

**“THE NETHERLANDS IS DOING WELL. ALLOCHTOON WRITING  
TALENT IS BLOSSOMING THERE”: DEFINING FLEMISH  
LITERATURE, DESIRING “ALLOCHTOON” WRITING**

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Nederland heeft Hafid Bouazza ... Nederland heeft Khalid Boudou  
.... Nederland heeft Abdelkader Benali ... En Nederland heeft een  
paar mindere goden .... Ja, Nederland doet het goed. Allochtoon  
schrijftalent bloeit er. En in België? Er is misschien maar één iets dat  
de Vlaamse boekensector liever zou hebben dan een degelijk  
boekenprogramma op tv: een handvol allochtone schrijvers.<sup>1</sup>

With the above passage, the Flemish reviewer and publicist Marc Cloostermans opens an essay in his book *De tak waarop wij zitten*, in which he tackles the following issue: compared to the range of successful “allochtoon” writers debuting in the neighbouring Netherlands, there were up to that point no “allochtoon” writers emerging on the literary scene in Flanders. Around the turn of the millennium, not only Cloostermans but also various other critics and policymakers were bothered by the mysterious absence of “allochtoon” writers in Flanders. Where were they? Why did not they speak? What was wrong with Flanders that it did not have any? Although these questions were addressed in various ways, it was hard to find individuals who would dispute the assumption that Flanders was in need of “allochtoon” writers.

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Cloostermans, *De tak waarop wij zitten: Berichten uit de boekenbranche*, Antwerp: Epo – UNESCO Centrum Vlaanderen, 2006, 71ff.: “The Netherlands has Hafid Bouazza ... The Netherlands has Khalid Boudou .... The Netherlands has Abdelkader Benali ... And the Netherlands has a few minor Gods.... Yes, the Netherlands is doing well. Allochtoon writing talent is blossoming there. And in Belgium? There is probably only one thing that the Flemish book sector desires more than a high quality book programme on television: a number of allochtoon writers.”

In this essay, I focus on the generally shared desire for “allochtoon” writings in Flanders, particularly in combination with the incessant reference to the thriving of “allochtoon” writing in the Netherlands. I argue more specifically that this discursive pattern reveals an attempt to define and distinguish Flemish literature from Dutch literature; paradoxically, this is accomplished by duplicating the literary situation in the Netherlands, and attempting to create in Flanders a category of “allochtoon writing” similar to the one existing in Dutch literature.<sup>2</sup> Differently put, I suggest that the Flemish literary field is caught in the oxymoron of a Flemish multicultural literature that it posits; on the one hand, the need to assert a singular cultural identity informing Flemish literature and language – particularly in its complex relationship to Dutch literature and language – and on the other hand, the notion that one of the important conditions of possibility for this body of Flemish literature to exist is an openness for cultural difference and diversity.

A number of aspects will be addressed. First, I discuss how a cultural paradigm demarcating Flemishness from cultural otherness is at work in socio-political discourses. Subsequently, I focus on how multicultural literature is framed in terms of desiring a category of cultural difference. I discuss more specifically how government policies were issued and initiatives taken to stimulate authors of ethnic minority background to enter the literary field, which were based on a number of, as I argue, problematic assumptions about the notion of culture and multiculturalism. Finally, I examine how the insistence on cultural difference, dominating the government controlled approach to the creation of Flemish multicultural literature, cannot be understood without reference to the longstanding but uneasy relationship between the Netherlands and Flanders, between Dutch and Flemish literature.

Exploring this tension and teasing out some of its repercussions, I situate my inquiry against the background of literary criticism of migration literature, particularly in relation to the assumption recently made that migration literature holds the promise of subverting nineteenth-century ideologies of national literature and offers ways of imagining new, transnational forms of community and cross-cultural

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<sup>2</sup> For elaborations on multiculturalism in the Dutch literary field, see Laroui and Nijborg’s, as well as Minnaard’s contributions in this volume.

mobility.<sup>3</sup> As I will show, however, literary discourses about migration literature in Flanders suggest that migration literature has served to reassert cultural and national ideas on the basis of which a culturally distinct Flemish literature is defined against other culturally defined collections of texts, be they Dutch or "allochtoon". I tentatively conclude that assumptions about migration literature's deconstructing challenge to ideas of language, culture, and nationhood may well be considered premature in the context of weaker national literatures such as Flemish literature, struggling as these literatures today are to assert themselves with, and against, other European literatures on the global literary market.

#### **Transitions in "Flemishness" in times of global change**

Flanders, which once figured as a predominantly rural and impoverished region, has over the past century developed into one of the wealthiest regions of Europe, yet is steeped in a regional nationalism that has propelled the country towards increasing federalization. Throughout these reforms, Flanders developed itself into an autonomous cultural and regional entity that not only distinguishes itself from its French-speaking southern counterpart Wallonia, but also from its northern neighbour, the Netherlands. Moreover, while Flanders was once an emigration region (by the end of the nineteenth century, mostly to France, but also to the US), it gradually developed into an immigration zone, attracting a large part of the current documented and undocumented migrants in the country.<sup>4</sup> Despite (or precisely because of) the history of federalization, transnationalism, and immigration, nationalist aspirations and discourses have thrived in Flanders as much as or even more than in other European nation-states. Its status as a political unity within the federal nation-state of Belgium seems to reinforce,

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer", *Contemporary Literature*, XLVII/4 (Winter 2006), 527.

<sup>4</sup> The immigration flows to Belgium before 1974 were mainly the result of a national immigration policy soliciting low-skilled workers in order to compensate for the labour shortage after the Second World War. Workers were initially recruited from Italy, Spain, and Greece, and in the early 1960s also from Morocco and Turkey. Yet since 1974, a date at which the national labour migration policy was frozen, immigration from non-European countries exclusively occurs through marriage, asylum, or education.

rather than downplay the importance of nationalist discourses, an assumption informed by the observation that today, ongoing communitarian tensions in the political arena energize nationalist and separatist voices who proclaim their ambition to realize an independent nation-state of Flanders.

