Strange neighbors
Vollebergh, A.S.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Conclusion
‘Living together’ in the New Europe

The enigma of lived culturalism: the weight of the everyday as a performative domain

In the analysis of most authors (e.g. Stolcke 1995; Grillo 2003; Silverstein 2005; Vertovec 2011; Schinkel 2013), culturalism revolves around a reified and primordial notion of ‘culture’, which is understood to result in the narrowing of political problems into an exclusionary discourse that projects an imagined national Self threatened by the presence of non-white (post)migrants who are construed as culturally ‘strange’ Others. In my analysis, however, this polarized and exclusionary discursive and policy dynamic is only one aspect of culturalist politics. I have argued in this thesis that culturalism also results in what I call a politics of ‘living together’. With this term, I denoted the hegemonic emergence of the notion that a deeply problematic deficit of proper fellow feeling and proper everyday relationships exists between what are construed as ‘culturally different’ denizens. This has led to an intensive political and societal investment in ‘healing’ the social fabric of multi-ethnic urban neighborhoods. Culturalism, so I contend, simultaneously consists of an anxious fixation on safeguarding the nation from what are produced as cultural ‘strangers’ and of a new ethical injunction for denizens to ‘live together’ with their culturally ‘strange’ neighbors. As I have shown throughout this thesis, the ethical injunction to ‘live together’ is not confined to the governance vision of policy-makers, but has permeated society; it has become a prism through which the denizens of the two neighborhoods I have researched have come to view themselves.

I have argued that conceptualizing the politics of ‘living together’ as an inherent aspect of culturalism opens up new questions and new theoretical understandings of how culturalism is ‘lived’. When viewing culturalism primarily as the anxious investment in separating those who supposedly naturally belong and are rooted in the nation (the ‘autochthons’, the ‘Belgians/Flemings’) from those who are assumedly strange to it (the ‘allochthons’, the ‘Moroccans), the impact of culturalism that is highlighted is that of the shaping of denizens’ readings of themselves and others in this overly simplified and excessively fixed dichotomy. I have shown in Part II that, to some extent, Flemish culturalist politics have indeed had such a polarizing impact in Borgerhout and the ‘Jewish neighborhood’. ‘Belgian/Fleming/autochthon’ and ‘stranger/Moroccan/allochthon’ have become the dominant labels in the vernacular neighborhood categorizations of my interlocutors. So much so, that even those to whom these terms were not directly applied in political debates – i.e. orthodox Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors – became sucked into this binary logic.
If we assessed the imbrication of culturalist politics in everyday multicultural life through a focus on the anxiety of ‘strangers’, it would appear that lived culturalism takes the form of ever more staunchly claimed certainties and ever more clear-cut answers to the questions of who ‘we’ and ‘they’ are and what that means. My interlocutors’ sense of Self, and their everyday neighborhood practices and experiences were, however, much more complex and ambiguous than the apparent dominance of this dichotomy suggests. Daniella, with her unruly identifications and contradictory sentiments, symbolized most forcefully that, for my interlocutors, lived culturalism did not take the form of simplistic answers at all. I argued that this apparent paradox should be understood in relation to the politics of ‘living together’. In the politics of ‘living together’, everyday multicultural neighborhood life is made into the object of discussion and fierce political contention, as well as of academic investigation and state management. It is construed as a deeply meaningful domain that is of moral importance to politics and society. In other words, how ‘ordinary’ denizens in urban neighborhoods ‘do’ everyday multiculture has been turned into a societal problem and a political project. I argued that, when analyzed in this light, lived culturalism means for my interlocutors that their everyday neighborhood life and interactions with fellow denizens have become fraught with questions to which secure or comfortable answers were never found. How do I appear when I see myself through other eyes and what does that say about me? How do I know if what I see about neighborhood life is ‘right’ and ‘just’? What is true ‘living together’ and how can sociability be achieved when cultural difference appears to result in different ‘subj ecthoods’?

