# MULTICULTURALISM AND MULTILINGUALISM IN CONTEMPORARY PROSE IN FLANDERS: CHIKA UNIGWE, KOEN PEETERS, AND BENNO BARNARD

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In a recent piece in *De Morgen*, "Land zonder cultuur" ("Country without culture", 2011), the acclaimed and prize-winning author Erwin Mortier sharply opposes both the separatist tendencies of the leading right-wing Flemish-nationalist political party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) and the "Flemish movement" in general. He particularly takes issue with the detrimental consequences of the structure of Belgium's current political organization in which cultural policy is legislated and executed on the Francophone and Flemish community levels rather than on the federal level. Mortier argues that the increasing federalization of Belgium's cultural sector has "created an incredible cultural emptiness on the national level", and crushed the international potential of cultural institutions in Brussels such as the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, the opera La Monnaie/De Munt, the International House of Literature Passa Porta, or the theatre house KVS.[1] Instead, Mortier subscribes to the notion of a "*Belgian* culture" that transcends the language and communitarian tensions between the Flemish and Francophone regions. In addition, he proposes to promote a cultural policy based on a national Belgian level and a new imagination of Brussels "as a capital community where the three national languages of Belgium [Dutch, French, and German] and English are officially accepted".[2] Mortier contrasts his vision to a

[1] Erwin Mortier, "Land zonder cultuur", in *De Morgen*, 5 March 2011: "een onvergeeflijke culturele leegte gecreëerd op het nationale niveau." This and all further translations are ours, unless stated otherwise.

[2] *Ibid*.: "als een hoofdstedelijke gemeenschap waar de drie landstalen en het Engels officieel erkend zijn."

"Flemish movement" which he sees as historically supported by the need to defend Flemish language rights. Mortier questions the movement's monolingualism as sprouting from provincial and Catholic-conservative ideological foundations, and, as such, poses an impediment to "Protestantism or free-thinking spirits" and "a broader cultural and intellectual heritage".[3]

For the purpose of this essay, we will not discuss the legitimacy of Mortier's claims nor the reactions his piece triggered in intellectual circles. However, seen in the context of the current political crisis in Belgium, which became most visible following the federal elections of 13 June 2010, Mortier's text is illustrative for the myriad ways in which writers and intellectuals in Flanders have recently expressed pro-Belgian sentiments in the public domain, opposing hegemonic nationalist and neoliberal discourses dominant in Flemish politics. These latter discourses are generally characterized by a demand for increasing political and economic autonomy of the Flemish region.[4]

As Sarah De Mul discusses in her essay on the intercultural literary policy in Flanders in this volume, an important part of the ideological framework underpinning the Flemish institutional literary field is the idea that there is such a thing as a homogenous Flemish culture, a notion that is distinguished from Dutch culture, and at the same time is made compatible with the integration of non-ethnic Flemishness. The idea of a homogenous Flemish culture is reinforced as an effect of a specific construction of a "Flemish literature", as De Mul writes, "through references to Dutch Literature in discussions about the lack and desirability of migration literature in Flanders". The latter point suggests that a Flemish multicultural literature derives part of its meaning from the focus on the non-Flemish ethnic background of

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[3] *Ibid*.: "het protestantisme of de vrijdenkerij" and "een weidser cultureel en intellectueel erfgoed".

[4] While in Wallonia the Social-Democratic party won the elections with a notable margin, the result in Flanders showed the overwhelming electoral success of nationalist right wing and conservative parties. In the wake of a complex combination of long-lasting communitarian tensions between the regions, and the urgency to decide on a number of difficult political issues and ongoing discussions about the functioning of the federal state structure itself, Belgium broke the world record in 2011 for a nation-state without government for the longest period ever (this record was previously held by Iraq with a period of 249 days). In Flanders, the winning parties are the N-VA (27.8%), CD&V (17.3%), Vlaams Belang (12.3%), and Lijst Dedecker (3.7%); in Wallonia, the Parti Socialiste (37.6%) is the winner.

authors such as Inan Abbas, Naima Albdiounni, Jamila Amadou, Saida Boudjaine, Mimount Bousakla, Fikry El Azzouzi, or Ali Wauters, as mentioned by De Mul.

The political context of federal Belgium and its concomitant communitarian and language tensions as briefly outlined above, however, suggests that a Flemish multicultural literature could also be analysed from the perspective of language deployed in texts and the concomitant concepts of identity linked to these linguistic strategies. In this essay, we examine a number of aspects of multicultural and multilingual literatures of Flanders. More specifically, we read a number of literary texts as counter-discourses subverting the dominant discourses of Flemish monoculture, monolingualism, and whiteness. Our analysis includes three levels. First, we justify and elaborate why we choose to analyse the specific literary texts under investigation. This is a necessary step, particularly since our critical endeavour involves an engagement with categories and binaries such as Flemish versus migrant authors and monolingual versus multilingual literature. Secondly, we analyse a number of linguistic and narrative strategies in *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) by Chika Unigwe, which we consider a transnational Flemish literary text that resists every attempt to link it to monolingual discourses or demarcate a strict national identity. Further, Unigwe's text uncovers the Flemish normality of whiteness negatively, in the sense that its black protagonists are shown to become highly conscious of the meaning of blackness when they are in Flanders. Finally, we analyse strategies of multilingualism in the writings by Koen Peeters, who is conventionally considered a "Flemish author", and by Benno Barnard, who could be categorized as a "Belgian" or "Dutch", rather than a "Flemish writer". Highlighting a number of multilingual and multicultural aspects, we hope to show that the literary texts under investigation are part of a wider discourse that counteracts the dominant imagination of a self-contained, monolingual Flemish culture which is scrutinized in many ways at the moment.

**Belgium and Flanders: discourses of mono- and multilinguality**

Although literary texts are arguably a privileged medium to reflect on the relation between language, multilinguality, and identity, multilingual literature has so far largely escaped the object of

academic research. This observation can be connected with the monolingual and national literary canons central to older nation-based, philological literary paradigms that are still dominant, perhaps not so much in the discipline of comparative literature, but certainly in the literary criticism of the literatures of the Low Countries and Scandinavia. Recently, however, it has been suggested that one of the pivotal future directions of literary studies is the turn towards the historic and comparative analysis of multilingual literature and the expansion of academic scholarship that focuses on multilingual literatures from comparative and linguistic perspectives.[5]

One of the starting points for such analyses could be the combination of forms of languages in literary texts. In multilingual literature, we find five different forms of languages. Firstly, standard languages like Dutch, English, French, or German; secondly, varieties such as dialects, ethnolects, slang, or technical terminologies; thirdly, words of foreign origin as fragmentary representations of "the other";[6] fourthly, hybrid or creole languages that could be called "multispeak", implying "speaking in different languages",[7] for example "Kanak Sprak", "Franglais", or "Swenglish";[8] finally, the artificial literary languages of the avant-garde, for example the sound poetry of the Dadaists.

Discourses promoting multilingual cultures on a European level, as well as theoretical and literary reflections on multilinguality just described, seem directly opposed to the discourses of national language and culture. The latter have seized hegemonic hold in the contemporary political landscape of Flanders and are also reinforced, amongst others, by media discourses directly and indirectly fed by

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[5] See, for example, Monika Schmitz-Emans, "Literatur und Vielsprachigkeit: Aspekte, Themen, Voraussetzungen", in *Literatur und Vielsprachigkeit*, ed. Monika Schmitz-Emans, Heidelberg: Synchron, 2004, 11-15.

[6] See Thomas Y. Levin, "Nationalitäten der Sprache – Adornos Fremdwörter: Multikulturalismus und bzw. als Übersetzung", in *Multikulturalität: Tendenzen, Probleme, Perspektiven*, eds Michael Kessler and Jürgen Wertheimer, Tübingen: Stauffenberg, 1995, 77-90.

