

A Belated Arrival: Flemish Immigrant and Ethnic-Minority Writing

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Abstract

Belgian Néerlandophone immigrant writing generally started to flourish only in the 2000s and has principally been led by second-generation Moroccan-origin authors. Research about immigrant and ethnic-minority writing, which to date is equally a borderline phenomenon, is influenced by two external traditions: research on Dutch immigrant writing and postcolonial feminist theory. Although state-sponsored efforts have been made to stimulate the burgeoning careers of ethnic-minority writers (rather than, for example, rendering the literary field structurally more inclusive), the success of these efforts seems rather limited whereas, in recent years, various literary and artistic projects were initiated by ethnic-minority artists, curators and authors outside of the established structures of the literary field. Taken together, ethnic-minority and immigrant writing and its scholarship promises to continue to develop as a steady, though thus far still rather submerged, literary trend in Flanders.

Introduction

Since its onset a multilingual and culturally diverse country, Belgium has a national literature which is by definition decentralised and multiple, divided as it is into two main literary traditions following the most prominently spoken languages in the country, the Belgian variant of Dutch – Flemish – and Belgian French.¹ Up till today, discussions have not abated about the possible mutual influences and intertwined historical developments of these two arguably distinct national bodies of literature in different languages (e.g. Berg 1990). Yet, Flemish and Belgian Francophone literatures are predominantly discussed in parallel and separate fields of literary criticism – to be more specific,

¹ German is the third language in Belgium and is spoken by a small community of about 70,000 on the Belgian border with Germany (for more on Belgian literature in German, see Sepp 2010).

in subfields of the wider disciplines of Neerlandophone and Francophone literary studies respectively.

Although the literature written in Flanders was regarded as an integral part of Dutch literature until the early nineteenth century, the question of Flemish literature's autonomy and distinctiveness from Dutch literature is now relentlessly provoking heated debates. While scholarly discussions of Francophone Belgian literature are less influenced by self-conscious assertions of cultural identity and regional nationalism, a critical awareness of Francophone Belgian literature as a distinctive presence within international Francophone culture is also visible.

These specific features of Belgian literature and scholarly debates have evidently influenced the emergence and development of Belgian (Flemish and Francophone) immigrant or ethnic-minority literature and the scholarship existing about this literature, not least in its multilingual and decentralised nature. Given that they are situated within the wider literary fields of Neerlandophone and Francophone literary studies, it seems justifiable to study Belgian Neerlandophone and Francophone ethnic-minority writings in separate, yet parallel, scholarly contexts, not least given their manifold distinct features and idiosyncrasies related to the specific linguistic context in which they have been published. In what follows, I focus on ethnic-minority and immigrant writing in Flanders and its scholarship.

Whereas Belgian Francophone immigrant writing has emerged approximately since the 1970s, and has primarily been dominated by first-generation authors of Italian origin, Belgian Neerlandophone immigrant writing generally started to flourish only in the 2000s and has principally been led by second-generation Moroccan-origin authors. Up until today, immigrant and ethnic-minority writing and its literary research is still a marginal phenomenon in Flanders. Its relative non-existence in the Flemish part of Belgium is interesting in itself, especially compared to very different developments in the Francophone part of Belgium, as well as to the flourishing of immigrant writing in neighbouring countries.

The relatively limited production of ethnic-minority and immigrant writing in Flanders also implies that, thus far, it has only been a borderline topic of literary research. Most efforts that have been made have come not so much from scholars of Flemish literature or Dutch literary criticism but, rather, from scholars whose main specialism is literature, migration and multiculturalism in other European literatures and neighbouring countries such as Britain, the Netherlands, France or Germany. Additionally, concepts of immigrant writing – cultural (rather than national) identity, 'accented' language, minority versus majority – which have gained increasing attention in the international

academic arena over recent decades have given new impulse to the question of Flemish literature's position in a wider literary field that has its epicentre in Amsterdam.

Historical Background and Development of the Field

The currently predominant image of Belgium as a 'bicultural' country, rather than a multicultural nation, has never been a reality, not even before Belgium became a country of immigration. In the nineteenth century, massive internal migration took place in Belgium as Flemish peasants in the north were attracted by the industrialisation of the southern region of Wallonia. Yet after World War II, the labour-hungry Walloon industries also started to recruit more workers from surrounding countries and, later, from Poland and Italy. The government pursued several bilateral agreements with Italy (1946), Spain (1956), Greece (1957), Morocco (1964), Turkey (1964), Tunisia (1969), Algeria (1970) and Yugoslavia (1970).

As in other European countries, officially halting all new immigration of foreign workers in the course of the 1970s did not manage to stop immigration, although the flow abated and changed, especially with regard to the types of immigration and the national origins of the migrants. In the 1990s the number of undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers fleeing from Iran, the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the republics of the former USSR (Gemenne 2009: 48) increased dramatically.

