

Contested Multiplicities and Mobile Monologues: The Poetics and Politics of Conviviality in the Plural

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ABSTRACT

In Antwerp, everyday interactions in ethno-racially diverse neighbourhoods have become the object of polarized debate and policy interventions that posit ‘living together’ as an ideal. Residents routinely use living together as a frame to assess themselves and their neighbourhood. They also bring divergent vernacular moral practices and sensory experiences to everyday interactions across difference. This complicates understandings of conviviality as a singular, demarcatable dimension of urban life. This paper delineates, instead, theoretical, methodological and textual manoeuvres for approaching conviviality in the plural. Methodologically, biographical interviewing and go-alongs are combined to explore diverging vernacular modes of engagement, and their intersections. Textually, the stylistic device of a collage of ‘mobile monologues’ – first-person, situated stream-of-consciousness narrations – works to recreate in writing a polyphony of embodied and moral modes of being, and their unfolding across myriad interactions. Finally, mobile monologues bring-out understudied dimensions of conviviality: (1) the situated performance of local narratives, (2) the circulation of moral economies of neighbourliness, (3) the contested political resignification of vernacular notions and practices in relation to discourses of living together. Conviviality emerges as heterogeneously assembled from a multiplicity of intersecting vernacular universes, whose political relevance in relation to living together is actively made and contested.

KEYWORDS

Conviviality; everyday racism; moral economy; neighbourliness; ethnographic methods; urban governance; social cohesion; go-along; writing otherwise

‘You Must Not Have Talked to the Right People’

Half-way during my ethnographic fieldwork in Antwerp (Belgium), I had an interview with Perel, a Hasidic Jewish woman with a prominent role in the founding of a new strictly orthodox Jewish girls’ school. I met Perel through a mutual Jewish acquaintance, who informed me that she usually attended the events organized by the local residents’ association. Consisting almost exclusively of non-Jewish white residents, the association regarded the facilitation of interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish neighbours as their main challenge and task (Vollebergh 2016a). The association’s objective chimed

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with a broadly shared narrative among non-Jewish residents in which they portrayed the Jewish Neighbourhood, as this part of Antwerp is colloquially called, as suffering from a profound lack of neighbourly sociality between communities (cf. Wessendorf 2013). Non-Jewish residents usually framed this as a problem of orthodox Jews' zealous religiosity and self-segregation, exasperating that 'there is no living together (*samenleven*) here' and that 'Jews don't want to integrate'. My interviews with Jews identifying as pious (*frumm*) or Hasidic, however, had led me to understand that pious Jewish residents had very different affective experiences of what constitutes good living together, imbuing it with alternative moral practices.

The tension between these diverging vernacular engagements with neighbourhood life surfaced acutely during my conversation with Perel. Like most of my Jewish interlocutors, Perel described her relationships with non-Jewish neighbours to me as satisfactory and 'very good'. When I sought to introduce the very different assessment of the neighbourhood's social fibre by non-Jewish residents to ask her how she would understand these perceptions, I realized that the negative sentiments I was conveying were unfamiliar to Perel. I tensed-up, unsure how to hold myself in the uncomfortable position of mediator and harbinger of bad news in which I had brought myself. Perel responded with vehemence, asserting that, whatever these perceptions about Jewish unconviviality were about, they were 'certainly not true'. She then questioned my findings and methods. 'To say that there is a bad relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish people, I really do not agree', she said. 'And I am not the only one who thinks so. You must not have talked to the right people. I am sure of it'.

Her remarks touched a nerve. For despite their repeated assertions that *samenleven* was non-existent, most non-Jewish residents also recounted, sometimes to their own confusion a range of neighbourly interactions and gestures they exchanged with their pious Jewish neighbours – receiving gifts or cards for baby showers or New Year, for example. My fieldnotes of that afternoon are riddled with critical questions directed at myself. Had I talked to the wrong people? Was there some implicit bias that I was not aware of? And if not, how then to make sense of the contrast between, and contradictions within, residents' perceptions and narratives?

These questions, so urgently scribbled down in my fieldnotes, touch upon the methodological challenges of studying the actual ways in which residents in ethno-racially diverse neighbourhoods interact and cohabit – what others have called 'lived multicultural' (Back 1996; Wise and Velayutham 2009; Wessendorf 2013) or 'conviviality' (Valluvan 2016; Gilroy 2005; Neal et al. 2013; Nowicka and Vertovec 2014). More precisely, my fieldwork doubts raise the question of how to research, and write, practices of living together across difference in a context where the very nature of 'living together' is plural, politicised, and contested.

Much ethnography of urban diversity since the 1990s attends to ambivalences and contradictions. For example, ethnographies of conviviality have repeatedly confirmed Paul Gilroy's emphasis that conviviality is always proximate to racism (Gilroy 2005), describing a 'metropolitan paradox' (Back 1996) of convivial moments and intimate relations coexisting with everyday racisms (Clayton 2009; Karner and Parker 2011; Nayak 2017; Tyler 2017). Others have understood this paradox rather in terms of the discrepancies between the ways people feel and narrate place and belonging and their concrete, mundane practices of interaction, that is, between discourse and practice (van Eijk

2012; Valentine 2008). Lastly, conviviality has been conceptualized as brought about by newly emerging ‘capacities’, ‘habits’, ‘ethics’ or discursive ‘scripts’ that render difference unremarkable or ‘non-intrusive’, but which exist amid other competing (nationalist and/or racialising) scripts (Baumann 1996; Noble 2013; Valluvan 2016: 217; Wessendorf 2013; Wise 2013).