In the Flemish political arena, the electoral success of the Flemish right and extremist right nationalist parties, such as NVA and Vlaams Belang, indicate a growing popularity of nationalist discourses in the last two decades. New ideas and notions of Flemishness are developing in a context characterized by the increasing regionalization of a Flanders that has increasingly defined itself over the last twenty years as a culturally autonomous, economically self-reliant, homogenous entity.<sup>5</sup> These discourses – eclectic as they are in ideological terms – translate social problems between the various communities in Belgium into a cultural vocabulary and inspire new imaginations of the Belgian nation-state, such as confederalism. They make older national imaginations of Belgium seem obsolete and inform apocalyptic visions predicting the breakdown of the entire country.

Since the existence of the Belgian nation-state, the Flemish Movement has successively demanded cultural, political, and economic rights, and, in the process, transformed from an elitist movement to a broadly supported popular movement that has redefined the notion of “Flemish culture”.<sup>6</sup> Today, the Flemish demand for more economic autonomy is no longer only supported by supporters of the classical Flemish Movement – such as the Flanders Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VOKA) – but by all major political parties in Flanders, by public intellectuals who define themselves as progressive (for example, De Gravensteengroup) and by

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<sup>5</sup> See also K. Arnaut, S. Bracke, B. Ceuppens, S. De Mul, N. Fadil, and M. Kamaz, *Een leeuw in een kooi: De grenzen van het multiculturele Vlaanderen*, Antwerp: Meulenhoff-Manteau, 2009, 16. This line of argument is developed by Bami Ceuppens in her research on nationalism and autochthonism in the Flemish context (*Congo Made in Flanders? Koloniale Vlaamse visies op “blank” en “zwart”*, Ghent: Academia Press, 2003; “Allochthons, Colonizers, and Scroungers: Exclusionary Populism in Belgium”, *African Studies Review*, XLIX/2 (September 2006), 147-86; “Plus que ça change, plus que ça resta la meme chose? From Flemish Nationalism to Flemish Autochtony”, *Social Anthropology*, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> Arnaut *et al.*, *Een leeuw in een kooi*, 16.

members of elitist organizations (for example, De Warande). An important reason why economic demands supporting notions of Flemishness are so widely supported, as Bambi Ceuppens has noted, may be explained by the notion of "welfare chauvinism", coined by Kitschelt and McGann.<sup>7</sup> The latter refers to the idea that the state guarantees that its social policies work to benefit one's "own people" and one's own nation, and not "foreigners". In these terms, the question becomes: how could Flemish people preserve their claim to the welfare state, given that the welfare state is increasingly under pressure in a global market economy marked by international migration, the international outsourcing of labour, and the ageing of the population?<sup>8</sup>

While nineteenth-century nation-states defended the civil rights of their subjects against foreigners on the basis of ethnic identity, today regions such as Flanders draw a distinction between "allochtoon" and "autochtoon", where "autochtoon" rights to claim cultural identity are prioritized over the rights of all other inhabitants of the same location. In the process, juridical definitions of citizenship are replaced by cultural ones. Cultural distinctions between "autochtoons" and "allochtoons" are invoked to preserve the rights of those "who came first" at the expense of "foreigners".

The deployment of cultural vocabularies and frameworks is by no means an entirely new phenomenon, nor does it pertain to Flanders exclusively.<sup>9</sup> But the culturalist framework of identity and difference

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<sup>7</sup> Ceuppens, "Allochthons, Colonizers, and Scroungers", 147; Arnaut *et al.*, *Een leeuw in een kooi*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Arnaut *et al.*, *Een leeuw in een kooi*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Scholars have documented the emergence and development of culturalist paradigms in the post-Cold War era by means of which ontological differences between cultures are posited and social events and conflicts between states and regions are understood as civilization or "cultural clashes" (Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations", *Foreign Affairs*, LXXII/3 [1993], 22-50). Culturalist frameworks draw on older Orientalist traditions – especially towards Islam – in which a range of overlapping categories – colonized peoples, foreigners, non-native speakers, refugees, "allochtoons" – are imagined as "others", while culture is considered the basis of irreconcilable differences distinguishing these others from Westerners. In the process, the culture of these "others" is almost self-evidently attributed the ontological status of a stable, innate race and is associated with a series of pejorative connotations marking difference and inferiority. At the heart of culturalist narratives, then, are two related processes: an increasing inferiorization or abnormalization of others and, also,

translates itself in specific ways in the Flemish region, where cultural definitions of Flemishness are continuously made, remade, and contested with reference and by contrast to a series of cultural others: the French-speaking southern counterpart Wallonia, the northern neighbouring country of the Netherlands, and ethnic minority populations within the Flemish region.

In so doing, discourses of Flemish cultural and national identity often draw on a series of past experiences and memories that conjure meanings ranging between the opposite poles of supremacy and suppression. On the one side of the spectrum, one finds expressions of Flemish cultural identity that are taking shape in relation to older, national-romantic mythologies supporting the emancipation of Flemish language and culture. Such notions of Flemishness were primarily blossoming during and in between the World Wars, and have carried along with them dark memories of Flemish collaboration with German Nazism. Today they also manifest themselves most clearly in the recent history of Flemish racism and the exclusionary imagination of Flanders in terms of whiteness distributed by extremist nationalist parties such as *Vlaams Belang* in the political arena.

On the other side, there are cultural expressions of Flemishness drawing on collective memories and sentiments of subjugation, which can be retraced to a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century legacy of struggle for the recognition of Flemish language and cultural identity against the Belgian political elite, who were predominantly Francophone. Notwithstanding that today the Flemish language and culture could hardly be considered “subaltern”, older feelings and memories of Flemish minoritarianism continue providing emotional material for the construction of Flemish subalternity.<sup>10</sup> As the

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an appeal to protect and defend the customs and values of one’s own culture. The apocalyptic pathos characterizing discourses of cultural otherness feed utopian expectations about one’s own culture and vice versa. See also the introduction to this volume.

