in her work that access granted to the non-Muslim researcher is limited and controlled (Stoica et al. 2012), since there is knowledge that is constructed during interviews, that I, as a non-Muslim cannot fully comprehend.

In other situations, my position as an outsider set me apart. Unlike Vroon, who is a converted Muslim herself and is thus seen as a real insider in this community (Vroon 2014), my religious and national identity is different. I pass as Dutch (Goffman 1978) because of my appearance (pale skin, blonde hair and blue green eyes) and I actually look like the "white Muslimas" (as they call themselves) in my study, except that most of them wear a head scarf and I do not. Here, it is important to note that a few participants had another ethnic background (Surinamese, Indonesian, Hindi and Latin American). The few converted Muslimas with a former Jewish background appeared "darker" and often had brown eyes and darker hair under their hijab. I am not a Muslim myself and even though I have been studying Muslim communities in the Netherlands for over a decade, there were moments in the interviews and in the participant observations in events and workshop where my lack of knowledge of Islam was tangible to me. On the one hand, all the interviews, lectures and talks were held in Dutch with here and there some use of words in Arabic, which I could follow; on the other hand, when praying or reciting Quranic verses I felt that I was a stranger. This was evident in other fieldwork as well—in a church, for example where I would participate throughout the whole mass, including kneeling and standing up when required, but I did not participate in the Holy Communion. In these examples, I was "negotiating the insider–outsider dichotomy" in order to enter the field, build trust between myself and the participants and collect data (Breen 2007).

Ortner's 2010 work explores the challenges that arise in attempting to explore a subject of limited access, such as film culture in Hollywood. She describes her many difficulties in trying to get "into" the industry, be granted interviews with people who have power, or even how get access to make observations in Hollywood studios (Ortner 2010). Similar to Ortner's experiences, I also struggled with some of the challenges related to entering the field. This involved the tension between being an insider and an outsider since I was conducting research in Dutch and in my hometown Amsterdam, yet exploring a community foreign to me. In these observations and during the interviews, I always needed to be aware of my choice of clothing (head scarf, in some cases, long loose-fitting dresses, tunics or overcoats in most cases) so it would be seen as sufficiently modest by the participants, and respectful towards them. I wanted to be right (the same way I dressed

modestly if I would be invited by my Jewish Ultra-Orthodox family, or when doing field work in churches in Israel, the Netherlands and Brazil). However, I did not want to come across as authentic, since the choice of clothing was not my identity, as I am not a Muslima myself. I believe this was perceived by my interlocutors as respectful and right, but not as authentic, since they knew I was not Muslim as they were. My identity was open and talked about from the very first email sent, until the end of each interview, which as stated, often ended with me being interviewed by the interviewee.

Undeniably, insider status gave me a natural access to events, meetings and connections within the community; I was frequently invited to events, dinners, lectures and sometimes weddings, and me and everyone else present shared the same language: Dutch. A big similarity between me and Creese, who described how her insiderness gave her access to similar events, is that she had attended these events before she was an anthropologist, and never had to explain her presence. I had also attended Muslim events such as weddings and *Iftar* dinners after the Ramadan fasting, prior to this study. However, I was always the Dutch friend who got invited by one of the participants, and not a true insider, unlike Creese who was a Jewish woman attending Jewish events (Creese 2020). Creese argues in this regard, that on some occasions, however, while her insider status might have opened the door to people's home, it was her researcher self with which they interacted. She had noted this particularly in stories, discussions and interactions that were less comfortable for participants to discuss publicly. (Ibid.) I often felt the same when sitting in a Muslim woman's living room that my insider position has helped me gain access to, yet being an outsider too helped the interviewee open up to bring more difficult topics such as lack of tolerance from Dutch society towards Muslims and converts to Islam.

The biggest challenge in this respect, however, is being (also) Israeli. Compared to my previous fieldwork in 2009, I felt that more potential participants would drop out once they heard I was affiliated with the Hebrew University. I had a few cancellations when potential interviewees realized I was Israeli. I realized that this might come as a surprise, because even though I announced my university affiliation and my place of residence, I corresponded with the women in Dutch, prior to our face-to-face meetings. Some must have missed the introduction line about my current home country, perhaps because the email or letter was written in Dutch. I am well aware of the fact that this could create a (participant self-selection) bias, since the women agreeing to be interviewed do not mind my other (Israeli) identity or are fascinated by it or interested in my story (not only my personal story of living between the two countries, but also what makes me want to study them). I often asked myself: what defines the women who agree to participate and what characterizes the women who refuse. In addition, most of the women who agree to be interviewed by academics and by journalists are women who chose Islam of their own accord. It is sometimes argued that women who convert as a result of a romantic relationship are often outside of the realm of scholarship

Secondly, participants tend to be more suspicious. There is a growing interest in Muslim populations and some have felt that they have been deceived by researchers and journalists. There were recent stories about a journalist entering a Muslim neighborhood in The Hague and presenting himself as a new convert to Islam although he was only doing research for his book. Another perhaps more horrifying story was described by Inge in her ethnography on Salafist Muslim women in London (Inge 2017). When she started her research, it was discovered that a female reporter had entered mosques and women-only gatherings and has been filming without their consent from a phone hidden under her long veil (Ibid.). I am fortunate that I have conducted studies for over a decade in my field. I have interviewed the same women over the years and the interviewees refer me to their friends. Recently, during an interview with a woman, I met on Facebook whom I was emailing for over a year, she gave me the name of another participant I had met a few years back. Apparently these women are good friends and my research came up during one of their conversations. In this case, it was more of a coincidence, since I was not introduced to her by the first respondent.