This body of literature clearly recognizes that convivial cultures may vary across time and place (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014; Wise and Velayutham 2014), and that such cultures are both haunted by political discourses of integration and belonging and somehow shaped by policies and governance discourses that propagate ideals of mixing, cohesion and encounter. What has received much less sustained ethnographic attention, however, is the possibility that my conversation with Perel alludes to. Namely, that there may exist *multiple* vernacular modes of engagement across difference in any one locality, so that people may act from quite different ideas of what constitute morally good ways to live in and with difference.

The challenge of exploring multiple vernacular modes of engagement while also tracing how these possibly intersect is especially acute in contexts in which the everyday life of ethno-racially diverse neighbourhoods is deeply politicized and contested. Antwerp is a pronounced example of such a context. In Dutch-speaking Belgium, ‘living together’ (*samenleven*), and especially its presumed absence in marginalized neighbourhoods, emerged in the 1980s as a new social and political notion indexing the dangers and hopes of a diversifying society (Beyen 2015; Vollebergh 2020). Rendering residents more amenable and capable of living together in difference has become the aim of policy interventions, grassroots mobilization and civil society organizations alike. In such political contexts, everyday practices and interactions gain new political and ethical meaning. They come to signal the presence or absence of ‘true’ living together in this normative political sense (Fortier 2007: 107, 2010; Nowicka 2020: 16), and citizens’ and communities’ moral (in)capacity for ‘openness’ to difference. This adds another layer of complexity. How to research not just a multiplicity of vernacular modes of engaging with difference, but also how such vernacular engagements come to be re-signified, performed, and contested in relation to living together as a political concern and ideal?

This is not a purely methodological question. It touches on how we conceive of what conviviality *is* and through what ways of writing we can convey it. The aim of this paper is to describe a set of interlocking theoretical, methodological, and textual manoeuvres which together offer an approach for exploring and capturing conviviality or lived multi-culture as ‘multiple’ (cf. Mol 2002; M’Charek 2013) and contested. The remainder of the text follows these three dimensions and their circular feeding into one another. I begin by describing the Antwerp context in more detail, and use it as a point from which to critically engage with the common theoretical understanding of conviviality as a particular kind of vernacular interaction across difference that can be analytically and empirically demarcated and pinpointed. Instead, I suggest that convivial encounters are heterogeneously assembled from multiple vernacular moral practices and embodied understandings, whose relevance in relation to living together as a governance project and broad political discourse is not fixed or given, but made (M’Charek 2013: 424) and contested. I then describe the ethnographic methods I deployed during fieldwork, as well as the experimental literary and textual devices – mobile monologues – I developed after fieldwork to capture the diverging sensorial and moral universes I encountered. The

second half of the paper gives an indication of what thinking conviviality in the plural might look like: it offers excerpts of three mobile monologues and demonstrates how these bring-out understudied dimensions of cohabitation.

Theoretical Manoeuvres

The research from which I draw my examples was carried out in two adjacent neighbourhoods in the city of Antwerp between 2008 and 2010. Antwerp's 'Jewish neighbourhood', situated in the city centre, has historically been a node of orthodox Judaism (Van den Daelen 2011) within Western Europe. Over the past decades, the proportion of Hasidic and strictly orthodox (*frumm*) sections within Antwerp's Jewish community have increased, causing for new kosher shops, schools and prayer houses to open up. Apart from Jews with varying migration histories and religious affiliations, the neighbourhood, largely located in formerly bourgeois quarters, is also inhabited by white non-Jewish residents, Indian and Lebanese migrants, and Eastern-European labour migrants.

The second neighbourhood is Oud-Borgerhout, situated in the poorer and historically working-class north-eastern part of the city. Due to its large Moroccan-background population and the far-right support among its white working-class population, Oud-Borgerhout symbolized the problems of ethnic conflict, xenophobia, and social disintegration that were perceived to riddle multi-ethnic 'ghetto' neighbourhoods (Beyen 2015) and which in policy and political discourses were summed-up as an urgent lack of living together (Vollebergh 2020). Since the early 2000s, white 'new middle-class' families have started to move into Oud-Borgerhout, attracted to the low real-estate prices and the borough's diversity.