In 2005, 10.2 per cent of the total Belgian population were born abroad, of whom 8.2 per cent were of foreign nationality (Gemenne 2009: 48). Most of Belgium's immigrants are Europeans, while Moroccans and Turks, as the fourth- and sixth-largest immigrant groups, represent the main non-European immigrant groups (2009: 57). While the immigrant population makes up 28.5 per cent of the Brussels-Capital region, with much higher concentrations in certain neighbourhoods in poor areas, it forms barely 5 per cent of the total population in the Flemish region. The figure is 10 per cent for the Walloon region, the oldest area for immigration in the country.

The immigration histories of the Francophone south and the Flemish north of the country have evolved in uneven ways. Early waves of Italian immigrants in Belgium have predominantly settled in the Francophone south, while successive immigrants from Maghreb countries have settled in the Flemish-speaking north of Belgium. This partly explains the dissimilar developments in the emergence of immigrant and ethnic-minority writing in Flanders and Wallonia. Italians, the most numerous of immigrants legally

residing in Belgium, have made up for the oldest tradition of Belgian Francophone immigrant and ethnic-minority writing since the 1970s. Moroccan- and Turkish-origin second-generation Belgians have dominated the stream of immigrant and ethnic-minority writing in Flanders, which originated only about fifteen years ago and which will be the main focus of this overview. Apart from these immigrant groups, generally speaking there is no direct correlation discernable between the size of the ethnic-minority group and literary output.

The starkly dissimilar development of Francophone and Neerlandophone immigrant writing has certainly been affected by Belgium's regionalised history of immigration (policy). Since the late 1980s, migration policy has been the (financial) responsibility of the Belgian federal government – more specifically of the Royal Commission for Migration Policy (*Koninklijk Commissariaat voor Migrantenbeleid*) – but the Flemish, Francophone and Brussels communities gradually defined their own integration policies (Coffé and Tirions 2004: 30). The demographic immigration histories of the Francophone south and the Flemish north of the country have also evolved in uneven ways. For example, early waves of Italian immigrants in Belgium predominantly settled in the Francophone south, while successive immigrants from Maghreb countries settled in the Flemish-speaking north.

However, the reasons why Flemish immigrant and ethnic-minority writing emerged so much later than its Francophone counterpart are more difficult to pin down. To address this question, one might consider a range of differences between the socio-cultural experiences of Maghreb- or Italian-origin immigrants in Flanders and Wallonia respectively, as well as dissimilarities between those of first- and those of second-generation immigrants. One could also try to explain the existing time gap between first-generation Maghrebi immigrants settling in Flanders and the moment when second-generation Moroccan-origin writers started publishing literary texts. With regard to the latter question, it is reasonable to assume that, in the 1970s, the first generation often expected to stay only as temporary 'guests' in Belgium/Flanders and were generally not stimulated to engage with Flemish culture and language. This climate changed radically in the late 1980s, when the realisation came that immigrants were here to stay and the phenomenon of 'multiculturalism in Flanders' increasingly became a topic of public debate in the wake of the electoral success of the extreme-right nationalist party *Vlaams Belang* ('Flemish Matters'). Compared to their parents, then, second-generation Maghrebi immigrants grew up in Flanders with Dutch as their primary or secondary language and accepted Belgium more readily as their home country. Explaining the relative absence of immigrant and ethnic-minority writing in Flanders, some observers (Amadou 2004) also pointed to the failed implementation of 'multicultural'

cultural policies or the ever-growing sentiments of cultural nationalism in Flanders, which would continue to play a role in excluding ethnic minorities from Flanders as an imagined community, with its culture and literature.

Not all immigration flows to Belgium have thus far brought about immigrant and ethnic-minority writing, in either the French or the Dutch language. For example, immigration from Spain, Greece or Yugoslavia has not yet yielded any literary production. Additionally, some of the major immigration flows to Belgium are intra-European and 'immigrant' writers from EU countries such as France, the Netherlands, Germany or Britain are usually not recognised as such. Renowned Dutch-origin writers such as Benno Barnard, Marc Kregting or Marc Reugebrink, who are based in Flanders, would conventionally not be labelled 'immigrant or ethnic-minority writers'. Moreover, there are several non-Western intellectuals, poets and writers living in Flanders who are writing in their mother tongues, and enjoying critical acclaim in their home countries and abroad – for example, Emad Fouad, Mohammed Berrada, Taha Adnan or Madjid Matrood. However, they have so far remained invisible in Flanders, perhaps because they do not write in Dutch and they orient themselves to readerships elsewhere. Current discussions on immigrant and ethnic-minority writers in Flanders principally focus on second-generation authors of Moroccan (Rachida Lamrabet, Sadie Choua, Fikry El Azzouzi), Turkish (Mustafa Kör, Kenan Serbest, Inan Akbas, Birsen Taspinar) and Nigerian (Chika Unigwe) origin.

Altogether the above overview shows that the Flemish context is characterised by what has been called a certain 'belatedness' concerning the emergence of ethnic-minority and immigrant writing, especially compared to the growing bodies of ethnic-minority writing that has emerged in recent decades in neighbouring European countries such as the Netherlands and Germany (e.g. Behschnitt, De Mul, Minnaard). An important background for discussing this belatedness is certainly the cultural nationalism that governs the structures of the Flemish literary field – a small subfield of the Dutch-language market place dominated by Dutch publishing houses in Amsterdam.