During the in-depth interviews, my identity always came up. Sometimes the respondents asked me things while telling their story, or inquired whether as a Jew in the Netherlands I felt different. Israel came up very often during the interviews. Approximately 85% to 90% of the interviews ended with the respondent interviewing me, asking me about my life in Israel, if I feel that I belong, if I ever miss living in the Netherlands. Some asked for my perspective on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, whereas others just wanted to know about the country and its holy sites (especially Muslim holy sites, but also Christian holy sites because that would interest their families). One respondent thought I was a Muslim myself and asked me whether I had converted after living in Israel/Palestine. The side of the researcher being interviewed, or the interviewer becoming an interviewee, gave the interview a whole new dimension I had not experienced before in other studies. Fader, in 2007, calls this phenomenon the boundary between observer and observed, researcher and subject, as she felt oftentimes being judged by her research subjects (Hassidic women) who lived a more religiously strict lifestyle and at times could be intolerant towards more mainstream versions of Judaism (Fader 2007). Kasstan also refers to being positioned in the (Jewish) community he studied and was himself a part of, enabling him to navigate and negotiate and thus to take distance from the field he knew well (Kasstan 2016). Many scholars discuss in their works the practice of doing fieldwork in a strict, pious, religious community as insiders to these communities: Muslim communities (Vroon 2014; Mahmood 2001) Jewish Hassidic (Fader 2007), Jewish Orthodox (Creese 2020; Kasstan 2016). A similar dimension was discussed in Stadler's work on Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) men studying in yeshivas (Stadler 2013). In her paper, Stadler reflects on doing ethnography on a group that is considered fundamentalist and the methodology she developed. Similar to the participants in other studies within religious communities (Creese 2020; Fader 2007; Vroon 2014; Mahmood 2001; Kasstan 2016) and the participants in the present study, the participants in Stadler's study practice a strict gendered segregation. In Stadler's case the men she studied practice a gendered segregation and only men are allowed. A secular woman is in that way an outsider to that community, even though in other ways she is an insider, as she lives the same country and speaks the same language as the interlocutors. Stadler argued that any study on a fundamentalist group should begin with an examination of its unique features and cultural influences as well as the consequences of these factors. Moreover, it is incumbent upon the scholar to develop sensitive ethnographic tools for accessing the group's sacred canon and other forms of collective knowledge, to include its hermeneutic techniques and the hierarchy among related texts and interpretations (Stadler 2013). In an attempt to better understand my participants and the unique features of their communities, I had a dialogue with myself in my field diary, going back and forth from my experience as a member of a religious minority, as a neighbor and a friend to many Dutch Muslims, yet also trying to learn the canonical texts of these religious groups. I own three copies of the Quran: one in Arabic, which unfortunately I cannot read, one in English and the third, my newest one, received as a present from one of the institutions for converts to Islam in the Netherlands, is my favorite, because many of my participants referred to this kind of Quran which has the text in Dutch, Arabic (Arabic script) and phonetic Arabic, so it is an excellent way to learn Arabic as well. I also learned important *Suras* and their different interpretations (and different translations). One of the main *Suras* that was often mentioned by the participants during interviews and in the classes I attended was *Surah* 24:31 on the covering of women. In another paper, Stadler elaborated on the strategies she developed to gain access to the community of Ultra-Orthodox men, who as mentioned above, are forbidden to interact with women. Stadler used a key informant who helped her meet and interview other yeshiva students. Other strategies involved studying ancient texts and engaging in yeshiva activities. All these helped her gain access and trust in a world she would normally be excluded from (Stadler 2007). In a way, the women I studied were also an excluded community for me. I refer to the more pious women in the ethnography. These women often preferred to be interviewed in the privacy of their homes, often quoting the Quran in their narrative. Some chose the mosque as a venue for our interview, thus making

it also easier for me to gain access to the mosque and its activities. I attended Quranic classes, read the *Suras* and discussed their meaning (with the use of Arabic words), but I also participated in less religious and sacred gatherings, such as the opening of a new community center, a charity event and other day to day activities. These also helped me gain access to the Dutch Muslim community. Here, it is worth to mention, that I did not find myself fighting familiarity (Delamont and Atkinson 1995) very often, since I often felt that the only thing my participants and I had in common was the (Dutch) language, growing up in the Netherlands and our blonde hair (theirs often hidden under the *hijab*). I was not Muslim like them, I had never converted, I was Jewish but non-practicing, very secular but I did enjoy going to houses of worship and classes, not only in the Muslim context while doing fieldwork in Amsterdam, but also in the Jewish contexts in my hometown and in Christian contexts for other studies I participated in. I had attended Jewish classes, women only meetings with regards to finding a suitable partner, I used to go every Shavuot to the Shavuot learning night, usually choosing topics such as gender, sexuality and love. I go occasionally to the Kotel to pray, but I do all these things as a secular person.