<sup>10</sup> Since at least the second part of the twentieth century, however, the status and reality of the Flemish language and region have considerably changed alongside successive state reforms that have granted an increasing degree of self-determination to the Flemish region, including policies of language rights. Apart from being Belgium’s most prosperous economic region, Flanders is now also the largest of the three official language communities and consists of approximately six million native speakers.

columnist Mia Doornaert points out, despite the fact that Flanders can hardly be considered a minority culture in Belgium, dominant self-definitions imagine Flemish culture not as a self-assured majority, but as an “incurable minority with complexes”.<sup>11</sup> Another observer describes Belgium as “the only state in the world where different oppressed majorities coexist, each with a claim of superiority over the other but all suffering from a sense of inferiority”.<sup>12</sup> As we will see in what follows, the Dutch language, literature, and literary culture of the Netherlands prove to be important points of reference and indeed complicate definitions of Flemish cultural identity in terms of subalternity.

As a realm where ideas and discourses of cultural identity are shaped, remodelled, and contested, literature has historically played an important role in the search for expressions of Flemish cultural identity. Inventing a glorious mythological past for Flanders, the nineteenth-century literary tradition of historical novels, such as Hendrik Conscience’s *De leeuw van Vlaanderen* (*The Lion of Flanders*), illustrate this point clearly. In what follows, I examine how notions of Flemish cultural identity are defined and manifest themselves in literary discussions about migration literature.

### **Towards a Flemish multicultural literature**

When compared to the Netherlands, Germany, and France, where a growing number of texts written by authors from ethnic minority backgrounds had been published, for some years Flanders had to accept that there was no comparable trend visible in Flanders. “Allochtoon” writing, hence, has often been framed as a lack in Flanders, as an abnormal absence in need of clarification, and a problem that required solving.<sup>13</sup> In what follows, I will discuss how the non-existence, rather than the emergence, of migrant writing in Flanders prompted government intervention and subsidy policies aimed at the publication and promotion of these texts. Exploring in particular the focus on authors of ethnic minority backgrounds in these

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<sup>11</sup> Mia Doornaert, “Wrokkige Vlamingen”, *De Standaard*, 14 September 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Wigny, trans., in Ceuppens, “Allochthons, Colonizers, and Scroungers”, 149.

<sup>13</sup> Gaettens makes a similar observation in the Danish literary context; see the essay “New Voices – Most Wanted: The Search for a Danish Multicultural Literature” in this volume.

subsidy policies, I argue that attempts to render Flemish literature multicultural are supported by a desire for a category of “allochtoon literature”. The latter is problematic not least since the requirement of this category partly seems to fulfil the wish that a Flemish body of literature stands comparison with other European literature, particularly the literature of the Netherlands.

In 2000, then-Flemish Minister of Culture Bert Anciaux announced that diversity and intercultural relations would be among the main issues addressed by his cultural policy programme, and this remained so during the two successive terms of his tenure. Anciaux formulated his rationale for doing so as follows:

Nieuwe inwoners van Vlaanderen moeten kansen op emancipatie krijgen. Zij moeten kunnen deel hebben aan de diversiteit van het cultuurgebeuren, zij moeten er een vanzelfsprekende plaats in opnemen. Dan komen er even evident nieuwe culturele uitingsvormen tot stand, die een wezenlijke verrijking vormen voor de Vlaamse samenleving.<sup>14</sup>

This passage illustrates “a politics of recognition” in Charles Taylor’s sense of the term, by means of which Taylor referred to the question of whether the institutions of liberal democratic government can make room – or should make room – for recognizing the worth of distinctive cultural traditions.<sup>15</sup> According to this logic, efforts should be made to support ethnic minorities to enter the cultural scene in Flanders from which they are by and large absent so that their presence could become considered self-evident. The latter social objective – emancipating ethnic minorities – is subsequently connected to a cultural advantage for Flemish society; it is hoped that the participation of ethnic minorities in the cultural domain will stimulate cultural innovation and “enrich” Flemish society. The verb *verrijken* –

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<sup>14</sup> Bert Anciaux, “Beleidsnota: Cultuur 1999-2004”, CXLIX/1 (12 January 2000), Flemish Parliament, 30: “New inhabitants of Flanders should have opportunities for emancipation. They should be able to participate in the diversity of the cultural scene, where they should take up a natural position. Then new cultural expression forms will emerge in an equally self-evident fashion, which will fundamentally enrich Flemish society.” (Unless stated otherwise, this, and all further translations of quotations, are mine.)

<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor *et al.*, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.

“to enrich” or “to make rich” – metaphorically denotes “to supplement” while it may also invoke an economic register of benefit.

Anciaux’s policy programme has been translated into practice by the government-subsidized Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren (Flemish Literary Fund), which stipulated a “intercultureel letterenbeleid” (“intercultural literature programme”). The intercultural literature programme aims to improve contacts between the Flemish literary world and authors living in Flanders who did not learn Dutch as their first language. One of the principal objectives of this programme is to facilitate access to the literary field for debuting authors of ethnic minority descent.

Though it nowadays exists in a different format, the literary writing contest “Colour the Arts”, organized by the non-profit organization KifKif with financial support from the Flemish local government, is one of the most acclaimed and arguably most successful initiatives launched to achieve this purpose. For various authors and artists – Kenan Serbest, Jamal Boukriss, Sadie Choua, or Rachida Lamrabet – this contest proved to be one of the entry points in the literary and cultural field; though, it should be added that many of these individuals were, in addition to their participation, also occupied in other activities that contributed to their increasingly wider audiences. For instance, Sadie Choua won the literature contest in 2004, but she released her widely acclaimed and awarded documentary *Mijn zus Zahra* (*My Sister Zahra*) in 2006.

Through the organization of literary master classes, workshops, and information sessions, ethnic minorities are also invited to attend introductions to the literary publishing world and to apply for creative writing courses. For instance, in the workshop “Vreemd in het schrijven” (“foreign in/to writing”), organized by Passa Porta, an international literary centre in Brussels, debuting young talents were guided towards publication under the auspice of distinguished Flemish authors like Kristien Hemmerechts, Stefan Hertmans, and Peter Verhelst.

The effects of these workshops on authors of ethnic minority descent making their debut are difficult to estimate, as debuting always depends on a range of factors. Both Mustafa Kör, who published his first novel, *De lammeren*, in 2007, and Rachida Lamrabet, whose first novel, *Vrouwland*, came out in the same year,

participated in this workshop. “Vreemd in het schrijven” has now discontinued, though other cultural organizations offer similar creative writing courses and projects specifically (though not always exclusively) aimed at an audience of aspiring writers from ethnic minorities.