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, one steeped in a regional nationalism which has propelled Belgium towards an increasing federalisation. Throughout these reforms, Flanders turned 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. In parallel, the Flemish literary field has, over the last 20 years, experienced a steady professionalisation and autonomy, with burgeoning Flanders-based literary organisations, publishing houses and journals.

The lack of immigrant and ethnic-minority writers in Flanders has certainly not gone unnoticed. Critics, authors, policymakers, publishers and ethnic-minority intellectuals have regularly framed ethnic-minority writing as 'lacking' in Flanders – as an abnormal absence in need of clarification, a problem that requires solving. As is often the case with 'problems' concerning ethnic minorities, the debates on the non-existence of ethnic-minority and immigrant writing in Flanders can be seen as a barometer for deeper and wider social problems there. In framing the absence of ethnic-minority authors as a problem, interlocutors, in various ways, projected onto the desired category of ethnic-minority writers their own ideas about the state of Flemish literature, culture and society and about how these should develop in the future. When the much-desired immigrant writers made their debut in Flanders, then, they certainly had expectations to fulfil.

In the course of the 1990s, debates about the lack of immigrant and ethnic-minority writing in Flanders took place against a background of blooming public debates about multiculturalism and integration. This context was marked geopolitically by a new centrality of cultural discourse and conflict after the end of the Cold War, a development which coincided in Flanders with the rise of racism and xenophobia and the electoral success of the extreme-right Flemish nationalist party *Vlaams Belang*. Although ethnic minorities had, for a long time, been part of the fabric of Flemish society, during the 1990s they became more visible in discussions about multicultural society in politics, newspapers and the media. It is worth noting that, in public debates on multiculturalism, an ethnocultural paradigm characterised by a cultural binary between 'autochtony'/'allochthony' and Flemish versus non-Flemish citizens has been prevalent, even though academics and public intellectuals have repeatedly and in various ways disapproved of the binary vocabularies for keeping ethnic minorities from imaginations of Flanders (e.g. Abou Jahjah 2003; Arnaut *et al.* 2009; Blommaert and Verschueren 1998; Fraihi 2004; Maly 2009).

In debates about the perceived lack of immigrant and ethnic-minority writing and the search to compensate for it, a number of interlocutors took part and expressed concern. The first group of people with perhaps the most obvious – economic – stake in the promotion of ethnic-minority and immigrant writing are publishers. That ethnic-minority writers in the West can be commercialised as exotic marketing products is a point that Graham Huggan (2001) already convincingly showed in his book *The Postcolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins* (see also Brouillette 2007). In the course of the 1990s in the Netherlands, the popular commercialisation of ethnic-minority and immigrant writing by publishers such as Vassallucci provided a concrete example of how the margins could effectively be marketed, as convincingly suggested by authors such as Kuitert (2001), Nijborg and Laroui. In this context, we can understand

how publishers participated in debates on the non-existence and subsequent promotion of ethnic-minority writing in Flanders – for example, Harold Polis, editor of what used to be one of the largest general literary publishing houses in Flanders – Meulenhoff Manteau. In so doing, Polis could be seen to reconcile his social and literary commitment to the wellbeing of Flemish culture and society (as exemplified in his essays) with his commercial interests as editor.

A second group of people who showed concern about the non-existence of ethnic-minority writing in Flanders is comprised of left-wing politicians, people working in multicultural socio-cultural organisations and ethnic-minority intellectuals and public figures. Names that spring to mind are, for example, the left-oriented magazine **Mo*, the multicultural organisation Kifkif and writers such as Rachida Lamrabet or Jamila Amadou. In general terms, the latter sought clarification of the absence of ethnic-minority writers in the prevailing climate of xenophobia and racism and the perceived failure of the country's multicultural policy. For example, in the newspaper column entitled '*Wij spreken pas als jullie luisteren*' (We only speak when you listen), Moroccan-Belgian writer Jamila Amadou (2004) argues that ethnic-minority writers have been absent from the literary field since they reject the only position in the Flemish literary field available to them, namely as spokesperson for his or her ethno-cultural community. Her point is that at stake is an ethno-cultural understanding of what an ethnic-minority literary voice should sound like, which is limiting.

Finally, anxieties about the non-existence of ethnic-minority and immigrant writers were also articulated by literary critics and scholars of Flemish literature – for example, Mark Cloostermans, the reviewer of the newspaper *De Standaard*, or the scholar Tom Van Imschoot. In relation to these interlocutors, it is worth pointing out that, in debates about the non-existence of ethnic-minority writing, the neighbouring country of the Netherlands is often cited as an example of 'good practice' when it concerns the proliferation of the genre, as in the following fragment by Marc Cloostermans (2006):

[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. Allochtonous 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 allochtonous writers (2006: 71–72).

