Strange neighbors
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Introduction
Introduction

Located on opposite sides of the central station of the city of Antwerp, the capital of Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium), are two distinct urban spaces. This book revolves around these two spaces and, especially, around the everyday negotiations of ‘living together’ that their denizens engage in. In certain respects, the two spaces are very similar, with both characterized by what Steven Vertovec (2007) has called “super-diversity”. Over half of their population consists of residents who have, in a wide variety of ways, a (post-)migrant background from outside Belgium. In both cases, a significant part of the population suffers from deprivation and unemployment, and sections of public space are marked by dilapidation and neglect. Both spaces, moreover, are widely known in Flanders and Belgium, and have come to play a symbolic role in the Flemish public debate about ‘integration’ and multicultural society. They differ, however, in terms of the (post-)migrant minority that has come to characterize their public space most visibly, the histories of Othering and belonging attached to these different minorities, the class histories of the two spaces, and the precise content and function of their symbolic imagination.

When exiting Antwerp’s central station to the south or west, you enter what is commonly referred to as the ‘Jewish neighborhood’ [joodse buurt/wijk]. This is not really a neighborhood in the sense of an administrative unit, and nor is it a clearly fixed or demarcated geographical space. The ‘Jewish neighborhood’ is, instead, a symbolic moniker, referring to that area, located in a collection of adjacent boroughs, where public space has come to be visibly marked by the concentrated presence of an orthodox and pious Jewish population, with its distinct dress and appearance, and by the prayer houses, schools and businesses that cater to it. As a symbolic space, the ‘Jewish neighborhood’ is widely known beyond Antwerp. The area, and the diamond trade and industry to which its presence is related, are also promoted as a tourist attraction by the city of Antwerp. In the Flemish public discourse and imaginary, it is considered to be at the same time ‘typically Antwerpian’ as well as intriguingly exotic and foreign, a closed-off ‘world’ of its own – a modern-day shtetl, the ‘Jerusalem of the North’.

When you exit the central station to the north or east, you enter a borough named ‘Old-Borgerhout’. Here, public space is marked by a different migration history: that of labor migrants who were hauled from Morocco in the 1960s as a solution to the labor shortage in the then booming Antwerp port and heavy industries. It is also marked by a history of urban policy tribulations: the demise and deprivation caused by the ‘city

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1 See Rotthier 2006a and 2006b.
flight’ of (white) urban middle classes to the suburbs, on the one hand, and, recently, by signs of gentrification (the cargo cycle, the renovated loft apartment) and small-scale urban regeneration on the other. Old-Borgerhout – usually called simply ‘Borgerhout’ – holds a prominent and deeply contested place in the Flemish public imagination. Indeed, from the 1980s onwards, Borgerhout (dubbed ‘Borgerokko’) functioned as the icon of the multiple problems associated with migration and cultural difference in Flemish public discourse and political debate.

The fieldwork for this book has taken place in these two adjacent neighborhoods, and has focused on their white Belgian, Moroccan-Belgian, and Jewish Belgian denizens. However, the book is not intended to be an ethnography of two neighborhoods. Nor is it an ethnography of three different ‘cultural’ (or ‘ethnic’ or religious) ‘communities’ and their interactions (cf. Baumann 1996: 1-3, 10; Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 1-7). Instead, I have written this work as an ethnography of a political notion, namely that of ‘living together’.

‘Living together’ [samenleven in Dutch], so I will argue, has emerged as a broad political project in Belgium, and in Flanders in particular. It acts as the condensation point for the imagination and contestation of who ‘we’ (as ‘Belgians’ or ‘Flemings’) are and how to organize a ‘multicultural society’. It mediates desires to become a properly ‘modern’, cosmopolitan society, as well as longings for what is felt to be a lost intimacy and organic community. Remedying an assumed deficit of ‘living together’ has been turned into a domain of governance and an object of policy. However, ‘living together’ has also taken hold beyond the management schemes of officials and politicians, becoming a generalized, vernacular concern. Indeed, as I will demonstrate, this deficit has become a prism through which denizens, in the context of the multicultural neighborhood, have come to understand and evaluate themselves and their everyday lives.

I call this the politics of ‘living together’, which has been brought to bear on some spaces more than others, and which interpellates different categories of urban residents in different ways and to different extents. The comparison between the political production and governance of ‘Borgerhout’ and the ‘Jewish neighborhood’ serves to investigate these differences and to bring into relief the shifting intersections of dominant imaginations of class, ethnicity or ‘race’, and religion or the secular, that the emergence of the notion of ‘living together’ entails.

With this uneven weight of the politics of ‘living together’ in mind, the major part of this book is devoted to vernacular or “demotic” (Baumann 1996: 10; i.e. by ‘ordinary’ denizens in everyday life) engagements with, and negotiations of, the notion of ‘living together’ by residents in Oud-Borgerhout and the ‘Jewish neighborhood’. The main question that this dissertation considers is how we can understand everyday life in super-diverse urban neighborhoods in relation to, and shaped by, the ‘politics of living together’. More than anything else, then, this book is intended to render a detailed

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2 To improve readability, I will refer to the two spaces as ‘neighborhoods’ from now on, but I ask the reader to keep in mind that this is a problematic concept.
ethnography of what happens in between urban denizens – perceptions, translations, practices, and feelings – when these mutual everyday engagements have become the object of a political project.

In the remainder of this Introduction, and through the concepts of ‘culturalism’ and a ‘culturalization of politics’, I first relate my idea of a ‘politics of living together’ to a wider field of literature that has sought to describe and explain the rise of political movements, policies and discourses that are anxiously focused on ‘migrants’ and their ‘integration’ in the ‘New Europe’. In particular, I sketch the two interventions I aim to contribute to this literature, which function as a framework for the further reading of this book. Although I believe that the emergence of a political notion of ‘living together’ characterizes European politics more broadly, I understand it to have gained a particularly acute force in Belgium, and especially in Flanders. I therefore briefly describe the particularities of Belgian and Flemish national politics within the European context. I end by highlighting several methodological questions and considerations, which I take to be inseparable from the theoretical arguments I make throughout the chapters that follow.

‘Culture’ and ‘strangers’ in the New Europe

From the 1980s onwards, a body of academic literature has been developed which seeks to understand the emergence of a specific formation of difference or Othering – “a new construction of exclusion” (Stolcke 1995: 4) - in late 20th century Western Europe. The particular form that this formation took was conceptualized as relatively new. Moreover, in the moral context of a post-World War II Europe that was supposed to be convinced of, and committed to, the need to overcome racism and exclusion (Stolcke 1995: 2), the vigor with which it excluded, and has continued to exclude (symbolically and institutionally), specific groups of migrants and minorities from both securely belonging in the nation-state and ‘Europeanness’ was considered to be shocking and in need of explanation. The logic of this formation of difference became most visible first in the discourses of a ‘national crisis’ that was assumedly caused by the presence of ‘migrants’ as propagated by the (extreme) right in the 1970s and 1980s, although its inner logic was never only confined to the political right (Gilroy 1987: 42, 45-47). Such discourses quickly gained more political weight, as several far-right parliamentary political parties were hugely successful across Western Europe in the 1990s (Banks and Gingrich 2006: 3-5).

All authors agree that what is central to this new politics of exclusion are: 1) a specific deployment of a reified or essentialist understanding of ‘culture’, and, strongly related to this, 2) notions of (cultural) ‘rootedness’ and ‘strangeness’ in relation to the nation or the nation-state. However, authors have used a variety of terms, and have highlighted a variety of aspects, in their descriptions of this new politics of difference. Some have conceptualized it as a “cultural turn in race thinking” (Gilroy 2005: 141), i.e. they view it as a ‘new’ form of racism or mode of racialization – ‘cultural racism’- that no longer relies on explicit biological determinism or the hierarchical ordering of ‘races’

In the early 2000s, another shift was sensed within this formation of difference. In a “backlash against multiculturalism” (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010; Lentin and Titley 2011), Western European national political elites (across the political spectrum) co-opted the exclusionary and “anxious” (de Koning and Modest 2016) aspects of culturalist discourse that had, until then, been the prerogative of the far right. As a result, culturalist notions were translated and institutionalized in new liberalist integration policies and citizenship regulations. This has sparked literature on what is alternately called the “culturalization of citizenship” (Geschiere 2009; cf. Schinkel and van Houdt 2010; Schinkel 2010) or the “culturalization of politics” (Zižek 2008; cf. Schinkel 2013). This literature has critically deconstructed the way in which ‘culture’ has become the main cipher through which all political problems and differences are reduced, as well as how citizenship has come to be understood as linked to participation in a supposedly ‘national culture’ or in ‘national values’ (cf. Schinkel 2010; Schinkel 2013). Moreover, several authors have emphasized that this has combined with an alarmist political problematization of religion, Islam especially, and with a particular construction of secular freedoms, as somehow inherent aspects or ‘achievements’ of specific national ‘cultures’ or of a putatively ‘Judeo-Christian’ European civilization (Brown 2006; Butler 2008; Scott 2009; Verkaaik 2009; Mepschen, Duyvendak, Tonkens 2010).