[7] Jürgen Erfurt, "De même I hope j'te bother pas: Transkulturalität und Hybridität in der Frankophonie", in *Transkulturalität und Hybridität: L'espace francophone als Grenzerfahrung des Sprechens und Schreibens*, ed. Jürgen Erfurt, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004, 16: "Multisprech" and "Sprechen in verschiedenen Sprachen".

[8] *Sprachgrenzen überspringen: Sprachliche Hybridität und polykulturelles Selbstverständnis*, eds Volker Hinnenkamp and Katharina Meng, Tübingen: Narr, 2005.

notions of a homogenous Flemish identity. As the communities composing the Belgian state structure are primarily demarcated along linguistic lines, language plays a crucial role in the current tensions that have historically accumulated in complicated ways.

The policies and practices of "unmixing" cultures and languages are visible in Brussels also. Although the sociologist Dirk Jacobs observes a "mix character of Brussels" and predicts in Brussels that "Dutch and French schools [will] offer very gradually forms of multilingual education", current political developments indicate that the opposite may well come true.[9] Recently, the Social Democrat and Flemish Minister of Education Pascal Smet abolished the FOYER-programme of the Flemish community, which had supported multilingual education in Brussels since 1981, a decision that shocked a number of internationally renowned academics and experts who publically expressed their disagreement.[10]

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the reactions of these international opponents were collected by and published on the website of the independent cultural and media watch organization KifKif, an organization that launches initiatives and organizes events for the stimulation of a democratic, multicultural society. The latter organization is situated within a much broader trend in Flanders in which intellectuals and artists of various philosophical and ideological positions contest the imagination of a homogenous Flemish community with Dutch as the sole and central language. Scrutinizing the dominant essentialist views of Flemish identity in popular culture and heritage since approximately the last two decades, Karel Arnaut *et al*. observe:

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[9] Dirk Jacobs, "'Brussels, do you speak-a my language?' Enige toekomstscenario's gewikt en gewogen", in *Waar België voor staat: Een toekomstvisie*, eds Geert Buelens, Jan Goossens, and David Van Reybrouck, Antwerp and Amsterdam: Meulenhoff-Manteau, 2007, 232 and 237: "gemengde karakter van Brussel", "Nederlandstalige en Franstalige scholen heel geleidelijk aan taalgemengd onderwijs aanbieden."

[10] See the quotations from the academics Nikolas Coupland (Cardiff), Nancy H. Hornberger (Pennsylvania), Jens-Normann Jorgensen (Copenhagen), James Collings (Albany), Adrian Blackledge, Angela Creese (Birmingham), Jef Van der Aa, Sirpa Leppänen (Jyväskylä), Ana Celia Zentella (San Diego), and Stephan May (Auckland) at *kifkif.be* (accessed 28 May 2011).

> Strips zoals Jommeke en televisieprogramma's zoals die van Piet Huysentruyt die het Algemeen Nederlands amper machtig is, worden nu gevaloriseerd als 'oer-Vlaams', 'typisch Vlaams' of 'uit de Vlaamse klei getrokken'. Tussenvormen van het Nederlands maken opgang, Vlaamse dialecten worden geherwaardeerd.[11]

This quotation suggests paradoxically enough that a veritable multiplicity of dialect languages and regional identities in Flanders form the background for the construction of homogenous and monolingual "Flemishness".

In addition, critics of Flemish nationalist discourses have underscored that the perspective of cultural identity does not help us to deal with the multilingual, globalized, fluid and transitory forms of life, economy and communication presently characterizing the Western world. In the introduction to the volume of essays *Waar België voor staat* (a doubling phrase that suggests "What 'Belgium' stands for" as well as "What Belgium has to overcome"), editors Geert Buelens, Jan Goossens, and David Van Reybrouck argue that "the future of Flanders and Belgium [will be] multilingual, intercultural and opposed to any form of identitarian or nationalistic form of thought – be it Flemish, Francophone, Belgian or of Brussels".[12] In a similar vein, author and translator Geert Van Istendael underscores that the construction of a pure Flemish identity is by definition impossible:

> You can be both a Belgian and a Fleming. Or a Belgian and a Walloon. Without the slightest effort. Or Belgian and a *Brusselaar*

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[11] Karel Arnaut, Sarah Bracke, Bambi Ceuppens, Sarah De Mul, Nadia Fadil, and Meryem Kanmaz, "Het gekooide Vlaanderen: Twintig jaar gemist multicultureel debat", in *Een leeuw in een kooi: De grenzen van het multiculturele Vlaanderen*, eds Karel Arnaut, Sarah Bracke, Bambi Ceuppens, Sarah De Mul, Nadia Fadil, and Meryem Kanmaz, Antwerp and Amsterdam: Meulenhoff-Manteau, 2009, 17: "Comic-strips such as Jommeke or television programmes by people like Piet Huysentruyt who hardly masters standard Dutch are now classified as 'primal Flemish', 'typical Flemish' or 'grown from Flemish mud'. In-between forms of Dutch are increasingly used and Flemish dialects are revalorized."

[12] Geert Buelens, Jan Goossens, and David Van Reybrouck, Introduction, in *Waar België voor staat: Een toekomstvisie*, 22: "de toekomst van Vlaanderen en België … meertalig, intercultureel en haaks staand op gelijk welk eng identitair of nationalistisch denken, of het nu Vlaams, Waals, Brussels of Belgisch is."

> and a Berber-speaker and on occasion a French-speaker. Or Belgian and Walloon and a German-speaker and quadrilingual too. Lots of combinations are possible, conceivable, and real.[13]

In light of the increasing public visibility of these counter-discourses promoting multilingual, transnational, and anti-identitarian aspects of Flemish and Belgian culture, the multilingual strategies deployed in a series of Flemish prose texts imagine a world beyond Flemish monolingual nationalism, and, as such, gain social and political relevance. Below, we discuss a number of selected texts to illustrate this point. Before proceeding, however, it is worthwhile to sidestep for a moment and problematize the main categories underlying our analysis.

**Contesting Flemishness in multicultural and multilingual prose**

In the Introduction to this volume, Wolfgang Behschnitt and Magnus Nilsson start off with the broad definition of multicultural literature as "literatures written, read and discussed in the context of migration, multiculturalism and multilingualism".[14] Certainly, Behschnitt and Nilsson differentiate this definition afterwards. In order to work with this category in an analytical way, they argue, the political and institutional preconditions, language discourses, and the specific national critical and theoretical discourse(s) that form the conditions of possibility for "multicultural literature" to emerge in a given context need to be analysed. Connections between cultures, languages, authors, and texts can indeed be ambivalent and contradictory. Behschnitt and Nilsson similarly argue in the Introduction that "multilingualism in literary texts does not evolve naturally from its author's linguistic background. Nor does it mirror authentically the languages or varieties used in a given society."[15] We would like to broaden this argument: if one assumes that a migrant author subject automatically writes intercultural texts, and that non-migrant authors take up a hegemonic position, this view on authorship and literary texts would just reproduce a dichotomic ethnic discourse and

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[13] Geert Van Istendael, "Dear Patrick Roegiers", *Passa Porta Magazine: Frontières, Grenzen, Borders* (2011), 35.
[14] See this volume, 1.
[15] *Ibid*., 15.

underestimate the resignifying potential of literary texts. To put it differently, the category of "migrant authors" may relate to authors who write monolingual texts addressing monocultural subjects, while "Flemish authors" may produce multilingual texts dealing with multicultural issues in various ways, a point which in itself is suggestive of the limitations of these conventional categories.

This point invites us to problematize conventional dichotomic categories like "migrant author" vs. "ethnic Flemish author", or "autochthoon writing" vs. "allochthoon writing", deployed to describe multicultural literature as well as the writings that include multicultural themes and multilingual forms in explicit ways. We take into account the critical reception of texts, the institutional and social subject positions available to authors, as well as the performance of authorship, particularly in the way in which these are connected to processes of migration, intercultural experiences, or culturally hybrid ways of living.