Thus Cloostermans opens the essay in his book *De tak waarop wij zitten* (2006, *The Branch on Which We Sit*), in which he tackles the following issue. When Flanders compared itself to European neighbouring countries such as

the Netherlands, where a growing number of texts written by authors from ethnic-minority backgrounds had been published, it had to face the fact that there was no comparable trend visible in Flanders. Cloostermans' awareness of a negatively marked exceptionality of Flanders compared to the literary situation in the Netherlands (rather than, for example, Francophone Belgium) indicates not only how he perceives the Flemish and Dutch literary fields as separate, yet closely intertwined spheres, but also how he desires the situation in Flanders to equal the one in the Netherlands. From this perspective, it seems that the desire for a multicultural literature expressed by some interlocutors can indeed not be divided from the broader discourse on Flemish national/cultural identity and from a Flemish longing to withstand the competition (as an independent 'national' literature) with Dutch literature (De Mul 2013).

In light of these debates, the then socialist Flemish Minister of Culture, Bert Anciaux, announced in 2000 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's policy programme was elaborated into specific policies for the literary field by the Flemish Literature Fund (*Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren*), an autonomous governmental institution that promotes Dutch-language literature in Belgium and abroad, particularly the literary production of Flemish authors. The Flemish Literature Fund stipulated a so-called 'intercultural literature programme' (*intercultureel letterenbeleid*), which aimed both to improve contacts between the Flemish literary world and authors living in Flanders who do not have Dutch as their mother tongue and to facilitate access to the literary field for debuting authors belonging to ethnic-minority communities. Organisations and publishers could subsequently apply for subsidies to realise literary projects and publications that would stimulate and enable the emergence of ethnic-minority and immigrant writers in Flanders.

Consequently a number of established literary organisations in Flanders undertook initiatives for the promotion of ethnic-minority talent. When, in 2002, Antwerp-based literary organisation Villanella programmed their yearly literature festival *De Nachten* around the theme of Arab culture, they failed to find Flanders-based authors of Arab origin to include in their line-up and decided to launch a so-called 'diary project' (*dagboekproject*) in collaboration with editor Harold Polis. In this project, young ethnic minorities were invited to write autobiographical pieces and then perform them on stage.

In 2003 Passa Porta, a renowned Brussels-based literary organisation, arranged their first creative-writing workshop *Vreemd in het schrijven* (Foreign in writing) in which aspiring ethnic-minority debutants were guided towards publishing their texts under the auspices of distinguished Flemish authors such

as Kristien Hemmerechts, Stefan Hertmans and Peter Verhelst. Among those participating in these workshops were the second-generation Turkish-origin writer Mustafa Kör, who debuted with his novel *De lammeren* (The Lambs) in 2007, and Rachida Lamrabet, who debuted with *Vrouwland* (Women's Country) in the same year.

Last, but not least, Kifkif – at the time a relatively young socio-cultural organisation for social diversity which, unlike Villanella and Passa Porta, is predominantly governed by ethnic minorities – launched the literary writing contest 'Colour the Arts' (*Kleur de kunst*) in 2004. In 2004–2005, Kifkif exclusively allowed competition entry to aspiring debutants of ethnic origin. However, candidates soon objected to these participation criteria, which they saw as a condescending form of positive discrimination. Kifkif then opened up the contest to all participants, regardless of their ethnic origin, although the focus on authors of ethnic-minority descent remained present. However, the initial idea of the contest was, to some extent, undermined by this change of focus. Nevertheless, for various ethnic-minority authors and artists – Kenan Serbest, Sadie Choua or Rachida Lamrabet, for example – participation in Colour the Arts was one of the pivotal entry points into the Flemish literary and cultural field.

Another established player involved in the multiculturalisation of the Flemish field is the Antwerp-based publishing house Meulenhoff Manteau (now named De Bezige Bij Antwerpen). In the course of the 2000s, Meulenhoff Manteau released a number of non-fiction publications and collections of newspaper columns by ethnic-minority intellectuals and writers such as Tarik Fraihi and Abou Jahjah. These were immediately followed by prose publications, among these the Albdioni *et al.* (2006) volume *KifKif. Nieuwe stemmen uit Vlaanderen* (Kifkif. New Voices from Flanders) that collected together the nominated submissions of the earlier-mentioned contest Colour the Arts. Meulenhoff Manteau also publishes the prose works of Naima Albdioni, Malika Chaara, Chika Unigwe and Rachida Lamrabet.

Initiatives such as these seem to have faded towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s. Meanwhile, still somewhat in the margins, new literary initiatives and young cultural organisations with a focus on ethnic diversity in literature have burgeoned. What distinguishes organisations and initiatives such as Moessem, Nuff Said, Mama's Open Mic, Mousseem and Sin Collectif is that, in stark contrast to the predominantly white established literary institutions such as Passa Porta or Villanella, these newer organisations are run and led by a group of younger individuals with immigrant roots. Another example is the independent publishing house Beefcake Publishing, a one-man project run by Turkish-origin author Inan Akbas, which specifically targets the publication of work by ethnic-minority and immigrant authors, though thus far

without very much appraisal. More generally there also seems to be a wider tendency to shift away from classical notions of literature and to invest in contemporary cultural expressions – such as stand-up comedy and slam poetry – which are closer to the urban youngsters' world and to which a large group of ethnic minorities belongs.

