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The other neighbour paradox: fantasies and frustrations of ‘living together’ in Antwerp

ANICK VOLLEBERGH

ABSTRACT In this paper, Vollebergh investigates the commitment to establishing intercultural encounters by so-called ‘active’ white Flemish residents in Antwerp, and their perpetual disappointment with the responses of their neighbours of orthodox Jewish and Moroccan backgrounds. Instead of viewing these relationships either as a product of culturalist social cohesion policies, or as a vernacular ethical achievement that escapes culturalist politics, she argues that we should understand them through the figure of the Neighbour. Combining the theories of Emmanuel Levinas and Slavoj Žižek, she suggests that the neighbourly relation is a paradox in which the Neighbour as a nearby Other induces both an ethical desire for total openness in the engagement with this Other, as well as the uncanny sense that his/her Otherness haunts and makes impossible such an engagement. When viewed in this way, vernacular intercultural relationships, and the fantasies and frustrations surrounding them, emerge as the site where residents of multi-ethnic neighbourhoods in postcolonial Europe engage and struggle with existential and ethical questions of human interconnection and, especially, the effects of the culturalist inflection that these questions have gained.

KEYWORDS Antwerp, Belgium, culturalism, intercultural encounters, lived multiculturalism, the Neighbour, social cohesion policy, urban Europe, vernacular ethics

As the culturalist politics of integration have come to dominate public debates and political agendas across Western Europe since the last decades of the twentieth century, two anxieties have been projected on to urban postcolonial spaces. One revolves around the fear of an influx of ‘strangers’ whose cultural and religious Otherness is believed to threaten the cultural and moral integrity of the nation. The second anxiety revolves around a concern that the nation’s social fabric may be disintegrating. It finds its expression in worries about segregation, ethnic conflict, racism and

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xenophobic populism, and about different cultural communities supposedly living 'parallel lives'. This paper focuses on this second anxiety, and the way in which residents of two multi-ethnic neighbourhoods in the city of Antwerp (Belgium) engage with it. The underlying assumption of this anxiety is that postcolonial and labour migration have combined to create European nation-states that are so culturally and religiously heterogeneous that proper fellow feeling among citizens is lacking. A range of policies aimed to stimulate 'mixing', 'social cohesion' and 'living together in diversity' have targeted deprived multi-ethnic neighbourhoods where this problem is believed to be particularly pressing.

Scholars have critically engaged with this political anxiety in two ways. First, ethnographies and cultural analyses of multi-ethnic urban spaces have shown that, even though 'lived multicultural' is to a large extent shaped by culturalist and racist political discourses, urban dwellers also demonstrate a capacity for what Paul Gilroy calls 'conviviality': living with difference as an unremarkable feat of life.¹ In contrast to the alarmist projections of segregation and ethnic conflict espoused in dominant political discourses, diverse urban citizens interact, establish relationships, share styles and narratives, develop new urban cultures and enact neighbourliness in the course of everyday life, and they do so in 'unpanicked, often competent ways'.² This coexistence of the negative repercussions of racism and everyday convivial practice is what Les Back has called the 'metropolitan paradox'.³ There is an often implicit tendency in this body of work, however, to argue that residents' ability to 'connect across difference' in the course of daily life is proof that 'everyday multicultural' to some extent escapes the clasp of (culturalist, racist and nationalist) politics.⁴ To be

1 Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge 2004), xi. See also, for instance, Elijah Anderson, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life* (New York: W. W. Norton 2011); Les Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives* (London: UCL Press 1996); Gerd Baumann, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-ethnic London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996); John Clayton, 'Thinking spatially: towards an everyday understanding of inter-ethnic interactions', *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2009, 481–98; Gwen van Eijk, 'Good neighbours in bad neighbourhoods: narratives of dissociation and practices of neighbouring in a "problem" place', *Urban Studies*, vol. 49, no. 14, 2012, 3009–26; Helga Leitner, 'Spaces of encounters: immigration, race, class, and the politics of belonging in small-town America', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 102, no. 4, 2012, 828–46; Sarah Neal, Katy Bennett, Allan Cochrane and Giles Mohan, 'Living multicultural: understanding the new spatial and social relations of ethnicity and multicultural in England', *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2013, 308–23; Sarah Neal and Carol Vincent, 'Multiculture, middle class competencies and friendship practices in super-diverse geographies', *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 14, no. 8, 2013, 909–29; and Amanda Wise, 'Hope and belonging in a multicultural suburb', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1–2, 2005, 171–86.

2 Neal, Bennett, Cochrane and Mohan, 'Living multicultural', 309.

3 Back, *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture*, 7.

4 Wise, 'Hope and belonging in a multicultural suburb', 177.

more precise, whereas these authors explicitly relate the everyday 'racisms' or 'culturalisms' that are part of the metropolitan paradox to national dominant discourses or politics, they do not do so for everyday 'intercultural accommodations' and connections, indirectly implying that these are not, or not as much, shaped by politics.⁵ In these studies, then, quotidian intercultural encounters and vernacular rapprochement across difference are implicitly conceptualized as 'true' and ethical encounters precisely to the extent in which they seem to escape, or form an antidote against, the Othering effect of racist and culturalist politics.⁶

A second body of literature investigates the policies of community cohesion, dialogue, diversity and mixing.⁷ These policies are analysed as neoliberal governance practices driven by the same culturalist and racist notions that they seemingly aim to overcome. What often remains unexplored in this critique of policy approach is the possibility that urban residents may draw on (culturalist) social cohesion policies in order to give expression to a sincere and also ethical desire to get to know and establish relationships with their culturally different neighbours.

There is thus a tendency in both approaches to conceive of conviviality as an ethical vernacular everyday practice that gains its meaning in opposition to the politicized aspects of lived multiculturalism and to dynamics of Othering. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in two multi-ethnic neighbourhoods in Antwerp, I argue that this implicit opposition does not help us to understand the emotional investment and the practices with which certain white Flemish residents attempt to get close to their 'strange' neighbours. In Antwerp, the development of a governance regime of responsible neighbourliness has resulted in a political investment in everyday multicultural life and, especially, in intercultural affect and relationships. In such a context, it is problematic to conceive of intercultural relationships or conviviality situated in 'everyday life' as a somehow pristine realm that forms a shelter against the impact of culturalism or racism. At the same time, analysing the intercultural practices and desires of these particular Antwerp residents as wholly reducible to culturalist

5 Clayton, 'Thinking spatially', 494.

6 As Thomas Blom Hansen points out, these theoretical conceptualizations of *everyday* interactions across difference can be understood as following western intellectual traditions in which 'everyday life' and 'ordinary' people are conceived as tactically subversive and authentic in the face of oppressive forces (as in the work of Michel de Certeau) or as harbouring some kind of organic morality or virtue: Thomas Blom Hansen, *Melancholia of Freedom: Social Life in an Indian Township in South Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2012), 18–19.