As my interlocutors engaged with and sought to position themselves in relation to these questions, the familiar and the strange turned out to not be securely tied to the cultural categorical Self and the cultural categorical Other, respectively. Alienation was not something that my interlocutors only sensed between ‘culturally strange’ categories, but also experienced vis-à-vis their ‘own’ ethno-cultural category, and even, crucially, within the Self. There were many moments in which my interlocutors recognized aspects of themselves in categorical ethno-cultural ‘strangers’, or when they felt that their sense of Self and moral worth was precisely recognized and affirmed in ‘strange’ eyes. Moreover, virtually all my interlocutors expressed a sense of ethical desire or duty to establish some kind of relationship with their culturally Other neighbors and to grant them some sort of recognition.

These alternative logics of familiarity and a desire for doing good by the Other resulted in relations and feelings of sharedness across ‘cultural difference’: Elsa’s enjoyment of the small talk with her ‘Moroccan’ neighbors, the empathy of Sanae with the sense of a lost neighborhood of ‘old Belgians’, Ann’s friendship with Madame Leibniz, Moshe’s appreciation of his former bourgeois neighbors. However, these points of recognition and familiarity often also caused uncanny senses of estrangement within the personal and categorical Self. We only have to remember the absurdity that the overlap between her own register of decency and racist stereotypes caused for Karima; the ambivalence of Muslims’ religiosity for Ina, mirroring a past religious Self that constituted to her something she has ‘overcome’, but also represents a loss; Sus and Dora’s ethical desire to encounter the cultural Other, which exposed the
individualized ‘free’ Self as uncannily ‘empty’; the urge displayed by Orli and Moshe to defend ‘pious Jews’ against the judging gazes of Others, and the contradictory impulse to distance themselves from ‘pious Jews’ ‘strange’ and ‘improper’ ways.

Moreover, lived culturalism meant struggling with the question of who ‘we’ and ‘they’ are, not only because there exists in multicultural everyday life multiple and cross-cutting forms of alienation and recognition that are not all subsumed by the culturalist cipher, but also because it entails an incessant confrontation with the tension between the personal and the categorical. ‘Moroccan’ and ‘Jewish’ interlocutors felt a need to explain and translate themselves in terms of their ‘culture’ and ‘religion’, but their explanations ended with a longing to be perceived as individuals with their very own unique character. ‘Young’ and ‘active’ ‘Belgians’ used the cultural form to give shape to their ethical desire to approach and encounter their culturally Other neighbors, precisely in an effort to overcome their cultural Otherness and get to know them for the persons they ‘truly’ are.

The effect of the politics of ‘living together’, however, is not just that lived culturalism means struggling with certain questions; it means having to do so under the weight of an imputed dominant political gaze that evaluates and scrutinizes denizens’ neighborhood perceptions and intercultural neighborliness. In that abstract gaze, the neighborhood perceptions and practices of some categories of denizen have become problematized (the ‘deprived autochthon’, the ‘allochthon’/’Muslim’), while others are celebrated (the ‘new urban middle class’). As a result, my interlocutors sense that, in this imputed dominant gaze (and also coming to view themselves and others through this gaze), how they perceive their neighborhood and how they interact with their culturally other neighbors has gained a political meaning: it has become a sign of ‘who’ they are and a token of their moral worth. Due to the political investment of everyday neighborhood life that is the effect of the politics of ‘living together’, the neighborhood, especially in Borgerhout, has, in this sense, become a stage. In such a context, the way in which denizens ‘do’ everyday multicultural life attains a performative and reflexive layer. My interlocutors’ experiences of the neighborhood or their relations with their culturally Other neighbors are never just that; they are also performances of certain modes of perception, and certain styles of neighborliness and enactments of neighborhood life, through which they (critically) position themselves vis-à-vis other neighborhood denizens and this imputed dominant gaze.