I build in this book on this broad field of literature on what I hereafter refer to as ‘culturalism’3 or ‘culturalist’ politics, and on its recent ‘liberal-secularist’ sub-strand. I offer an ethnographic inquiry into the impact of a ‘culturalist’ and ‘secularist’ formation of difference on everyday life and interactions in multi-ethnic neighborhoods. As such, it is situated in a wider field of ethnographic studies investigating how “lived

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3 I use this term because it overarches all the other more specific aspects of the evocation of ‘culture’ (cultural fundamentalism/essentialism, cultural anxiety, cultural racism, integralism etc), and because I believe that a crucial aspect of culturalist politics is precisely that it combines, and moves between, all these different, more specific, modes. I will engage with more specific aspects of ‘culturalism’ throughout the chapters in order to highlight such combinations or slippages, and their shifts. I duly note Schinkel’s remark, however, that we need to distinguish current political usages of ‘culture’ from ‘culturalism’ as it was traditionally used in anthropology, namely: to denote an approach that foregrounds ‘culture’ as an explanation of human diversity in explicit critique of racist, scientific notions of ‘natural’ human differences (2013: 1145). Moreover, although I use ‘culturalism’ to refer to the nature of these politics, I believe that this particular use of the concept of ‘culture’ is deeply inflected with notions of ‘race’ (with a strong link to the way in which ‘race’ was operationalized in colonial governance through notions of ‘culture’, ‘mentality’, ‘morality’ and ‘psychology’; see Stoler 2002; Ceuppens 2003), and has the effect of “racializing” particular bodies in certain ways. This will be highlighted with more precision in the chapters that follow.
multiculture” takes shape in practice in this political context, and how urban denizens are affected by and negotiate dominant culturalist (or ‘racist’, or ‘nationalist’) discourses (e.g. Back 1996; Baumann 1996; Shoshan 2008; Wise and Velayutham 2009; Hall 2012; Watson and Saha 2013). However, my ethnographic material also allows me to complicate and reframe the broad analytical assumptions that undergird the literature on culturalism and its impact on everyday multicultural life in roughly two ways, which I will treat one by one in the sections that follow.

The first contribution I aim to make concerns an overall emphasis in the literature on ‘culturalism’ as predominantly coming down to anxieties over the threat that ‘strangers’ pose to the cultural integrity of the nation, and an understanding of the (migration and integration) politics and policies that culturalism gives rise to as essentially exclusionary in nature. I argue, instead, that there is a second inherent effect of culturalism that tends to be overlooked due to this emphasis and cannot be reduced to anxious exclusion alone: namely, the emergence of the question of how to politically arrange ‘living together’ between culturally different citizens. Second, explanations of why ‘culturalism’ emerged in Western Europe as a dominant way to think about difference and Otherness at a particular moment in time (which is usually hinted at with the terms the ‘New Europe’ or ‘postcolonial Europe’) have the implicit effect of suggesting that the new presence of non-white fellow denizens from outside Europe induces, somehow ‘logically’ or ‘naturally’, a heightened sense of alienation in white ‘Europeans’; as if these (post)migrants are indeed a ‘stranger’ kind of stranger than those that Europeans have had to deal with so far. My ethnographic material complicates this assumption as it shows that ‘strangeness’ is not as easily pinpointed in the ways in which culturalism is lived in Borgerhout and the Jewish neighborhood.

Both points are also attempts to go beyond the binary model of Selfing/Othering that in most of the literature is presented as underlying culturalist and secularist discourses: namely, the construction of an opposition between an assumed cultural (national) Self vs an assumed culturally alien (migrant or minority) Other. Inspired by Gerd Baumann’s insistence that processes of Selfing/Othering are virtually never “simple binary oppositions of ‘us=good’ and ‘them=bad’” (2006: 20), and that ‘triangular’ relations and models are by definition more conceptually interesting,⁴ I use the two points of complication that emerge in my data to highlight within culturalism’s seeming “binary grammar” the implicit presence of at least two “ternary” configurations (Baumann 2006: 37) that have historical roots that precede culturalist politics (in this, I build on Stoler 1989a, 1989b, 2002; Ceuppens 2003; Brodkin 1998; Roediger 2005). I regard this not only as a matter of a better conceptual understanding of the structural logic of culturalism, but also as a crucial tool for bringing out the different emotional layers to, and affective textures of, culturalism in its impact on everyday life. In the

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⁴ I had the good fortune of not only being exposed to this stimulating notion through Baumann’s writing, but also through his teaching, especially the methodology clinic for PhD students that he taught at the AISSR, during which he presented the triangle as a conceptual model par excellence.
following sections, I will describe these two points in more detail and elucidate the ternary elements that they imply.

**From cultural anxiety to anxiety over ‘living together’: a split within the national ‘we’**

Let me start by providing a more detailed description of what is usually meant by the term ‘culturalism’. ‘Culturalism’ relies primarily on an essentialist, reified, bounded and static notion of culture, which displays “embarrassing similarities” (Banks and Gingrich 2006: 18) to a certain anthropological tradition that is now largely abandoned within the discipline for a “processual” understanding of culture (Baumann 1996: 11; Grillo 2003). This essentialist understanding presupposes that humanity consists of different territorially-rooted and self-coherent ‘cultures’, and that culture as “a thing that one has” (Baumann 1999: 83) “determines individual and collective behavior” (Grillo 2003: 165). The result is the common equation of community, ethnicity and culture: those sharing an ethno-religious identity are believed to naturally form a ‘community’ that has its very own ‘culture’ compared to other communities (Baumann 1996: 10).

Culture is described as a “fundamentalist” (Stolcke 1995) or ‘anxious’ (Grillo 2003) version of such a culture concept, however, because it relies not only on a reification of ‘cultures’, but also on “reifying cultural boundaries and difference” (Stolcke 1995: 12). In a culturalist discourse, cultural difference is presented as absolute, overarching all other difference, and “as the fundamental and immutable basis of identity and belonging” (Silverstein 2005: 366; cf. Grillo 2003: 164). It is in this conception of cultural differences as “fixed, solid, almost biological properties of human relations” (Gilroy 1987: 37) that some authors view culturalism as touching on, or being a form of, racism. As different cultures are thought to be incommensurable and unbridgeable (Stolcke 1995: 4, 8; Grillo 2003: 164), and to each have their own proper (territorial) “place” (Stolcke 1995: 8), another aspect of culturalism is that relations ‘between cultures’ and members of different cultures are assumed to be “by ‘nature’ hostile” and “inherently conflictive” (Stolcke 1995: 5, 7). Lastly, as Grillo points out (2003, cf. Holmes 2000), culturalism fits into a longer Herderian tradition, not just in its conceptualization of culture, but also in its “cultural anxiety”. In other words, there is “anxiety about a culture and what is happening to it” (Grillo 2005: 158), or a fear of the erosion or loss of a specific cultural identity (ibid: 166) when it is exposed to the influence of another culture or to the alienating forces of abstract, unrooted systems (the state, universal doctrines, imperial civilizations) (see, for this latter aspect: Holmes 2000: 7; cf. Gingrich 2006: 31-31).