Problems like these underlay the selection of authors and texts discussed in what follows. First, we analyse *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), written by the Nigeria-born Chika Unigwe who now lives and works in Flanders as a "literary bilingual" writing in Dutch and English. Conventionally, Unigwe is categorized as a writer of ethnic minority descent and a female politically active writer in ways similar to Rachida Lamrabet or Yamila Idrissi, whose texts will, however, not be analysed here.[16] Following the analysis of *On Black Sisters' Street*, a text which is often read in terms of Unigwe's languages, ethnicity, migratory trajectories, and political activities, we focus on two texts written by male authors who are normally not framed by means of socio-historical references to migrancy but whose writing, as we will demonstrate, are inherently multicultural and multilingual. Koen Peeters, usually perceived as a "Flemish" writer, addresses multicultural themes and weaves numerous European languages into

[16] Rachida Lamrabet and Yamila Idrissi are as well representing the type of award-winning and politically active Flemish female writers with the background of an intercontinental migration experience. Both were born in Morocco, immigrated early to Flanders, and both of them are juridical and political activists – with Lamrabet working on human and equal rights and Idrissi working as a politician for the Flemish Social-democrats (see Jamila Idrissi and Tessa Vermeiren, *Kif-Kif: Aan de ander kent men zichzelf*, Roeselare: Roularta, 1995; Rachida Lamrabet, *Vrouwland*, Antwerp and Amsterdam: Meulenhoff-Manteau, 2007).

his *Grote Europese Roman* (*Major European Novel*, 2007). Besides Peeters, we could have analysed the work by other ethnic Flemish authors such as Tom Naegels or Tom Lanoye, who also deal with issues of multiculturality while inserting fragments of non-Dutch languages in their texts.[17] Finally, we examine the writing of Benno Barnard, who in a sense presents an uneasy category between "ethnic Flemish" and "non-ethnic Flemish authors". Barnard was raised in the Netherlands and speaks Dutch as a first language. He has been living in Belgium since 1976 and actively participates in public debates in Flanders. Nevertheless, he remains typified as a non-Flemish or non-Belgian author in media and the literary field in Flanders. While biographically Barnard may not fit into the category of "ethnic Flemish author", his literature is situated within the philosophical, aesthetic, and political discourses in which also the writings of most "ethnic Flemish authors" are embedded.

**Becoming black in Belgium: Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street***

In February 2010, Chika Unigwe wrote the satirical column "Zwart worden in zeven lessen" ("Becoming Black in Seven Lessons"), which is also available as "How to be an African" in English in a thoroughly revised form.[18] In this column, Unigwe describes with great irony what she has learned about blackness since living in Europe:

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[17] *Los* (2005), a novel written by the Flemish journalist Tom Naegels, tells amongst other things the story of the protagonist's relationship with a Pakistani asylum-seeker and about the clashes in the Antwerp migrant quarter Borgerhout. Meanwhile, *Los* has become a bestseller in Flanders and has been filmed. Tom Lanoye's novel *Het derde huwelijk* (2006) is set up around the fake marriage between a Flemish man and an African woman. His short prose pieces *Johannesburg, le bain (een reisverhaal)*, *Kaap de goede hoop*, and *Gezond verstand in't buitenland* (all 2004) report in Dutch and partially in English from South Africa, where Lanoye lives half of the year.

[18] Chika Unigwe, "Zwart worden in zeven lessen", *Mo* magazine*, 11 February 2010: http://www.mo.be/opinie/zwart-worden-zeven-lessen. See also Chika Unigwe, "How to be an African", *African Online*, IX: http://www.african-writing.com/nine/chikaunigwe.htm; and Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write About Africa: Instructions for Beginners", *Granta*, XCII ("The View from Africa", Winter 2005).

> Ik leer nu dat zwart zijn betekent dat ik word aanzien als een liefdadigheidsproject. Dat ik dankbaar zou moeten zijn voor de kans die ik heb gekregen om in Europa te mogen zijn.[19]

These lessons further include dressing in an authentically African way, always being prepared for police control, and being able to dance.

Unigwe's "Becoming Black in Seven Lessons" reminds us of the social construction of blackness. Coming to Europe means entering a social imaginary where subjects are already imagined, constructed, and treated as "black" by hegemonic discourses. As argued in the essay by De Mul in this volume, in Flanders a discourse on ethno-racial and cultural identity has emerged, which significantly shapes notions of blackness in the contemporary African diaspora in which Unigwe as an author is situated. One of the consequences is that Unigwe is primarily assigned the position of an ethnic minority author in the Flemish literary field. If Unigwe is treated as an ethnic minority writer by hegemonic discourses, it is worthwhile to ask how she negotiates and relates to this position. We will address this question by reading Unigwe's second novel, which was published as *Fata Morgana* (2007) in Dutch and *On Black Sisters' Street* in English. More specifically, analysing how the four protagonists in the book are defined by exotic definitions of black womanhood they simultaneously act out and subvert, we explore how parallels can be drawn with Unigwe's stance *vis-à-vis* the authorial position assigned to her. Unigwe, as we will argue, performs the role of ethnic minority writer in Flanders, while she can also be seen transcending and destabilizing this position by means of what Declercq and Boyden in this volume name "literary bilingualism".

*On Black Sisters' Street* renders an account of four African sex workers who desperately seek to escape their miserable living conditions and respond to the lure of a better life in Europe. On arrival in Antwerp, the women's idealized image of Europe soon proves to be a mirage, or a "fata morgana" in the terms of the title of the Dutch edition. The title of the English translation is a literal translation of the

[19] Unigwe, "Zwart worden in zeven lessen": "I now learn that being black means that I am perceived as a charity project. That I must be grateful for the opportunity granted to me to be in Europe."

street name "Zwartezusterstraat" in the city of Antwerp, which refers to a renowned Roman Catholic religious order. In this particular street, the female African protagonists share their lives and live together under the watchful eyes of their madam and her menacing assistant Segun. The title, however, does not just refer to the geographical location of Antwerp, for its Catholic local history and perhaps also the role women play in this history are concerned. But it also alludes to the notion of black diasporic womanhood and the possibilities of black sisterhood or community formation in Europe, which in many ways is thematized in the book.

With their fake passports withheld by Madam and living under her close surveillance, the four women are almost literally imprisoned in the house in the red-light district but also objectified in the position of black sex workers satisfying white men's sexual desires: "As for liking black women, Oga Dele had told her [Efe] that they were in great demand by white men, tired of their women and wanting a bit of colour and spice."[20] Primarily, the women are indeed socially constructed through exotic, sexualized codes of black womanhood.

As illegal workers in Belgium, the women hide their true names and family histories from each other. When Sisi tries to escape the world of prostitution and is murdered, Ama, Efe and Joyce work through her death by revealing their painful histories to each other. The novel indeed centres on the life narratives of the women, who are usually observed from the outside, as sexual spectacles sitting under red spotlights behind the windows of the Schipperskwartier of Antwerp. The novel's concern, however, is not to offer to the white middle-class reader the sensationalist testimonies and authentic experiences of those women experiencing globalization from below. Nor does the novel want to deplore the miserable fate of black sex workers who are victims in Dele's women's trafficking network as well as in the male-dominated Western sex industry. Rendering her account of the journey to Belgium, Ama says:

> I made this choice, at least, I was given a choice. I came here with my eyes wide open.[21]

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[20] Chika Unigwe, *On Black Sisters' Street*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2009, 84.
[21] *Ibid*., 114.

The four women are indeed not victims, but individuals making choices, choices that are restricted by circumstance.