The dynamics between myself and the respondents in this work was very special. Most of them agreed to a second or even third interview and shared their narrative from different time perspectives, some introduced me to their family members (mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters), so I have their narratives from inter-generational and different points of view. Some even became (virtual/Facebook) friends and we chat occasionally or meet up for coffee whenever I am in town.

### *3.3. Code Switching in the Field*

Code switching is a strategy developed by qualitative researchers to help gain access and report in their research fields. In code switching, researchers employ the language, accent or vocabulary used by their interlocutors to express their 'insiderness'. Gardner-Chloros argued that code switching (CS) often emerges as part of the process of language change, which can often create new varieties such as pidgins or mixed languages (Gardner-Chloros 2009). Code switching is also a good way to look at my own ethnography. The Dutch Muslim community actively employs code switching in the way they use Arabic words in their Dutch language, similar to the Cypriot community in London, as discussed by Gardner-Chloros (2009). It is not surprising to hear the words *sabr* (patience) or *inshallah/mashallah* (with God's will) during conversations between Muslims, in interviews or in lectures and workshops. This was true for born Muslimas, as well as by converted Muslimas. In the case of converted Muslimas, speaking Arabic was not part of their upbringing and their habitus (Bourdieu 1977). In terms of CS, the use of Arabic words in the Dutch language, which thus forms a Dutch Islamic language, may be used by converts to show themselves as well as others (the researcher, peers, Muslims and non-Muslims) that they are insiders in the Muslim community. In the ethnography, the interlocutors often saw themselves as belonging to the global Muslim community, the *ummah*, rather than the local Muslim community of their neighborhood, city or country, as the quote below demonstrates:

(The quotes below have words in Arabic in bold, for the reader to see the use of Arabic words in conversation).

> *" . . . during the **Hajj** it was very special to see Muslims from all over the world come together . . . "* (converted Muslima, 35 years old)

In the quote above, as well as the quote below, we can see examples of words in Arabic (in bold) are used during the interviews, and it is believed that I, as the interviewer understand these words and their context (which was indeed a correct assumption in these cases)

> *" . . . I hope I'll meet someone **Inshallah**, and if not . . . then it's probably my destiny not to meet anyone . . . if Allah says it's time . . . all is in the hands of **Allah** . . . and if **Allah** decided, God forbid—that I should live without a man, without love, then so be it, then I will accept my fate.".* (Asia, converted Muslima, age 22)

For me, as the researcher, I understood the words in Arabic, their context and their meaning. After a decade of annual fieldwork and dozens of lectures, workshops and interviews, it was clear to me whenever an Arabic word was used in a text, and why it was used. By nodding my head and gazing with a look of understanding at the interviewee who was mixing these two languages, I gave my interlocutors the reassurance that I could follow, that I was a kind of insider, and that they could continue telling their story. I was not going to stop them to ask for an explanation. In this regard, Gardner-Chloros (2009) also noted that social factors provide the researchers with clues as to their social identity. In my case, I felt that sometimes I accentuated certain factors in my identity to resemble the person with whom I was trying to create an interaction. At other times, I felt that a failure in code switching, or something in my appearance worked against me. I thus changed language (Dutch and English), dress (modest clothing, long dresses and skirts without a headscarf), and the appearance of my ethnicity and nationality (Israeli, Dutch, Jewish Ashkenazi).

> *" . . . I had gotten a remark once: 'you have to go and get tanned', because I'm a very white person and that doesn't fit perceptions of white and Muslim . . . they would never say that to someone like you, the way you walk around without a headscarf. Well for a lot of people you can't be Muslim and white. 'you are white' means you are one of us . . . a non-Muslim . . . "*

In the quote above, the interviewee refers to my appearance (as white) and my choice of clothing (without a headscarf). In this interview, the word headscarf (*hoofddoek*, in Dutch) was used, rather than the Arabic word *hijab*, which is usually more often used in interviews.

As discussed in the previous section *insiders and outsiders*, my choice of clothing (always modest and in dialogue with what my participants would wear) is also a way of code switching, since the physical appearance of what I was wearing could look as if I am one of them. However, since I was not, me not being Muslim always came up (all the participants knew I was Jewish and Israeli). I believe the choice of clothing was respectful and right, fitting into the situation created, but was not authentic, since I, as a non-Muslim, do not dress this way in daily life when I am outside of fieldwork.