The wider political and policy context in which these neighbourhoods are situated, was shaped by the landslide electoral successes of the far-right party Flemish Block (later renamed Flemish Interest) in the 1990s. As a result, everyday interactions and sentiments in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, and especially concerns about a perceived lack of living together, moved to the centre of political and policy attention.¹ Far-right discourses focused on 'ordinary Flemings' feeling threatened by 'strangers' in their neighbourhoods, formed the start of a continuing polarized public debate in which contrasting vision of the truth and nature of everyday life in marginalized multi-ethnic neighbourhoods compete with one another (de Koning and Vollebergh 2019). In Antwerp and Oud-Borgerhout, the polarization between far-right anti-migrant politics and leftist pro-diversity politics was felt to be about the very soul of the borough and the city at large (Beyen 2015; cf. Shoshan 2016: 209). How residents affectively engaged with everyday diversity became deeply entwined with their political and moral sense of self, as well as with the way they were read and interpellated by others (Vollebergh 2016b: 272–233).

Simultaneously, policy makers started to develop a wide range of new governance initiatives to address problems of 'everyday living together', particularly in disadvantaged multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. Whether by way of subsidizing social cohesion projects, citizen participation, or intensified surveillance of youth nuisance, these new policies ambitioned to monitor and reshape residents' feelings and moral dispositions towards diversity, calling upon citizens to become more neighbourly and more

‘active’ (Loopmans 2006; Vollebergh 2020). As the proliferation of discourses about ‘parallel lives’, ‘*communautarisme*’, and extremism (Philips 2006; Chabal 2015; Shoshan 2016) evidences, such political and social investment in citizens’ neighbourly feelings and relations is not unique to Flanders, but part of a broader postcolonial European moment.

Living together as a normative policy ideal, however, does not address all citizens in the same way (Fortier 2007: 19). Echoing racialized and classed discourses of belonging and moral citizenship, policy initiatives delineate some categories of citizens as in need of particular support and guidance, most notably citizens with a non-Western or Muslim background (‘allochthons’) who are presumed not to share liberal values and to self-segregate in their ethnic community (Tyler 2017: 1892), and working-class native whites (‘disadvantaged autochthons’) thought to be susceptible to far-right discourse (cf. Haylett 2001; Shoshan 2016; Wekker 2019). Others, most notably the ‘new urban middle class’ associated with a progressive political orientation, were heralded in policy discourse as potential ‘role models’ of openness and democratic citizenship (Uitermark 2003: 77). By the time of my fieldwork, the promotion of ‘living together in diversity’ formed a generally accepted ideal that was routinely deployed not just by Flemish regional and municipal policy makers, but also by community organizations, civil society actors, and, crucially, by residents themselves.

In Antwerp, the line between *samenleven* as a governance ideal and a vernacular concern is thus extremely porous. Residents routinely assessed their neighbourhoods and themselves in relation to the extent in which ‘true’ living together as a public and moral good was achieved. This led to the circulation of racialising and moralising judgments and counterclaims in which residents discussed particular groups’ perceived investment in living together as indexing their (lack of) belonging, integration, and moral worth. The desire for living together itself thus produced new racialised and secularist exclusions and hierarchies (Vollebergh 2016a). This pushes for an empirical examination of which feelings, practices, and intimacies are recognized as proper *samenleven* and which remain unintelligible (Vollebergh 2020; cf. Fortier 2007: 19), not only in the realm of policy, but also between residents in the course of everyday life.

Crucially, and in contrast to the focus on either analytically demarcating conviviality as those interactions that move beyond ‘groupist precepts’ (Valluvan 2016: 218) or empirically researching it as *shared* ethics or capacities (Wessendorf 2013), there existed no consensus as to what living together consists of in the polarized political context of Antwerp. Residents sensed their neighbourhood in very different ways and brought diverging moral underpinnings to ‘doing’ living together and neighbourliness. Aspects of such diverging vernacular engagements and moral practices were, at certain moments, explicitly performed or narrated in relation to political discourses of living together as a national social problem. Other dimensions of vernacular engagements consisted rather of unspoken habituated and embodied repertoires and sensibilities (cf. Wise 2010). In the Antwerp context, the question to be asked was thus not so much how people come to interact across difference. Rather, the question to pose was how such interactions were assembled from *heterogenous* affective and moral dispositions, and how these were grasped and made relevant in relation to living together as a political ideal and concern at any given moment.

Methodological Manoeuvres

Encounters, such as my conversation with Perel, made clear the need to explore divergent modes of sensing and doing difference. The ethnographic methods I deployed are common tools in urban ethnographic fieldwork. I held biographical in-depth interviews. I hung out in public and semi-public spaces, such as playgrounds and shopping streets, and participated in local events. And I conducted ‘go-alongs’ or mobile interviews (Kusenbach 2003; Spinney 2015). The specificity of the methodological approach I developed lies rather in how these methods were recombined towards excavating multiple vernacular modes of engagement, and tracing their shifting, contested relationship to political discourses of living together.

Politically-shaped local categories formed a starting point for provisionally delineating differing modes of engagement. As I detail elsewhere (de Koning and Vollebergh 2019), the (racialized and classed) iconic figures produced by the discourses of living together discussed above – such as ‘ordinary’ or ‘old’ Flemings, ‘Moroccans’, ‘new Belgian families’, or ‘ultra-orthodox Jews’ – were at the surface of everyday neighbourhood life during my field encounters. I tried to achieve a reasoned sampling of research participants along these dominant local categories, while also focusing my selection of participants spatially. This led to clusters of participants from different categories who lived in the same sets of streets, or even were neighbours, and who thus knew each other to some extent and where affected by the same local issues.