If they want to be successful as sex workers in Antwerp, the women have to abide by gendered and racialized norms and codes of dress and behaviour. *On Black Sisters' Street* is indeed not so much an account of four African sex workers as an exploration of how they become black sex workers: "Blue bra sprinkled with glitter and a matching G-string, boots up to her thighs, she stood behind the glass, and prayed that no one would notice her."[22] The novel suggests the constructed nature of sexualized black womanhood by describing how the four women dress up and act upon the role behind the window that is expected of them. If it is true, in the terms of Eva Pendelton, that "sex work is drag in that it is a mimetic performance of highly charged feminine gender codes", to which we may also add racial codes, then the novel portrays the four protagonists in the process of performing these highly charged codes of black femininity.[23]

While Judith Butler's understanding of agency arises from social iterability and the fact that every reiteration opens the potential for change and subversion, in Unigwe's novel, however, the disruptive potential does not reside in the women's rewriting of the codes of black sex workers.[24] Rather, it is situated in the narration of how the women act out these codes. Unigwe juxtaposes scenes of the women's performance as black sex workers to self-reflexive fragments that explicate their doubts, uncertainty, embarrassment, or feelings of freedom, and to text portions in which the women are seen to take an emotional distance from or critically comment on their behaviour. In so doing, their work is revealed to the reader as a strategic lie. Joyce piously scrubs the make-up off her face at the request of a regular customer who calls her "Etienne's Nubian princess". She is ready to change the script and to change costume, as it were, whenever this is desired. Her ultimate goal is not, however, to please white men's desire. The latter is but a means to achieve economic purposes and upward social mobility. Or in Ama's terms: "the men she slept with

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[22] *Ibid*., 134.

[23] Eva Pendelton, "Love for Sale: Queering Heterosexuality", in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle, New York: Routledge, 1997, 183.

[24] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss, New York: Routledge, 1993, 24.

were … just tools she needed to achieve her dream. And her dream was expansive enough to accommodate all of them."[25]

In their daily lives also, the women's identities, as the novel underscores, consist of a series of provisional narratives. Narrating their histories to each other – life writing being a formal way to underscore the narrative dimension of identity – the women change the story about themselves alongside the rapidly changing circumstances that have occurred to them. Sisi and Joyce have changed their names and were originally called Chrisom and Alek, the latter, as she reveals, being Sudanese, not Nigerian as she has made everyone in the house believe. Alek refers to the UN refugee camp she lived in for a while as "a collection of sad stories".[26] Upon arrival in Belgium, Sisi is determined to "shed her skin like a snake and emerge completely new".[27] Madam invents the story of an escape from Liberia that Sisi must tell about herself to the Immigration Office. Sisi agrees to be Liberian, "in the next months she would be other things. Other people. A constant yearning to escape herself would take over her life."[28] While the performance of sexualized definitions of black womanhood is central to the four women's lives as sex workers, their family histories emphasize their identities as a series of narratives invented strategically to suit the circumstances.

Formally, also, *On Black Sisters' Street* can be seen to defy exotic notions of black female identity and community, notions which define the four women when they are at work in the public space in Antwerp. The chapters entitled "Zwartezusterstraat" render an account of events that occur in the present, and are geographically situated in the city of Antwerp – more precisely in the house on Zwartezusterstraat, where the four women live together. These chapters are interwoven with chapters focusing on the individual life stories of the women and bring into view their separate, idiosyncratic pasts and futures. Their individual stories follow the ongoing movement back and forth between Nigeria and Belgium. The movement between individual stories set in divergent geographies and dissimilar timeliness creates a weaving effect that rejects essentialist notions of black female

[25] Unigwe, *On Black Sisters' Street*, 169.
[26] *Ibid*., 194.
[27] *Ibid*., 98.
[28] *Ibid*., 121.

identity, while simultaneously insisting on a commonality of experience:

> Their different thoughts sometimes converge and meet in the present, causing them to share the same fear. But when they think about their past, they have different memories.[29]

Additionally, the women living together in the African microcosm in their house on Zwartezusterstraat are supposed to share Nigeria as their place of origin, but they are not bound by anything except for their situation in the present in Flanders – a state of being sexualized and exoticized by hegemonic discourses. As we come to know their individual life stories, it is gradually conveyed that these women have had very different lives and would not be in contact in normal circumstances. The women share no sense of belonging or commonality based on their national or cultural background. When at a party a South-African man addresses her as his sister, Ama vehemently replies that she is not his sister, and turns his back on him. The rejection of family ties is suggestive, also for the mutual relationships among the four protagonists. Though they share the same house, their conceptions of home and family are not defined in national or cultural terms. The house, a spatial metaphor for the four black women's community in Europe, is a place of conflict that offers no true sense of belonging, it is a cold place without a heart or a hearth; the conventional symbol of the beating heart of the home, the fireplace, is fake.[30]

In the course of narrating their histories to each other, however, they develop a sense of belonging in each other's company. Through the intimacies of storytelling, the women discover their communal bond and shared predicament, which gradually ignites a sense of home. It is indeed the act of storytelling that constitutes the women's community in the house, which in the penultimate section, is described "like a family home", in which the kitchen is "communal" and the living room "shared', but where they "could also retire to their rooms for some privacy". It is a space where they could escape "the glare of the Schipperskwartier, live a life that did not include strange

[29] *Ibid*., 40.
[30] *Ibid*., 32.

men with sometimes stranger requests".[31] *On Black Sisters' Street* suggests, then, how cultural discourses that hypereroticize the black female body determine the way in which the four African sex workers in the red-light district of the Belgian city of Antwerp become African sex workers. But it also formally and thematically resists these popular cultural perceptions in favour of rendering more diverse, subtle representations of the women and the community they share.

From this perspective, *On Black Sisters' Street* to a certain extent also reveals itself to be a book that theorizes its own cultural mobility. Generally put, it conveys how Chika Unigwe's writings – their production, circulation, and reception – transcend the unilateral category of ethnic minority writing to which they are relegated in order to circulate in multiple transnational contexts. Unigwe's Dutch-language debut novel *De Feniks* (2005) was received as "the first book of fiction written by a Flemish author of African origin".[32] It was considered as a hopeful trendsetter for ethnic minority writing in Flanders, although it was also met with criticism. Reviewers commented on the fact that the novel was originally written in English and only afterwards translated into Dutch, a remark indicating the monolingualism, or at least the significance of Dutch as a primary language in nation-based paradigms of literature dominant in Flanders, even if the author is of African origin.[33] Unigwe, who speaks Igbo and English, has Dutch as her third language. After her debut, she has continued to publish Dutch as well as English short stories, essays, and translations and editions of her writings. The inherent bilingualism, not to say multilingualism, that characterizes Unigwe's oeuvre distinguishes her from most contemporary writers in Flanders.[34] The latter more often than not write principally in Dutch –

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[31] *Ibid*., 273.

[32] Chika Unigwe, *De feniks: roman*, Amsterdam and Antwerp: Meulenhoff Manteau, 2005. This description also appears on the back cover of *On Black Sisters' Street*.

[33] For a more detailed outline of Chika Unigwe's writings and other 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.

[34] In her review of *On Black Sisters' Street*, Fernanda Eberstadt describes Unigwe's language as "a rich mix of schoolmarm British and pidgin English, spiked with smatterings of Igbo and Yoruba" ("Tales from the Global Sex Trade", *New York Times*, 29 April 2011).

Dutch being their first language – and participate primarily in the Flemish-Dutch literary field.