In nationalist culturalist discourse, it is thus not a (racially) inferior (colonial) subject that is imagined as Other to the nation, but the (post)migrant or, more generally,

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5 It is at this point that culturalism is not similar to an ‘old’ anthropological culture concept, but is in fact a deforming caricature of it.
the ‘stranger’, where strangeness is taken to mean ‘foreignness’ (not locally rooted) and cultural Otherness (Stolke 1995: 7-8; Silverstein 2005: 366). This notion of the stranger as a political problem is predicated on a Romantic tradition that views the nation and the nation-state as also founded on a “primordial”, territorially rooted, cultural community (Stolke 1995: 8, 11-12). The immigrant, as well as the post-migrant ethnoreligious minority, is thus constructed in the dominant culturalist discourse as an “invasive presence… an intrusion, an alien wedge cutting in to the body of an unsuspecting nation” (Gilroy 2005: 121). By virtue of cultural Otherness, the migrant/minority is perceived as an alienating threat to the nation’s cultural integrity, as well as eroding its unity and cohesion (Vertovec 2011: 241; Stolke 1995: 3, 8; Silverstein 2005: 364).

In line with this analysis, most focus in the literature is on how culturalism as a new formation of difference has led to the emergence of politics and policies that were intended to diminish the presence of ‘strangers’ or alien influences, whether by removing them (as in the fantasies of far right parties in the 1980s of remigration or deportation), blocking the arrival of more ‘strangers’ (via stringent migration policies), or fostering the “integration” of migrants and post-migrant minorities. In addition, there has been an analytic focus on politics and policies that aim to re-define, ‘re-invigorate’, or ‘strengthen’ so-called national culture, identity and values.

My point is that the focus of the analysis has largely been on how culturalist politics work ultimately to the Othering and exclusion of migrants and post-migrants from national belonging and full citizenship. Willem Schinkel’s analysis of the Dutch social scientific discourse on ‘integration’ (2013) is an eloquent example. In a very short summary of his argument, he shows that the way in which social science research in the Netherlands measures and maps ‘socio-cultural integration’ has the discursive effect of producing the non-integrated as if they are “outside” society and not (yet) part of it due to their (mainly cultural) deficits. As such, those who are not integrated function as the constitutive outside of ‘Dutch society’, which is construed as itself being cleansed of problems (2013: 1146). In this reading, which is, I think, characteristic of other critical analyses of culturalist politics, a seemingly inclusive policy aimed to “pull” migrants into society, is deconstructed as a politics of Othering in which a national Self is seen as dependent on, and constituted by, the opposition and exclusion of the cultural Other (i.e. non-integrated ‘allochthons’).

Ethnographic studies of multi-ethnic neighborhoods in Europe’s metropoles have repeatedly shown that neither culturalism’s essentialist understanding of ‘culture’ (Baumann 1996), nor the (racist, nationalist) politics of Othering that it gives way to, are completely hegemonic in everyday multicultural life (e.g. Back 1996; Wise 2005; Clayton 2009). Les Back’s notion of the “metropolitan paradox” is illustrative here (cf. Keith 2005: 15):
What is omitted in the deafening row over “essentialism” versus “anti-essentialism” is the complex interplay between these two impulses at the everyday level and how forms of social exclusion and inclusion work through notions of belonging and entitlement in particular times and places. … Urban vernacular cultures possess incommensurable political impulses that allow racism and transculturalism to be simultaneously proximate and symptomatic of what it means to grow up in post-imperial cities.

(Back 1996: 7)

This combination of ‘strangeness’ and ‘familiarity’, and of “neighborliness” and “dissociation” (van Eijk 2012), does indeed also characterize the interactions and mutual perceptions of my interlocutors in Borgerhout and the ‘Jewish neighborhood’. I will use the notion of the metropolitan paradox as an organizing principle, while also attempting to nuance and re-define its terms (‘racism’/‘transculturalism’) and problematizing the extent to which these should be understood as “incommensurable” political impulses.

However, my critique of the analytical focus on culturalist politics as an “anxious politics of the nation” (de Koning and Modest 2016) goes beyond this (in itself important) observation that everyday life is more complicated than the political rhetoric suggests. I contend that there is also another, different kind of political anxiety inherent in culturalism: namely an anxiety over the unraveling, not of the nation’s cultural integrity, but of the social fabric of society, and especially its urban neighborhoods, in their de facto comprising of what are construed as ‘strange’ and ‘culturally Other’ denizens. “Multiculturalism entails shifting the mechanics of creating national communities,” writes Anne-Marie Fortier, “by presenting new national family portraits that suggest a substantive shift in who ‘we’ are and how ‘we’ relate to each other (2008: 4).” Using this imagery, what I aim to contribute is a shift in theoretical attention away from the aspects of culturalist politics that are focused on conjuring a culturally homogenous ideal “national family portrait”, and towards a strand in which, however grudgingly and conditionally, the emergence of a new heterogeneous “family portrait” of a national ‘we’ joined by ‘strangers’ has come to be taken as a lasting reality that needs to be dealt with.

Although deeply related and intertwined with the politics of integration and migration, this second strand of politics revolves around a question, both practical and ethical in nature, that I believe cannot be reduced to the national question alone: how should the relations between the characters in this new family portrait be managed towards some kind of cohesion and away from conflict? How can a human connection across a difference that is imagined to be insurmountable be created? My critique is that this particular culturalist anxiety over a lack of fellow feeling between denizens, and the politics of ‘living together’ that it has induced, has not received enough theoretical and
ethnographic attention. This is not a naive appeal to recognize a somehow more ‘benign’ aspect of culturalist politics. Indeed, as will become abundantly clear, what I call the politics of ‘living together’ is no more benign than integration politics. Instead, I hold that this shift in focus is necessary if we want to understand the more subtle implications of culturalist and secularist politics within everyday multicultural life. What this dissertation contributes is an ethnography of lived multiculture in which both poles of the metropolitan paradox - racism and transculturalism, exclusion and neighborhood - are analyzed as shaped by, and taking place under the weight of, culturalist politics.

Importantly, in the politics of living together, it is not just ‘strangers’ (migrants and minorities) that are the object of state governance and disciplining, but also the national ‘we’ itself (cf. Fortier 2008: 8). Moreover, it is in the effort to regulate intimate relationships between the national ‘we’ and migrants and minorities, that the national ‘we’ emerges as problematically heterogeneous and divided; as if involved in a “quarrel with itself” (Stuart Hall in Gilroy 2005: 115). Seen in this way, the culturalist problem of who the national ‘we’ is, is not only a problem of an intruding stranger, but also an issue of internal dissensus and (heavily classed) concerns about an internal lack of moral integrity. The ternary element that attention to the politics of ‘living together’ makes visible within the culturalist binary between the national Self versus the strange cultural Other is that of a split within the national Self. In Flemish politics and the public imaginary, the interrelated anxieties over ‘integration’ and ‘living together’ have been heavily projected onto Borgerhout. Therefore, it is my discussion and ethnographic enquiry of Borgerhout that brings this first ternary of culturalist Selfing/Othering into view.

From postcolonial stranger fetishism to shifting templates of strangeness: the other Other

In most of the relevant literature, the emergence of a culturalist rhetoric of exclusion and neo-nationalist politics in the last few decades of the 20th century is situated in, and explained by, wider political and economic developments that characterize what is often called the “New Europe” (Modood 2007: 1). ‘New’ refers here to a variety of more or less overlapping historical ‘moments’: the end of the Cold War and the accelerated integration and enlargement of the European Union; the influx of former colonial subjects and labor migrants after World War II and the intensification and diversification of transnational flows of migration thereafter (Vertovec 2007); and the post-Fordist economic restructuring of former welfare states (Banks and Gingrich

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6 Recently, literature has emerged that deals critically with the early 2000s’ policy shift towards ‘community cohesion’ and ‘diversity’ (Ahmed and Fortier 2003; Fortier 2007, 2008, 2010; Lentin and Titley 2011). This has included several ethnographic studies of the implementation of these policies (e.g. Loopmans 2006; de Wilde, Hurenkamp, Tonkens 2014; Jones 2014). However, as will be elucidated in Part I, I see these policies as a specific (liberalist) phase in a much longer and broader politics of ‘living together’.
 Culturalism is thus generally understood as one form of a more general investment in the local, and in fixing boundaries, precisely as global flows are rendering the status of local belonging and boundaries uncertain and fluid (Appadurai 1998; Geschiere and Meyer 1998). Other authors have emphasized that culturalism has emerged in a postcolonial Europe that is afflicted by “an unresolved postcolonial condition” (Hesse 2000: 12) or “postcolonial melancholia” (Gilroy 2005). With these terms, these authors argue that Europe continues to be haunted by the loss of empire, and that the focus on non-white migrants and minorities as the ultimate cultural ‘strangers’ in culturalist politics needs to be understood as the effect of “lingering but usually unspoken colonial relationships and imperial fantasies” (Gilroy 2005: 100).