Interviews were held at people’s homes or place of their choice and lasted generally between 2 and 4 h. They were semi-structured and focused on ‘the minutiae of people’s biographies and daily lives’ (Karner and Parker 2011: 369) through a range of topics, which I gradually tailored to better reflect preoccupations specific to each category: biographical histories; everyday routines of shopping, leisure, and school; various key local spaces; neighbourly relations and friendships; and organized neighbourhood feasts or events. Interviews were useful for drawing out participants’ narratives about the neighbourhood. Narratives often consisted of emotionally charged anecdotes linked to the senses (smells, bumpings, hissing; cf. Wise 2010; Mepschen 2016), as well as of participants’ sense of being read in certain (racialised or classed) ways through the embodied gazes and responses of others (Nayak 2017). In line with phenomenological accounts of race and racial affect (Ahmed 2004, 2007), these narratives thus pointed to the need to understand vernacular modes of engagement as intersubjective, ‘fleshy’, and affective; as embodied ways of doing and being done while moving through neighbourhood space and encounters (Nayak 2017: 289).

Interviews also offered glimpses of habituated moral economies sustaining ‘deeply personal relations of trust and care’ (Tyler 2017: 1904; Wise 2005) that seemed to fall outside, and sometimes contradicted, these explicit narratives (van Eijk 2012). Practical repertoires of neighbouring and bodily habitus (Wise 2010) – gift giving, food sharing, domestication of public space, small talk, greeting, etiquette and proximity in stores, regulation of children’s play – and their moral underpinnings, were often not explicated but embedded in participants’ accounts of concrete relationships and interactions.

To some extent, differences in repertoires that were practiced rather than spoken could be observed in parks and playgrounds, by paying attention to who sat with whom and to casual conversations (Leloup et al. 2016: 204; Jean 2017: 218). As I came

to know a smaller set of research participants of each category more intimately, I started to visit them regularly at home and I accompanied them during ‘natural’ routines in the neighbourhood (Kusenbach 2003), such as going to the weekly market, and to local festivities or events. ‘Go-alongs’ are a phenomenological methodology that ‘place[s] the researcher alongside the participant in the context of the “doing” of mobility’ (Spinney 2015: 232), allowing to explore participants’ ‘stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment’ (Kusenbach 2003: 463). Because they string together various interactions and contexts, go-alongs also made visible habitual styles of sharing neighbourhood space and undernarrated moral practices extended to neighbours and passers-by, including how such practices coincided with or interrupted explicit narratives. Together, these methodological manoeuvres made it possible to explore multiple vernacular modes of engagements, not as sharply delineated ‘attitudes’ towards difference, but as ambivalently unfolding and intersecting across a multitude of embodied and affective interactions.

Writing Manoeuvres: Mobile Monologues

After fieldwork, the methodological challenge of accessing differing vernacular modes of engagement, reposed itself as a question of writing. How to evoke in text, both to myself and possible readers, these multiple modes of embodiment, their intersubjective character, inner tensions, and overlaps? Anthropology has a history of experimenting with the ‘poetics and politics’ of writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986; see also Pandian and McLean 2017; Wulff 2016). Fictional techniques such as dialogue (Stoller 2016), collage (Stevenson 2017), or poetry (Kusserow 2017; Stone 2020) are not considered embellishments or falsifications of ethnographic reality, but as ways to ‘get closer to the real’ (Pandian and McLean 2017) and capture, for example, ‘the condition of being in a body and being in time’ (Stone 2020: 196). Novels on the condition of European metropolitan life, such as Zadie Smith’s *NW* or Camilo Jose Cela’s *The Hive*, moreover, also deployed modernist and postmodernist techniques for creating impressionistic, multi-perspectivist, and non-directional accounts of a multiplicity of urban lives fleetingly touching.

Drawing on these traditions, I developed an experimental stylistic device which I call ‘mobile monologues’. The monologue as a literary form has two distinct characteristics in contrast to dialogue: it evokes a subject through inner, embodied stream of consciousness and inchoate impressions rather than through outside description, and it addresses the reader directly. A mobile monologue is a first-person, impressionistic, composite narrative by a single research participant, written as if spoken while navigating their neighbourhood.

I went to work as follows. For each of the local categories of residents, I selected one participant with whom I had spent large amounts of time, and whose practices and ruminations, I felt, would allow me to ‘linge[r] with the vicissitudes and implications of empirical encounters’ (Pandian and McLean 2017: 4) with participants of that category more broadly. I then cut out excerpts of conversations I had had with this participant, whether during go-alongs, hanging-out, or interviews, and arranged and re-arranged them into a composite monologue. While arranging, I tried to capture the mobility of participants’ engagements, in a double sense: as spatially situated, and as fragmented and non-unitary (cf. Braidotti 2014). I arranged excerpts so as to convey the way in

which buildings and people had prompted anecdotes and sensations during actual walks. For example, the first monologue below of a woman I name Elsa is so composed that it reflects the route from her senior home to the weekly market that I walked with her several times, and the interactions I witnessed during those walks. I also arranged excerpts so that the monologue would reflect what I had experienced as common sudden shifts in participants' tone or emotional register, or remarkable discontinuities between what was spoken and what was done.