In the reception of *De Feniks*, the effects of the ethno-culturalist assumptions underlying the intercultural literature programme in Flanders, as discussed in the essay by De Mul, are visible. In his review of Unigwe's first Dutch-language novel *De Feniks*, the Flemish critic Marc Cloostermans, for instance, complains that the Nigerian protagonist Oge did not have "a particularly interesting view on our country". Cloostermans is disappointed about Unigwe's general portrayal of Belgium in the novel, as it does not satisfy his expectations of the idea of a Nigerian-born writer: "To draw our attention to this kind of banalities, we really did not need a Nigerian writer."[35] According to this argument, Unigwe, as a Nigerian-born author is to present the Flemish audience with an interesting, new, Nigerian perspective on Belgium and if she fails to deliver this through her characters' mouths, one of the main reasons to read her work disappears. The reception in Flanders of Unigwe's *Fata Morgana* (*On Black Sisters' Street*) and her third novel *Nachtdanser* (*Night Dancer*, 2011) has not been particularly good. One would only seldom see the name of Unigwe while scrolling down the list of authors appearing at the most important Flemish literary events, festivals, or on lists of nominees for important literary prizes in the last five years. It is safe to say, therefore, that Unigwe's true acknowledgement or breakthrough has not yet happened in Flanders. From this perspective, the acclaim of *On Black Sisters' Street* in the Anglophone global literature market has been remarkably positive, with reviewers of major UK- and US-based newspapers *The Independent*[36] or *The New York Times*[37] praising the book's literary merits and its nomination for the 2011 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

While Unigwe seems to be to an extent confronted with certain expectations and limitations attached to the position of ethnic minority

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[35] Mark Cloostermans, "As en confetti: Grote emoties bij Chika Unigwe", *De Standaard*, 22 September 2005.
[36] Bernadine Evaristo, "*On Black Sisters' Street* by Chika Unigwe", *The Independent*, 3 July 2009.
[37] Fernanda Eberstadt, "Tales From the Global Sex Trade", *New York Times*, 29 April 2011.

writer which is available to her in Flanders, she simultaneously partakes successfully in a transnational literary system that transcends far beyond the localized Flemish literary field. To account in a detailed way for the relative dissimilarities in the reception of Unigwe's Dutch and English version of the novel *Fata Morgana/On Black Sisters' Street*, one would certainly need to look at a range of factors, such as publishing marketing strategies or the existence of an Anglophone niche-market of black diaspora writing, with its long history and relative prestige. The latter might possibly be more receptive to Unigwe's work than Flanders; or Belgium, as a whole, somewhat provocatively described by Caryl Phillips as the country where "non-white writers … have no visible role in society".[38]

It is safe to say, however, that Unigwe's writing in Dutch enables her to participate as an ethnic minority writer in the Flemish literary circuit and that it is also a springboard to transcend this small and localized literary market perhaps more easily than any other Flemish writer, and reach a much broader, if not to say global, readership. In the process, the notion of literary bilingualism involves a complex linguistic transmutation of an English-language manuscript into the Dutch-language book *Fata Morgana* in 2007, turned into an English-language edition *On Black Sisters' Street* in 2009. From this perspective, the circulation of Unigwe's literary bilingual fiction illustrates Rebecca Walkowitz's assumption that literature of migration "reflects a shift from nation-based paradigms to new ways of understanding community and belonging and to transnational models emphasizing a global space of ongoing travel and interconnection".[39] As already illustrated, it is precisely this quest for new ways of being, belonging and community which is formally and thematically central to *On Black Sisters' Street*.

**Brussels is Europe: multilinguality and multiculturality in Koen Peeters' *Grote Europese Roman***

Koen Peeters was raised in Flanders and is currently living in Leuven. He has been awarded several literary prizes, such as the *NRC Literatuurprijs* (1994) and the *Bordewijk-prijs* (2001), and nominated

[38] Caryl Phillips, "The Silenced Minority", *The Guardian*, 15 May 2004.
[39] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer", *Contemporary Literature*, XLVII/4 (Winter 2006), 533.

for the *AKO-literatuurprijs* (2001) and the *Gouden Uil* (2008). Characteristic of Peeters' *oeuvre* is a formal and thematic preoccupation with the practices of categorizing and collecting, an element generally linked to postmodern literature.

In his novel, *Grote Europese Roman* (2007), Peeters undertakes an attempt to "summarize Europe's history in an ambitious and epic way, but seen from the minute perspective of people working or living in Brussels".[40] The subject matter of the novel reveals Peeters' interest in European, rather than Flemish identity, although his perspective on European identity is localized and expressively "Flemish". In the novel, Europe's history is reflected through the imagination of Brussels – the geographical space which is often presented in media discourses as *pars pro toto* for the European Union and its legislative power – while at the same time Brussels functions as the prism through which European diversity is addressed.

In *Grote Europese Roman*, a Belgian company employs the protagonist Robin. His superior, named Theo Marchand (*nomen est omen*), instructs him to travel across Europe and visit business partners. Robin is expected to write an extensive report about his deliberations ("a beautiful SWOT-analysis"),[41] hoping that this will yield the necessary innovative inside knowledge that can rescue the company from downfall. In this set-up, Europe is imagined as a monstrous multinational construction where countries wage economic wars against each other and where encounters between firm representatives, who are in fierce competition, can only be superficial.[42] In transitory non-places, such as hotels, bars, taxis, and

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[40] Koen Peeters, *Grote Europese Roman*, Antwerp and Amsterdam: Meulenhoff-Manteau, 2007, 4: "Groots en episch … de geschiedenis van de Europese mensheid samenvatten, maar dan vanuit het kleine perspectief van mensen die werken of leven in Brussel."

[41] *Ibid*., 216: "een mooie SWOT-analyse."

[42] Thereby Peeters reproduces the topos of the primacy of economy in capitalistic Europe foiling the idea of a humanistic Europe. A similar argument can be found in Tom Lanoye's drama *Fort Europa* (2004) (see Thomas Ernst, "Europa zwischen Fluchtfabeln und Luftwurzeln: Der belgische Autor Tom Lanoye über Kapitalismus, Wissenschaft und Biopolitik in seinem Stück 'Festung Europa'", in *Ökonomie im Theater der Gegenwart: Ästhetik, Produktion, Institution*, eds Christine Bähr and Franziska Schößler, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009, 268-70).

business meetings, Robin meets his colleagues.[43] His attempts to reach meaningful communication regularly fail and his meetings are hasty and unsatisfactory, lending a reading that the protagonist experiences Europe as a capitalist non-space of fleeting professional encounters.

The novel consists of thirty-six chapters titled by the names of capital cities of European nation-states – from Bern to Ankara – although the chapters are not necessarily situated in the capitals announced in the respective titles. Robin composes his report as a collection of scenes, experiences and observations:

> Een mens is altijd onderweg, en soms wil hij bijzondere woorden die hij vindt, meenemen. Ook al is hij ondertussen aan het werk. Mijn schriftje is de opsomming van die vondsten.[44]

This specific form reinforces the aesthetic principle of collage, gathering heterogeneous elements that illustrate in their diversity the hybrid globalized world of Europe. During a nocturnal moment of self-reflection towards the end of the novel, Robin reviews his notes and formulates his ideal of a hybrid and diverse Europe:

> 's Nachts begrijp ik Europa, als mijn raam openstaat en de bloemen in het perk beneden Europees ademen. Of als je een gesprek begint in Boedapest, en iemand antwoord je in Praag. Of je vindt Lissabon terug in Brussel. Je spreekt met een blanke Noor die blij is vanwege de zon, en je kijkt in de Kroatische hand van een Kroatische vrouw. Je hoort de woorden van de Portugees in het vliegtuig. In de krant zijn Grieken verongelukt, en je lacht met het lawaai van de Nederlander, en de Duitser speelt Bach in de kerk, en in een kille straat in Warschau besef je dat je bestaat .... en dat allemaal samen is het profetische portret, het periodiek systeem van Europa. Het stijgt op uit mijn schriftje.[45]

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[43] Peeters, *Grote Europese Roman*, 213: "Eigenlijk zou ik haar baas willen zijn, noteer ik in mezelf."

[44] *Ibid*., 231: "One is always on a journey, and sometimes, one would like to take along particular words one finds along the road. Even if he is working meanwhile. My little notebook is a record of these discoveries."

[45] *Ibid*., 263: "At night, I understand Europe, when my window is open and the flowers in the flowerbed downstairs are breathing in a European way. Or when you start a conversation in Budapest, and someone is answering in Prague. Or when you discover Lisbon in Brussels. You talk to a white Norwegian who is thankful for the

In this passage, Europe is a transnational patchwork of people, cultures, and artefacts united by history, in a good and ugly sense: "Europe … is a melting pot, a mixing container, a steaming pot. Europe is Goethe and Vergil and Napoleon and Hitler."[46] At stake in the novel is an unresolved tension between Robin's ideal of a humane Europe which is one in diversity and the described reality of Europe, in which economic rivalry among the nation-states makes any form of human contact almost impossible. Europe is at once the object of a utopian desire and a questionable reality. This ambivalence determines the two central lines of action, which can be identified as such particularly towards the end of the novel, before they eventually merge.