This aspect of the politicization of everyday ‘living together’ means that lived culturalism as a tentative searching is not free-floating. It takes, as I have put it, the form of implicit ‘discussions’ and contestations: between those claiming that reflexivity forms the ground for a truthful and ‘just’ neighborhood perception, and those defending their moral worth and claiming access to reality by foregrounding their embodied immediacy and eye witnessing; between those arguing that true ‘living together’ consists of the dissolving of cultural Otherness in organic and personal intimacy, and those contending that it can just as much be grounded in impersonal virtues of formality, distance, and neighborliness as a ‘positive ethical’ obligation. These polarized performative discussions, too, are about the question of who ‘we’ and ‘they’ are in ways that cross-cut and complicate the allochthon-autochthon divide. In fact,
these discussions revolve predominantly around the positions claimed, and misrecognitions felt, within ethno-cultural categories: between ‘old’ and ‘new Belgians’, between ‘modern’ and ‘pious’ Jews, and between ‘Moroccans’ aspiring to middle-classness in their distinction from ‘traditional’ or ‘indecent’ ‘Moroccans’.

The notion of the “metropolitan paradox” (Back 1996) fits the ambiguity and complexity characterizing Daniella and all my other interlocutors. I have demonstrated, however, that the way in which this paradox is commonly conceptualized - i.e. that everyday multicultural life is characterized by both the impact of hegemonic ‘racist/nationalist’ discourses and by ‘transculturalist’ dialogue or identifications that escape or subvert these discourses (1996: 7; cf. Clayton 2009; van Eijk 2012) - is not useful. I suggest a rephrasing of the terms of the paradox, so that it also attunes us to the impact of the politics of ‘living together’ and the weight of everyday multicultural life as a performative domain. The paradox, then, is that even though the culturalist allochthon-allochthon divide has become hegemonic, this divide is lived (it gains its compelling affective structure and becomes implicated in denizens’ sense of Self) through the internal performative distinctions and contestations of what is the ‘proper’ and ‘ethical’ way of doing everyday multicultural neighborhood life. Put differently, the paradox is that although culturalism seems to handle the question of who ‘we’ and ‘they’ are through a rigorously clear-cut and essentialized opposition between the cultural Self and culturally ‘strange’ Other, the politics of ‘living together’ complicates this simplicity as it asks what the ways in which we engage with the cultural Other say about the kinds of people ‘we’ are. In this perspective, the new kind of alienation that denizens in super-diverse neighborhoods have come to have to deal with in the New Europe is not so much that of the presence of non-white, postcolonial ‘strangers’. As the politics of ‘living together’ have turned the most basic assumptions about human interconnection – that you can know what you see, that you can know what it is to do ‘good’ – into a performative and contested political domain, they are confronted with a more fundamental alienation: of everyday urban neighborhood life itself.

The structural logic of the governance of ‘living together’: the ethnographic real and the stranger slot

The politics of ‘living together’ turn everyday multicultural neighborhood life into a domain of questioning and political contestation, as well as into an object of state monitoring and governance. What mode of neighborhood perception, and what practices of neighborliness, are recognized as proper? What is constituted as ‘true’ ‘living together’ in the urban neighborhood governmentality through which everyday neighborhood life is governed, and what is taken to be problematic or does not even become visible as such? Or, to put it differently, what is the underlying logic to the problematization of the ‘deprived autochthon’ and the ‘allochthon/Muslim’ categories and the heralding of the ‘new urban middle class’?

I argue that to understand the nature of that logic, my earlier suggestion that the Flemish governance of ‘living together’ entails a political investment and valorization
of the ‘ethnographic real’ provides a useful entry point. Mirroring a similar ambiguity within ethnography as an anthropological research method, the neighborhood governmentality relates to, and valorizes, the ‘everyday’ and the ‘ordinary’ through two contradictory notions or impulses: an ideal of organic immersion and embodied immediacy on the one hand, and one of disembodied, distanced reflectivity on the other.