Obviously, I could not change certain physical factors, such as my gender and age, and these worked sometimes to my advantage, but not always. For example, in some interviews and observations with younger Muslimas (18–22), the fact that I was "older" (in my thirties) contributed to my positioning as 'less experienced' on social media such as Instagram and Snapchat, which affected the power relations. However, when my participants and I exchanged our social media accounts and they saw that I was very active on these platforms, this reaction changed somewhat. During the interviews, there was also a sense of code switching. In many cases, during the 2 h interview, I was asked questions as well. Some questions were a confirmation that I understood what they were talking about, and had mostly to do with issues of feeling of belonging and hybrid identities, but other questions were related to my knowledge of Islam and terms in Arabic. In both cases, my 'insiderness' was confirmed by the interlocutors.

### *3.4. Emotions and Assumptions in the Field*

Dominguez (2000) refers to the role of emotions in ethnography. Specifically, she talks about the contrast between the love and feelings the interviewer has about his/her own imprints and the lack of representation of these feelings in academic writing (Dominguez 2000). In her view, feelings need to be acknowledged, since their presence or absence can be informative as to the researcher's motivation and place in research. Naturally, when conducting online ethnography, there is a greater distance between the local researcher and the informants, who do not always know that they are in fact participants in a study. In my case, after each long interview I tended to feel very connected to the participants, and I would feel as though they were my friends, because of the emotional features of the interviews.

> *" . . . the biggest change for us is the change in (her) clothing . . . that it is now all covered up and after the birth child of our first grandchild, she started wearing a headscarf. At first, I was a bit sad about the fact that she started to wear a headscarf because she has beautiful hair but I have gotten used to it now and it's fine. In terms of identity, she has not changed. We have good contact with her in laws"* (mother of a converted Muslima, August 2018)

These feelings would intensify when I would meet a participant for the second or third time, or when I would interview one of their family members, for example when I interviewed a 23-year-old woman, her mother and her grandmother. Quotes from the inter-generational interviews are described below:

> *" . . . Here in the Netherlands, we don't have many family members, from my mother's side my uncle lives here, and my grandmother, and also some family members from my grandmother's side, but I don't see them that way often. From my father's side we don't have any family here . . . I have a lot of family in Algeria.*
>
> *My father is Algerian, I was born there too, I came to the Netherlands when I was 5 . . . I think I was 19 when I came back for the first time to Algeria . . . . it was restless there for a long time, that's we left. It is still a bit restless now, but not very much . . . so I went back for the first time when I was 19 and then went back a few times . . . I had the advantage that my mother is half Dutch, so she always spoke Dutch to me, I could speak some words like grandma and stuff, but I do remember that I picked the Dutch up super-fast . . . at that age it is easy. within six months I could already speak Dutch fluently. my father of course lived in Algeria all his life and came to the Netherlands when he was 40 or late thirties, he had a little more trouble with it. For him it was his first time really living in the Netherlands, he had been on holiday a few times before . . . but he also picked it up very well, it depends on how you deal with it yourself, how much work you put into it . . . so yes . . . that actually went quite well . . . When I came here, I first went to an Islamic school, so I got Quranic classes and Arabic lessons, and I was actually surrounded by immigrant children at school . . . I did not have any Dutch friends. When I was in group 8, we moved to H and then I first ended up in a school where only Dutch people attended . . . and then I was one of the only ones who was a foreigner . . . that took some getting used to, I think I had some difficulty with it in the beginning, but yes, I was always a bit of an outsider child because of course I am half Dutch and half Algerian. But I could always understand both sides and empathize . . . "* (Dutch born Muslima, 23 years old, daughter)
>
> *" . . . I'm from Algerian and Dutch descent. I have an Algerian father and a Dutch mother . . . I'm 46 years old, I grew up both in the Netherlands and in Algeria. At one point in my life, my father actually kidnapped me, to live there with my grandmother. My mother traveled to Algeria and took me back to the Netherlands, then my parents came together again and I lived in the Netherlands until I was 18 . . . after age 18 I returned to Algeria and I really got to experience Algerian life and the Islam. I studied there and I got to know my husband, he played basketball there and was in the national basketball team, coming from a very sporty family . . . we got married after 3 years, but my father absolutely did not want me to marry my husband because he thought my husband was not rich enough, not good enough. My father thought 'I can marry my blonde daughter to a rich stinker' (laughs)"*
>
> *. . . When the political situation in Algeria started to escalate and my in-laws both died in a short time and it became a bit dangerous for a European looking woman like me, we decided to go to the Netherlands. I would love to go back to where I come from, to Algeria, but my husband not . . . he would rather be in the Netherlands than there. But that's how we came back to the Netherlands, with 2 children and my husband, we were actually very lucky . . . "* (Dutch born Muslima, 46 years old, mother)

> *"I am Dutch, from a Christian household but my daughter and granddaughter are Muslim. I am not Muslim, I never converted to Islam. It all started when I had an Algerian partner in the sixties, the father of my son and daughter. My daughter met her husband while she was living with her father in Algeria and that's how my grandchildren are Algerian too . . . This family will always have a strong bond with Algeria . . . will you have some cake? They are not here for the show (laughs)"* (Dutch, non-Muslima, mother and grandmother of Muslimas, 70 years old)