Robin, the business traveller across economic Europe, narrates Theo Marchand's family history. Theo Marchand's father Robert was a Lithuanian Jew who felt threatened by the pre-war rising national socialist sentiments and committed suicide in Brussels. Theo, who had to rebuild the company from scratch, is regularly confronted by anti-Semitic comments. He is fed up with the European economic sphere and is forced to sell his company: "Theo's world was falling to pieces. Most of all he would have liked to evaporate namelessly."[47] Not only the bad conditions of his company and its eventual take-over by a Bulgarian investor are haunting Theo, but the past is also chasing him. When he is looking over the canals in Brussels, he sees blood and pogroms in the sky. Theo's perception of Europe is a morbid version of Robin's happy picture of unity in diversity, referring to the victims of European wars and especially of the Holocaust as a shared legacy:

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sun, and you look in the Croatian hand of a Croatian woman. You hear the words of the Portuguese in the plane. In the newspaper, some Greeks are reported dead in an accident, and you laugh with the noise of a Dutchman. And the German plays Bach in a church, and in a chilly street in Warsaw you realize you're alive …. And that all together is the prophetic portrait, the periodical system of Europe. It arises from my notebook."

[46] *Ibid*., 124: "Europa ... is een mengvat, de smeltpot, de stoofpot. Europa is Goethe en Vergilius, Napoleon en Hitler."

[47] *Ibid*., 252: "Theo's wereld viel zo ongeveer uit elkaar. Het liefst van alles zou hij naamloos verdampen."

> Mijn vader pleegde zelfmoord om niet vermoord te worden …. Europa, dat zijn de namen van de doden op onze gezamenlijke kerkhoven.[48]

Thus Peeters connects in a problematic way the story of a hegemonic capitalist Europe with the stereotype of the Jewish businessman who is destroyed by history: Theo Marchand, who has seen his father being eliminated by the nationalization of a neighbouring European country, is now in his turn destructed by the economic globalization of Europe.

Theo finds a loyal collaborator in Robin, who initially takes on the travel project to save his own career above everything else but grows increasingly desperate. His desolate wanderings across the business world of Europe and his growing interest in Theo's biography make for a shift in his way of thinking. He starts reading books about the holocaust by Anne Frank, Primo Levi, and Imre Kertész. Accidentally, he meets his former girlfriend Esther in the swimming pool, and discovers that he is the father of her daughter. After this self-discovery, Robin becomes a father and a man at the same time and he finally leaves his career, though involuntarily.

The stereotyped story of the Jewish merchant and the one of the insecure present-day figure of Robin intersect in the scene of Robin's dismissal. Here, the intersection of the Holocaust motif and of the economic Europe takes on rather questionable forms. Robin, who increasingly identifies with the history of the persecuted Jews, conflates his fate as the dismissed employee with nothing less than a vision of the fate of the Jews selected for the gas chambers:

> Op kantoor word ik direct gebeld …. 'Je hoeft niet weg', zegt Remco. 'Maar de voorwaarden zijn nu erg gunstig.' Hij zegt wat, maar ik versta hem niet. Ik zie de deur. Daarachter de smalle trap. Staan zij daar en sta ik hier, en mijn handen stijgen belachelijk in de hoogte. 'So, und jetzt bist du an der Reihe', en daar verschijnt een kluwen van mensen. Uitgerekt, naakt. De lijken verstrengeld als ze uit de gaskamers worden gehaald.[49]

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[48] *Ibid*., 216-17: "My father committed suicide to avoid being murdered …. Europe, it is the names of the dead buried in our common graveyards."

[49] *Ibid*., 284: "In the office, I am instantly called …. 'You don't have to go', Remco says. 'But the conditions are presently very interesting.' He is saying something, but I cannot understand him. I see the door. Behind it, the small flight of stairs. They are

In this quotation Europe's history of the Holocaust and the Second World War are juxtaposed with the present-day Europe of neo-liberalism. Whereas Jews were eliminated out of the "Volkskörper", in the present scene employees are being made redundant in the world of trade, which is a rather ahistorical analogy. The motif of the Europe of war-waging nations is repeated, while capitalism is described as present-day fascism. Peeters' imagery links up historically unconnected European histories into a whole which is at the same time provocative and problematic.

Apart from this, it is clear that Theo and Robin represent two different European types. Theo is the pessimistic-ironic intellectual of the post-war era and Robin is the younger, self-reflexive *homo economicus* of the new millennium. Eventually both drown in the waves of globalization. They share the inability to engage in a meaningful human relationship and their unsuccessful professional life, but also the love for Brussels, which is the topographical as well as thematic centre of the novel. Theo's company is located in Brussels and he remembers his family history during a walking tour around the city.[50] Robin is visiting the social world of the Brussels *Bildungsbürger* such as the KVS Theatre, the cultural centre De Markten, or renowned restaurants as Bonsoir Clara in the Dansaertstraat.[51] Brussels reflects European diversity in the sense that the Flemish, Belgian, and European capital is topographically composed of numerous smaller cultures. It is a liminal space of cultural encounters:

> Podgorica. In deze straat doe ik mijn Brusselse truc. Via één straat van de ene wereld in de andere stappen …. Wie door de Montenegrostraat loopt, stapt door een spiegel, hij reist, hij wordt iemand anders.[52]

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standing there and I am standing here, and my hands are ridiculously getting up in the air. '*There, and now it's your turn*', and a bunch of people appears. Stretched out, naked. The bodies are entangled when they are taken out of the gas chambers."

[50] *Ibid*., 246.

[51] *Ibid*., 40, 224, and 226.

[52] *Ibid*., 207: "Podgorica. On this street, I do my Brussels trick. Stepping via one street from one world into the next …. Walking in Montenegrostraat is like stepping into a mirror, travelling, becoming someone else."

Koen Peeters' *Grote Europese Roman* imagines the ideal and reality of the European Union through Brussels, which is portrayed as a transformative, multicultural Europe in miniature. In so doing, the novel anticipates in a literary way what Geert Buelens, Jan Goossens, and David Van Reybrouck in their volume *Waar Belgie voor staat* observe in the political and cultural domain: that Brussels "is forcing us to think about the large social questions in Belgium and Europe. All the large and small communities in Brussels, and there are much more than two, will have to cooperate in order to deal with and solve these questions."[53] From this perspective, Brussels becomes the multicultural avant-garde city of the European integration process. However, because it is bound up in discourses of homogenous Flemish identity, it turns into an alterity space again and again.

Further, *Grote Europese Roman* deploys strategies of multilingualism, the main one being a form of textual multilingualism that inserts foreign languages into the Dutch main text. This counters the imagination of the Dutch language as a closed-off entity. In addition to the deployment of colloquial Dutch[54] and various quotations from Latin,[55] a range of words, idioms and sentences from Europe's languages are quoted in Robin's notebook during his travels. Romanian, Estonian, Slovakian, Hungarian, Czech, Lithuanian, Serbian, Swedish, Slovenian, Italian, and Polish languages are used.[56] Robin consciously collects these bits and fragments of languages, words, and meanings and portrays them as an important part of the fascinating diversity of which Europe is composed.[57] This also involves his reflections on non-Latin alphabets, amongst others the Slavic or Hebrew ones.[58]

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[53] Buelens, Goossens, and Van Reybrouck, *Waar België voor staat: Een toekomstvisie*, 20: "dwingt ons om na te denken over de grote samenlevings-vraagstukken in België en Europa. Alle grote en kleine gemeenschappen in Brussel, en dat zijn er dus veel meer dan twee, zullen moeten samenwerken om die vraagstukken aan te pakken en op te lossen."

[54] Peeters, *Grote Europese Roman*, 43.