I agree with these analyses. At the same time, my material calls into question a particular unintended discursive effect that these analyses have. On the one hand, many of these studies mention that immigration and ethnic difference have shaped European societies, and especially European cities, since their very foundation (e.g. Keith 2005: 49-50), pointing out that the colonial project also shaped or was “looped back into” (Gilroy 2005: 7) European metropoles in various ways. In other words, most authors would agree that European nation-states have always been diverse and heterogeneous, and argue explicitly that a white European sense of a lost national homogeneity and coherence due to an influx of non-white migrants is, in fact, a culturalist construct. On the other hand, due to their emphasis on the ‘new-ness’ of former colonial subjects coming “here”, or the ‘new’ scope and intensity of transnational migration as that which has formed the impetus for the force of the culturalist construction of alienation, there is an implicit suggestion that, for white Europeans, the proximity of non-white migrants from formerly colonized regions outside Europe is somehow ‘logically’ experienced as more problematic and more ‘strange’ than other forms of diversity. In this sense, these analyses go along with the culturalist discourse in that they also understand the ‘new Europe’ to contain a diversity or heterogeneity that is ‘more’ (in degree or in kind; cf. Keith 2005: 50; Modood 1997: 1) than that of the ‘Old Europe’. In other words, they tend to view Europe’s ultimate form of Oithering to be the construction of non-whiteness in colonial histories of racism.

On the one hand, then, the experience of cultural difference as problematic Otherness is deconstructed in this literature, while on the other, it is implicitly confirmed as experiential historical reality. It is precisely in the ambition to “offer new suggestions for living in diversity” (Amin 2012, back flap), or “address the problems of living together in multicultural urbanism” (Keith 2005: 15), that this critical literature converges with the culturalist rhetoric it aims to deconstruct. This is because both, albeit in different ways, suggest that contemporary European heterogeneity, and the inclusion of postcolonial non-whiteness and its history of Oithering within Europe, have made the question of how to live together more urgent than ever.

In the literature, culturalism and integration politics are critically deconstructed as revolving around an imagined binary between a national cultural Self that is ultimately constructed as ‘white’ and ‘European’ versus a ‘strange’ cultural Other who is ultimately constructed as ‘non-white’ and ‘non-European’. I aim to push this analysis further by
suggesting that this analytical emphasis on the experiential equation of the stranger with a (post)colonial construction of non-whiteness and non-Europeanness results itself in a form of what Sarah Ahmed calls “stranger fetishism” (2000). “Stranger fetishism … invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own” (2000: 5, emphasis in text). In this case, the assumption of the literature on culturalism seems to be that ‘the stranger’ is a fixed slot through which some bodies (i.e. non-white) will logically be experienced as more ‘strange’ than others. What I want to ask in this thesis is how this particular stranger slot has come into being in the first place, and how it is precisely lived and deployed in everyday multicultural life. Inspired by the work of Karen Brodkin (1998; see also Roediger 2005; Jacobsen 1998), who gives an intimate account of the shifting racialized position of Jews (from ‘off-white’ to ‘white’) as a prism through which to investigate the depths and logic of the formation of ‘race’ in the US, I bring in a ternary element, an ‘other Other’, in order to complicate the culturalist binary and destabilize its particular stranger fetishism: Jews.

With this second ternary as a conceptual ‘hook’, this book offers an ethnography of culturalism and its impact on everyday life in which the imagination and negotiation of ‘Jews’ and ‘Jewishness’ as ‘other’ Others is not understood as outside, but as constitutive of, culturalist politics. This means I will not only investigate multicultural politics and everyday life via ‘Jews’, but that I will also render an ethnography of Antwerp’s Jews, including the strictly observant, in light of their entanglement in and negotiation of these politics. This is a departure from how European Jews, and strictly orthodox Jews more generally, are usually studied7. I thus consider the ‘Jewish neighborhood’ to be a space that is also politically produced through culturalist politics, and as a space of lived multiculture. This allows me to ask how ‘strangeness’ itself is conceptualized in different periods (which I call ‘templates of strangeness’), and how the current culturalist conceptualization is operationalized and negotiated in the complexity of super-diverse neighborhoods (what I call the ‘diagnostics of strangeness’).

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7 European Jewry is more commonly studied in light of secularization and post-war Jewish identity (e.g. Solinge and de Vries 2001; de Vries 2004; Rapaport 1997); the holocaust and its impact on Jewish communities (e.g. Bodemann 1996; Lipschits 2001; Vanden Daelen 2008); Israel and ‘new’ anti-Semitism in Europe (e.g. Klug 2003; Bunzl 2005; Lambert 2008; Rensmann and Schoeps 2011; Meer 2012); or, in the case of strictly orthodox Jewish communities, as an example of non-liberal religious practice and piety (e.g. Valins 2003; Bucskor 2005; Longmann 2007, 2008; cf. for ethnographies in Israel and the US: Heilman 1992; El-Or 1994; Fader 2009, 2013).
“Ceci n’est pas un pays”: the case of Belgium

We Belgians live in an artwork of top class surrealism. It was once knocked together by foreign bricoleurs, it hangs superbly upside down, it has been generously pissed beside it, mussels have been cooked in it and it cannot fly. What more can a patriot wish for – whether he be Fleming, Walloon or Belgian?

(Tom Lanoye, Schermutseling, 2007: 28, my translation)

What does it mean for my research about everyday interactions in super-diverse neighborhoods that it has taken place in Belgium, or, more specifically, Flanders? Recent politics and developments in Belgium are, on the one hand, very indicative of the culturalist anxieties and policies that have emerged throughout Western Europe more generally. In Antwerp in particular, the political-social phenomena that have come to the fore, and became the focus of intense debate and policy in Europe more generally (neo-nationalism, integration, racism, antisemitism, urban decay and social deprivation, religion and the neutrality of the state), all converge in a relatively small area, leading to a very polarized public sphere.

On the other hand, Belgium is an exceptional case. Indeed, in Belgium, the “multicultural” national question always combines with, and is sometimes superseded by, its other national issue (Jacobs 2004: 281-282; Blommaert and Martiniello 1996: 51): the “multinational” question of the (im)possibility of the Belgian nation-state (or even the Belgian federal state) to accommodate the difference and polarization between its two linguistic majorities. In itself, such a second national question revolving around “centrifugal” regionalist or secessionist subnational movements is not unique to Belgium in the European context (Huysseune 2011). It is, however, Belgium’s historical lack of one dominant national ‘core’9, in combination with the specifics of the federal structure that has been developed as a remedy to this absence, that makes the “multinational” question exceptionally volatile and, at times, ‘surrealist’ in the Belgian

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8 This text, below illustrations of the map of Belgium or the Belgian national flag, cropped up in (Belgian and international) editorials, as well as in Belgian public culture, as a comment on the country’s political crisis in 2011-2012. After the 2011 federal elections, Flemish and Francophone political parties failed to forge a national government coalition, leading to a prolonged impasse: the country was without a national government for over a year. The line refers to the work of the Belgian surrealist painter, Magritte (‘ceci n’est pas un pipe’). See, for example, the Economist 21 July 2011, http://www.economist.com/node/18988904, accessed on 3 October 2015.