The neighborhood governance logic is based on the idea that the ‘real’ of neighborhood life and the truth about the state of ‘living together’ lies in the everyday perceptions and interactions of ‘ordinary’ denizens. According to this logic, getting to know and making legible their views and actions as they come about in their immersion in everyday life is essential for accessing the ‘truth’ of a particular neighborhood and making it available for management and disciplining. Moreover, the neighborhood governmentality also hinges on an implicit assumption that, in its ‘natural’ or ‘proper’ state, everyday neighborhood life necessarily constitutes a meaningful and important social domain and a potentially redeeming and affirming organic sociality. As in ethnography as a method, the ‘real’ of neighborhood life – ‘truly’ knowing it as well as its ‘true’ social potential – is assumed to be located in, and accessible through, immersion in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

Yet, again as in anthropology, immersion alone is not the whole story in the governance of ‘living together’: the ideal of immersion and organicity combines with the notion of the need for distanced reflexivity. So, even though ‘ordinary’ denizens are seen as speaking a certain truth about the neighborhood and ‘living together’ due to their immersion in neighborhood life, how they perceive and relate to their neighborhood and fellow denizens is simultaneously construed as problematic, and as that which blocks ‘proper’ neighborhood life and is in need of management. Within the governance logic, the problem of ‘deprived autochthons’ and ‘allochthons’ is that they are too immersed in their everyday neighborhood life, assumedly unable to extend their perception and fellow feelings beyond their own parochial horizons and immediate interests. This is why so many governance projects revolve around creating spaces and moments that are symbolically bracketed off from the flow of everyday life (the street feasts, the dialogue evenings, the neighborhood centers, the Opsinjoren neighbor contracts) as a technique for temporarily placing denizens at a reflective distance from their everyday experiences and concerns so as to broaden their horizons. This is also why the new urban middle class is seen to be those making ‘living together’ possible: they are assumed to have the capacity for a properly reflective, nuanced and ‘open’ engagement with their neighborhood as affected by the ruptures of globalized postmodernity, while also valorizing and seeking to achieve the organic sociality of neighborhood life, not as a closed horizon, but as an ethical project. In other words, it is they who are assumed to have the right balance of immersion and distance, of an appreciation of organic sociality and a capacity for individual rational reflectivity.

The result of these two contradictory impulses and principles within the governance of ‘living together’ is painfully ironic. It means that precisely those denizens for whom the neighborhood is an important social and moral universe, and whose claim to moral worth and knowledge is based on the immediacy of their embodied
experiences, are problematized as lacking in their neighborhood engagement. It also means that those denizens whose everyday life follows a rhythm of mutual obligations and responsibilities within a dense network of local social relations, and for whom neighborliness is a matter of civil convention or religious rule, are seen as not properly ‘interested’ and as ‘hard to involve’ in neighborhood life. It means, most of all, that neither the evenings spent by Mo, Eddy and Rene jointly complaining about the demise of Borgerhout, nor Daniella’s policing and care of the children playing on the square, nor Khadija’s soup, or Perel’s enjoyment of the borough feasts, are recognized as ‘true’ ‘living together’.

The extent to which the political investment in the ethnographic real of multicultural neighborhood life is not just new, but also constitutes a new ‘diagnostics of strangeness’ became apparent in the ‘Jewish neighborhood’. There, the weight of culturalist discourses and the politicization of everyday life were not as coherent and all-encompassing as in Borgerhout. In line with the position of ‘Jews’ as an ‘other Other’, and the shift towards a more pronounced ambiguity of that position so that orthodox Antwerp Jews increasingly come to be viewed as also akin to ‘allochthonen’, the politics of ‘living together’ was brought to bear on the Jewish neighborhood in a fragmented way. As a result, the searching character, as well as the performative discussions that constitute lived culturalism, were of a different nature.

‘Non-Jewish’ interlocutors struggled with finding a way to express what it means to them to live in a ‘Jewish’ neighborhood. In doing so, they drew on and argued the (in)applicability of discourses that are normally reserved for deprived ethic neighborhoods and ‘Moroccan/Muslims’, instead of positioning themselves and claiming moral worth vis a vis other ‘Belgians’ based on how they relate to ‘Jews’. ‘Jewish’ respondents were struggling with distancing themselves, and the ‘Jewish neighborhood’, from what they tried to de-naturalize as a very particular political construction, namely ‘the neighborhood’ and ‘everyday neighborhood life’ as inherently meaningful and important. From these vernacular negotiations emerged the contours of a new diagnostics within the postcolonial template of ‘strangeness’, in which ‘strangeness’ is generalized into more abstract symptoms beyond non-whiteness or non-European post-migranthood pure and simple. In this diagnostics, strangeness was understood to be located in, and diagnosable through, the everyday neighborhood experiences of ‘ordinary’ denizens and the quality of neighborhood life and, crucially, in the ‘proper’ recognition of, and engagement in, the neighborhood as a ‘naturally’ deeply meaningful domain. It was in this latter aspect that ‘orthodox Jews’ were found failing and that made them ‘strange’ and ‘not integrated’ in the eyes of ‘active’ and ‘young’ non-Jewish residents.