[55] *Ibid*., 20, 56, 66, 152-153, 156, 164, 209, 228, 242, 248, 256, 266, 269, 276, and 278.

[56] *Ibid*., 42 and 44 (Romanian), 61-62 (Estonian), 73-74 and 78 (Slovakian), 85-86 (Hungarian), 89-90 (Czech), 104 (Lithuanian), 118 (Serbian), 144 (Swedish), 148-49 and 151 (Slovenian), 169 and 171 (Italian), 190 and 196-97 (Polish).

[57] *Ibid*., 77 and 231.

[58] *Ibid*., 67-68 and 195 respectively.

Opposed to the smaller European languages, the larger, middle-European languages – notably English, French, and German – are given a particular status and connotation. English is the novel's principal language to proclaim all of the problematic effects of European economic globalization. Striking in this respect is that the personalized name of Theo's company transforms into "CSP – Communications & Sales Partnerships".[59] In some cases, English is deployed as the language of human rights[60] or the expression of poetical lyrics,[61] but its main connotation is as a vehicle of neoliberal globalization. This is exemplified by terms from the business jargon such as "e-auction", "workflow", or "city-marketing" to name just a few examples.[62] In a similar vein, a virus-infected email conversation is held in English.[63] This conversation symbolizes the Anglo-dominant economic sphere of Europe, particularly its aggressive forms of communication.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the German language is similarly inscribed with emblematic meaning, as the language of National Socialism. It is of course hardly neutral, particularly when used as the instructions on the Zyklon-B boxes[64] or the dead proclamation in the gas chambers are quoted in the original German.[65] By implementing these German sentences into the text, Peeters repeats the idea of the German language as one of the central media of National-Socialist ideology and practices into his concept of a hybrid Europe.

As opposed to English and German, the French language is deployed in a more neutral way. This point can be considered as a statement, particularly when seen from the perspective of the long-standing history of communitarian tensions in Belgium. In fact, the two major languages of Belgium are portrayed to coexist fruitfully, which suggests a functioning bilingual Belgium.[66] Officially bilingual

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[59] *Ibid*., 255.
[60] *Ibid*., 134.
[61] *Ibid*., 138 and 285.
[62] *Ibid*., 88, 82, and 132 respectively.
[63] *Ibid*., 33.
[64] *Ibid*., 283: "Nur durch geübtes Personal zu öffnen und zu verwenden" ("only to be opened and used by experienced staff").
[65] *Ibid*., 284: "So, und jetzt bist du an der Reihe" ("And now it's your turn").
[66] *Ibid*., 25-26, 53-59, and 293.

street and square names in Brussels are in the novel alternatingly referred to by the Francophone and Dutch denominations.[67]

Peeters' imagination of a Europe in which equal languages thrive side by side is also visible in a particular trope which underlines his utopia of Europe. Throughout the novel, specific nouns are mentioned as a list of translations in Dutch, English, French and German, sometimes including even more languages.[68] This trope is a formal representation of Theo's interest in language acquisition during his childhood: "Theo inserted a new ink cartridge into his pen, and wrote in slow, school-blue letters: Vader, Vater, father, père. Moeder, Mutter, mother, mere."[69] Theo has a particular interest in the study of bird names in various languages and it is characteristic of birds that they are able to fly across territorial and linguistic borders. The multilingual relation to borderless birds opens up a new, utopian perspective, which is stated explicitly in the *envoi* which ends the book:

> Ik wil graag op beschaafde wijze met vogels praten …. Zij zijn de echte internationalen, de handelsreizigers, die vertegenwoordigers …. Ach, mijn Deense *rødhals*, mijn Zweedse *rödhake*, mijn Noorse *rødstrupe*, mijn *petirrojo* van Spanje en *pettirosso* van Italië, *Erithacus rubecula*, mijn Poolse *rudzik*, *červenka* van Tsjechië en Slowakije, mijn Finse *punarinta* en mijn Ierse *spideog*, mijn sympatieke *κοκκινολαίμης* van de Grieken.[70]

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[67] *Ibid*., 293. In Jamal Boukhriss' and Saddie Choua's prose pieces for the first Flemish anthology of "migration-literature", the multilinguality of Brussels is turned into an important aesthetic principle (see Jamal Boukhriss, "Alleen tegen de wereld/Seul contre tous" and Saddie Choua, "Les Chips au Paprika", in *KifKif: Nieuwe stemmen uit Vlaanderen*, ed. KifKif, Antwerp and Amsterdam: Meulenhoff-Manteau, 2006, 45-65 and 87-99).

[68] *Ibid*., 109, 122-23, 125-30, 156-59, 186, 189, 229, 235, 249, 272, and 290-92.

[69] *Ibid*., 126: "Theo deed een nieuw inktpatroon in zijn vulpen, en schreef in trage, schoolblauwe letters: Vader, Vater, father, père. Moeder, Mutter, mother, mere."

[70] *Ibid*., 293-94: "I would like to speak in a civilized manner to the birds …. They are the real internationals, the business travellers, the representatives …. Alas!, my Danish *rødhals*, my Swedish *rödhake*, my Norwegian *rødstrupe*, my *petirrojo* from Spain and *pettirosso* from Italy, *Erithacus rubecula*, my Polish *rudzik*, *červenka* of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, my Finnish *punarinta* and my Irish *spideog*, my sympathetic *κοκκινολαίμης* of the Greeks."

The unbound freedom of birds and the possibilities of multilinguality beyond the limitations of people and their monolinguality are promoted as the novel's main image. This stands in explicit contrast to the dominant language and identity discourses which serve to support Flanders as a closed-off, monolingual space.

**Epilogue: Benno Barnard's Belgitude**

In this essay, we have argued that dominant monolingual and monocultural imaginations of Flanders are currently being contested, not only in public debate but also in literary texts. To illustrate this point, we have examined a number of narrative and linguistic strategies in the writings by Chika Unigwe and Koen Peeters respectively, who, each in their own way, abandon monocultural and nation-based ways of thinking and being in the portrayal of protagonists living in Antwerp and Brussels, respectively. In so doing, Unigwe and Peeters deploy strategies of either literary or textual bilingualism and scrutinize the authority of the dominant national language in Flanders.

Unigwe engages with a form of literary bilingualism in her bilingual *oeuvre*, in which Dutch and English language texts are translated, rewritten, and revised in complicated ways. While Unigwe takes up the authorial position of an ethnic minority author in Flanders, her writings simultaneously circulate beyond the topographical space of Flanders and reach a global English readership. The latter at once national and transnational mobility of her writings is reflected in the thematic representation of black womanhood in the book *On Black Sisters' Street*.

Peeters' *Grote Europese roman* shifts the focus to Brussels, a liminal space where the possibilities and limitations of European identity are played out and where the ideal of a unity in diversity cultural model is made to clash with a reality of a neo-liberal economic Europe. In the process, strategies of textual bilingualism, notably the insertion of foreign phrases into the main Dutch texts, and the insertion of strings of translated words, are used. They instantiate the idea of a European commonality across cultural difference, but they also highlight the critical dimensions of this happy multicultural and multilingual idea of Europe. This point is illustrated by the visible, if not stereotypical, connection of English to the economic

system of neoliberalism, German to the political system of National Socialism, and by the detrimental effects these languages have on human relations.

Despite or because of dominant constructions of a monocultural, monolinguistic space in Flanders, the two texts under investigation indicate that aspects of multilingualism and multiculturalism can and do figure in a variety of ways in the literatures produced in Flanders today. These are addressed both by authors who are conventionally considered to be Flemish and of non-Flemish origin. However, we have focused on merely two literary texts, while our argument pertains to a much broader collection of texts. By way of conclusion, therefore, we will briefly broaden our scope and address aspects of multilingualism and multiculturalism in the writings of Benno Barnard, a Dutchman living in Belgium for approximately the last thirty years.

Barnard is a poet, novelist, and travel writer who has recently become renowned for his public criticism of Islam. In his view, Islam as a religious principle is incompatible with western democracy based on Enlightenment values. His defence of the headscarf ban[71] provoked a considerable response among Muslim intellectuals and activists.[72] Although Barnard has been criticized for his anti-Islamic statements, his own position in the Belgian literary field is also rather equivocal.