While each mobile monologue aims to convey a vernacular mode of engagement through a first-person, situated stream-of-consciousness portrayal of everyday multiculturalure, the crux is the effect of several mobile monologues positioned next to one another. As 'a series of juxtaposed paratactic tellings of a shared circumstance' (Tyler 1986: 126), mobile monologues aim to evoke the polyphony of everyday life in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, while also showing where and how differential embodied experiences, narratives, and moral practices interrelate and touch. In the remainder of the paper I render excerpts from three mobile monologues to illustrate this: one of Elsa,² an elderly white resident of Oud-Borghout; one of Karima, who has been born and bred in Borgerhout and is of Moroccan background; and one of Dina, also born in Antwerp, in Hasidic circles. I use these monologues to show how thinking and writing conviviality in the plural opens up three understudied dimensions of cohabitation: (1) the embodied, intersubjective and performative nature of local narratives, (2) what I call vernacular moral economies of neighbourliness, (3) the contested ways in which vernacular notions and practices are 'made relevant' (or irrelevant) (M'Charek 2013: 424) to living together as a political ideal.

Elsa

You see that flat over there, just behind that little park? That's the retirement home I had to move into. My husband, Stef, died a couple of years ago, the house got too big for just me, but I really miss living in my house, my street. It's the best street in Borgerhout, you know, where I lived. Especially when it comes to strangers. A lot of Belgians have always lived in that street, there were never more than 25 per cent Moroccans. All the other streets are full of them strangers, but we had the fewest and the most decent ones.

Look at all those empty store windows. It's a shame, really, this used to be such a fine street. There used to be a butcher's there, and another one right across the street. There were bakeries and some very beautiful clothing stores, a bicycle store. It was the fanciest street in Antwerp, now it's all neglected and gone to waste. All that's left now are these shops of strangers. Moroccan groceries, Moroccan bakeries. Sometimes I buy beef or chicken from them, but I don't like their bread. Though I must say this bakery here, it's also Moroccan, but they have decent Belgian bread, and they keep the store clean at least. Oh wait, I hate it when they do that. Hey you, little guy, watch it! You can't cross when the light is red!

–You can't tell me what to do, bugger off.

You heard that? Yes, they really dare taunt you, especially the kids. Once, when I walked my dog, it did a pipi against a fence, and this little brat said to me: 'Hey filthy whore, you can't do that'. And I said to him: 'Then I'm just like your mother'. So he got angry: 'You can't say that about my mother!' And I said: 'You can't say that about me'. And then I

told his father, whom I knew quite well, but afterwards I regretted doing that, because the kid got such a beating.

The market is just around the corner. It's really a Moroccans' market now. I tell you, it gets so crowded you can hardly walk around. And the women, they always stand together with their strollers, leaving no room to pass them. You really have to ask: Excuse me, can I pass please? And, I mean, of course they can't leave their children at home, but they should really take more account of other people, you know.

–Hey Elsa! Ça va?

Hey little fellows! I've known these guys since they were little kids. Can't help calling them 'little fellows' still, even though they're in their twenties now. A couple of weeks ago, I asked one of them about Ramadan, what it means exactly and all, and we got talking. He said it himself, by the way: 'It's all about raising kids properly'.

Shared Narratives and Performativity

The first thing that springs out from the monologue is how Elsa engages with, and is engaged by, objects, places and bodies in a 'somatic weaving of an ethnicised urban landscape' (Shoshan 2008: 380) that is strongly shaped by (far-right) political discourses of white alienation and ethnic threat. As we witness Elsa narrating and sensing the environment through racialized tropes ('strangers'), accumulations of intercorporeal encounter (strollers blocking the way), and affective and visceral responses (the sense of loss prompted by stores that are no more, the shudder at 'their' food), a process of myriad moments of ethnicised interpellation unfolds, in which Elsa turns non-white passers-by into 'strangers' and 'Moroccans', while simultaneously performing herself as an 'ordinary' native Fleming and 'original' inhabitant of Borgerhout.

Such explicit neighbourhood narratives were often on the surface of most research encounters. They are what participants told spontaneously and often with strong emotions. There is, however, a second dimension to these narratives that is hard to fathom based on interviews. Narratives were shared between particular networks of people, who engaged in their performance often in a highly standardized way (with the same anecdotes and phrases told over and over, triggering fixed sets of responses), and in specific situations. In short, they functioned as social practices. Go-alongs and their rendering in walking monologues allow for a precise empirical investigation of embodied narratives as performed and situated: in what contexts and with whom are particular narratives shared? To what (broader) audiences are they directed and performed?