The extent to which these initiatives have played a role in the growing number of immigrant and ethnic-minority authors emerging in the Flemish literary field over the last decade is difficult to measure. What is clear, however, is that, since 2005, a growing number of immigrant and ethnic-minority authors have published literary works in Flanders. In 2005 the Dutch-Palestinian poet Ramsey Nasr was prominent in the public eye as the official 'city poet' of Antwerp. The young Flemish journalist Tom Naegels published *Het boek Saida* (2005, *The Saida Book*) together with Saida Boudjaine, a young Moroccan-origin woman on whose autobiographical life narrative the book is based. 2005 was also the year when Chika Unigwe debuted with *De feniks* (*The Phoenix*), a novel short-listed for the Vrouw and Kultuurprijs, a literary prize for women writers, in the same year.

Yet so far Rachida Lamrabet and Chika Unigwe and, to a lesser extent, Mustafa Kör and Fikry El Azzouzi, are the main authors who have developed a flourishing writing career and are recognised by the mainstream literary field in Flanders. Among these, Chika Unigwe deserves specific mention here because she has found her way into the Flemish literary field via Nigeria and Britain, where she won several prizes – amongst which the 2003 BBC Short Story Competition and a Commonwealth Short Story Award – and where her second Dutch novel, *Fata Morgana* (2007, *On Black Sisters' Street* 2009), was nominated for the 2011 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and prestigious Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature. After her debut in Flanders, Unigwe has continued to publish both Dutch and English short stories, essays, translations and editions of her writings.

The Emergence of Literary Research on Immigrant and Ethnic-Minority Writing

The genealogy of scholarly interest in immigrant and ethnic-minority writing in Flanders, if we can even use this term for such a contemporary and rather submerged phenomenon, is difficult to pin down to one point in time or location. At present, one could hardly speak of a visible scholarly debate on ethnic-minority writings in Flanders written in departments of Dutch literary criticism. At the moment the bulk of immigrant writing in Flanders is still awaiting in-depth critical scrutiny. Despite the fact that immigrant writing as a phenomenon has been generally longed for, most published texts categorised as such have thus far not received major critical acclaim by the

literary press and the wider audience, let alone by literary researchers. This was the case, for example, with the debut novels by Mustafa Kör (2007), Malika Chaara (2007) or Naima Albdouni (2009), which were all released without much notice. The relative absence of scholarly debate on ethnic-minority writing in Flanders must undoubtedly, and in part, be related to the fact that texts traditionally collected under this banner have been published in Flanders only very recently. Another reason may possibly be that most of these works have not been considered aesthetically innovative or exceptional, as they deploy fairly traditional psychological-realist techniques or conventional literary genres such as the *Bildungsroman*. One of the reasons must certainly also be that the study of contemporary literature is not one of the most popular and often-practiced research traditions in mainstream Dutch literary criticism, where current methodological interests seem predominantly to lie in the development of a variety of literary historical, narratological or institutional-sociological approaches.

Initial research located Flemish immigrant writing within the wider tradition of Dutch immigrant and ethnic-minority writing, due in part to the lack of contemporary authors to discuss, in an attempt at charting a newly emerging collection of texts. In a special issue *Schrijven tussen culturen* (Writing between Cultures), the literary magazine *Vlaanderen* presents a collection of essays largely focused on Dutch immigrant writing. One of the contributions is the (2009) essay 'Culturele diversiteit in de Nederlandse literatuur. Aanzet tot bibliografie' (Cultural diversity and Dutch literature. Preliminary bibliography), in which Julien Vermeulen lists approximately 250 titles categorised as '*Nederlandse migrantenliteratuur*' (Dutch immigrant literature). He notices in particular that only ten of these authors are based in Flanders and mentions them in a remark preceding the bibliographical list. In another contribution entitled 'Turkse migrantenauteurs in Nederland en Vlaanderen' (Turkish immigrant authors in the Netherlands and Flanders), Johan Soenen (2009) sets out to present an overview of Turkish-origin authors in the Low Countries, but his actual overview is, by and large, a descriptive impression of the work of authors of Turkish descent living in the Netherlands. His essay concludes with a sub-section entitled 'Finally, a Fleming!', introducing Mustafa Kör, a Turkish-origin writer living in Flanders, who immigrated from Turkey when he was three years old. Kör debuted with the novel *De lammeren* in 2007, a nostalgic, lyrical prose narrative in which a protagonist named Umut mourns his brother's death and returns to his birth village in Anatolia.

In the next section, I outline how research on Flemish immigrant literature is influenced by two external traditions: research on Dutch immigrant writing and postcolonial feminist theory, the latter with regards to the work of the Belgian-Nigerian writer Chika Unigwe in particular.