9 In contrast to France, the Belgian Francophone elite has never been committed to a fully fledged assimilationist model aimed at integrating all its citizens within one culture or language. The Romantic idea that the unique character of a nation (Volk) was manifested especially in its language posed a problem for the early ‘Belgian’ intellectual elite, particularly for Francophone writers. In order to construct a unique ‘Belgian’ nation (i.e. separate from the French nation, even though its official language was also French), the Belgian intellectual elite created a body of ‘Belgian’ literature via literature written in Flemish, or by drawing on Flemish lore written up in French. Flemish was, in this period, seen as essential to Belgian nationhood by both Flemish and Francophone Belgian nationalist Romantic writers (and thus not to be assimilated away) (Berg 1998; Vos 1998: 84).
case. If the Scots or Catalanians would become successful in gaining independence, the United Kingdom and Spain would loose a leg or an arm, but they would still be able to continue as ‘English/British’ or ‘Spanish’ nation-states, albeit in a severely deformed way. Belgium, on the other hand, would be split in two (or three) and cease to exist entirely.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that the linguistic-subnationalist divide between Flemings and Walloons has not been the only cleavage resulting in a fragmented social and political landscape throughout Belgian history. Politicized denominational differences and regional inequalities in economic power and socio-economic development have been just as important, and have crosscut and overlapped with linguistic divides in complicated and shifting ways (Zolberg 1974; Deprez and Vos 1998). There has been a particular tendency in sociology (esp. Huyse 1970; Lijphardt 1981) to portray Belgium as a remarkably stable “consociational” political system, where fragmentation and difference have been “pacified” through compromise, moderation, and power-sharing by the elite. This view, however, obscures the fact that all of these cleavages have regularly resulted in mass upheaval and major political crises (De Schouwer 2006). In order to assess the peculiarity of the Belgian case, and to highlight the previous heterogeneity and strands of conflict on top of which contemporary culturalist politics have emerged, I will briefly describe the history of these other politics of difference in Belgium, as well as their accommodation in the federal state.

In 1830, Belgium was founded as a unitary kingdom. A coalition of liberal and liberal Catholic political elites had been the driving force for independence from Dutch rule. French was the language of this elite (including in urban centers in Flanders). Even though in line with the liberal spirit of the constitution language use was free (the majority of the population spoke Walloon, Picard, or Flemish dialects), French was institutionalized as the nation-state’s only official language (i.e. of modern business, state administration, secondary and higher education, the army, the judiciary) (Zolberg 1974: 183, 191-192). In the second half of the 19th century, Belgium was among the most industrialized countries in the world. The center of this industrialization and modern development, as well as of international economic investment, was Wallonia (due to its coal reserves), whereas Flanders’ economy was mostly agrarian and its rural population poor and much less developed. This economic gap was widened by the fact that the

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10 Similarly, it is often remarked that the “ethnic conflict” between Flemings and Walloons - a description that is logical only if one goes along with the radical Flemish and Walloon nationalism that arose around 1900 among a segment of the Flemish and the Walloon movements – is exceptionally non-violent. For an interesting comparison between the Belgian case and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see: Mnookin 2007.

11 It also obscures the fact that this diversity, and its not always so ‘moderate’ politics within Belgium, was itself interrupted and crosscut by (violent and racist) politics of difference beyond its nation-state boundaries: that of the royal, and later national, colonial project in Central Africa (Vints 1984; Ceuppens 2003; Vlaene, Van Reybrouck, Ceuppens 2009a); and that of the German occupations and battlefields of the global power blocks during the two World Wars. I will attend in Chapter 1 to the influence of colonial politics and that of the two World Wars on the construction of the Belgian nation (and on Flemish nationalism), as well as on their lasting, haunting presence in recent culturalist politics.
Walloon population became assimilated in the language of the political center (through primary education), while the Flemish population could only do so to the extent that it managed to acquire French as a second language (while receiving primary instruction in Flemish). This resulted in a general stereotypical imagination in which Flanders was associated with rural, traditional (or ‘backward’) Catholic life, while Wallonia was imagined as secular, urban and modern (Zolberg 1974; De Smaele 2009).12

This situation coincided with something that was happening throughout Europe (McLeod 1995, 1997), namely a battle between different denominational elites (first, Liberals and Catholics, later also Socialists) over how to secure the soul, and to a lesser extent the well-being, of the emerging masses as well as the ‘freedom’ of public/private life guaranteed by the state, in line with their respective ideologies and against the influence of the other denominations. This battle was fought over education especially (the ‘freedom’ to either public, secular, or Catholic education), and intensified with the emergence of the middle classes and the gradual extension of suffrage. It was this conflict, and the attempts by an emerging Christian Democratic movement to encapsulate and ‘protect’ Catholic workers from the dangers of modern secularism, which laid the foundations for what is generally called ‘compartmentalization’ or ‘pillarization’ [verzuiling] (Witte and Meynen 2006: 72-75). 

Verzuiling means that, as a way for denominational political establishments to extend their influence over the lives of their community members, and emancipate or ‘develop’ the masses along and within their particular ideological boundaries, all social domains (unions, media, health care, insurance, women’s and youth organization), and after WWII also leisure time (sports clubs, scouting), were segregated along ideological lines and via this network of organizations linked to a specific political party (i.e. the Christian Democratic, Social Democratic, or Liberal party). It was the party elites who managed through compromise and power-sharing (as the “consociational” or “pacification democracy” model emphasizes) to rule with a measure of stability, even though society was deeply divided and fragmented into what Huyse calls “autarkic blocs” (1970: 163).

The denominational struggle for the masses at the end of the 19th century coincided with a shift in the ‘Flemish Movement’13 from an intellectualist to a mass

12 These images had different meanings: if rural Flanders was considered backward by Francophones, it was idealized as ‘pure’, as the location of true ‘Flemishness’, by the emerging Flemish movement and low level clergy. In contrast, although Wallonia may have considered itself superior in terms of modernity, from a Flemish Catholic stance this ‘modernity’ was a corruption and degeneration of the God-given natural order of things. Moreover, these images were also very much stereotypes that failed to take into account the political role of Flemish urban centers, Walloon Catholicism, as well as the numerous conflicts between Flemish-oriented, low-level clergy and the Catholic bishops (see De Smaele 2009; Gevers 1998).

13 This term suggests a more coherent organization than there was in reality (Zolberg1974: 206). It is deployed to refer to the rather loose and very shifting collection of intellectuals, middle classes, and organizations committed to the ‘Flemish cause’ or to the institutionalization and recognition of Flemish. The Flemish movement, or rather, parts of it, only manifested itself through specifically Flemish nationalist parties at certain points in time (the first of which was not really a party, but a shared voting coalition between Liberals and Catholics, and emerged in Antwerp: the populist Meeting Party; Beyen e.a. 2011: 80-83). The main part of the Flemish movement, however, drew from and was linked with the
movement in which the petty bourgeoisie played a main role. They strived, first, for the recognition of Dutch as a second public or official language in Flanders, which was, to some extent, achieved during the latter half of the century. Towards the 1900s, the Flemish cause was increasingly perceived (in line with broader European ideologies about ‘nations’ and ‘races’ at the time, and in response to a growing administrative class in Flanders confronted with the stigma attached to their language in the political and administrative center) as the emancipation of Flemings as a ‘people’, a ‘nation’ or even a long-standing ‘race’ with its own unique soul. Recognition of language, the cultural and social emancipation of the masses, and the economic development and autonomy of the Flemish region were increasingly understood to be aspects of the same struggle (Witte en van Velthoven 2010: 82-83; Vos 1998: 85-86; Zolberg 1974: 227-228). As the Flemish movement became a fully-fledged nationalist movement, demands changed towards the recognition of Flanders as a monolingual region, and an anti-Belgian sub-stream emerged (which saw Flanders as a nation deserving to rule itself sovereignly, and Belgium as a ‘foreign’ state) (Vos 1998: 87-90). This radical strand grew in importance, especially in the interbellum. In the 1930s, several laws were passed which created both Wallonia and Flanders as monolingual regions, while Brussels and the state administration were to become bilingual.

After World War II, the overlapping linguistic and denominational cleavages erupted in several episodes of bitter conflict, street violence and mass protests.

other political movements and parties (Witte and van Velthoven 2010: 64.) In other words, all the other parties had Flemish sympathizers (Flaminganten) among them, and it was mainly via them that the Flemish movement managed to reform legislation. The overlap was greatest with the Christian democratic movement, not only because the Christian Democratic party was dominant in rural Flanders in particular, and drew most of its constituency from Flanders (Gevers 1998: 111), but also because the low- and mid-level Catholic clergy believed that Catholicism was an essential aspect of the character of the Flemish people, and that the Flemish language would work as a buffer against the ‘secular spirit’ of French among the rural and working class masses in Flanders (Gevers 1998: 111; Witte en van Velthoven 2010: 36, 64, 76; De Smael 2009).

In this period, the idea that Belgium was situated on the border between the ‘Germanic’ and ‘Latin’ civilizations was also translated into, and scientifically researched in terms of, the racist anthropological and etiological discourses dominant at the time: with ‘Walons’ and ‘Flemings described as ‘races’ with distinct physical characteristics and different ‘natures’ or ‘spirits’ (Volksgeist, ziel) (Van Paemel and Beyen 1998).