7 See, for instance, Anne-Marie Fortier, 'Proximity by design? Affective citizenship and the management of unease', *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2010, 17–30; Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age* (London: Zed Books 2011); and Justus Uitermark, Ugo Rossi and Henk van Houtum, 'Reinventing multiculturalism: urban citizenship and the negotiation of ethnic diversity in Amsterdam', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2005, 622–40.

politics would mean to gloss over the fact that there is also a sincere ethical element to them. In order to understand the ambivalence and the tensions of these relationships, I turn to a philosophical contemplation of the figure of the Neighbour, inspired by the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Slavoj Žižek.

Antwerp: a regime of responsible neighbourliness

My ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Antwerp, the cultural capital of the Flemish-speaking region of Belgium. In Flanders, the sudden electoral success of the neo-nationalist party Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block) in the 1990s instigated fierce debates about the supposedly failed integration of ethnic minorities, especially workers recruited in the 1960s and 1970s from Turkey and Morocco and their descendants. In response, a set of interrelated policies (focusing on integration, urban regeneration, and poverty and deprivation) has been developed.⁸ Policy terms used by the Flemish government in these policies evolved from 'migrants' via 'minorities' to 'allochthons', who are increasingly urged to integrate through 'civic integration' (*inburgering*).⁹ As in many European countries after 9/11, the focus of the integration debate, as well as the policies that have been implemented in response, have turned to the religious identity and cultural practices of *allochthons*, especially Muslims.¹⁰

- 8 Jan Blommaert and Marco Martiniello, 'Ethnic mobilization, multiculturalism and the political process in two Belgian cities: Antwerp and Liège', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1996, 51–73; Dirk Jacobs, 'Alive and kicking? Multiculturalism in Flanders', *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2004, 280–99; Maarten Loopmans, Justus Uitermark and Fiulip De Maesschalck, 'Against all odds: poor people jumping scales and the genesis of an urban policy in Flanders, Belgium', *Belgeo*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2002, 243–58; Albert Martens and Frank Caestecker, 'De algemene beleidsontwikkelingen sinds 1984', in Jan Vranken, Christiane Timmerman and Katrien Van der Heyden (eds), *Komende Generaties: Wat weten we (niet) over allochtonen in Vlaanderen* (Leuven: Acco 2001), 99–127; Justus Uitermark, *De sociale controle van achterstandswijken: Een beleidsgenetisch perspectief* (Amsterdam: Koninklijk Nederlands Aardrijkskundig Genootschap 2003).
- 9 The idiom of autochthony has become a dominant and politically salient discourse in Dutch-speaking Western Europe in the past decades. The notion distinguishes between autochthons who supposedly have an 'original' link to a certain territory, and allochthons presumably lacking this original link by virtue of having arrived 'later'. See, for example, Bambi Ceuppens and Peter Geschiere, 'Autochthony: local or global? New modes in the struggle over citizenship and belonging in Africa and Europe', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 34, 2005, 385–407; Bambi Ceuppens, 'Allochthons, colonizers, and scroungers: exclusionary populism in Belgium', *African Studies Review*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2006, 147–86; and Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2009).
- 10 Ico Maly (ed.), *Cultu[u]renpolitiek: Over globalisering en culturele identiteiten* (Antwerp and Apeldoorn: Garant 2007); Karel Arnaut, Sarah Bracke, Bambi Ceuppens, Sarah De Mul, Nadia Fadil and Meryem Kanmaz, *Een leeuw in een kooi: De grenzen van het multiculturele Vlaanderen* (Antwerp: Meulenhoff 2009).

The political and societal anxiety about the disintegration of the social fabric in urban multi-ethnic neighbourhoods has been particularly strong in Flanders. 'Living together' (*samenleven*) or, more precisely, the idea that proper *samenleven* between different ethno-religious groups is urgently lacking, has emerged in Flanders as a political project and a new domain of governance.¹¹ The notion of 'living together' is used to address such divergent phenomena as the rise of political extremism in the form of Vlaams Blok voting, the supposedly failed integration of migrants, and the level of nuisance and liveability in public spaces. Whereas, in the 1990s, lacking *samenleven* was seen as a problem of deprivation in underprivileged urban neighbourhoods for both extreme-right voting *autochthons* and migrants, it has, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, been reframed as a more general problem of 'shared values' and responsible citizenship in a 'diverse' society.

In Antwerp, where the success of Vlaams Blok (and later Vlaams Belang, Flemish Interest) has been especially pronounced,¹² a policy regime, implemented by municipal services that explicitly posit 'the neighbourhood' as a 'governable domain',¹³ aims to turn residents into responsible citizens who care about and identify with their neighbourhood and who are capable of appreciating 'living together' in 'diversity'.¹⁴ The centrality of neighbourliness as a value in this regime is best demonstrated by Opsinjoren, a strikingly popular social cohesion project that the city of Antwerp adopted in the late 1990s.¹⁵ The aim of Opsinjoren is to 'make residents neighbours again' by stimulating and assisting them—sometimes but not always integrated in resident committees—to unite around jointly developed plans to beautify or clean their streets, or to organize social gatherings for neighbours such as street

11 *Samenleven* as a political project is surprisingly unconnected to what might be characterized as a much more problematic disintegration of the social fabric and solidarity in Belgium: namely, the increasing polarization between the Dutch- and the French-speaking parts of the country on the level of the nation-state.

12 In 2004, several associations related to Vlaams Blok were convicted in the courts under anti-discrimination laws. In order to avoid losing its state subsidies, the party dissolved and renamed itself Vlaams Belang.

13 Some of these municipal programmes, such as those called *buurtregie* and *buurttoezicht* (literally, 'neighbourhood direction' and 'neighbourhood supervision'), focus on nuisance in public space, others (such as *stedelijk wijkoverleg*, 'municipal borough consultation') are intended to stimulate and manage citizen participation in order to close a perceived 'gap' between politics and 'ordinary citizens'.