Approaches and Interpretations

Placing Immigrant and Ethnic-Minority Writing in African Diaspora Writing

Public debates on multiculturalism since the late 1980s, which were, as mentioned before, informed by a vocabulary centred on the cultural binary between autochthony and allochthony, have determined the primary vocabulary which literary critics and reviewers deployed to discuss 'ethnic-minority and immigrant writing', even if it was discussed as an absence. More than the somewhat-dated term *migrantenliteratuur* (migrant literature) deployed by Julien Vermeulen, as mentioned above, the categories of *allochtone literatuur* (allochthonous literature) and *allochtone auteurs* (allochthonous writers), borrowed from the Netherlands, soon found their way into mainstream literary discourse (e.g. Leyman 2006; T'Sjoen 2004: 58–59). At the same time, however, it was by that time known from discussions of immigrant and ethnic-minority writing in the Netherlands that the categorisation of an amalgamate collection of texts under the umbrella term 'allochthonous writing' posed exclusionary problems to which notable Dutch immigrant writers such as Hafid Bouazza had already strongly objected. One of the problematic consequences of the term 'allochthonous writing' is indeed that the author's ethnic identity is singled out as the defining feature of his or her text, while a very different approach is adopted for white Flemish authors, whose work is collected under the universal, non-ethnic category of 'contemporary Flemish literature'.

Alongside the emergence of Flemish immigrant writing, various critics soon started searching for more adequate analytical tools and categories by means of which to understand this diasporic body of texts and their relation to various literary traditions. Below, I focus on one strand of scholars who have, in a variety of ways, contextualised and situated Flemish ethnic-minority and immigrant writing in particular literary traditions, often related to the author's place of origin.

In her essay 'Chronicling beyond Abyssinia: African writing in Flanders, Belgium' (2009) Elisabeth Bekers introduces African writing in Flanders as a brand new group of African literary voices. The essay is mainly focused on the work of the Belgian-Nigerian author Chika Unigwe, who speaks Igbo and English and has Dutch as her third language. Before making her appearance on the Flemish literary scene in 2005, Chika Unigwe had already successfully made her debut with English-language publications in Nigeria and Britain. Her poetry was published in Nigeria (1993, 1995), her short stories won the 2003 BBC Short Story Competition and a Commonwealth Short Story Award and were published in Wasafiri and a number of anthologies of contemporary African

writing and she wrote the two children's books *Rainbow for Dinner* (2003a) and *Ije At Boarding School* (2003b). Unigwe's second novel *On Black Sisters' Street* in particular received positive acclaim in the Anglophone global literature market, with reviewers of major UK- and US-based newspapers such as *The Independent* (Evaristo 2011) or *The New York Times* (Eberstadt 2011) praising the book's literary merits and a nomination for the 2011 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. In 2012, Unigwe's *Night Dancer* won international praise (Evaristo 2012) and she was nominated for the prestigious Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature with *On Black Sisters' Street*. This rather impressive list of international accolades suggests that Unigwe's work resonates not only locally in Flanders but also internationally.

Unigwe's work indeed easily transcends the specific locale and literary world of Flanders, not only as far as its formal features, settings and central themes are concerned, but also because her work enjoys a global readership, participates in Anglophone global literary networks of African (diasporic) writings and is discussed in an international field of scholars of African literature.

To Bekers, Chika Unigwe belongs to a newly emerging African (diasporic) literary tradition in Dutch – Bekers' entry on Unigwe in the *Dictionary of African Biography* also illustrates this approach (2011). Not only Bekers' but also several other readings of Unigwe's *oeuvre* suggest that her work is informative for those concerned with literary-historical questions of contemporary African (diasporic) literature.

Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton consider Chika Unigwe as belonging to what they call 'the third generation of Nigerian writers' (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005: 7). Their characterisation of third-generation African writers has lingered on their position as 'temporally severed from the colonial event' (2005: 14) and therefore shaped more astutely by contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism, globalisation, nomadism and liminality than their predecessors. Positioned in this postmodern milieu, third-generation Nigerian writers such as Unigwe, as the authors contend, question over-determined identity markers and deconstruct 'totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbolgies' (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005: 15).

In a similar vein, in 'Metonymic eruptions: Igbo novelists, the narrative of the nation, and new developments in the contemporary Nigerian novel', Obi Nwakanma (2008) devotes attention to Unigwe's questioning of the Nigerian nation, which he characterises as a particular concern of Igbo authors. Nwakanma places Chika Unigwe amongst an array of other Igbo authors, such as Uzo Maxim Uzoatu, Emeka Aniagolu and Okey Ndibe. Adopting a diachronic perspective, Nwakanma retraces the evolution of the Igbo novel in English, ranging from Chinua Achebe's seminal *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to

the emergence of a new generation of authors who, since the mid-1980s, have displayed an ambiguous stance towards the Nigerian nation.

Focusing comparatively on the work of Moroccan diasporic authors in Spanish, French and Dutch, Ieme van der Poel also undertakes a critical endeavour characterised by an exploration of the writer's literary bond with his or her country of origin, *in casu* Morocco. This bond, as van der Poel argues, often still forcefully exists, as does the relationship between Moroccan immigrant writers who share the same roots but have settled, or at least have published, in different European countries. In her study *Diasporic Writing: New Moroccan Voices in French, Spanish and Dutch* (2015) van der Poel focuses on the 'Moroccaness' of Moroccan diasporic authors and their work in various European languages in order to consider the multiple external connections of French, Spanish and Dutch literature. Her case studies include *Vrouwland* (*Women's Land*), the aforementioned debut novel by the Moroccan-Flemish author Rachida Lamrabet, a kind of short-story cycle which narrates and connects the lives of Moroccan youngsters in both Belgium and Morocco.