Underlying the focus on authors from ethnic minorities and their access to the literary field are a number of assumptions that reconfirm cultural divisions between “allochtoons” and “autochtonen”, which permeate public discussions on multiculturalism where they serve to reinforce the exclusion of ethnic minorities from the Flemish imagination.

First, a connection between writing and cultural identity is established, which in effect acculturates the writings of authors from ethnic minority descent. Access to the literary field of the individuals targeted in these policies is made to depend on their cultural and linguistic background. It is precisely this point that Jamila Amadou criticizes in the newspaper column entitled “Wij spreken pas als jullie luisteren” (“We will only speak if you listen”).<sup>16</sup> Amadou argues that since the only position in the Flemish literary field available for “allochtoon” writers is to be a spokesperson for his or her cultural community, migrant writers have been absent from the literary field. They do not wish to speak if they can only do so because of their representative function, and choose to remain silent if there is no audience available that is really prepared to listen to them. Regardless of whether what is at stake here is, as Amadou claims, really a voluntary self-silencing mechanism among aspiring authors, her assumption that Flemish audiences may not hear, or may not be prepared to listen to, literary voices that fall beyond a specific stereotypical understanding of what an “allochtoon” literary voice precisely must sound like, resonates with Gayatri Spivak’s contention that the subaltern cannot speak. The literary scholar Tom Van Imschoot similarly observes that “the text of an allochtoon writer, ... even if he writes about the autochtoon majority, stands for the

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<sup>16</sup> Jamila Amadou, “Wij spreken pas als jullie luisteren”, *De Standaard*, 13 October 2004.

minority perspective and as such may or may not enrich Flemish literature ...".<sup>17</sup>

A second issue that deserves critical scrutiny is the notion of culture deployed. Since opportunities for debuting authors are made to depend on their cultural background, it is suggested that it is very clear what an individual's culture is, or should be. Cultures are considered to be static and homogenous entities that can be neatly put side by side as with a mosaic or patchwork. According to this logic, the result of this series of cultures will subsequently be called "diversity" or "multiculturalism".<sup>18</sup> This view ignores, however, the dynamic nature of cultures, characterized as these inherently are by contradictions, ambivalences, and internal differences of class, gender, religion, age, ideology, and so on. Moreover, the focus on debuting authors from ethnic minority cultures reveals that two different notions of culture are being deployed. Culture is something that sticks to writers of ethnic minority descent, but not to "autochtoon" writers. The former are supposed to have cultural attachments; they represent a cultural tradition by means of which they could enrich the diversity of the Flemish cultural scene; they are, in other words, culturally specific. This notion of culture is subsequently defined in opposition to a notion of "Flemish culture", which symbolizes universal and collectively shared customs and traditions, and which is not considered as a culturally specific feature characterizing "autochtoon" writers and their work.

A final point relevant to our discussion is that by focusing on writers from ethnic minority backgrounds, the burden of multicultural literature in Flanders rests on the shoulders of under-represented target groups. Policymakers are indeed situated in the institutional positions from which they are entitled to specify the ways in which the underrepresented group should render Flemish literature "multicultural". At the same time, however, they remain alleviated from all

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<sup>17</sup> Tom Van Imschoot, "Naar een Vlaamse minderheidsliteratuur?", *Rekto Verso*, XXXIII (January-February 2009): <http://www.rektoverso.be/artikel/naar-een-vlaamse-minderheidsliteratuur> (accessed 13 June 2012): "als de tekst van een allochtoon, die zelfs wanneer hij over de autochtone meerderheid schrijft voor de blik van een minderheid staat, én die als dusdanig de Vlaamse literatuur al dan niet verrijkt, afhankelijk van het kritische oordeel."

<sup>18</sup> For a similar critique of diversity but in the Swedish context, see Magnus Nilsson's contribution in this volume.

responsibility in rendering the Flemish literary field more inclusive. Debuting authors, from this perspective, receive a task. Whether or not they achieve it, is made to depend not on anything or anyone except themselves, their individual talent, and eventually their degree of success in gaining access to the literary field. In the process, some very clear ideas are imposed upon ethnic minorities, particularly about how their emancipation should develop; for example, whether they should acquire knowledge about the literary field through info-sessions, or they should improve their writing skills in Dutch.

It is worthwhile mentioning in this respect that policymakers and publishers – a group by and large composed of white males – hold institutional authority over under-represented groups of potential ethnic minority authors for whom they set an agenda for emancipation. The form of identity politics interwoven in the intercultural literature programme, then, is imposed from above.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the distinct cultural background of debuting authors is called upon in efforts to create a Flemish literature that is multicultural by composition, the preservation of Flemish cultural identity, as I will suggest in the next section, is strategically invoked to secure the diversity of Dutchophone literatures. Whereas in the latter case, however, the right to claim one's own cultural particularity is demanded by various actors of the Flemish literary field themselves, in the former case, the cultural particularity of debuting authors is forced upon them by the literary establishment. As a result, divisions between "autochtoons" and "allochtoons" informing dominant imaginations of Flanders in the socio-political field can also be perpetuated in the literary field.

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<sup>19</sup> The term "identity politics" finds its roots in the Anglo-Saxon context, where it is often used as a generic term denoting the political mobilization of minorities: feminists, homosexuals, or ethnic minorities. In the Belgian and Flemish contexts, immigrant populations have increasingly mobilized themselves to express their culturally distinct concerns and preoccupations in the public domain. In so doing, they claim space and demand the right to express their cultural identity, a possibility which many of them perceive to be denied to them due to the imposition to integrate or assimilate into mainstream Flemish culture. See Arnaut *et al.*, *Een leeuw in een kooi*, 111-29.