14 'Samenleven in diversiteit: Gedeeld burgerschap en gelijke kansen in een kleurrijk Vlaanderen: Strategisch plan minderheden beleid 2004–2010', adopted by the Flemish government on 26 March 2004; Stad Antwerpen, *Samenleven in Diversiteit: Eenheid in Verscheidenheid & Verscheidenheid in Eenheid. Beleidsplan 2009–2011* (Antwerp: Stad Antwerpen 2009); Maarten Loopmans, 'From residents to neighbours: the making of active citizens in Antwerp, Belgium', in Jan Willem Duyvendak, Trudie Knijn and Monique Kremer (eds), *Policy, People and the New Professional: De-professionalisation and Re-professionalisation in Care and Welfare* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2006), 109–21.

15 Loopmans, 'From residents to neighbours'.

barbecues, New Year's parties or the annual city-sponsored 'Neighbours Day'.¹⁶ Initiatives that are approved by Opsinoren receive small budgets and other help to enable residents to carry out their plans.

It is against this political backdrop that I read the material of my year-long fieldwork in two multi-ethnic Antwerp neighbourhoods.¹⁷ The first, Oud-Borgerhout, is a working- and lower-middle-class neighbourhood that has become infamous since the 1980s for its relatively large population of Moroccan descent, and for being the neighbourhood where Vlaams Blok had its first major electoral success. As a result, Borgerhout, nicknamed 'Borgerokko', has long been the symbol of Flanders's contentious encounter with its *allochthonous* Other.¹⁸ The second neighbourhood is the so-called 'Jewish neighbourhood', which is located partly in the somewhat impoverished area around the Central Station and in an adjacent historically bourgeois borough. The Jewish neighbourhood is known for its very visible strictly orthodox and Hasidic Jewish population, whose presence in Antwerp is historically related to the diamond trade and industry.¹⁹ The neighbourhood's population also consists of white non-Jewish Flemings and, since the 1990s, migrants from Eastern Europe, India and other countries.

In both neighbourhoods, there exists a category of what are in the Antwerp political context considered 'active' residents. These residents, predominantly white and middle class, visibly participate in the neighbourhood social cohesion structures facilitated by the city. As members of resident committees or as 'street volunteers' of Opsinoren, the residents that I present in this paper declared an explicit commitment to the ideal of 'living together'. Though their investment was exceptional, their concern with what they felt to be a problematic absence of 'living together' in their neighbourhoods was widely shared by white Flemish residents more generally. 'Here', white Flemings commonly said, 'people don't live together'. They complained of having very little contact with 'Jewish' or 'Moroccan' neighbours, everyone living 'next to' each other instead of 'with' each other.

By fleshing out the particular positioning of 'active' white Flemish residents as the ones *asking* their 'Jewish' and 'Moroccan' neighbours to live together and as suffering unrequited love in return, I want to draw attention to the fact that the meaning of 'living together' is neither neutral nor clear. The

16 Ibid.

17 The fieldwork consisted of participant-observation at neighbourhood feasts, street barbecues, meetings of resident committees and informal chats and hanging-out in squares, parks and in cafés during the year 2009. I conducted over one hundred interviews with residents of different self-defined categories, that is, with 'Belgian/Flemish', 'Moroccan' and 'Jewish' residents.

18 Marnix Beyen, 'Antwerpen: "Borgerokko": De confrontatie met de allochtone ander', in Jo Tollebeek (ed.), *Belgie: een parcours van herinnering*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker 2008), 163–73.

19 Veerle Vanden Daelen, *Laten we hun lied verder zingen: De heropbouw van de joodse gemeenschap in Antwerpen na de Tweede Wereldoorlog (1944–1960)* (Amsterdam: Aksant 2008).

ideal of 'living together' and the political regime of neighbourliness interpellates different categories of resident—whom I will address here as 'white/non-Jewish Flemish', 'Moroccan' and 'Jewish'—in very different ways.²⁰ As a result, what it means to 'live together' is the subject of negotiation and contestation in these two neighbourhoods, which, I argue, can be understood as engagements with existential and ethical questions evoked by the figure of the Neighbour.

Rethinking the Neighbour

In urban studies as well as in the literature on postcolonial lived multiculturalism, one of the underlying assumptions is that the neighbourly relationship is in itself not problematic, but has become problematic in the anonymous and heterogeneous context of modern city life, or through the politicization of inter-ethnic relations as a result of dominant culturalist or nationalist discourses. But as anthropological work on treason and witchcraft demonstrates, even non-urban *communitas* and intimacy among neighbours and kin is fraught with tension,²¹ 'running counter to our assumptions about the amicable and intrinsically peaceful core of neighborliness as a value in itself'.²² These studies argue that it is the intimacy of close-knit and interdependent

20 My use of the terms 'white' or 'non-Jewish Flemings', 'Moroccans' and 'Jews' is based on two considerations. First, these terms give insight into the basic classificatory logic that residents themselves use (including residents of Jewish denomination or Moroccan background) when they talk about neighbourhood life, and in which whiteness (and non-Jewishness to a lesser extent) is implicitly associated with true Belgianness and local rootedness. In Borgerhout, for example, residents distinguish 'Belgians', on the one hand (interchangeably used for 'Flemings', 'Whites' and *autochthons*), and 'Moroccans' (*allochthons* or 'strangers'), on the other. Second, my choice for the label 'white/non-Jewish Flemings' is also intended to project a critique of this emic logic by making the slippage between 'whiteness' (and non-Jewishness) and belonging explicit. I find the term 'Flemings' slightly preferable to 'Belgians' or 'autochthons', as many 'Jews' and 'Moroccans' are in fact Belgian by nationality and commonly have a longer family history in their neighbourhood or in Antwerp than most 'white' residents. Moreover, all categories of residents tend to use 'Flemish' as an exclusive ethno-cultural identity. For example, when my respondents of Jewish or Moroccan background stepped out of the neighbourhood discourse and critiqued its assumptions, they would do so by identifying as Belgian or Antwerpian, and only very seldom by presenting themselves as Flemish. In the remainder of the paper, I will use these labels without quotation marks to improve readability.

21 Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (Oxford: Blackwell 2002); Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, trans. from the French by Peter Geschiere and Janet Roitman (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 1997); Sharika Thiranagama and Tobias Kelly (eds), *Traitors: Suspicion, Intimacy, and the Ethics of State-Building* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2010).

22 Sharika Thiranagama and Tobias Kelly, 'Introduction: Specters of treason', in Thiranagama and Kelly (eds), *Traitors*, 1–23 (13).

relationships in non-urban or culturally homogeneous communities that causes deep anxiety and suspicion.