This was particularly relevant for comprehending the surprising mix of racist discourse told in the midst of scenes involving intimacy and familiarity across ethnic difference that was typical for the mode of engagement of 'old Belgian' participants such as Elsa. As the monologue intimates, they spent extensive amounts of time in neighbourhood space, often in the form of daily or weekly routines of visiting always the same shops and cafes, walking the same route or sitting in the doorway of their homes. In these domesticated public spaces, they met the same people and familiar faces. They often practiced an implicit moral norm of striking casual conversations with whomever they met as well as an almost compulsive correcting of any wrongdoings or breaches of what they deemed 'normal', 'decent' behaviour, such as ignoring a red light. It was in particular in these routine spaces of 'public familiarity' (Blokland and Nast 2014) that the

narrative of Borgerhout as a dangerous ghetto circulated and was shared; complaining about the neighbourhood functioned as the topic at hand for engaging others, including myself, in this particular form of neighbourly sociality.

Importantly, as go-alongs and participant observation revealed, the people with whom Elsa and others shared these domesticated spaces to a large extent consisted of residents and neighbours of Moroccan background. That Elsa knew the boy's father (and that he received a beating), or that she was greeted by Moroccan-background passers-by on the way to the market, was thus not coincidental, but shows how these different residents' modes of inhabiting and hanging out in neighbourhood space overlap. Elderly white participants and those of Moroccan background also shared, much more so than 'new' middle class white families, the haunting sense that the territorial stigma of Borgerhout as a ghetto continued to stick to them (Pinkster et al. 2020). As they shared stories of muggings and complained about 'youths', Moroccan-background and elderly white residents jointly deployed the racialized narrative of the demise of Borgerhout as a means for crafting a particular kind of (working-class) neighbourly sociality, and as a way to publicly perform and reclaim respectability. 'New' white middle class families, in contrast, who often leisured outside of the neighbourhood and who precisely sought to counter such racializing narratives by organizing neighbourhood feasts and events, were not part of these mundane cross-ethnic routine interactions.

Go-alongs and mobile monologues thus make it possible to examine in which contexts embodied narratives circulate and how these circulations, and their limits, are related to habituated routines and norms for interaction that are not explicated. As such, mobile monologues complicate an analytic understanding that views embodied racialized narratives as uniquely expressive of people's inner or 'true' feelings about difference (Valentine 2008). Instead, they hold in perpetual tension the discursive and the enacted dimensions of vernacular modes of engagement, while showing how these to people themselves are seamless and coherent.

Karima

I remember when Flemish Block had its first win like it was yesterday. I would walk on the street all the time thinking: 'every third Belgian I see wants me out'. I have been so angry about Flemish Block for a long time. And still, my right-door neighbours for example, I greet them always, very friendly, I smile, but they have never greeted me back. Maybe it's because I wear a headscarf, I don't know. But, I mean, those are the moments that you think: 'They're all racists', you know.

But, especially with elderly Belgians, I can also understand that it must be very difficult for them, to have seen your neighbourhood change like that, with all these people you don't know. That cannot have been easy for them. I have worked in a retirement home for a while when I was a teenager, and that was so sad. There are so many lonely Belgians who don't have anyone to talk to, no family, no friends, no one. With some people, you notice – not that it's like written on their forehead that they vote Flemish Interest – but you notice them looking at you like, like ugly, you know? I am always extra nice to people like that, I give them a very friendly smile. I usually avoid coming here, to Borgerhout's weekly market, it's so horribly crowded.

–No Nora, we don't need fruit anymore, we have enough, we'll just go the supermarket to get some yoghurt and some sodas. Tariq, please don't make a scene, you can't go to that playground and stay there alone, you know I don't like it there.

I am always afraid of letting him play outside alone, and the influence the other boys there may have on him. Smoking, drinking, going out, that's what you learn on the street. Our boys especially, you know, they hang around on the street, doing some mischief, and then it gradually goes from bad to worse. My mother says that too: 'No wonder that the Belgians do not want us, so much criminality as there is'.

But there are other stories too, especially about the old days. My mum is always saying Belgians were much more friendly back then. When she was pregnant she did not know how to get to the hospital, because she did not know any Dutch. And then a Belgian neighbour helped her. Taking care of neighbours is also something of our religion. In Islam, neighbours are one of the most important people, they're really at the same level as family. So when it's the feast of sacrifice, I always bring my neighbours a portion of meat, for example. My Belgian neighbours, that is. Moroccan neighbours can make those things for themselves or they will get them anyway. No, I don't expect anything in return. You do these things in exchange for your own virtue, that's what counts. But I've noticed that for Flemings it is different: neighbours are just neighbours.

Moral Economies of Neighbourliness

The first part of Karima's monologue provides the mirror image of Elsa's racialized navigating of the social landscape, showing how the sighs, frowns, and 'dirty looks' of white residents turn Karima incessantly into a problematic intruder in her own neighbourhood. It also shows how she, too, senses the neighbourhood through an equally politically shaped embodied narrative of inherent Flemish racism, reading white passers-by as 'racists' in myriad intersubjective encounters. Placing different walking monologues side-by-side shows that vernacular modes of engagement are fundamentally interdependent as categories are 'lived through the body and coming-into-being in encounters with other bodies' (Nayak 2017: 289–290). Again, however, Karima's account is more complex. Her empathy for lonely 'old Belgians' and recounts of neighbourly exchanges of care and food bring out vernacular moral practices and their circulation.