Another issue regarding emotions in the field is connected to the level of participation when engaging with participants in events. D'Alisera talked about her work in a mosque and stated that as a non-Muslim, she did not know whether to pray with her interlocutors in this house of prayer (D'Alisera 1999). In my fieldwork, I faced this dilemma when entering a mosque or a Quranic class. Should I participate in prayer with the participants of my study? I was a Jew after all. My solution was to participate in everything, except the prayers, during which I moved towards the back of the hall. In other events, such as engagements and henna parties, weddings, informal gatherings and charity events, I would fully participate.

Another point worth mentioning are the assumptions made during the ethnographic encounter between the researcher and the research participants. The assumptions I often had of my interlocutors were that they were strong-minded, independent women who had chosen their own path, oftentimes as opposed to their family's views (see more in Hass 2020b). I assumed most of the women converted to Islam or re-discovered their faith as a result of a personal journey and less often as an outcome of a romantic relationship, as often assumed in the media or in politics (Vroon 2014; Hass 2020b). The assumptions the interlocutors had about the researcher (me), as they sometimes told me directly, were that I was personally interested in Islam and maybe would consider converting (this was assumed both by converts to Islam as well as by born Muslimas) (see also in Vroon 2014). Another assumption that we (interlocutors and researcher) had about each other was that we would understand the other in terms of being a religious minority in the Netherlands and in the everyday struggle in terms of belonging. Here, I saw the converted Muslimas as symbolic migrants who migrated from one (former) identity to another (new) identity. The born Muslimas had a migration background in their narratives, since they were children or grandchildren of migrants to the Netherlands.

### *3.5. Positionality*

Positionality is a key feature for any social research. As mentioned above, my gender, for instance, was an important aspect of my ability to carry out my research. The Muslimas whom I wanted to study practice strict separation of the sexes during their meetings, and therefore no men are allowed. As mentioned above, in my research group, I qualified as an insider, since I share their gender, ethnicity, nationality and language. I do not share their religion, which would make me feel like an outsider. The insider–outsider position is discussed by Karin v. Nieuwkerk, a Dutch non-Muslim researcher who studied Dutch Muslim women (born Muslim and converted) (Van Nieuwkerk 2004, 2006, 2014), as well as by Vanessa Vroon, a Dutch converted Muslima who converted approximately 20 years before carrying out her research and describes the different experiences she gained as a converted Muslima in the early 1990s in comparison to her participants who had cyberspace, women's classes and newer more liberal mosques (Vroon 2014) at their disposal. Michal Kravel-Tovi discusses her position as an Israeli Jewish woman studying women undergoing conversion *Giyur* classes (Kravel-Tovi 2012, 2015). Sarah Bunin-Benor examined her experiences as a non-Orthodox researcher studying the experiences of newcomers to Jewish Orthodoxy (Bunin-Benor 2012).

Similar to Stam, who as a black woman studied white-minority Dutch girls in higher education, and was asked whether these 'white youths could tell the truth to a black female researcher', I was asked by friends and other scholars whether Muslim women would tell the truth to a Jewish Israeli woman. As ethnography often involves the development

of close connections between the researcher and the (key) participants and the situations being studied, I believed that my participants shared some points of similarity: we were both females, both Dutch, both minorities (in Dutch culture as well as in other cultures in cases where the Muslima immigrated or had thoughts about it. In addition, I am a double migrant as well). Issues such as marriage, romantic relationships, child bearing and family as well as the search for a suitable partner (online for example) were also things we had in common.

> *"Normally, introductions are arranged through the family, but when you are a converted Muslima . . . and you don't have that . . . a family . . . so you have to do it online . . . like I did, but then you come across the weirdest things, you know? All my girlfriends who are divorced or single will agree. I experienced situations when I received messages or pictures that were just not ok . . . at one point you have a nice conversation with someone, and then suddenly a picture comes in of certain body parts that you wouldn't want to see (laughs). Or they ask about your body and then I think "what is this all about??" I just want to get married. You know, online dating has its risks . . . "*
>
> (Converted Muslima, 36 years)

When participants used to tell me about their lives as single women or how they have been single or divorced for years, I used to nod my head in understanding, showing them that I understood first-hand what they were telling me, as demonstrated in the quote above, a situation that I have experienced myself as well, as a woman. In the participant observations, I kept detailed records about how my presence influenced the women's behavior. This information was logged and reflected upon during the analysis. Fader and Creese described in their work that sometimes during field work it was not clear to them if it was them, Jewish women observing other Jewish women in their Jewish communities (in Fader's case it was at the time she had gotten married and she observed topics of the Jewish girl, bride, wife), or was it the (native) anthropologist observing? (Creese 2020; Fader 2007), I often felt this way and mainly when I attended classes or workshops on two topics: a. finding a suitable partner and b. reflections on being a religious minority in the Netherlands. While I attended classes, workshops and even artistic performances on the topics of finding love, me, also single at that time, felt that that I was both the anthropologist observing, but also the single girl who could use some of the advice given. I attended many events dealing with topics such as being Muslim in a non-Muslim country. Also then, I found myself wandering between the anthropologist observing and taking notes, and the Jewish girl who not always felt at home in her non-Jewish environment. The significant identification with both topics made it easier on me while taking notes. However, I needed to be alert to stay objective and not to mix too many emotions or over-identification with my data.