Building on this argument in a more philosophical vein, I suggest that the Neighbour is fundamentally a deeply paradoxical and problematic figure. My discussion of the figure of the Neighbour has its origin in the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Slavoj Žižek.²³ Both authors conceptualize the Neighbour as an Other who is physically close. S/he is, in Levinas's terms, an Other-whom-I-can-look-in-the-face. Levinas and Žižek draw diametrically opposed conclusions, however, on the effect of this proximate Otherness and the kind of relationship it calls forth.

For Levinas, looking in the face of an Other results in an intensely ethical interpellation. The face constitutes an embodied encounter with a transcendental call for a total responsibility towards the Other's humanity. As he writes: 'The "resistance" of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical.'²⁴ In his reading, the Neighbour's Otherness is fundamentally a 'non-allergic presence'.²⁵ Instead of inducing abjection, it instigates an ethical desire for the total opening up of the Self to the close-by embodied Other.

Žižek argues against this idea of neighbourliness as a primary ethical relationship. For him, the Neighbour signifies an uncanny and always potentially violent encounter with an impossible 'thing' in the Freudian and Lacanian sense. Based on Freud's concept of the *Nebenmensch* as the figure positioned at the 'impossible intersection of family and society',²⁶ Žižek turns Levinas's argument on its head: 'The neighbor (*Nebenmensch*) as the Thing means that, beneath the neighbor as my *semblant*, my mirror image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be "gentrified".'²⁷ The physical presence of the face of the Neighbour is exactly what renders her/him such an impossible and unsettling figure. The face is what makes her/him *seem* to be like me, while there is always the possibility that the face is a mask, hiding the Neighbour's true monstrous self or 'the abyss' of the Neighbour's Otherness.²⁸ What is bugging us about our Neighbour, as Žižek puts it, is that we can never know for sure what may be bugging her/him.²⁹ In this psychoanalytical view, the Neighbour is 'an irritant' as her/his embodied and proximate Otherness

23 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [1961], trans. from the French by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press 1969); Slavoj Žižek, 'Neighbors and other monsters: a plea for ethical violence', in Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 2005), 134–90.

24 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197.

25 *Ibid.*, 199.

26 Kenneth Reinhard, 'Toward a political theology of the Neighbor', in Slavoj Žižek, Eric Santner and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor*, 11–75 (29)

27 Žižek, 'Neighbors and other monsters', 143.

28 *Ibid.*, 146, 147.

29 *Ibid.*, 141.

poses fundamental questions as to how to know, and whether we can know, another human being.³⁰

Instead of prioritizing one of these understandings over the other, I argue that the Neighbour is best conceptualized by combining them. The figure of the Neighbour is characterized by the fact that, as a near Other, s/he creates two opposed movements and structures of feeling simultaneously. On the one hand, the Neighbour's embodied Otherness constitutes an ethical call for a complete rapprochement dissolving the boundary between Self and Other. On the other hand, his/her near Otherness also forms a constantly irritating presence that haunts the apparent similarity and closeness and therefore with the possibility of truly knowing any Other. Thus, the neighbourly relation in its abstract form is structured upon a paradox, its fundamental Otherness being both opening and limiting, evoking both desire and frustration. The Neighbour is a problematic figure in the sense that s/he poses existential and ethical questions about the possibility of human interconnection: about what it means to know and to be good to another human being. This reconceptualization of the figure of the Neighbour has the analytical advantage of separating the problem of the Neighbour from a culturalist problematization of neighbourliness. We can now ask what *particular form* the Neighbour paradox takes in a specific political context and for a particular category of resident. Now let us see how the Neighbour paradox plays out in the way in which 'active' white Flemish residents approach their Jewish or Moroccan neighbours in the political context of Antwerp.

Jews and Moroccans as neighbours: cultural Otherness as desire and frustration

Michel was in his fifties, dandy-esque in appearance, with a signature style of pointed Italian shoes and flower-printed gilets.³¹ He was the chair of one of the residents' borough committees located in the historically bourgeois parts of the Jewish neighbourhood. Originally, this borough committee was set up by local shop owners who were worried about the decline of their neighbourhood and wanted to make it more attractive for their clientele. The committee had grown more professional over its ten-year existence and had started to focus on organizing a range of yearly cultural activities: a borough feast, Christmas drinks, a New Year's reception, a lantern procession for children and art expositions in vacant shop windows. These activities had dual aims: to make the neighbourhood more visible and eligible for funding from the city authorities, and to encourage the different communities living in the neighbourhood to 'live together'. This latter aim was especially directed at the borough's orthodox Jewish population.

30 Reinhard, 'Toward a political theology of the Neighbor', 29.

31 All respondents' names are pseudonyms.

According to Michel:

The drive to get into contact with the other 50 per cent [of the neighbourhood's population], the Jewish people, is really important to us in the borough committee. . . They live in front of you, behind you, next to you, but, actually, you don't have any contact. That is a very strange feeling.³²

Like most other non-Jewish Flemish respondents, Michel felt that the strictly orthodox Jewish fellow residents formed an extremely closed community, a ghetto of their own, within the neighbourhood itself. Their strict religiousness, so non-Jewish Flemings assumed, forbade Jews from interacting or working with others. 'To them, we are the *goyim*, right, you've probably heard that word before', explained Michel, 'the non-believers'. In the experience of non-Jewish Flemings, orthodox Jews do not return eye contact or greetings. They also do not engage in small talk. Michel complained: 'It doesn't interest them what you may have to say, you know. The potential cosiness (*gezelligheid*) that you could create is wasted on them.' Non-Jewish Flemings experienced this indifference as an alienating lack of basic social interaction. In Michel's eyes, overcoming this divide was the most important task for the borough committee, and he presented himself as committed 'to continue to try and make contact with that [Jewish] world'.