This was not only the result of radicalizing Flemish nationalism, but was also very much embedded in the refusal of Francophones, much under the influence of an emerging Walloon nationalist movement, to consider giving Wallonia a bilingual status (i.e. the many Flemish labor migrants to Wallonia had to assimilate to French, whereas the Wallon movement simultaneously strived to maintain French language rights for the Francophone Flemish elite and Walloon civil servants working for the state administration in Flanders) (Vos 1998: 87; Witte en van Velthoven 2010: 89-91).

The first episode of conflict, leading to mass marches, street violence, four deaths and an all-round threat of civil war, was one between the Flemish-Catholic and (mostly Francophone) anti-clerical segments of the population. It can be understood as a repercussion of World War II: it revolved around the position of King Leopold and the treatment of Flemish-nationalist collaborators (Witte and Meynen 2010: 40-45). In the 1950s, the second series of conflicts and political mobilization was the final eruption of the Catholic/anti-clerical cleavage, again around the organization of the role of the state in education in relation to the guaranteeing of an autonomous Catholic life-sphere. This was settled with an elaborate
Although the divide between Catholics and anti-clericals became settled to great extent (and grew less relevant as de-pillarization and secularization set in from the 1960s onwards), the Walloon-Flemish divide only deepened (Vos 1998: 91). As the economic gravity of the country had started to shift to Flanders (especially due to the Antwerp port and new petrochemical industries) while the coal and mining industry in Wallonia declined, this divide also gained a new economic logic. Flanders now started to imagine itself as the hardworking, disciplined and market-driven part of the country (and was seen as egoist, fascist and unsolidary by Walloons), while it depicted Walloons as lazy, clientalist scroungers (Walloons saw themselves, in turn, as democratic, secular, open-minded and loyal to Belgium) (Van den Abbeele 2001: 512; Arnaut and Ceuppens 2004). A range of constitutional reforms from the 1970s onwards led to the gradual federalization of the Belgian state, by way of a succession of crises and their being resolved through compromise - and not so much as a comprehensive plan with a clear end goal in mind (De Schouwer 2006: 903).

This process of federalization primarily meant that all the formerly national political parties split in two: there are now only Flemish or Francophone parties and politicians, and no national ones (De Schouwer 2006: 902). Similarly, a national public media no longer exists. In this sense, one cannot speak of a ‘national’ Belgian political or public debate.\(^{17}\) The federal structure that was developed is notoriously complex. In the 1993 constitutional reforms, Belgium was officially declared to be a federal state made up of three cultural ‘Communities’ [Gemeenschappen] (Flemish-, French- and German-speaking) and three geographical ‘Regions’ [Gewesten] (Flanders, Wallonia, and bilingual Brussels), each with their own parliaments (directly chosen since 1995) and legislative governments. Regions have exclusive responsibility over “space-bound” matters such as the economy and infrastructure, while communities have (in their appointed linguistic region [taalgebied] jurisdiction over “person-related” matters such as education, but also, crucially, ‘integration’ and, recently, the ‘civic integration’ of migrants [inburgering] (Jacobs 2004: 282). In the Flemish case, ‘Community’ and ‘Region’ more or less overlap (apart from Dutch-speakers in Brussels), and have fused into one Flemish parliament and government. Tax revenues and their redistribution via social security, as well as defense, justice, and migration laws and nationality legislation, are still in the hands of the federal government (Loobuyck and Jacobs 2011: 136).

Even though step-by-step federalization was established as a way to appease subnationalist demands and conflict (by granting autonomy, as well as by putting in place a complicated structure of measures preventing a one-sided majority domination

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\(^{17}\) There have been several events that have sparked debate and identification across the language divide (especially the corruption scandals and the Dutroux-affaire in the 1990s).
in both the national and Brussels’ governing’ structures), it is generally understood to have had an exacerbating “centrifugal” effect (Swenden, Brans, De Winter 2006; Huysseune 2011). Another effect, however, is that Flemishness has gained a new meaning beyond identification with a language or a Flemish ‘nation’: “a process has taken place of nationalization of the public sphere” (Beyen and Destatte 2009: 1771, my translation). Most of the government administrations that the residents of Flanders have to relate to, most of the societal organizations they have to deal with, the political parties they can vote for, and the media they read and watch all present themselves as ‘Flemish’ (ibid). As a result, a version of Flemish identity has emerged that is more akin to a kind of de facto ‘citizenship’ or ‘state belonging’ than the substantive idea of a Flemish ‘people’ or ‘nation’ that was traditionally propagated by the Flemish movement (even though, officially, ‘Flemish’ citizenship does not exist).

The ‘state’ in Belgium thus consists of an extraordinarily complicated, multilevel structure of various legislative bodies and administrations. In the remainder of this thesis, I will highlight the administrative level or unit of government (federal/national, Flemish/regional, provincial, municipal/local) whenever I discuss a specific policy. However, in my analysis of a general logic behind the politics of ‘living together’ and my interlocutors’ experiences of everyday life in Borgerhout and the Jewish neighborhood, I will talk about ‘the state’ in order to signify the specific weight that state policies have (largely irrespective of the precise governmental level of the state that has developed them), and I ask readers to keep in mind the measure of simplification that this entails.

The culturalist politics and the deep contestation around them that are the subject of this book, then, did not replace in Belgium some ‘peaceful’, stable nation-state at ease with itself. Societal fragmentation along ‘cultural’ lines, conflict over the role of religion and the nature of the state, and cultural anxiety (in short, a previous politics of difference that also had ‘culturalist’ aspects) have very much characterized Belgium before the advent of the notion of a ‘multicultural society’ and integration politics (Blommaert and Martiniello 1996: 51). Two things stand out in this Belgian history. “Belgium has been described as the only state in the world where different oppressed majorities co-exist, each with a claim of superiority over the other, but all suffering from a sense of inferiority” (Ceuppens 2006: 148). It was not just the linguistic communities, but also the denominational movements, that displayed such a “siege mentality” (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005: 398): a somewhat paranoiac disposition of presumed victimhood in which the (national, ideological, economic) Other is always

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18 Even though the raison d’être of the Flemish movement seemed to have disappeared with this federal structure, and the slow waning of Flemish Interest seemed to point in that direction, the recent immense success of a new Flemish-nationalist party (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, N-VA) contradicts this idea. The N-VA demands are increasingly focused on devolving federal responsibility for tax revenues and social security to the Regions.

19 Moreover, there had of course also been earlier debates about migrants - especially Jews - and their relation to the nation long before the arrival of labor migrants from Turkey and Morocco, or Congolese students. This will be investigated in Chapter 2.
suspected of deliberately eating away at one’s own sphere of influence and sovereignty, intentionally eroding the freedoms and conditions needed for self-realization (individual or communal), and misusing their political and economic position to do so. This dynamic gives Belgian politics its volatile and anxious character. It also combines with a second aspect. In Belgian history, two different models for imagining the nation-state and difference – one ‘statist’ and based on (liberal-secular) universalist claims, the other ‘ethno-cultural’ based on the völkisch idea of a cultural ‘nation’ – have been drawn upon by virtually all political movements at different moments in time. These models sometimes merge (as at the start of the Belgian nation-state, or the current nation-building project of the Flemish government), but are more often used by different parties in explicit opposition to one another. This brings out a ‘culturalist’ dialectic that is more submerged in most other European countries.

In Brussels, where the language difference between Dutchophone and Francophone residents combines with a largely poor and mostly Francophone (post)migrant population and the presence of multilingual Eurocrats and expats, the intersection of ‘multicultural’ anxieties and the ‘multi-national’ question is explicit in everyday life and politics (Jacobs 2004). In Antwerp, however, where the former Francophone bourgeoisie and elite have disappeared from public view, this intersection is fragmented and elusive, working through slippages and silences. Most of the time, my interlocutors (as well as political and public opinion, apart from Flemish nationalist parties) seemed to deem the questions of ‘migrants’ and ‘Belgium’ to be separate, incomparable issues, requiring quite different policies and terminologies. Very much summarized: the former was thought to be a problem of ‘integration’ and ‘living together’, but the latter was not. If references to Francophones/Walloons and political crises on the federal level seem to be strangely absent from my ethnographic material, this is because they were almost never mentioned during my conversations and interviews about multicultural neighborhood life. Yet, then again, sometimes they were. This history of the previous politics of difference, as well as Belgium’s persistent other national question, thus resonate within culturalist politics, but never in a clear-cut way.21

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20 The more dominant rendering of this argument is the idea that these two models coincide with Francophones/the Belgian federal state/the Walloon regional government, on the one hand, and Flemings/the Flemish government, on the other. The idea is that this difference in ‘political culture’ between Wallonia and Flanders can be linked to their location on opposite sides of a so-called border between “Germanic” and “Latin” Europe. From even a cursory reading of Belgian history, this is a gross simplification.