Rethinking Flemish Literature: Minority Literature and Multilingualism

Some critics have read ethnic-minority and immigrant writings as providing us with a new understanding of Flemish literature in times of global change. In 'Naar een Vlaamse minderheidsliteratuur' (Towards a Flemish minority literature) Tom van Imschoot (2009) offers an astute critique of the aforementioned 'intercultural literature policy', arguing that it is based on the erroneous assumption that ethnic-minority and immigrant authors would represent the ethnic communities from which they stem and from this position would enrich Flemish literature. According to Van Imschoot, Lamrabet's debut novel *Vrouwland* and short-story collection *Een Kind van God* (2008, *God's Child*) force the Flemish literary mainstream to reflect critically upon itself and its own blindspots. He situates Rachida Lamrabet in a long-standing tradition of Flemish literature, defined by him as a minority literature 'which has always been more political than the Dutch one' (Van Imschoot 2009, my translation). From this perspective, ethnic-minority writing could be the element that could make 'Flemish literature move towards an "inclusive minority literature": written not for, but by a minority claiming the right to speak, which literature sometimes demands when a majority prevents it' (2009, my translation).

How does immigrant and ethnic-minority writing help us to understand Flemish literature as one of the 'weaker' national literatures in Europe, struggling as these literatures are today to assert themselves with and against

other European literatures on the global literary market? This question is the driving force behind the two chapters focused on Flanders which are included in the edited collection (Behschnitt *et al.* 2013) *Literature, Language and Multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries*. By juxtaposing (analyses of) the emergence and development of multicultural literature in four West-European countries – Sweden, Denmark, Belgium-Flanders and the Netherlands – the volume aims to offer insight into and understanding of the particular(ly) national complexities involved in these multicultural literatures and in the ways in which the multilingual dimensions of multicultural literature can be seen as specific strategies in relation to the linguistic context in which these are inscribed and the language struggles that characterise this context.

The chapter written by De Mul (2013) focuses in particular on the recurrent expression of the desire for ethnic-minority and immigrant 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 that existing in Dutch literature. Put differently, I try to suggest that the Flemish literary field is caught in the oxymoron of the 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 with 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 to cultural difference and diversity.

The chapter written by De Mul and Ernst (2013) focuses on the strategies of multilingualism deployed in texts by both Flanders-based ethnic-minority and -majority writers so as to suggest that the predominant image of a monocultural, monolingual Flanders is challenged in various ways in contemporary Flemish literature. Chika Unigwe’s (2009) *On Black Sisters’ Street*, is analysed alongside *De grote Europese roman* (The Great European Novel) by Koen Peeters (2007) and the writings on the notion of Belgitude by the Dutch-origin author Benno Barnard (2001). Whereas Unigwe draws on the status of black femininity to draw our attention to a narrative and performative notion of community and belonging beyond ethnic origin, cultural descent or geographical and national affiliations, Barnard (2001) and Peeters (2007) rely on a notion of Europe imagined through the spaces of Belgium and Brussels for the creation of a humanistic, multicultural and multilingual identity.

Feminist and Postcolonial Approaches

There are interesting parallels between the growing scholarly attention given to Unigwe's work and the burgeoning trend of transnational, postcolonial and comparative approaches in Dutch literary criticism, which has certainly benefited the scholarly attention Unigwe has enjoyed in Flanders over the last few years. In particular, Unigwe's overt focus on questions of black African identity and womanhood in Europe lends itself well to those scholars who are interested in exploring possible adaptations of Anglo-dominant postcolonial feminist theory to Low Countries' texts and contexts, as illustrated by the collection of essays *The Postcolonial Low Countries* (Boehmer and De Mul 2012), a volume seeking to consolidate the many piecemeal interventions in recent years that have sought to make connections between international, often largely Anglophone, postcolonial debates on the one hand, and explicitly Neerlandophone perspectives on the other.

In my own analysis of Unigwe's authorial self-representation, juxtaposed to the representations of black female identity in Unigwe's second novel, I have theoretically drawn on the social construction of blackness in African postcolonial theory dating back to Franz Fanon. Central to the inquiry is the question of how Unigwe as author on the one hand and the African sex workers in *On Black Sisters' Street* 'become' black in Belgium and how they negotiate a sense of self *vis-à-vis* the already pronounced social order. Their self-representations, as I intend to suggest, reveal the mediation of dominant historical images and Western symbolic meanings and their attempts to wrest control of the construction of their bodies away from the distorted visions of dominant culture. Without conflating Unigwe's situation as a black middle-class author in the Flemish literary field with the position of the four Nigerian women working in the sex industry described in the book, parallels can be drawn between them in the ways in which their agency is established in the performance of cultural configurations of black identity which have seized hegemonic hold.