Michel and the other members of the borough committee considered the borough feasts crucial in this effort. The hope was that these feasts, as organized moments of intercultural enjoyment, might change mutual perceptions and inspire more openness in everyday interactions. Moreover, the organization of the borough feasts provided the committee with an occasion around which their desire for closer contact could take more concrete form, and the right conditions for rapprochement to be investigated and attempted. As a rule, the borough committee never planned feasts on the Sabbath, and usually tried to arrange kosher candy for the children's activities. Michel reported that his orthodox Jewish contacts were always explicitly invited to participate, suggesting, for example, they take a stand at the jumble sale to sell typical 'Jewish pastries'; or, in the case of the Antwerp Chabad-branch

32 Like Michel, many non-Jewish Flemings believed that at least half the neighbourhood population consisted of what they called 'Hasidic' or strictly orthodox Jews. My Jewish respondents felt that this estimation greatly exaggerated the actual number of Hasidic Jews (there are no official statistics about the Antwerp Jewish community, let alone about its various factions; estimates of the population as a whole run between 16,000 and 25,000). Though part of the orthodox Jewish population in the Jewish neighbourhood is affiliated with Hasidic courts (Belz, Satmer, Gur, Bobov, Witznitz, Chabad-Lubavitch, Pscheworsk, to name the most influential), not all strictly orthodox Jews are Hasidic. Orthodoxy in Antwerp also comprises what are called modern orthodox, and *yeshivishe* or *haredi* (strictly orthodox) orientations. In fact, the boundaries between different Hasidic communities, and between Hasidic Jews and those of other orthodox denominations, are quite porous and flexible in Antwerp compared to those in New York or Jerusalem.

with whom Michel had become well acquainted, to give out flyers and booklets with information about Judaism or Jewish holidays. These efforts and invitations, however, had not produced the response that Michel had hoped for. 'We really try to orientate ourselves to them', he said, 'and still we see only three Jewish persons turning up. But we keep on pushing!'

I got to know Michel and started to join in the borough committee's meetings while they were in the process of planning that year's borough feast. The feast's theme was going to be 'borough sounds', and there were going to be various stages for musical performances. The performances were chosen to represent the diversity of the communities living in the borough: a Polish choir, African gospel, jazz and classical music. When the discussion came to what would constitute 'Jewish music', Michel explained that there would be a klezmer band. A klezmer performance was arranged every year, in order for the feast to be, as Michel put it, 'already a little bit in the atmosphere, because Jews can enjoy that too'. However, Michel was well aware that the preferred music of his strictly orthodox neighbours was not klezmer but religiously inspired songs accompanied by electric keyboards. He concluded the discussion about 'Jewish sounds' with some exasperation: 'Jews have wonderful music, the most beautiful music, in their culture: klezmer. But the only thing you ever hear here are those electric organs that they play so loud that the windows almost burst out of their sills.'

The borough feast was well attended and included strictly orthodox Jewish children and their parents, some of whom were dressed in black silk *bekishe* (kaftans) and wearing *streimels* (fur hats worn on the Sabbath) due to the fact that the feast coincided with the Jewish feast of Sukkot. When the feast was evaluated during the next meeting, however, the committee members' feelings were mixed. They were pleased that orthodox Jewish residents had turned up but, at the same time, there was also a sense of disappointment. Due to the coincidence with the Jewish feast, so they complained, Jews had turned up in lesser numbers than usual and had not been allowed to participate in the jumble sale. Michel somberly predicted that there was a considerable chance that the borough feast—itsself always planned in the same weekend of October—would again coincide with some Jewish feast the next year. Referring to the yearly changing period of approximately four weeks of Jewish holy days starting with Rosh Hashana (the Jewish New Year) and ending with Simchat Torah, he sighed: 'That's a planning disaster, of course, but okay.'

The commitment that Michel showed to the idea of 'living together' and the amount of time and energy he invested in gaining contact with orthodox Jewish residents was particular to him and the most active of the 'active' non-Jewish residents. The desire he expressed to get closer to his orthodox Jewish neighbours, combined with a perpetual sense of disappointment that such contact was never quite achieved despite all kinds of efforts on the part of the non-Jews, was, however, shared much more widely. It was especially prominent among young middle-class white Flemings who had

relatively recently moved into the neighbourhood and for whom life in the inner-city, including its cultural and ethnic diversity, was a conscious lifestyle choice.

In Borgerhout, the presence of this new category of residents since the 1990s has been particularly significant. Though many 'new' or 'young Belgians', as they are commonly called, were to a large extent attracted to Borgerhout because of low property prices, they have also positioned themselves (and have been positioned in Flemish media) politically—and morally—in opposition to the 'old Belgian' population of supposedly 'negative' Vlaams Blok-voters. In the story now commonly told about Borgerhout, the positive view of cultural diversity and the active neighbourhood engagement of this 'new Belgian' middle class is perceived to have changed the former Borgerokko-image of Borgerhout into that of a 'hip' multicultural neighbourhood.

Jan and Yvon are one such 'new' middle-class couple. They recently bought a house in Borgerhout because, among other reasons, they found it important for their two young children to be exposed to different cultures and lifestyles. Like many white Flemings, and especially young middle-class families, they were quite happy with the basic day-to-day intercultural interactions in Borgerhout. They reported exchanging greetings, chats and laughs with the Moroccan families in their street; during Ramadan or other feasts they received pastry or other dishes; and the daughters of a neighbouring Moroccan family with whom they are particularly close regularly babysat their children. Jan was one of the volunteers organizing street feasts in their road, facilitated by Opsinoren. Like Michel, he and Yvon were heavily invested in getting their Moroccan neighbours to join these feasts. They bought only halal meat, put the name of the halal butcher on the invitation and invited people personally. They were also successful: several of the male Moroccan neighbours regularly joined the feasts, occasionally accompanied by their wives and children.

Even with all these interactions and moments of togetherness, however, Yvon expressed a nagging feeling that somehow a distance, a gap, remained between white Flemings such as themselves and their Moroccan neighbours. In her experience, *samenleven* in Borgerhout kept bumping into subtle limits, leading to a sense of 'disenchantment'. This was a feeling shared by many 'new' white Flemings, though they often found it difficult to articulate this distance. Yvon attempted to explain by arguing that she was convinced that the white Flemish residents in their street would, when invited, all attend a wedding of their Moroccan neighbours. 'Because', she said, 'fundamentally, you're interested in those people, or else you wouldn't come live here [in Borgerhout]'. She implied, however, that this would not be the case if roles were reversed.

I ask myself the question, what if we asked the eldest daughter [in her early twenties] of Khadija and Elias [the neighbours with whom they are particularly close] to come with us for a drink? She would *want* to go, but I don't know

whether she would be *allowed* to go. I very much doubt she would, and that is what I mean about the distance that exists. That you trust each other as neighbours, that you bring food and you come and borrow something if you need it, that's no problem at all. But to let a daughter come with us and have her participate in our world . . . I wonder whether that would succeed. I think there is some kind of fundamental distrust. Sometimes I do think that.