The notion of moral economies provide a useful angle for thinking about everyday multicultural. 'Moral economy', writes Didier Fassin (2009: 37), refers to 'the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space'. Anthropologists and historians have used this concept in particular to analyse subaltern moral registers and values that underpin emergent political resistance, but are hidden in customary repertoires of action and relations of gift giving and exchange (Scott 1985: 184). It orients us to the vernacular notions of neighbourliness and care that may not be spoken and which do not correspond to the policy ideals of openness and intercultural encounter, but which are implicit in patterns of customary practices and exchanges. Because mobile monologues string together a range of concrete interactions and open up space to discuss neighbourly exchanges in detail, they help to bring-out various moral economies of neighbourliness, and to follow to whom these are extended and how they are translated and (mis-)recognized in the process.

Karima's account, and especially her references to offering specific plates of foods during religious feasts gives insight into one such vernacular moral economy of neighbourliness. Karima's practices reflect a repertoire of neighbouring conventions and customary gestures practiced by Moroccan-background participants, women's especially. This repertoire included, besides a range of home-cooked Moroccan dishes during religious occasions, inviting neighbours to weddings, and taking care of elderly neighbours in cases of sickness or death. Like Karima, they usually presented this moral norm of neighbourly gestures as intrinsic to Islam, and took visible pride in neighbourliness as a kind of 'Moroccan' cultural specialty – especially as opposed to what they viewed as the unsociable nature of white Flemings. Moroccan-background participants often lived with extended kin networks in the near vicinity, and were close to other Moroccan-background families with whom they had grown up in Borgerhout. Within familial and community networks these norms of neighbourliness were intensely lived, not as gestures of politeness, but as, also burdensome, reciprocal obligations and expectations. As Karima intimates ('in exchange for your own virtue'), when extended to white neighbours, such gestures took on a different shape: they became ethical gestures of rapprochement and moral decency across difference that were not expected to be reciprocated.

White Belgian participants appreciated these acts of neighbourliness which they, too, understood to be specifically Moroccan. New white middle class families were sometimes at a loss how to reciprocate, and there was a distinct sense of inadequacy in relation to these self-confident 'Moroccan' neighbouring traditions (Vollebergh 2016a). They were often also frustrated by the discrepancy between Moroccan-background residents' neighbourliness and investment in family networks, on the one hand, and their less committal participation during street feasts and other events that active white residents organized to generate *samenleven*. Elderly white residents, who often had extended relations with some Moroccan-background neighbouring families, had re-invented traditions (giving Easter eggs or Christmas presents to neighbouring children, but also the exchange of small talk discussed above) in order to give shape to such neighbouring relations across difference. These long-term relations were often recounted with deep fondness by both Moroccan-background and elderly white participants.

Karima's efforts to always smile 'extra friendly', however, indicate another moral notion that Moroccan-background participants enacted towards their 'old Belgian' neighbours. Participants of Moroccan background were often deeply invested in mending or countering the effects of far-right and racist discourses which, in their eyes, had undone the more intimate form of *samenleven* of their youth in Borgerhout, sowing 'distrust' and 'hate' between white and Moroccan-background residents. At the same time, they, like Karima's mother, also conveyed a persistent self-doubt and shame, especially in relation to Moroccan-background youths ('our boys') running amok (cf. de Koning and Vollebergh 2019). As a result, they often felt a responsibility to try and empathize with their old and lonely 'Belgian' neighbours, even when the latter engaged in explicit racist discourse. The circulation and shared performance of complaints about Borgerhout as 'ghetto' are thus ambiguous in character: genuine as a form of distancing from territorial stigma and (sometimes) genuinely enjoyed, but also a moral gesture to counter racist stereotypes and a kindness to a public familiar face or a lonely old neighbour. Tracing moral economies of neighbourliness thus shows that even when certain moral practices are represented and claimed as fixed ethnic or

cultural traits, they are always ‘unstable or at least fluid realities’ (Fassin 2009: 47), resulting in relations across difference that are deeply intimate, yet assembled of heterogenous moral practices and politically-situated aspirations.

Dina

The neighbours next door are friendly people, and we can always ask each other for help. We used to speak to each other a bit more when the children were younger. Once they invited us over. But the thing is: we don’t sit together, men and women, mixed. And then the food would also not be kosher. But frankly, I have never had the time for such things, I also do not visit my Jewish neighbours at home. I did always bake a cake for the neighbours next door, you know, for your new year. But actually, they’ve never reciprocated. Now I just send them a card. So yes, we do greet them, and when they have something to ask, the husband too, I will always speak with him, ask how they are doing, always polite.

We live pleasantly here, and everything is nearby: the synagogue, the schools for the children, everything we need. But we do really have to watch out, because nowadays the street is very improper. So many of these indecent advertisements! When I was little these advertisements did not exist. Jewish men should not look at women and prevent their eyes from seeing improper things. Now with all these advertisements, they have to pay attention even more. It is difficult. We really watch out for our children, making sure they do not watch television, but now, unfortunately, just by walking on the street you see things that you should not see. Especially in summer, when people are dressed in ways that are so inappropriate. That’s why I prefer that my sons go by bike, because, if they go faster, they also see less.