### *3.6. New Muslimas and Newly Practicing Muslimas*

This ethnography points to common themes and differences between New Muslimas (converts) and Newly Practicing Muslimas (born Muslimas who re-discovered their faith). As mentioned in the methodology section, mainly during participant observations in women's groups and lectures it was often hard to tell who was a convert and who was a born Muslima. In the Quranic classes for example, it was often the born Muslimas who asked a lot of questions, and who mentioned their confusion related to themes that were deeply rooted in their upbringing as Muslim girls. Some of the converted Muslimas, however, who were born and raised in other traditions before discovering Islam, and had to learn its principles and doctrines at a later stage of life, often volunteered to answer questions (dealing with religious knowledge, but also on how to practice Islam in a better way). In this regard, it is worth mentioning that I also attended women's classes led by converted Dutch Muslimas attended by born and converted Muslimas. In terms of their identity, most participants in this study first and foremost felt Muslim, and only then Dutch, or Dutch and Moroccan. The quest for pure Islam, disassociated from cultural influences, was stressed both by born Muslimas (who often criticized their parents and grandparents

for mixing customs and religion) and by the converted Muslims. However, identity is also negotiated differently by Muslim women from different backgrounds. Converted Muslimas from a native Dutch background would often bring their Dutch identity to the forefront when they felt it was needed, for example when engaging in "talking back" strategies (Hass 2020b). Converted Muslimas from other backgrounds and born Muslimas had something in common that connects them to another identity, which was not only Dutch and Muslim, but also Moroccan, Brazilian or Indonesian. What these women had in common was their immigration narrative (which calls for further research). Most of my participants were not immigrants themselves (except for one who emigrated from the Netherlands to a Muslim majority country). They were born in the Netherlands, but in many cases their parents or grandparents had been immigrants and the immigration narrative was present in their identity as well as in the stories they told me (as seen in the quotes above).

The topic of belonging in the context of identity was explored in depth in this research. Born Muslimas as well as converted Muslimas stated that they often felt a sense of non-belonging as Muslims in Dutch surroundings, especially when their Muslimness was visible, for example when wearing a hijab or when using terms in Arabic such as *Inshallah* or in cases when they had an Islamic or Arabic sounding name (some converted Muslimas choose to change their names). Born Muslimas often stressed that they felt that they were not accepted in Dutch society. They were born and raised there, they possessed the correct local accent, they had acquired a higher education and were successful in the professional world, but some felt deep inside that they were not entirely home in the Netherlands. Islam and the Muslim community gave them a home, a place to be themselves. This home can be a physical home (for example in the mosque, or when the converted Muslima starts her own family), but is certainly also a home on a spiritual and emotional level when belonging to a global Muslim community, the *ummah*, and everything this entails. Born and converted Muslimas stressed that they felt that they were not fully accepted or members of Dutch society. The born Muslimas often had an Islamic or a foreign name, they spoke a different language than Dutch at home. They were born and raised in a double environment that was often Moroccan or Turkish and Muslim at home, Dutch in other aspects of life such as at school, the university, at work, among friends, and often during leisure time activities.

The converted Muslimas, on the other hand, actively searched for another identity and belonging, a new home, but after conversion felt that they no longer belonged to Dutch society (in comparison to the feeling of belonging to the Dutch national fold in the past, yet experiencing certain restlessness). The converted white Muslimas knew the feeling of once belonging to the majority mainstream society and now being a (religious) minority, and the converted Muslimas from other backgrounds often stressed the feeling of a double estrangement. They felt different because they had a Latin name or an Asian look, and now their (visible) Muslimness makes them feel even more different, like a double Other. In a strange way, taking on the religion of the other in order to feel belonging makes converts at times feel that they are estranged from their past and background, and that they are "othering" themselves from society, but are gaining a feeling of belongingness to a new community. What they all have in common is that for all of them being Muslim makes them feel that they do not belong (even if some felt that they belonged in a previous lifetime).

Privilege is a subtheme of belonging. Born and converted Muslimas differ in terms of privilege. In the ethnography, some converted Muslimas expressed the privilege of being Dutch, and the feeling of being less Other than the born Muslimas, whereas others expressed their privilege of not only of being Dutch, but also being older and highly educated, which, in their eyes, made the conversion process and the discourse with society easier on them as compared to younger converts. This was true with respect to the younger generation of converts, who are often active on social media and appear on the more traditional media channels such as television, radio, magazines and newspapers. Some New Muslimas expressed their worries about their younger sisters. They often argued that the young converted Muslimas turned to Islam (and oftentimes to strict Islamic clothing

and covering) as a rebellion against their parents, something they (the older converts, who converted at a later age) would have done in their teen years in the late 1990s if they had become punks or goths and that their decision did not stem from a deep study of the faith.