The focus on Jewish and Moroccan neighbours in the two vignettes is typical. When discussing neighbourhood life or when asked to describe their neighbourly relations, white Flemings, and especially 'active' residents like Michel or Jan and Yvon, focused almost automatically on their relations with *culturally Other* neighbours. This does not mean that the neighbourly relations they report having with fellow white Flemings are necessarily intimate or harmonious. It means, rather, that active white Flemings are less explicitly concerned with their relationships with other white Flemings, or with the depth of their participation in organized moments of togetherness, *irrespective* of the actual quality of these relationships. Jan and Yvon, for example, conveyed that the 'somewhat older Belgians' were in fact harder to involve in the street feasts than the 'allochthonous families' on their street, and this concern about 'old Belgians' as a hard-to-reach or -involve category was quite common. Although Jan and Yvon deplored this, they did not experience it as an indication of a deeper divide or mistrust that needed to be overcome. Neighbourly relationships without an intercultural component, then, did not induce in 'active' Flemish respondents the same ethical fantasy of openness and togetherness. Instead, these neighbourly relationships were evaluated in much more pragmatic terms: that is, a balance between respecting privacy and keeping a certain distance and lending a helping hand at times of need.³³

For this category of respondent, then, the Neighbour as a paradoxical and problematic figure, and the questions that this figure evokes, are almost exclusively projected on to and associated with *culturally Other* neighbours. It is their Jewish and Moroccan neighbours who induce these white Flemings to reflect on and fret about the (im)possibilities of true human encounters, and in relation to whom they feel an ethical responsibility. The effect of the

33 In fact, in the case of 'active' Flemish respondents, their neighbourly relations with *culturally Other* neighbours spanned more or less the same range (from conflict, to distanced but unproblematic, to friendly chats, to intimate and personal friendships) as those with fellow white Flemish neighbours. What differed was how these relationships were experienced and discussed. They usually framed problematic or aloof relationships with fellow white Flemish neighbours as a matter of personality (some people being more sociable than others) and of personal preference (some people liking street feasts, others preferring anonymity). When intimate neighbourly relationships with fellow white Flemish neighbours did develop, this was much enjoyed and appreciated, but it was described as the happy coincidence of a personal rapport rather than as an ethical goal to be pursued for the good of neighbourhood life more generally.

emergence of a culturalist politics in Flanders that posits cultural difference as the main frame to understand urban relations, has meant that, for these residents, the ethical problem of the Neighbour has been culturalized and has come to converge completely with the ideal of 'living together'. They feel this responsibility does not just lie in their individual neighbourly relations, but also in a responsibility as a 'Flemish we' to open up and be good to cultural Others. As I will elaborate below, the notion of the culturalization of the problem of the Neighbour helps to explain the particular form that the efforts of 'active' white Flemings take, as well as the specific emotional intensity attached to these efforts. However, not all is culturalization. The attempts of Michel and Jan and Yvon to open up to their culturally Other neighbours in the light of the figure of the Neighbour helps to identify that this opening up is, as they sense, also an *ethical* responsibility. Particularly against the backdrop of the success of Vlaams Blok/Belang, their desire for an encounter is a desire to do 'good' that is deeply bound up with their sense of Self in the neighbourhood context.

The other neighbour paradox I: overcoming cultural Otherness through cultural Otherness

In their attempts to answer the ethical call of opening up to their culturally Other neighbours, my 'active' and 'young' 'Belgian' interlocutors were confronted with one main question: how should they approach and persuade those neighbours to participate in encounters? In short: how does one get to know one's culturally Other neighbour? As they try to answer these questions, 'active' and 'young' 'Belgians' draw on dominant culturalist framings of difference.

In the recent culturalization of politics in Europe,³⁴ a distinction is produced between, on the one hand, a national 'we' of autonomous and individual citizens who are assumed to be free to enjoy culture and have beliefs and, on the other hand, an internal 'them' of ethnic and religious minorities perceived as '*being* culture and being ruled by it'.³⁵ In line with this cultural essentialism, strictly orthodox Jews and Flemings with a Moroccan background are therefore commonly perceived as forming bounded communities, as possessing a determining and fixed particular cultural essence, and to be driven by the

34 R. D. Grillo, 'Cultural essentialism and cultural anxiety', *Anthropological Theory*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, 157–73; Paul Silverstein, 'Immigrant racialization and the new savage slot: race, migration, and immigration in the new Europe', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 34, 2005, 363–84; Verena Stolcke, 'Talking culture: new boundaries, new rhetorics of exclusion in Europe', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1995, 1–24.

35 Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon.: Princeton University Press 2006), 151; Anne-Marie Fortier, *Multicultural Horizons: Diversity and the Limits of the Civil Nation* (London: Routledge 2008), 5. See also Baumann, *Contesting Culture*.

rules of an authoritarian religion. It is this culturalist notion of an uneven distribution of supposedly essential qualities that structures 'active' white Flemings' engagement with the question of how to get to know and approach their Jewish and Moroccan neighbours, as well as their disappointed sense of whether that is possible at all. I will describe the effect of this cultural essentialism on these neighbourly relations in the form of two paradoxes.

In the culturalist framework, the assumed religious and cultural essence of ethno-religious minorities not only makes them Other; it also makes them knowable. Notions of 'Jewish' or 'Moroccan' customs and traditions, of Jewish and Islamic religious rules allowing or prohibiting certain practices, and of Jews and Moroccans forming homogeneous communities provide active white Flemings with points of contact for rapprochement. In his drive to get into contact with the world of orthodox Jews, gaining knowledge about 'Jewish' culture and religion was a commonsense and important starting point for Michel. 'You live with these people and it is absurd to pretend you don't see them. They do that, but I don't want to do that too', Michel said. 'I want to know how things work with them, to understand them.' Thus he has attended, for example, a course on Jewish religious feasts. He was no exception; many non-Jewish Flemish residents told me about evening courses they had attended or books they had read about Jewish religion or the history of the Antwerp Jewish community. 'And, slowly, I do start to understand why they are the way they are', Michel added, summing up what he had learned: 'It is their religion that dictates, or prescribes: "It will be *thus*, and no other way".'