One of Barnard's predominant preoccupations in his work is the quest for European identity, which he locates in the idealized model of multicultural, multilingual Belgium and compares to the hybridized monarchy of Austro-Hungary and its literature. In his writing, Barnard imagines an idealized image of the contemporary European citizen

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[71] See, for example, Benno Barnard and Geert Van Istendael, "Bericht aan weldenkend links: Waarom wij het hoofddoekenverbod verdedigen", *De Standaard*, 2 February 2008.

[72] Cf. Dirk Debruyne, Pascal Debruyne, Ico Maly, Marlies Casier, Sami Zemni, Christopher Parker, Dany Neudt, Bilal Benyaich, Nadia Fadil, Noël Clycq, Sarah De Mul, Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa, Najib Chakouh, and Jan Zienkowski, "Onze islam bestaat niet!" *indymedia.be*, 12 March 2008, http://www.indymedia.be/index.html%3Fq=node%252F26524.html. On 31 March 2008, Barnard's speech at the University of Antwerp, scheduled in the series "De erfenis van de verlichting" ("The inheritance of the Enlightenment"), and ironically and provocatively titled "Leve God! Weg met Allah!" ("Long live God! Away with Allah!") was massively disturbed and had to be cancelled after just a few minutes. Mainly supporters of the radically Islamic website www.sharia4belgium.com claimed responsibility for this action.

similar to the lifestyle of himself, who is in possession of a Dutch passport, while living in Belgium with a US-American woman and being professionally active as an intellectual in the Flemish public arena and literary field. It is worthwhile to underscore that Barnard's image of the European citizen stands out because of its Eurocentric nature. It is closely connected to the knowledge of European history and both the humanistic and the Judeo-Christian tradition, while downplaying Europe's affiliations to the intellectual and religious traditions of other continents.

Barnard's collection of essays *Eeuwrest: Een genealogische autobiografie* (*Century Rest: A Genealogical Autobiography*, 2001) is a collection of reflections and travel writing about Belgium, which foregrounds the question of the possibility of a European identity against the background of the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Formally, *Eeuwrest* conveys the multilingual dimension of European identity which it thematizes. The text is sprinkled with German, English, and French words and attention is drawn to the Greek and Latin linguistic tradition ("zoön politikon", "creatio ex nihilo"),[73] even though Barnard leaves less room in the text than Peeters to the smaller European languages. Barnard's search for a "Belgian model", that is, to anticipate a "European model", is at the same time distinguished from a homogeneous notion of Flemish identity. This is illustrated in the central essay "Waarom ik Belg geworden ben" ("Why I have become Belgian"), originally from 1996:

> Om te beginnen realiseerde ik me dat ze [de vraag] verkeerd was gesteld. Want wat is het Vlaamse van de Vlaming anders dan een kwestie van natuur, familie, worteling, provincie, dialect, al datgene wat men van zichzelf is zonder daar moeite voor te hoeven doen? .... Het Belgische van de Belg daarentegen, zijn 'belgitude', is een kwestie van cultuur, levenswijze, vriendschap, urbaniteit, Nederlands en Frans – en voor die cultuur heb ik gekozen. Ik ben dus om zo te zeggen Belg geworden.[74]

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[73] Benno Barnard, "Waarom ik Belg ben geworden", in *Eeuwrest: Een genealogische autobiografie*, Amsterdam and Antwerp: Atlas, 2001, 488 and 493, respectively.

[74] *Ibid*., 487-88: "As a start, I realized that it [the question of becoming Flemish] was posed in the wrong way. After all what is the Flemishness of a Fleming other than a matter of nature, family, rootedness, province, dialect, all that which one is effortlessly doing? …. The Belgianness of the Belgian, on the contrary, his

In this passage, a dichotomy is posited between a Flemish culture oriented towards nature, provinciality, and dialect and a Belgian culture defined by urbanity, lifestyle, and multilingualism to which he himself aligns. In a later section of the essay, this Flemish culture is revealed to be an unreachable impossibility. As Barnard argues, a myth of Flanders originated after the foundation of the Belgian nation-state, and was cherished by the supporters of the Flemish movement, who were members of the Belgian French-speaking bourgeoisie: "The more he [the Flemish nationalist] is pulling at Flanders, the more Belgium is exposed."[75] Barnard not only deconstructs Flemish nationalism on historical grounds, but also scrutinizes some of its representatives with reference to autobiographical anecdotes. He describes Flemish nationalists polemically as no more than representatives of a "gushing, naive, archaic romance" who indulge in "lazy, uncreative, increasingly historical sulkiness" and who only take ethnic pure Dutch speakers from Flanders seriously as discussion partners "when after twenty years of Belgium, I permit myself an opinion about this particular subject".[76]

How then does Barnard in *Eeuwrest* refer to the conventional phrase "belgitude", which generally denotes the difficulty of Belgium to define itself? As a result of the historical experience that nationalism has led to lost war experiences, according to Barnard, the Belgians have developed an artificial lifestyle in which they create their identity out of a playful engagement with communication, arts, and food. This virtual nature of Belgian identity manifests itself in a specific deployment of language and sign-system with a Babylonian quality: "Sentences said or written in Belgium often do not signify what one would think on first sight, because over generations Belgians

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'belgitude', is a matter of culture, way of living, friendship, urbanity, Dutch and French – and that's the culture I chose. I have, as a matter of speaking, become Belgian."

[75] *Ibid*., 493-94: "Hoe harder hij [the Flemish nationalist] aan Vlaanderen trekt, hoe meer België er te voorschijn komt."

[76] *Ibid*.: "dweperige, naïeve, archaïsche romantiek", "luie, oncreatieve, steeds historischer wordende verongelijktheid", and "wanneer ik mij na twintig jaar België een mening over dit onderwerp permitteer".

have been practising in hyperbole, wit and paradox."[77] For Barnard, Belgian identity centres on an "inscrutable semiotics"[78] to which ambivalence and multimodality is inherent and which is starkly opposed to the illusion of a clearly defined, unilateral Flemish identity.

Barnard is happy to identify with this notion of Belgitude, as he says at the end of the essay, while at the same time he refers to his Dutch passport and his wife's American nationality.[79] Interestingly enough, Barnard plays his own games of identity on different levels: in Belgium, he takes up the hybrid position of a Dutch-Flemish author, while at the same time he presents himself as a Belgian-European writer who defends the European Enlightenment. But as a European writer, he reconstructs a strong dichotomy between a humanistic and Christian European tradition and a Muslim Arabic tradition, which does not leave any room for the possibility of hybridization.

Texts by Barnard as well as by writers such as Mortier, Unigwe, Peeters and many others underscore in various ways the fundamental impossibility of the myth of a monolithic Flemish culture. Whereas Unigwe draws on her status as a black female hood 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 and Peeters rely on a notion of Europe imagined through Belgium and Brussels for the creation of a humanistic, multicultural, and multilingual identity. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, this newly imagined community is already realized by the African women living in Zwartezusterstraat, where it emerges as a result of the sexual and racial power relations inherent in Oge's women's traffic network, Europe's sex industry, and heterosexual desire. In the case of Peeters and Barnard, this alternative vision of community must still be won over against the horrors of history, the primacy of the global economy (Peeters), and the contemporary regionalization of Flanders (Barnard). Most certainly, many readers in

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[77] *Ibid*., 489: "In België uitgesproken of opgeschreven zinnen betekenen dikwijls absoluut niet wat men zou menen, want de Belgen hebben zich gedurende generaties geoefend in de overdrijving, de boutade, de paradox."
[78] *Ibid*., 490: "ondoorgrondelijke semiotiek."
[79] *Ibid*., 494.

Flanders today eagerly anticipate the effects on the political domain of their efforts to imagine forms of community beyond the monocultural and monolingual hegemonic discourses.