But that doesn’t mean that Jewish men are impolite! My husband does not look at women, but he does not look at the ground all the time either. Those who have their feet on the ground and have their wits, they know that they can pay attention to what they see but still greet, and be polite, and be normal to people. But within our own community, we do not greet one another on the street, men and women.

Contested Relevance and the Un/Intelligibility of Vernacular Engagements

Finally, juxtaposing mobile monologues provide a tool for examining in detail how vernacular modes of engagement, and the heterogenous interactions that emerge in their overlap, come to be grasped as pertaining to living together as a political concern by different actors. How are particular interactions, sentiments and practices made relevant, when – and when not – and by whom? This also touches on local power dynamics. Some residents are better connected to local political actors and street-level bureaucrats than others. Moreover, not all vernacular modes of engagement and moral underpinnings are equally intelligible from within the discourse of ‘living together’ (Vollebergh 2020).

The specific shape of Dina’s monologue above mimics something above and beyond the research encounter. It is a searching, tentative narrative that seeks to explain and defend a Jewish ‘we’ in response to questions or assumptions that are not her own (‘but the thing is, we don’t sit together’). It reflects the way in which living together as a political concern has charged previously unremarkable interactions in the Jewish

Neighbourhood with new political meaning and significance. As explained at the start of this paper, 'active' non-Jewish residents have started to organize and commit themselves to generating a sociable neighbourhood life, drawing on municipal programmes and subsidies to stimulate living together. Many of these 'active' residents sensed that the neighbourhood was becoming increasingly dominated by 'ultraorthodox' or 'extremist' Jews who, they felt, refused to reciprocate what they deemed to be basic social gestures, like eye contact and greetings.

As Perel and Dina's accounts indicate, pious Jewish participants narrated their relations with non-Jewish neighbours in very different terms. In their descriptions, a particular moral notion of neighbourliness emerged, partly consisting of the value of aloof politeness ('always polite') and not bothering one another, and partly of a fixed set of gendered neighbourly practices (bringing cake for the non-Jewish new year). Pious Jewish participants took great pains, like Dina in the segment, to explain and argue during interviews that 'not-looking' is primarily a religious ethical practice, aimed at cultivating and protecting spiritual purity. Because this practice is context-bound and gendered, it does not in itself preclude good neighbourliness or politeness, they argued.

The non-Jewish narrative made orthodox Jewish practices relevant in new ways, re-signifying them as indicative of a problematic 'unwillingness' of Jews to live together. Non-Jewish residents circulated this narrative, moreover, also towards local politicians and civil servants, demanding governance regulation, as well as to the occasional anthropologists. In contrast, Jewish tentative rearticulations of living together in more modest terms as not bothering one another and polite but distant neighbourliness, as well as *frumme* Jews' resistance to a secularist re-reading of Jewish ethical practice ('that does not mean that Jewish men are impolite') did not circulate explicitly in the neighbourhood or into political spaces, remaining unintelligible.

Conclusion

'Might our encounters with others demand on occasion that we experiment?' ask Pandian and McLean (2017: 13) in their wonderful collection on ethnographic writing. I have argued in this paper that the Antwerp context, where a prolonged, polarized investment in 'living together' as a political problem had spilled over into everyday neighbourhood life, indeed demands experimentation. My encounters with Perel, Elsa, Karima and Dina led me to rethink, explore and write conviviality in the plural. A combination of biographical interviews and 'being/seeing/feeling there' (Spinney 2015: 233) as I moved with participants from interaction to interaction, context to context, offered a methodological window into differing embodied modes of engagements and their intersections. Methodological manoeuvrings gradually morphed into textual experiments. The resulting 'mobile monologues' mimic the flow of sensuous, intersubjective impressions, under-narrated moral practices, and shifting emotional registers and intensities. They offer a poetics that fits the alternative, critical politics with which conviviality studies aim to intervene in alarmistic political discourses about integration and cohesion. Namely, a poetics that conveys residents and their modes of engagement not as coherent entities and delineated attitudes, but as ambivalently and incoherently unfolding and touching in myriad moments of encounter.

As with all forms of writing, mobile monologues are also heuristic and analytic devices: they open-up new questions, bring out new dimensions for analysis. Most of all they allow for a fine-grained empirical examination of the situated performance of local narratives, the circulation and limits of moral economies of neighbourly practices, and the active production and contestation of the relevance and intelligibility of vernacular practices. Read consecutively, the monologues of Elsa, Karima and Dina show conviviality as heterogeneously assembled of a plurality of sensory and moral universes, elements of which are made to move in and out of political relevance and intelligibility. Positioned next to each other, they suggest ‘a “third thing”’ (Kusserow 2017: 220), a thing that is not contained in either mode of engagement nor in what they share: the contested multiplicity of cohabitation.

Notes

1. In 2011, there has been an important shift in Antwerp and Flemish politics, as the Flemish-nationalist party N-VA won the municipal and regional elections. My material does not speak to this shift. Significantly, many of the municipal governance programmes aimed at neighbourliness and cohesion have remained, albeit under new names and financial constructions.
2. All names are pseudonyms.

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