Both the born and converted Muslimas expressed agency in the context of being Dutch and Muslim through their ability to choose and engage in social action. In converting to Islam or in re-discovering their faith while practicing differently than their parents, they have pushed the limits of the archetypal Dutch identity (Vroon 2007) while simultaneously stretching the meaning of Islam (Hass 2011) to construct their own identity, which is influenced by their being Dutch and Muslim, and influenced by themes of immigration, belongingness, knowledge, gender, and other concepts. Thus, the core findings of this study as a whole are to be found in the concepts of identity, belonging, agency and gender. The theoretical contribution lies in the combination of theories of identity, theories of belonging and theories of gender and agency among women in conservative religions.

Relatedly, as scholars, ethnographers and authors, we must be sensitive to the words our interlocutors use during interviews. In scholarship, media and politics, the term 'conversion' is widely used. I suggest revisiting this term and not taking it for granted, since not all converted Muslimas referred to themselves as "converted" or as "New Muslims". Other frequent terms in their narratives were phrases such as "always felt a Muslim", "white Muslima", "Dutch sister" (*Nederlandse zuster*, in Dutch), "coming home", "finding peace", "finding one's own true self" and "sisterhood" which oftentimes expresses their desire to be involved in (alternative) feminist voices in Dutch Islam, as they express their interest in being involved in organizing and leading women's groups, equality in religious practice and even to be involved in mixed Muslim groups. This has emerged in other ethnographies on Dutch Muslimas as well, whether the informants were born into Islam or converted at a later stage in life (Badran 2006; Bartels 2000; Bartels 2005; Buitelaar 2006, 2014; Moors 2009; Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019; Van Nieuwkerk 2004; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014; Stoica et al. 2012).

This is a story of searching for identity, belonging, agency and (new) gender roles (or, in other words, the connection to more traditional gender roles, which are new to these women) in the Netherlands of 2021, whether the women were born in the Netherlands to a generation of Dutch families, or born in the Netherlands to families of immigrants (Muslim or not). What these women all have in common is that in their journey of searching for identity, belonging and agency, they turn to Islam. This work sheds new light on these discourses by the linking the themes of identity and belonging with agency and gender in the specific context of the Netherlands and its history. By pushing the findings even further, it could be argued that the Netherlands and Dutch culture allow them to freely to choose to re-discover or adopt a religion that is in the minority, as a religion of the Other, yet at the same time, most narratives stressed that although Dutch culture provides the option to choose another religion, it has a hard time stretching the limits of Dutchness, and can be judgmental and, in some cases, even hostile towards this choice.

## 4. Conclusions

This paper is part of a project that examines the ways in which Dutch women from various ethnic and religious backgrounds re-discover or adopt a new religion, including new patterns of behavior that have implications for the themes of belonging, identity, piety, gender roles and rejection or modification of the Dutch way of life. The Netherlands has specific sensitivities, affected by the historical and collective memory of the country as one of tolerance, and also historical events related to society and immigration and religion and immigration, and a very interesting religious history that has been characterized by considerable diversity of religious thought and practice.

Thinking back to my experiences entering the field and being in the field, my experience of being an insider assisted my journey as an anthropologist. My cultural and social connections opened doors that others may have struggled to enter, particularly in a community that has expressed fatigue from being studied by outsiders. I believe that my

own journey between countries and belonging to a religious minority myself, eased my entering the field. However, that same identity was at other times an obstacle and a reason for participants to opt out from this study. Similarly, Creese argues (and I could not agree more) that in the context of her study of Jewish communities, being an insider allowed for a deeper space for reflexivity and awareness of how concepts such as power (relations), knowledge and representation interplay within anthropological work (Creese 2020).

During the years of fieldwork, I, as a Dutch Jewish researcher, aimed to understand two puzzling questions that arise from the Dutch ethos: Why do Dutch women convert to Islam? To what extent do converted women still have a sense of belonging to the Netherlands/Dutch culture? These questions were examined with respect to the history of the Netherlands and current events, as well as the growing Islamophobia and xenophobia, the anti-terror debate, the integration discourse and media coverage of Muslims and Islam as extremists who do not mesh with Dutch or Western culture. The techniques that helped me enter the field and collect the data for this ethnography involved the insider–outsider axis, code switching, emotions in the field, assumptions in the ethnographic encounter and positionality.