**Desiring migration literature, constructing Flemish literature**

In the previous section, I discussed how the assumption that Flanders for a long time lacked migration literature has framed the discussions and state interventions in terms of the desirability of a particular form of literature defined by cultural difference. The reasons why this literature is sought after are most of the time unsaid, as if they are assumed to be self-evident, but this makes it all the more striking that the lack of migration literature has been insistently connected and contrasted to its steady growth in other European countries, particularly in the Netherlands, where migration literature has burgeoned exponentially since the late 1990s. Taking as a starting point that the Netherlands is such an important reference point, in this section I argue that discussions about migration literature in Flanders can be seen as instances that reveal a desire to demarcate the literature and literary field in Flanders as an autonomous entity *vis-à-vis* Dutch literature. I will do this by focusing on the difficult relationship between Flemish and Dutch literature and literary fields. In particular, I discuss how the cultural paradigm is invoked to assert the autonomous status of Flemish literature and the literary field as compared with the literature and the literary field of the Netherlands. As we have seen earlier, this very same cultural paradigm is also drawn upon in the creation and stimulation of a Flemish multicultural literature.

In order to understand the significance of references and comparisons to Dutch migration literature, such as those already cited, it is useful to consider the historical affiliations and linguistic connections that form important factors in the intense, yet complex, cultural relationships that have existed for centuries between Flanders and the Netherlands. Today, busy cultural traffic crosses the borders between Flanders and the Netherlands, from the import and export of cultural products and other forms of crossover, exchange, and cooperation between cultural institutions and producers. Flanders and the Netherlands have also historically been each other's priority partners in international policy programmes.

Collaborations and initiatives are undoubtedly fostered by the idea that Flanders and the Netherlands share an important historical heritage, culture, and language. In 1995, the Dutch and Flemish governments signed a cultural treaty (*Cultureel Verdrag Vlaanderen-*

*Nederland*) regulating collaboration in the fields of culture, education, and welfare. The Nederlandse Taalunie (Dutch Language Union) was formed in 1980 to institutionalize and stimulate cooperation between the Netherlands, Flanders, and the Dutch-speaking former colony of Suriname in the domains of language and literature. Under the flag “One language, three countries”, the Dutch Language Union declared its intention to stipulate agreements and policies aimed at the integration of the Dutchophone languages and literatures of these countries, for example a common literary policy for Flanders and the Netherlands.<sup>20</sup> The latter objective is supported by the fact that due to the common language and the economic integration of a number of literary publishing houses the literary production, distribution and book markets in the Netherlands and Flanders are already interwoven.

However, despite, or precisely because of, the close linguistic and cultural affiliations and economic collaborations in the domain of literature, the relationship between Flanders and the Netherlands is not – nor has ever been – without a range of sensitivities, difficulties, and ambiguities. The “integration model” endorsed by the Dutch Language Union has so far not fully been realized. Some critics have rejected the integration model because it bears the undesired legacy of the Greater Netherlandism ideology, a mode of thought that aspires for the unification of the Netherlands and Flanders as a singular political state, and which was primarily popular among extreme right fascist organizations in both the Netherlands and Belgium during the Second World War.

Further, expressing their objections, critics of “the integration model” borrow extensively from the vocabulary of multiculturalism. For instance, in the year report of the Flemish Literary Fund, it is stated:

De systematische integratie van het Nederlandse en Vlaamse letterenbeleid is een te verre gaande optie. Een maximale samenwerking met aandacht en respect voor ieders eigenheid is een meer realistische benadering. De samenwerking met beide Nederlandse

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<sup>20</sup> “Cultuur: Bilaterale samenwerking tussen Nederland en Vlaanderen”, 1 August 2010: [http://www.benelux.int/nl/almanak/07-08-01\\_almanak.asp](http://www.benelux.int/nl/almanak/07-08-01_almanak.asp) (accessed 13 June 2012): “Het Verdrag inzake de Nederlandse Taalunie (1980) heeft tot doel ‘de integratie van Nederland en de Nederlandse gemeenschap in België op het gebied van de Nederlandse taal en letteren in de ruimste zin’.”

Fondsen op basis van gelijkwaardigheid waarborgt deze eenheid in verscheidenheid.<sup>21</sup>

Criticism of “the integration model” expressed in this passage clearly recalls familiar objections raised against the notion of “integration” in debates about multiculturalism. Here, if integration means the movement of Flemish language and literature into the Dutch mainstream so as to gain full access to the opportunities and rights available, then integration poses a threat to the cultural identity of the Flemish language and literature. If integration implies that the dominant language and literature of the Netherlands is homogenized, then the cultural particularities of the literature, language, and literary culture in Flanders require safeguarding. Instead of integration, “respect for each other’s identity” and “equality” is required for the two literary fields to thrive independently and collaborate fruitfully.

Relatively young compared to its Dutch counterpart, the Flemish Literary Fund was established in 1999 and is itself suggestive of a broader movement towards professionalization of the Flemish literary field in the last fifteen years. It is a state-subsidized body that promotes, stimulates, and financially supports “Dutchophone literature in Belgium and abroad so as to improve the socio-economic position of Flemish authors and translators”.<sup>22</sup> In light of the latter emancipatory objective, one could understand the objections raised against the integration model: “... integration of the Dutch and Flemish literary policies would obstruct diversity and the autonomous opportunity for development.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren, “Jaarverslag 2002”, 48: [http://www.vfl.be/\\_uploads/Downloads/downloads/VFL\\_JAARVERSLAG\\_2002.pdf](http://www.vfl.be/_uploads/Downloads/downloads/VFL_JAARVERSLAG_2002.pdf) (accessed 2 May 2011): “The systematic integration of the Dutch and Flemish literary policy is one bridge too far. Maximal collaboration with attention and respect for each other’s identity is a more realistic approach. The collaboration between both Dutchophone funds on the basis of equality guarantees unity in diversity.”

<sup>22</sup> “Over Het VFL”: <http://www.fondsvoordeletteren.be/nl/1/content/141/over-het-vfl.html> (accessed 2 May 2011): “Het VFL steunt de Nederlandstalige letteren en de vertaling in en uit het Nederlands van literair werk in de brede zin van het woord. Op die manier helpt het de sociaaleconomische positie van Vlaamse auteurs en vertalers te verbeteren.”