Such built-up cultural and religious 'knowledge' about the traditions and rules driving his orthodox Jewish neighbours formed for Michel the means by which to then organize encounters. By making room in the feast's programme for klezmer and African gospel, Michel and his colleagues hoped to create conditions in which Jews and Africans, recognizing something of their 'own' culture, would be tempted to come and enjoy themselves during the feast. Similarly, Michel invited Jews and tried to convince them to participate in the borough feast precisely by giving them the opportunity to do so by being present *through* references to essential cultural characteristics or representations. His request to Chabad-Lubavitch community leaders to participate in the jumble sale with a stand containing flyers and booklets about Chabad and Judaism in order to 'introduce themselves and what they do' to the non-Jewish public, as well as his invitation to sell 'Jewish' pastry during the jumble sale could be seen in this light. The logic behind many of the efforts of active Flemish residents to create 'living together' is the idea that the inclusion of references to (Jewish and Moroccan) culture, traditions or customs provides relatively safe and easy ways to take first steps towards a more in-depth transcultural encounter.

The notion of cultural essences thus functions for active Flemings as a kind of operating manual as to what makes their Other neighbours tick in the positive sense, providing practical clues and tools for what to include in order to

bring them towards encounter. The notion of the Other's subjugation to religious rules, on the other hand, functions as a potential handbook of what drives orthodox Jewish and Muslim neighbours in the negative sense, offering clues as to what kind of restrictions and prohibitions need to be accommodated in order not to offend their Muslim and Jewish neighbours.

Flemings, who usually see themselves as secular or as only mildly Catholic, perceive the religiosity of orthodox Jews especially, and that of Moroccan Muslims to a lesser extent, as consisting of clear-cut religious laws authoritatively imposed and obeyed without reflexivity or flexibility. Such religious rules of what is or is not 'allowed', as white Flemings usually put it, form potential barriers to the fulfilment of encounter (almost always involving the sharing of food, public mixed-gender gatherings and drinking alcohol) as imagined by Flemings. But precisely because Flemings imagine them to be essential to the motives of their culturally Other neighbours and to function in such a clear-cut way, religious rules are also taken to be 'knowable'. From the secularist point of view of white Flemings, religious restrictions are 'practical' problems that can thus be accommodated. This was Michel's hope: if he could gather enough knowledge of the religious rules that his orthodox Jewish neighbours lived by, he would be able to create the 'right' conditions and lift the barriers to Jewish participation in the borough committee's activities. Most resident committees have likewise developed creative techniques to adjust ideas of togetherness to religious restrictions: buying only halal meat, serving only vegetarian dishes, asking participants to bring food from their 'own culture', or providing detailed lists of ingredients for every dish served.

Living together as dissolving Otherness in *gezelligheid*

Though white Flemings appealed to the imagined cultural essences of their Other neighbours as a means towards encounter, they perceived it as a failure when those Moroccan or Jewish neighbours participated in organized gatherings only through such cultural forms. Yvon, for example, complained that, even in the case of the Moroccan neighbours she had come to know personally, the women did not partake in the street feasts in the way she had envisioned.

Khadija has joined us one time, or maybe two. But that's always just for a short time and then she goes back inside the house again. She prefers to make a big pot of soup and give that to us and then go back inside, rather than coming out and sitting with us, despite all our encouragements.

That, Yvon said, 'is of course not the concept of a *street* feast'. For Yvon, the soup had long ceased to be a cultural custom facilitating contact. Instead, she felt that the soup represented only the superficiality of the cultural form. What Yvon envisioned, instead, was for the street feast to be a

moment in which she could be with Khadija and get to know her in a 'deeper', more personal way, that is, to be with her in a manner that would go precisely *beyond* her 'Moroccanness'. Even though 'active' white Flemings thus try to achieve encounters using cultural Otherness as a blueprint, a true intercultural encounter is only achieved in their eyes when some kind of organic togetherness is reached in which cultural and religious Otherness is dissolved.

For Jewish and Moroccan residents, these 'encouragements' and calls to live together were problematic. On the one hand, they recognized the ethical aspect of the feasts and other neighbourhood happenings that 'active' white Flemings organized. They generally perceived their 'active' white Flemish neighbours to be 'good Belgians', and they appreciated street feasts, and the efforts specifically taken to involve them, as demonstrations of an exceptional openness, interest and kindness. On the other hand, Jews and Moroccans also were critical of the way in which 'active' white Flemings defined *samenleven* and the forms they chose for organizing encounters. They pointed out that white Flemings put great emphasis on participation in street feasts and other moments of joint enjoyment in the context of neighbourhood life. For Jews and Moroccans, however, this was only a marginal aspect of what were to them much more urgent problems of 'living together', such as racism, exclusion or increasing restrictions put on religious practices by the (local) state. The joint festive gatherings—or, more generally, what in Dutch is called *gezelligheid*—are not only relatively unimportant to Jews and Moroccans: some of them also find it a somewhat problematic mode for encounter in itself.

Gezelligheid can be loosely translated as 'cosiness' or 'sociability'. It is used to refer to a social situation that is enjoyed specifically as informal, authentic and in relaxed togetherness. For 'active' white Flemings, the dissolving of cultural Otherness in moments of informal, cosy sociality (whether during a casual chat or an organized feast) is what constitutes a true encounter and signals to them the achievement of true 'living together'. The sharing of food, consuming of alcohol and mixed-gender company are crucial conditions in the eyes of white Flemings for creating such cosy encounters. Strictly orthodox Jews, and Moroccans to a lesser extent, have argued that this means that they are called upon (and found wanting) in a seemingly neutral or universal value of 'living together' that in practice entails a very particularly 'Flemish' and 'secularist' mode of togetherness.

Jewish and Moroccan respondents thus made a distinction between their hesitation to participate in cosy neighbourhood feasts, on the one hand, and their commitment to *samenleven* as a much broader ideal, on the other. In the perception of 'active' white Flemings, however, it was the immersion of Jews and Moroccans in their own 'communities', cultural traditions and religions that caused them to lack a proper desire for, or commitment to, 'living together' *per se*. They perceived Jews and Moroccans as forming such close-knit and socially self-sufficient communities, for example, that they were not 'interested' in, or had 'no need' for, establishing intimate contacts with

others; indeed, as Michel put it, 'potential cosiness was wasted on them'. Similarly, active white Flemings felt that Jews and Muslims stubbornly clung to their religious rules as if they were far more important than the value of cosiness. No matter how many practical adjustments were made to dietary laws, Michel and Jan and Yvon complained, there was always another religious rule prohibiting Jews' and Muslims' participation; there was always the 'planning disaster' of some kind of Jewish feast popping up, spoiling their efforts to create cosiness.