Given its thematic focus on African sex workers in Belgium, *On Black Sisters' Street* has also attracted attention from scholars interested in feminist postcolonial issues. Daria Tunca (2009), a scholar of Anglophone Nigerian literatures based at University of Liège, focuses on the ways in which Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* can be said to redress the 'narrative balance' in at least two ways. First, the novel gives voice to the 'silenced minority' – African prostitutes in the red-light district of Antwerp – and, secondly, it presents a sensitive and nuanced picture of its heroines' personalities and fates. To Tunca, Unigwe manages to arouse the reader's empathy for these protagonists through the act of writing,

by establishing a complex interplay between subjectivity and subjection in its portrayal of black diasporic women's identity in a transnational world.

Eze (2014) similarly focuses on African feminism in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, arguing that the novel belongs to a new generation of African women's writing that recasts feminism as a moral issue of our times. To Eze, the novel draws attention to some of the central issues of feminism, i.e. the rights and dignities of the female body and, in so doing, establishes women's rights as fundamental human rights that have to be urgently addressed in contemporary Africa.

Impact

The situation in Flanders has been characterised by a discernible belatedness when it concerns both the production of ethnic-minority and immigrant literature and the emergence of literary research on it. Rachida Lamrabet and Chika Unigwe and, to a lesser extent, Fikry El Fazzouzi and Mustafa Kör are among the few ethnic-minority authors who have thus far managed to develop a career as a fully recognised writer in the mainstream literary field in Flanders – while, for Unigwe, it is probably more apt to say that she has enjoyed more international than national accolades, as a Nigerian rather than an ethnic-minority writer.

Although in the course of the 2000s the Flemish literary field made visible efforts to stimulate the burgeoning careers of ethnic-minority writers (rather than, for example, rendering the literary field structurally more inclusive), the success of these efforts seems to be rather limited, despite the fact that these initiatives received subsidies from and acclaim by the mainstream media. At the same time, in recent years there has been an increase of ethnic-minority artists and authors who engage with non-traditional literary expressions such as slam poetry and stand-up comedy and who started their careers outside the established structures of the literary field. These latter initiatives have had a somewhat local, grass-roots character and have so far enjoyed less attention by the mainstream media; nevertheless, they certainly seem to be successful in functioning as a talent pool for ethnic-minority youngsters and in attracting culturally diverse audiences, compared to earlier initiatives by recognised organisations in the Flemish literary field. Although it is not known exactly how fruitful these efforts are going to become, there is no doubt that ethnic-minority and immigrant writing will continue to develop as a steady, though thus far still rather submerged, literary trend in Flanders. At the time of writing, the

recently published second novel *Drarrie in de nacht* (2014, *Drarrie at Night*) by the Moroccan-origin writer Fikry El Azzouzi promises to attract great acclaim. It is a picaresque novel recounting the journeys, experiences and adventures of a group of four ethnic-minority youngsters out on the streets at night in a provincial town in Flanders.

Since, up to now, there has only been a small body of literature produced by ethnic-minority authors in Flanders, it is not surprising that it has been only marginally addressed by mainstream Dutch literary criticism, whose conventional focus is not in the first instance on contemporary literature. Whereas the study of ethnic-minority and immigrant literature in Flanders has thus far been a side-lined topic in university courses on Dutch literary criticism, in comparative literary critical research projects outside Belgium there has been somewhat more critical attention paid to ethnic-minority authors in Flanders – such as, for example, the virtual platform ‘Multicultural Netherlands’ led by Jeroen de Wulf at Berkeley University.

At the same time, however, analytical concepts and tools of the international field of migration literature seem to considerably impact on current topics of debate in Dutch literary criticism. In recent years, calls for papers and programmes of major conferences and symposia gathering together (Flanders-based) scholars of Dutch literature increasingly show an interest in, and awareness of, the need to address questions of boundary crossings, transnationalism and migration. Perhaps in the absence of a vast body of ethnic-minority and immigrant literature in Flanders, critical efforts have, meanwhile, increasingly turned to questions of the relations between Flemish and Dutch literature, its position in a global world and the increasingly global nature of Dutch literature. Examples of such events are the International Conference *Cross-Over* 2015 organised by the Internationale vereniging voor neerlandistiek (International Association for the Study of Dutch Language and Literature), devoted to the theme ‘*Regionaal, (trans)nationaal, continentaal, globaal. Definities en methodologieën, grenzen en gemeenschappelijke ruimtes*’ (Regional, (Trans)national, Continental, Global. Definitions and Methodologies, Boundaries and Common Spaces) or the 19e IVN colloquium ‘*Hyperdiverse neerlandistiek*’ (Hyperdiverse Dutch Studies) held in Leiden in 2015.

There are clear signs, therefore, that current debates on the future direction of Dutch literary criticism might also engender an increase of scholarly attention to ethnic and immigrant writing in Flanders. That the prestigious Flanders-based Royal Academy for Dutch Language and Literature in 2014 launched a prize call for studies about multiculturalism and Dutch literature could perhaps be seen as an attempt to consolidate this developing future direction.

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