<sup>23</sup> Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren, “Jaarverslag 2005”, 125: [http://www.vfl.be/\\_uploads/Downloads/downloads/VFL\\_JAARVERSLAG\\_2005.pdf](http://www.vfl.be/_uploads/Downloads/downloads/VFL_JAARVERSLAG_2005.pdf) (accessed 2 May 2011): “... een integratie van het Nederlandse en Vlaamse

The perceived threat of Flemish cultural identity, language, and literature is undoubtedly informed by older notions of Flanders as an annex of the Netherlands and the Flemish language as a somewhat incorrect, inferior form of the Dutch language. As Kevin Absillis recently noted, older perceptions of Flemish provincialism, narrow-mindedness, and backwardness associated with the marginal position of Flanders compared with the Netherlands are very much alive and are still hampering the credibility of Flemish publishers in their attempt to publish fiction.<sup>24</sup> Despite the increasing professionalization of the Flemish literary field, however, the perception generally remains that the epicentre of literary activity today is located in Amsterdam, as it used to be in the past. The largest number of Flemish authors are affiliated with Dutch – not Flemish – publishing houses; more Dutch books are imported and read in Flanders than Flemish books are imported to the Netherlands; most foreign-language books are translated by Dutch, not Flemish, translators.

Consequently, the question of a space in which Flemish literature and the literary field could develop autonomously is clearly at the core of discussions, and cultural paradigms are invoked to secure this space. Some critics indeed contend that underlying the integration model is the misconception that the shared Dutch language in the Netherlands and Flanders would naturally produce a shared culture and literature. As Inez Boogaerts puts it: “Commonality in language does not imply a shared cultural consciousness.”<sup>25</sup> In the terms of Flemish publisher Harold Polis:

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letterenbeleid op korte termijn [zal] remmend zou kunnen zijn voor de diversiteit en voor ieders autonome ontwikkelingskansen.”

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Absillis, “Vlaamse uitgevers en hun gevecht tegen de bierkaai”, *Apache*, 1 March 2010. The Flemish author and intellectual Tom Naegels described Flanders as “an amputated periphery” to the Netherlands, suggesting that older imbalances have continued to define the cultural relationships between Flanders and the Netherlands, while at the same time the Flemish literary field has grown further away from the centre. Naegels criticizes in particular that the Flemish have lost touch with Dutch literature due to the increasing autonomous status of Flemish literary field which has made it also increasingly provincial (Tom Naegels, “Vlaanderen is een geamputeerde periferie: We kennen de Nederlandse literatuur niet meer”, *De Standaard*, 10 March 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Inez Boogaerts, “‘Voor mij zeede gij ongelooflijk schoon’: Een lange traditie van aantrekken en afstoten in the Lage Landen”, *Boekman*, XVIII/67 (Summer 2006), 12.

The existence of a Dutchophone literature does not mean that there is not such a thing as a Dutch and Flemish literature .... Flanders and the Netherlands function very differently as nations, as societies, as cultures .... Their book markets and reading cultures are no exception to this.<sup>26</sup>

The cultural paradigm, then, manifests itself not only in discussions about multicultural literature but also in discussions about the relationship between Dutch and Flemish literature. Opportunities for actors and authors of the Flemish literary field are made to depend on cultural difference, in a way that recalls the Flemish Literary Fund’s focus on the ethnic minority background of debuting authors.

Intercultural policies tend to consider Flemishness as a general and self-evident notion of culture in contrast to a particular notion of cultural identity on the basis of which the emancipation of authors of minority descent is supposed to be realized and migration literature is promoted. In discussions of the relationship between Flemish and Dutch literature and literary policy, however, Flemishness, in turn, is understood and emphasized as a particular notion of cultural identity. The latter is strategically fruitful for arguments against the integration model, which emphasize that Flemish cultural distinctiveness needs to be preserved in order to secure the diversity of Dutchophone literatures. The assumption that diversity is realized through an emphasis on cultural identity resonates in the focus of intercultural policies, focused as these are on the cultural distinctiveness of authors of ethnic minority descent. In this context, however, discourses of cultural identity lead to considerably different effects. The visible emphasis on the cultural distinctiveness of “allochtoon” writers relies upon implicit contrasts between these authors and “autochtoon” Flemish authors, marking their writings with an exotic otherness that serves to define Flemish literature negatively.

Apart from the discourse of achieving diversity through emphasizing cultural particularity, discussions about migration literature intersect with discussions about the relationship between

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<sup>26</sup> Harold Polis, “Het wederzijds huwelijksbedrog”, *Boekman*, XVIII/67 (Summer 2006), 24-25: “Het bestaan van een Nederlandstalige literatuur betekent niet dat er geen Nederlandse én een Vlaamse literatuur zou zijn .... Vlaanderen en Nederland functioneren heel anders, als land, als maatschappij, als cultuur .... De boekenbranche en de leescultuur vormen geen uitzondering.”

Flemish and Dutch literature in yet another way. The frequently cited lack and desirability of migration literature in Flanders, especially in comparisons to Dutch literature, harbours the desire that Flemish literature should not lag behind Dutch literature. From this perspective, the desirability of migration literature is a yearning for a literature in Flanders in its own right, which is at once multicultural and culturally distinct from Dutch literature. If only Flemish literature were multicultural, it could stand the comparison with Dutch literature and achieve equal status. From this perspective, where Flemish cultural identity is invoked as a requirement to secure the diversity of Dutchophone literatures and languages, cultural diversity becomes a condition on the basis of which Flemish cultural identity confirms its existence.

#### **Migration literature in Flanders: outlining a recent phenomenon**

The emergence of, and interest in, migration literature is a phenomenon that has occurred in various Western European literatures, but probably nowhere more recent than in the Flemish region. Usually (albeit reductively) collected under the container label “allochtoon” writing, the literature written by ethnic minority authors approximately has emerged on the Flemish literary scene in the last decade. In what follows, I will present a short overview of the most important authors and texts involved in this recent trend without, however, pretending to render an exhaustive list.

The first publications that came into print were predominantly written in non-fiction genres. This seems natural, given that many of these are authored by individuals who had already made acclaim as politicians, public intellectuals, or newspaper columnists. In 2002, the socialist (now turned liberal democrat) politician Mimount Bousakla published *Couscous met frieten (Couscous and Fries)*, a collection of columns, initially published in the newspaper *De Morgen*, about multicultural topics such as racism, the practice of arranged marriage, Moroccan folklore, and eating customs. Another publication that presents a critical vision of multicultural policy is *De smaak van de ongelijkheid (The Taste of Inequality)*, published in 2004 by the philosopher and socialist politician Tarik Fraihi. It is Fraihi’s attempt to enter the public discussion about integration, tolerance,

emancipation, and diversity, a debate from which, as Fraihi says, "allochtoon" voices had been absent.