21 In Part I, I will delve into this question of the shifts and continuities between previous formations of difference and the politics of ‘living together’.
On doing ethnography and writing difference in the ‘New’ urban Europe

In the context of the culturalization of European politics, and the strong projection of culturalist anxieties onto specific metropolitan urban neighborhoods in all European countries, conducting ethnography in such neighborhoods is problematic in a specific way. The difficulty is not only, as it is sometimes represented, one of gaining entry to and trust among ‘hard to reach’ or ‘closed’ religious or ethnic ‘communities’ (or lower class populations), which are assumedly either unacquainted with or suspicious of social scientific research. In such a representation, methodology is reduced to the problem of ‘representativity’ (are your interlocutors representative of the ‘real’ residents of a particular neighborhood?) and an assumedly specific ethnographic capacity for ‘immersion’ (have you been able to discover your interlocutors’ ‘true’, ‘inner’ perspectives). Instead, in my view, the methodological difficulty in this particular political context is a conceptual one, and it is inextricably bound up with the wider argument I make throughout this book.

I will demonstrate in Part I that a crucial effect of culturalist politics is a widespread ethnographic-like interest in, and competing claims of access to, the ‘everyday life’ of ‘ordinary’ residents of diverse urban neighborhoods. In my reading, the “uncanny similarity” between dominant culturalist politics and scientific anthropological inquiry goes much beyond a specific understanding of ‘culture’, going right to the heart of, mostly implicit, ethnographic notions of where the ‘reality’ of a place or a way of life is located and how it can be accessed (cf. Hansen 2012: 18-20). How should one do ethnography in everyday neighborhood life, then, when one’s own scientific ethnographic gaze is doubled by a political gaze that is also invested in making legible ‘everyday life’ and the perspectives of ‘ordinary denizens’? I have treated the methodological implications of this question as an integral part of my theoretical arguments, as well as of my stylistic choices for representing my ethnographic material. They will therefore be discussed in earnest in the chapters that follow. This section does not therefore offer ‘the methodology’ of this research. Instead, it serves to provide the reader with a brief overview of my main methodological choices.

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22 There is a specific claim to ethnographic prowess in some authors’ presentations of themselves as having been able to adopt the right kind of tough masculinity and ‘swag’ to immerse themselves in the ‘non-white’ and lower class street culture of urban neighborhoods (e.g. Waquant 2004; De Jong 2007). Another version of this frequently pops up in ethnographies of Hasidic Jewish communities (e.g. El-Or 1994). Here, too, the problem of ‘access’ to what are described as extraordinarily closed-off communities is highlighted, and authors tend to portray themselves as slowly immersing in a world that they had long been fascinated with, but which is normally closed to outsiders (usually, these authors are non-observant Jews themselves).

23 I lived on the border between Borgerhout and the ‘Jewish neighborhood’ during the entire year of 2009, and paid multiple short visits to the neighborhoods and to residents I had become acquainted with in the two years preceding my fieldwork and the two years thereafter. This means that this research does not touch upon the political shift in the Flemish and Antwerp context that took place in 2012, when the
In culturalist politics, some residents are assumed to be more ‘ordinary’ than others; their perspective is portrayed to be somehow more telling of what life in multicultural neighborhoods is ‘really’ about. Moreover, some groups or ‘communities’ are also considered to be “harder to reach” than others; their particular perspectives, their ‘view from within’, is thought to need a particular effort to be uncovered. As a consequence, the aforementioned methodological concerns with representativeness, and with the quality or depth of one’s understanding of one’s interlocutors, become problematic: they may slip, however unintended, into this political concern. I have therefore tried to engage critically with an inclination (the pull of which I have felt and struggled with during my entire fieldwork) to view ethnography as the uncovering of the ‘true’ and ‘inner’ perspective of ‘ordinary people’, and to resist granting the everyday the status of “a semivisible ontology waiting to be divined” (Hansen 2012: 20). I have done so, first, by expanding my ethnographic focus to also include categories of resident that are not generally thought to be ‘ordinary’: ‘progressive’, white, new urban middle class residents; modern orthodox Jews; ‘non-Jewish’ residents; and middle-class residents with a Moroccan background. Second, I emphatically problematize an understanding of what my interlocutors told me as expressions of an authentic ‘view from within’ – as expressive of who they ‘really’ are. Instead, I analyze them as

Flemish nationalist party N-VA gained the most votes and Bart De Wever (N-VA) became mayor in Antwerp.

I have hung out in the two neighborhoods’ public spaces, and conversed and met with people informally while sitting with them on squares, play grounds or in cafes, and walking with them through their neighborhood. I was also present during a range of local events: the meetings of resident committees and local civil servants, neighborhood feasts and festivals, information evenings, lectures, and public discussions. I have conducted in-depth interviews with 87 residents, some on multiple occasions (41 residents of the Jewish neighborhood; 46 residents of Oud-Borgerhout), and held six focus groups (with secondary school students of a school in Oud-Borgerhout, and with residents of a home for the elderly, also in Oud-Borgerhout). I conducted 31 interviews with people who worked in either of the two neighborhoods as shopkeepers, professionals, or, mostly, as civil servants in what I call the neighborhood governance regime (see Chapter 1), some of whom were also residents themselves. This methodology, in which I spoke to and observed the same residents on multiple occasions and in different settings – during street feasts, walking with them in the neighborhood, during an interview, speaking with their neighbors - allows me to present my material in the form of elaborate individual portraits, as well as through renderings of public events and rumors from multiple perspectives. The names of interlocutors I mention are all pseudonyms.

Enumerating how many interviews I did with what ‘kind’ of resident is, by definition, a largely random construct, as I explain in the paragraphs below. However, to enable the reader to assess my material, and with these remarks in mind, let me render the following overview. In the Jewish neighborhood, I conducted interviews with: 19 interlocutors who identified as ‘Jewish’ (13 presented themselves as ‘pious’ or as affiliated to one of the Hasidic courts, six as ‘modern (orthodox)’ or ‘secular’); and 22 residents who saw themselves as ‘non-Jewish’, ‘autochthonous’ or ‘Belgian’. In Borgerhout, I interviewed 18 interlocutors who perceived themselves, and experienced being perceived, as ‘Moroccan’ (six of whom I considered to have a distinct middle class life style and aspiration); 15 who talked about themselves as long-term ‘original’ Borgerhoutians or ‘Belgians’; and 13 who presented themselves as ‘young’ or ‘new’ ‘Belgians’. My focus on these categories of resident means that other (postmigrant) residents fall outside the scope of this research: ‘Eastern-Europeans’, ‘Indians’ and ‘asylum seekers’ in the ‘Jewish Neighborhood’, and ‘Eastern-Europeans’, ‘Roma/Kosovars’, and ‘Africans’ in Borgerhout.
performances and translations of aspects of themselves in relation to context and my own person.

Moreover, there were particular dynamics at play in my conversations with different categories of interlocutor, especially in terms of what they sensed to be in need of explanation (and the reading public that interlocutors assumed my research to imply) and what I was expected to understand without saying. There were also stark differences in what I felt it was possible to do, as well as in the measure of ‘at-handness’ of the neighborhood as a subject (i.e. whether or not the neighborhood was discussed as a matter of routine in public space; whether people regularly hung out or spent leisure time in public space or not; whether or not I was invited to informally visit people’s homes) between the two neighborhoods, and between my relationships with different categories of resident. In short, the kinds of relationship within which my interlocutors performed and translated themselves differed in ways that went beyond the impact of my own person. Instead of viewing these differences only as problematic degrees of ‘immersion’25, I use them in my analysis as a way into the particular configurations of culturalist (and class) politics and their unequal weighing on the two neighborhoods and different categories of resident.