Throughout the years of ethnography, during interviews as well as when I participated in events, workshops, Quranic classes and lectures, I encountered tensions between religious and ethnic/cultural belonging. One example is the quest for a pure Islam, disconnected and disassociated from cultural influences, that was stressed throughout this work. Tensions between gender and religious identities and belongings were often brought up when discussing the role of the women in Islam, compared to what is perceived as the free and emancipated women of the Netherlands and the West. These discussions were related to clothing and covering, and the return to traditional gender roles of the women who embrace these fashions and consider to be liberating to the puzzlement of many. However, the biggest challenge emerging from the ethnography was the bridging of religious identity with national (Dutch) identity, and the larger issue of belonging. Does belonging to a (different in terms of the majority) religion, make someone feel less belonging to the national fold? Most of the women I met in this ethnography would have said it does. Time after time, it was stressed during interviews and participant observations that being Muslim has changed the way society looks at them as though these women can participate, but do not truly belong. This runs counter the literature on religion and identity that typically documents a connection between faith and belonging, for example when converted Muslim women build a new network of sisters (giving the term sisterhood a new meaning) (Vroon 2014). This work contributes to research by Bunin Benor who described the challenges of being a newcomer to a religious community (in her case Orthodox Judaism) and shows that one of the main challenges in being a newcomer is to have a hybrid identity consisting of both the previous and the new identity, since the newcomer can struggle with issues of belonging to the old community he or she grew up in, and the new community. In other words, they feel that society sees them as less Dutch once that they join the Islamic nation. However, inside they feel completely Dutch and insist they have not lost an ounce of their Dutchness because of their choice to convert to Islam. This stance reflects a demand for a place within the Dutch ethos or in any case a change of that ethos, perhaps stretching the meaning of what Dutchness is (Vroon 2007).

By analyzing the women's narratives presented in this project, I challenge and redefine different understandings of freedom in a liberal public space, in this case the Netherlands, that accepts a different kind of woman, who is Dutch and Muslim and, oftentimes, something else. As a whole, my work sheds light on the narratives of these women who see Islam as allowing them to acquire an identity that is not entirely Dutch, yet not entirely foreign either (Islamic, Moroccan, Turkish or otherwise); in particular due to their quest for a pure Islam disconnected from cultural influences and customs, an Islam that can be Dutch, and part of the Netherlands. Thus, these women's identities cannot be seen as only Dutch-Moroccan or Moroccan-Dutch: they are simultaneously both and neither.

Another point worth mentioning is that in scholarship, media and politics, the term conversion is widely used. I propose to re-construct this term and not take it for granted, since not all the converted Muslimas here referred to themselves as "converted" or as "New Muslims". Other popular terms in the narratives of my interlocutors were "always felt a Muslim", "white Muslima", "coming home", "finding peace" and "finding one's own true self". This is evident in other ethnographies on Dutch Muslimas as well, whether born into Islam or converted at a later stage in life (Badran 2006; Bartels 2000, 2005; Buitelaar 2006; Buitelaar 2014; Moors 2009; Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019; Van Nieuwkerk 2004; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). Another interesting point in this regard is the extension of the studied topic over the borders of research: some of the participants became my friends, others wanted to invite me to their gatherings as a friend, rather than a researcher. As I experienced in my previous fieldwork and as I saw in other ethnographies (Vroon 2014), I was frequently asked whether I was a converted Dutch Muslima as well, or whether I would be willing to convert.

To conclude, during ethnography, my body was my tool of collecting data. My appearance, my choice of dress, my language (and my accent), my identity, my gender, my position as Dutch with a foreign background, and my belonging to a religious minority myself all helped me to enter the field, deal with challenges and build trust with the participants in this study. However, in some cases, coming from a foreign background also complicated the access granted to me in this specific field.

Many Muslim women in the Netherlands are also much more than just Muslim, in that their identities are also shaped by Dutch culture and society. The exploration of this complex dynamic suggests that their expression of agency and choice to convert does not occur in reductionist or stereotyped ways. Rather, it involves a complex interplay of many factors, each deserving of its own story.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (date of approval: 19 November 2018).

**Informed Consent Statement:** A concerted effort was made to ensure the ethical integrity of this work. The author specifically took two ethics research courses at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem—one in 2010 and one in 2016. All subjects gave their informed consent before they participated in this study. The author has their consent on tape/audio files, a requirement before each interview was conducted, which was also approved by the institution the author is affiliated with (Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The rigorous methodology of the research, which included anonymizing all names to preserve the participants' anonymity and confidentiality during Quranic classes, was also approved by the Hebrew University's Ethics Committee. Each interviewee was also asked to provide informed consent, thus making it possible to produce a study that complies with the ethical obligations of reporting research which speaks in the words of interviewees, rather than speaking for them. For the first ethnographic study carried out in 2009, in the absence of a formal ethical committee (which did not exist at the Hebrew University during the author's MA), this research was supplemented by the attached ethical declaration, which was formally submitted to the University in 2011. In 2018, the PhD research proposal "Is Being Dutch Enough? Women's conversion to Islam and the politics of belonging and identity, a Dutch case study", submitted by the author, was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The committee found that the ethical standards of the methods and data analysis described in the proposal were acceptable, and the proposal was approved by the Committee.

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