In 2003, the Arab political activist Dyab Abou Jahjah published *Tussen twee werelden: De roots van een vrijheidsstrijd (Between Two Worlds: The Roots of a Freedom Fight)*. Written as an autobiography, this book integrates Jahjah's personal life story into the history of the Lebanese wars, the Israeli invasion of 1982, and European immigration policy. Jahjah, who sought asylum from Lebanon in Belgium, is the founder and former leader of the Arab European League (AEL), a Pan-Arab movement that supports the interests of Muslim immigrants in Europe but is mainly active in Flanders, and to a lesser extent in the Netherlands. The acclaim of *Between Two Worlds* is undoubtedly informed by the public controversy that arose around its author in 2002, when Jahjah was arrested and detained under suspicion of inciting violent street riots, charges of which he was acquitted in 2008.<sup>27</sup> Although Jahjah announced his return to his native country in 2006, he continues to publish non-fiction works in Dutch. *Dagboek Beiroet Brussel (Diary Beirut Brussels)*, the romanticized account of Jahjah's personal journey to Lebanon during the events of the war in July and August 2006, was published in 2007 by the Antwerp-based publishing house Meulenhoff-Manteau.

In addition to these non-fiction works, the recent stream of literature of migration in Flanders has so far been strikingly dominated by female authors of Muslim descent. *Het boek Saida (The Saida Book, 2005)* is composed and promoted as a joint venture by Tom Naegels, a young male Flemish writer, and Saida Boudjaine, a young woman from Moroccan descent on whose autobiographical life narrative *Het boek Saida* is based. Narrating the experiences of a Moroccan family in Belgium, the book focuses on the life story of Saida, a girl forced into an unhappy arranged marriage by her family, who eventually succeeds in mobilizing this very same family into ending this marriage.

Two young women from Moroccan descent, Naima Albdioni and Jamila Amadou, started off as newspaper columnists but moved on to

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<sup>27</sup> For a more detailed analysis of AEL-discourse as Arab identity politics and its representation in the Flemish public domain, see Sarah De Mul, "Oproerkraaiers in het culturele landschap: De AEL en de identiteitspolitiek voor etnische minderheden in Vlaanderen", *Freespace Nieuw Zuid*, X (2003), 60-75.

enter the domain of fiction. Together with the work of renowned authors such as Tom Lanoye and Jef Geeraerts, Albdioni's fiction debut appeared in an anthology of short stories entitled *Gelezen en goedgekeurd. Nieuwe verhalen van Vlaamse schrijvers* (*Read and Approved: New Narratives by Flemish Writers*). Amadou's short story "De ijzeren vogel" appeared in the anthology of creative writings entitled *KifKif: Nieuwe stemmen uit Vlaanderen*.<sup>28</sup> The latter volume collects narratives and poetry by young authors of ethnic minority backgrounds, many of whom, for example Sadie Choua, Ali Wauters, and Kenan Serbest, were nominees in the literary writing contest "Colour the Arts" organized by the Flemish Community and KifKif. As an after-effect of the literary writing contest, then, the anthology is arguably one of the most direct and widely acclaimed effects of the intercultural literature policy.

In the subtitles of both these anthologies, the emphasis put on the Flemishness or the Flemish location of the authors whose work is collected is significant in a double sense. There is first of all a clear ideological statement involved in the notion that there exists such a thing as a culturally or geographically defined category of "Flemish writers" or "voices from Flanders", whose work can be collected and anthologized. The reification of this category is all the more suggestive when seen in light of the fact that ongoing arguments are being made (and rejected) which aim at shaping a particular collective identity construction by means of which the literature written in Flanders or by authors living in Flanders can affirm its existence. Moreover, by stressing the Flemishness or Flemish location of the writers, the subtitles harbour a critique of the exoticizing label of the "allochtoon" author and present an inclusive vision of a Flemish multicultural literature, which covers "autochtoon" writers as well as writers from Moroccan descent, such as Naima Albdioni and Jamila Amadou. As a clear attempt to define a collection of texts by an

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<sup>28</sup> *Gelezen en goedgekeurd: Nieuwe verhalen van Vlaamse schrijvers*. Antwerp/Amsterdam: Meulenhoff-Manteau, 2005; *KifKif: Nieuwe stemmen uit Vlaanderen*. Antwerp/Amsterdam: Meulenhoff-Manteau, 2006. The Antwerp based publisher of the two anthologies, Meulenhoff-Manteau, has also published works by Amadou and Albdioni mentioned earlier. It has had a remarkable share in the publication of the texts mentioned here and more generally also in fiction in Flanders and the proliferation of "allochtoon" writings.

inclusive notion of cultural or geographical identity, the Flemishness to which these anthology titles refer is at the core of my argument.

In addition to these anthologies, a number of authors started publishing fiction individually. The first book of fiction written by a Flemish author of African origin is entitled *De Feniks (The Phoenix)* by the author of Nigerian descent Chika Unigwe. It was shortlisted for the 2005 *Vrouw & Kultuurprijs* for best first novel by a woman. The story, set in the Belgian city of Turnhout, explores themes such as grief, illness, and loneliness. By featuring a central character who shares the novelist’s Afro-European background, the narrative also exposes some shortcomings of Belgian society, such as its pervasive unwelcoming atmosphere and the superficiality of many of its inhabitants. Although at its publication, *The Phoenix* was well received as a hopeful trendsetter for other authors coming from an ethnic minority background, the novel has also been met with reservations. Objections were raised, for example, against the fact that the novel was originally written in English – not in the Dutch language – and was only afterwards translated into Dutch. It gives an indication of the significance of the Dutch language as a criterion for the label of a “Flemish author”, even though he or she is of African origin.<sup>29</sup>