At this point, the way in which I refer to different interlocutors requires some explanation. In this book, I will write in terms of ‘Belgian’ or ‘non-Jewish’, ‘Jewish’, and ‘Moroccan (-Muslim)’ interlocutors. These terms reflect the dominant vernacular categorizations drawn upon by all my interlocutors when describing the demographic make-up of their neighborhood and themselves within the neighborhood context. When asked directly, all my interlocutors would nuance or criticize this crude categorization.

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24 As will be discussed at length in Part II, spending time in public space is commonly done by many Borgerhout residents, and the neighborhood accommodates such hanging out to some extent through a range of small squares, playgrounds, cafes and eateries. The Jewish neighborhood almost lacks such spaces for informal encounters. I became very well acquainted with several families of Moroccan background, where I would spend time chatting and watching Turkish and Latin American tele-novellas, or with whom I would go grocery shopping. Interviews, on the other hand, were sometimes uneasy, especially with older residents of Moroccan descent, and were hampered by the fact that I had no knowledge of Berber or Arabic. In a similar way, I spent much time informally chatting with elderly white ‘Belgians’ in public space and cafes in Borgerhout, while interviews were sometimes tense and defensive (due to interlocutors’ assumptions, not wholly incorrectly, that my political sympathies would be leftist and ‘pro-diversity’). This situation was reversed for my relationship with ‘Jewish’ interlocutors, with whom I had very limited informal contact, but who took great care and time for my interviews (resulting in multiple interviews, with a length of two to four hours). I could identify most easily with young, middle class residents (whether ‘white’ or of Moroccan descent), and interviews with them felt informal. Although I befriended some of them, and we would occasionally meet for dinner or go out for a coffee, they were generally too busy too coincidentally bump into and casually hang out with in public space. ‘Active’ residents (especially ‘white’ and ‘non-Jewish’ ones) were eager to talk to me – and had a great deal to say and information to share – and were generally very willing to let me join in with their activities.

25 I do not mean to say that these differences should not also be taken seriously as methodological biases that need to be accounted for and minimized as much as possible. During my fieldwork, I made a continuous effort to expand my network and my relationships with ‘old Belgian’, ‘Moroccan’, and ‘(pious) Jewish’ interlocutors.
In fact, this book is devoted, much in line with the aim set by Rogers Brubaker for studying how ethnicity and nationalism “work” in everyday life (2006: 6-17; see also Baumann 1996), to historicizing and politicizing the dominant logic of this overlapping culturalist-cum-secularist understanding of difference (Part I). I also investigate in great detail how and when neighborhood residents precisely ‘do’ culturalist readings of one another, and when they destabilize or contest the culturalist-secularist logic (parts II and III). When I write about ‘Belgian’ or ‘Jewish’ interlocutors, then, I do not do so to designate these interlocutors’ essences, or in the assumption that these identifications necessarily subsume all others, but to instead refer to them as “sets of category members” (Brubaker 2006: 12), and to how they are dominantly interpellated through these categorizations in the neighborhood context.

Whereas Brubaker presents this as a move in line with his theoretical aim, I want to emphasize that this is also a less than satisfactory solution to the problematic balancing of writing ‘deconstructed difference’ and readability. I recognize that my use of these labels – quotation marks or not – runs the risk of unintentionally confirming and contributing to the culturalist politics I want to critically investigate, and especially the culturalist notion that Jewish residents and those of Moroccan descent are somehow less ‘Belgian’, even though they are mostly Belgian nationals. A different solution would be to render implicit culturalist assumptions about ‘Belgianness’ uncomfortably explicit: to speak, for example, of ‘white, secular/Catholic, Dutch-speaking Belgians’, ‘Moroccan-descent Belgians’, and ‘Jewish Belgians’. This would, however, not only make for very strained reading, but is also, I believe, a false solution. It suggests that if we would only enumerate all those other categorizations (‘race’, ethnicity, language, denomination, class) evoked by culturalism, then the culturalist inflections of particular labels could be neutralized. Not only does this imply that all these categorizations always intersect in the same way in culturalist understandings (while in fact different categorical aspects are stressed in different ways in different contexts, Keith 2005: 6), but it also assumes that the distinctions made in culturalist understandings can be caught in the intersection of nameable categorizations in the first place.

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26 Another option would be to not write in terms of ‘Belgians’, but to use the designations ‘Flemings’ or ‘autochthons’ (two terms that residents also frequently used interchangeably with ‘Belgians’). The advantage of the term ‘Flemings’ is that all categories of resident tended to use ‘Flemish’ as an exclusive ethno-cultural identity. For example, when my interlocutors of Jewish or Moroccan descent stepped out of the neighborhood discourse and critiqued its assumptions, they would do so by identifying as Belgian or Antwerpian, and only very rarely by presenting themselves as Flemish. The downside is that this would suggest that these categorizations have a particular Flemish-nationalist feel, which was not always the case (when it did, I have highlighted this in the analysis). I find the use of the term ‘autochthons’ (which infers local rootedness, or a primordial relationship to the ‘soil’, see Chapter 1) to be no less problematic than ‘Belgian’: many ‘Jews’ and ‘Moroccans’ are not only Belgian by nationality, but they commonly also have a longer family history in their neighborhood or in Antwerp than most ‘white’ residents.
Outline of the dissertation: politics, strangers, neighbors

Part I provides a sketch of the political histories and imaginaries attached to the two neighborhoods. Chapter 1 focuses on the political production of ‘Borgerhout/Borgerokko’ as a way to trace the emergence and characteristics of what I call the politics of ‘living together’. In particular, I ask what kind of split within the national ‘we’ is produced in this politics, and how the politics of ‘living together’ infuses seemingly neutral terms (living together, the neighborhood, everyday life, ordinary residents, encounter) with political meaning and significance. In Chapter 2, I describe the shifting positions ascribed to the Antwerp Jewish community throughout the 20th century, with a special focus on the way in which Antwerp’s Jews have recently become increasingly construed as being akin to ‘allochtonen’. Deploying the Jewish neighborhood to explain that culturalist-secularist politics also involve an ‘other Other’, I try to give a first provisional answer to the question of what kind of conceptualization of strangeness is contained in culturalist discourse. Part I, then, serves to sketch the contours of the politics and governmentality of ‘living together’, and the uneven way they have been brought to bear on Oud-Borgerhout and the ‘Jewish neighborhood’.

Parts II and III are ethnographic in focus, asking how denizens relate to culturalist and secularist discourses and the politics of ‘living together’ in the course of everyday neighborhood life, and how this shapes their mutual perceptions and interactions. I suggest that the politics of ‘living together’ problematizes two kinds of relationship between culturally different urban denizens in particular: their perception of one another as ‘strangers’ in the context of neighborhood public space (the subject of the ethnographic chapters of Part II), and their interaction as ‘neighbors’ (considered in Part III). The start of my ethnographic analysis is very much grounded in the work of Rogers Brubaker (2006) and Gerd Baumann (1996), and revolves around a detailed investigation of how my interlocutors ‘do’ or ‘enact’ (ethnic, cultural, religious, national) categorizations, and in what contexts they draw upon a culturalist understanding of ‘culture’ or ‘community’. In contrast to these approaches, however, I also aim to consider the affective and non-discursive aspects of the shaping of everyday, super-diverse neighborhood life by culturalist-secularist discourses.

This means that I am not so much interested in the impact of culturalism as instilling in urban denizens certain (binary) answers. Instead, I want to understand the effect of culturalism by asking what existential or ethical questions it confronts urban denizens with. I do so by developing in Part II a phenomenological approach to residents’ mutual perceptions and being-perceived in the neighborhood street. Re-thinking the figure of the stranger allows me to ask what kinds of recognition and misrecognition, what sense of alienation and familiarity, these local politics of perception entail. Here, I research the impact of culturalism as the vernacular engagement with the question: who am I (for you) as you see me and I come to see myself?

In Part III, I re-conceptualize the figure of the Neighbor along psychoanalytical lines, so as to ask what kind of (ethical) desires and anxieties are negotiated in my interlocutor’s vernacular understandings of neighborliness and the ideal of ‘living
together’. In this part, I understand culturalism to result in a specific urgency of the question of ‘how to connect with, and be good to the Other.’ If the dissertation started by separating the question of ‘living together’ and the conceptualization of strangeness, and linking each to either of the two neighborhoods, towards the final chapters these two aspects of culturalist politics will increasingly turn out to be intertwined.