The post-war shift in European formations of difference from one Other to another Other – from Jews to Muslims as Europe’s epitomic ‘strangers’ – is, then, so I argued, not just a shift in who is made to inhabit the stranger slot. Instead, this personnel shift also entailed fundamental changes in the conceptualization of the stranger slot itself. What is new in this slot, is not so much the use of a reified notion of ‘culture’ to exclude migrants from the nation, as the history of the shifting position of Antwerp’s Jews showed. What is new is that ‘living together’ - with its governance
definition characterized by the two contradictory impulses of liberal autonomous subjecthood and ethics as a personal reflective project, and a Romantic desire for organic sociability and valorization of the ‘truth’ of the immersed immediacy of the ‘ordinary’ man - has become conceptualized as itself a criterion, a symptom, of strangeness.

Coda - ‘Living together’ and the New Europe

On 1 July 2014, the European Court for Human Rights announced its ruling in the case of S.A.S v. France. The case involved a challenge by a French Muslim (S.A.S. are her initials) against the country’s legislation prohibiting the wearing of face-covering clothing in public, which was more generally discussed as the ‘burka ban’. The French government had put forward three aims underpinning the legitimacy of this legislation, namely the safeguarding of: gender equality, human dignity, and ‘living together’ (“le vivre ensemble”).

In fact, the argument that the burka is a threat to ‘living together’ and a disruption of social life, as well as the underlying notion that the state has a responsibility to ensure ‘living together’, had also been put forward in Belgium during the development of the Belgian bill banning face veiling, and had been affirmed by the Belgian Constitutional Court (Brems e.a. 2013: 86-87). In Belgium, where, so I have argued, political anxieties over ‘living together’ have been exceptionally heightened due to the combination of the weight of the moral history attached to Flemish Block and the precariousness of the unity of the nation-state, this reasoning was presented as more or less common sense and requiring little development (ibid: 86).

In France, in contrast, the notion of “le vivre ensemble” was elaborated on and discussed extensively so as to turn it into the main legal principle justifying the government bill on face veiling. It rests on a reinterpretation of the Republican value of fraternité in relation to the state’s responsibility to defend public order as also a responsibility to protect the social fabric of the nation. It was also explicitly based on philosophical notions such as Levinas’ conceptualization of seeing the “face” of the Other as a primary ethical relationship (Brems e.a. 2013: 87-88). Covering the face in public was deemed to be “quite simply incompatible with the fundamental requirements of ‘living together’ in French society” and, “[being] contrary to the ideal of fraternity, also falls short of the minimum requirement of civility that is necessary for social interaction” (‘explanatory memorandum’ to the Bill, quoted in ECHR 2014: 8).

In the ruling of the ECHR, the arguments of gender equality and human dignity were not recognized as justifiable grounds for the ban. The principle of ‘living together’, however, was stated to be a legitimate aim: “It indeed falls within the powers of the State to secure the conditions whereby individuals can live together in their diversity” (ECHR 2014: 55).

240 There were two dissenting judges who found that the principle of ‘living together’ was too vague and far-fetched. See, for more extended critical discussions of the ruling: Howard 2014; Brems 2014.
The notion of ‘living together’ investigated in this book may have been exceptionally highlighted in Belgian, and especially Flemish, culturalist politics. Yet, as this case shows, it is not unique to Belgium. Indeed, it is, I suggest, an inherent aspect of the European culturalist formation of difference, and is increasingly becoming an explicit prism through which the New Europe understands itself: so much so that ‘living together’ is now a legal principle within European jurisprudence.