Another recently acclaimed author and public intellectual is Rachida Lamrabet, a female author of Moroccan descent and a lawyer for the Centre for Equality of Opportunity and Opposition to Racism in Brussels. Lamrabet debuted with the prize-winning short story “Mercedes 207” in the previously mentioned anthology *KifKif*, a short story about the difficulties and hardships encountered by first-generation Moroccan men on their arrival to Belgium during the 1960s. Lamrabet’s debut novel *Vrouwland (Woman Country)*, which saw publication in 2007 and won a prestigious debuting prize, describes the experiences of four young people in search of a better life. Central is the painful soul-searching of a Moroccan woman who has immigrated to Belgium and finds herself torn between a western

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<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed outline of writings by Flemish authors of African descent, see Elisabeth Bekers, “Chronicling Beyond Abyssinia: African Writing in Flanders, Belgium”, in *Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe*, eds Elisabeth Bekers, Sissy Helff, and Daniela Merolla, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009, 57-69.

lifestyle and the traditions of her homeland. Lamrabet also published a collection of short stories entitled *Child of God* in 2009 and the theatre play *Belga* in 2010.

Together with Unigwe, Lamrabet, who is arguably at present the most acclaimed author of ethnic minority background, seems to have paved the way for even more new names that keep on making their appearance on the literary scene in Flanders. In 2009, Naima Albdouini published her prose debut *Voyeur*, and Inan Akbas, a young male writer with Turkish roots, self-published his debut novel *De nullen (The Zeroes)*.<sup>30</sup> In 2010 the young Moroccan-Flemish Fikry El Azzouzi saw *Het schapenfeest (The Sheep Party)* published by the Dutch publishing house Van Genneep, a tragi-comic novel about the life of an eleven-year-old boy called Ayoub. Inan Akbas and Fikry El Azzouzi are just two recent examples of a steady, though so far still rather submerged trend of debuting authors with an ethnic minority background in Flanders, which will most certainly expand in the near future. Meanwhile, the still relatively absent category of “allochtoon” writers in Flanders continues to be a mystery that keeps intriguing public debate.<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

Postcolonial discourses have often stressed the political potential of conditions of displacement, migrancy, and hybridity and saw these as providing subversive perspectives on notions of the nation-state and nationalism. Figurations of transnational border-crossing and

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<sup>30</sup> Akbas published his novel through a privately owned publisher, called Beefcake Publishing. With respect to some of the problems involved in the intercultural literature policy as elaborated in this essay, it is interesting to consider Akbas’s self-publishing as an alternative to this government-led approach. In March 2011 moreover, the prose debut *Terroriste uit liefde (Terrorist out of Love)* written by the Muslim-Flemish publicist Eva Vergaelen was published as an e-book by the aforementioned organization Kifkif (whereas her non-fiction book *Thuis in de Islam (At Home in Islam, 2008)* was published by the publishing house Meulenhoff-Manteau). Both Akbas’ and Vergaelen’s prose debuts, however, received minor critical acclaim.

<sup>31</sup> Until most recently, the difficult emergence of “allochtoon” writers in Flanders has been a topic of discussion in the literary field. To mention a number of occasions: “Literair salon – Allochtone auteurs” on 17 September 2009, organized by Gynaika Zuiderpershuis, and “MO\* debat Allochtone lezers en schrijvers” on 9 November 2010 by Boekenbeurs.

metaphors of mobility – “the nomad” (Rosi Braidotti) or “in-betweenness” (Homi Bhabha and Avtar Brah) – proved useful lenses to question these notions, which are conventionally perceived as natural and static. Since the last decade, however, theorists have also warned against too-celebratory readings that deploy migrancy and displacement as theoretical metaphors and remove them from their material conditions. Timothy Brennan argues that “cosmo-theory”, as he pejoratively terms it, wrongly assumes that national sovereignty has “been transcended, the nation-state relegated to an obsolete form, and the present political situation is ... one in which newly deracinated populations ... are outwitting a new world order in the name of a bold new transnational sphere”.<sup>32</sup>

In this essay, I have outlined and examined how discourses of cultural nationalism and cultural identity play a role in the reception and promotion of migration literature in Flanders. I have argued that the emphasis on the cultural distinctiveness of “allochtoon” authors in intercultural literary policies find a remarkable parallel in the visible efforts made to distinguish an autonomous literature and literary field in Flanders from Dutch literature on the basis of a culturally distinct identity. However, discourses of cultural identity have divergent effects according to the circumstances in which, and by whom, they are expressed. Targeting authors of ethnic minority descent, intercultural policies venture towards creating a category of literature based on “cultural otherness” even though they simultaneously and paradoxically aim to contribute to creating a multicultural literature in Flanders through the stimulation of this underrepresented category of “allochtoon” authors. I have also argued that definitions of Flemish literature in terms of its cultural distinctive nature are constructed through references to Dutch literature in discussions about the lack and desirability of migration literature in Flanders.

In light of these observations, it is worthwhile to refer to the essay “Alive and kicking? Multiculturalism in Flanders”, in which sociologist Dirk Jacobs observes that the idea of multiculturalism – the recognition and protection of immigrants as distinct ethnic groups – is very much embraced in Flanders, while it is in crisis in many

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<sup>32</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*, New York: Columbia University, 2006, 219.

other European countries.<sup>33</sup> One way in which Jacobs accounts for the resilience of the focus on ethnic and cultural diversity in the Flemish policy of multiculturalism is by connecting it to the competition between Flemish and Francophones in the Brussels-Capital Region, in which Flemish arguments for cultural distinctiveness are strategically significant: “The recognition and promotion of ethno-cultural diversity could have an added instrumental value in safeguarding the influence of the Flemish community and the de facto importance of the Dutch language in the Belgian capital.”<sup>34</sup>

Considering the ongoing attempts to distinguish Flemishness in the face of a series of others, be they Dutch, Francophone, or “allochtoon”, it seems that the promises and imaginations of a world beyond cultural nationalism which postcolonial theoretical discourses have read in migration literature and narratives of cross-cultural mobility may well be premature. Whether the search for culture and nation-based paradigms of literature and identity will continue to determine the reception and promotion of migration literature in weaker national communities, such as the Flemish one, remains to be seen.

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<sup>33</sup> Dirk Jacobs, “Alive and Kicking? Multiculturalism in Flanders”, *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, VI/2 (2004), 280-99.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.