In the eyes of 'active' white Flemings, what haunted their attempts to create 'living together' was that Moroccans and Jews were unable or unwilling to step out and get over their cultural Otherness. Cultural Otherness was thus simultaneously what 'active' white Flemings wanted to open up to *and* what they felt caused the failure of this opening up. In their perception, the Other's cultural essence created a net imbalance of desire for encounter: a frustrating inequality as to who, in the end, was prepared and longing to open up to whom.

The other neighbour paradox II: cultural Otherness reflecting a lack within the Self

The culturalization of the problem of the Neighbour has another paradoxical impact on the neighbourly engagements of 'active' white Flemings, one that is related to questions that are much less explicitly addressed by Levinas and Žižek. How does one reciprocate one's Neighbour? Can the nearby Other truly know us, and how, then, to make the Self available for encounter? These questions direct the focus away from the Neighbour as close-by Other. Instead, they make the Self visible as Neighbour. When considered in this light, a much more uncanny anxiety about the white Flemish Self appears to simmer underneath white Flemings' frustrations about their Jewish and Moroccan neighbours.

This insecurity surfaces, for example, when white Flemings are offered food by their Moroccan neighbours. This is quite a common practice, usually concerning traditionally 'Moroccan' dishes—couscous, specific pastries—or connected to religious celebrations, especially the end of Ramadan. Dora and Sus, both retired teachers who had lived in Borgerhout for over thirty years, had a good relationship with Sanae, their Moroccan neighbour across the street. Dora was pleasantly surprised when, at the beginning of their neighbourly relationship, Sanae turned up on her doorstep with a pot of *harira* (the traditional soup eaten at the breaking of the fast). It also, however, confronted her with somewhat of a problem. How to return this gesture? Because, as she pointed out: 'We, with our feasts, we do not have much that we do with neighbours.' What, white Flemings seem to ask themselves in such situations, do *we* have to offer?

I argue that this problem of a lack of self-evident and readily available forms through which the Flemings themselves could be neighbours to Moroccans

and Jews is in fact the other side of the asymmetric distribution of imagined cultural and religious essences that characterizes culturalist politics. It is a side effect of the position of those regarded as being 'free' of being ruled by culture or religion, and as forming the unmarked point from which Others are viewed. The Self, so positioned, runs the risk of being invisible to itself, ungraspable and unidentifiable, as it is imagined to lack the essences—culture, religion, community—through which it could be positively named and known. When seeing themselves through the eyes of their culturally Other neighbours, Flemings are confronted with a disturbing question: who are we, and how can we make ourselves desirable for encounter, if we lack the kind of visible and knowable qualities through which we understand our neighbours and that render them so interesting to us?

The lack that emerges within the white Flemish Self in the relationship with Jewish and Moroccan neighbours is clearer and more forcefully pressing on Flemings within another context discussed by Dora.

I wanted to say something about that: when there are these initiatives, then the *allochthonous* community often is the starting point. Like: 'we're opening up our culture to you'. Or: 'we're proud of this'. And the, you know, *autochthons* are being invited. But the other way around, the other gesture, hardly ever happens. Things like dinners, or an 'open house', or like, 'things from our culture', that's never done by us.

Sus: But the problem with food poses itself immediately: if it is not halal, then they, certain groups, simply can't participate without problems.

Dora: True [silence]. . . But I do find that a lack, because now it is as if, when they integrate, it is always from their feeling—and they are allowed to have that feeling, of course—that *their* culture is so nice, and *we* are allowed to get acquainted with it.

Anick: But then, what is the culture that you would want to . . . ?

Dora: I know, I know, that's . . . [silence]

As argued above, 'active' white Flemings tended to explain their experience of an imbalance—that they 'always have to be the ones taking an interest' or 'be the ones who have to adjust'—by blaming the cultural Otherness of Jews and Moroccans. Dora's helpless silences and her inability to name some kind of knowable and presentable 'Flemishness' points to her being distressed by quite a different possibility: that the real impediment to the fulfilment of a true encounter may be a lack within the Flemish Self. In the reflection that the culturally Other neighbour casts back to white Flemings as neighbours, their unremarkableness, their supposed individuality and autonomy from culture or religion, emerges not as a superior, positive characteristic making them modern and rational and open. Instead, it emerges as a lack: as that which

makes them, as neighbours, strangely empty, boring figures who fail to inspire desire or to even present a substance that Others could open up to. Paradoxically, it is precisely the ethical desire for encounter induced by the culturally Other neighbour's imagined cultural visibility and essence that reveals the white Flemish Self to be strangely invisible and formless.

Rereading in this light, Michel's constant remarks that Jews are not *interested* in living together and do not *want* contact, or Yvon's frustration with Khadija's refusal to come and chat with her during the street feast, takes on a different colour. Underneath the self-assured claims that Jews and Moroccans are the problem, due to their assumed unwillingness to get over their encapsulating community and religious rules, there is a sense of rejection and a flicker of self-doubt. What if they are right about us? What if it is not that they are not properly interested in us, but that we are, quite simply, not interesting? It is this second paradox, and the anxiety about the white Flemish Self that it reveals, that, I suggest, makes it impossible for active white Flemings to accept and truly acquiesce in the disappointing response they receive to their rapprochement. The true fulfilment of the encounter is forever haunted by the disturbing possibility of the Self as a fundamentally undesirable absence. This gives the engagement of the active white Flemings with 'living together' its frantic quality; why they, as Michel said, 'keep on pushing!'

Postcolonial Europe and neighbourliness as a site of contentious ethics

The commitment to encounter across cultural difference of so-called 'active', white Flemish residents in Antwerp, and their perpetual sense of disappointment, is deeply shaped by Flemish culturalist politics and the political anxiety over a supposed deficit of 'living together'. When we consider their commitment to 'living together' through the figure of the Neighbour, however, an aspect comes to the fore that cannot be completely reduced to culturalist politics. In its abstract form, so I have argued, the neighbourly relation is a paradox in which the Neighbour's nearby Otherness induces both an ethical desire for total openness, as well as the uncanny sense that this Otherness forms a haunting presence. Due to the force of culturalist politics in postcolonial Europe, including in Flanders, this paradox seems to have been projected on to and associated almost exclusively with the close-by *cultural* and *religious* Other. Seen in this way, vernacular neighbourly relationships across cultural difference, and the desires and frustrations around these relationships, are not just the product of the culturalist political project of 'living together'. They emerge as the site at which residents of multi-ethnic neighbourhoods in postcolonial Europe draw on, and struggle with, the culturalist understandings of Self and Other espoused in social cohesion politics, in order to engage with existential and ethical questions of the (im)possibilities of human interconnection.

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