

IMPORTED GOODS

Negotiating ethnicity and belonging within the
multicultural city of Maasmechelen

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For Aziz

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Vrienden, het project dat we afleveren is ééntje van lange adem. In het voorbije jaar hebben we een onderzoek gevoerd naar de

gemeenschap onder jongeren in Maasmechelen, de gemeenschap waar we allemaal deel van uitmaken en onze thuis in vonden. De afgelopen periode is niet gemakkelijk geweest, gekenmerkt door vele ups en downs, tranen en verdriet, maar dit project is het fysieke bewijs dat we er sterker uit zijn gekomen. Het was een leerrijke ervaring om dit project samen met jullie te creëren, vrienden. We zijn er, maar niet voordat we met opgeheven hoofd en uit volle borst samen zingen: *het leven van MM, het enig leven dat ik, en alles wat daarbuiten is, zijn maar fucking fluistertjes. Ik blijf wie ik ben.*

Abstract

What now?, were my exact words on the 28th of July 2018 after hearing the unexpected passing of Aziz Özel, youth worker, rapper, friend. Aziz was the driving force behind the contemporary generation of youngsters in Maasmechelen, born and raised in Belgium as children of migrant workers. His passing plays a central role since he was considered to be the founding father of the youth culture in Maasmechelen and the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar*. I differentiate on the remembrance of Aziz as a person, and Aziz as a metaphor to conceptualize the way he lives on and still structures the lives of *Maasmechelaars* and their resistance. Using Aziz's passing as a starting point, I research the liminal space the youngsters of Maasmechelen occupy within our contemporary Belgian society, between the traditions of their (grand)parents and the land they call home (Belgium). The lives of the youngsters in Maasmechelen are characterized by experiences of exclusion; turning Maasmechelen into a unique case for anthropological research because of its specific geographical and symbolical position within the Belgian field of tension surrounding 'ethnicity'. My primary interest within this thesis is to explore the ways in which the youngsters with an interethnic background deal with feelings of exclusion within the Belgian society: both mentally as through practices.

I go about this by inviting the youngsters in various places: the miners' museum of Eisdén-Tuinwijk, in front of the mine shafts, at the graveyard, etc. to show their bodies in the intimate space where they can connect to the past and the reason their (grand)parents boarded a train towards a new homeland. The miners' museum is the symbolic analogy to the lived experiences of these youngsters: placed in a liminal space between the traditions of their elders and the land they were born in. I unravel the symbolical and experiential aspects of their liminal space and multiple belonging. Multiple belonging in the case of Maasmechelen should not be understood as a longing for a forgotten homeland, but a scream for recognition in their 'new' homeland. The intracorporal relations these youngsters are engaging in with their fellow citizens of Maasmechelen is strongly sensed through the

fragmentation of their lived experiences within the Belgian society.

I tried to grasp their lived experiences by implying Hall's notion of *new ethnicities* in order to understand the way youngsters of Maasmechelen find inclusion within the Belgian society. The new ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar* is not only an imagined community, in the words of Anderson, but expands towards a substantial youth subculture. Basing my arguments on Hebdige's concept of *bricolage* it is possible to analyze different style-elements that make up the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar*, which finds its origin both in the Belgian tradition as in the influences of the different cultural traditions present in Maasmechelen. By researching the youth subculture as a hip-hop structure, it becomes clear that the youngsters re-arrange different elements in order to foreground their 'otherness' within a hegemonic, mostly white public space.

The youth culture becomes a way of resistance against the exclusive character of the Belgian nation-state. Through the creation of *Maasmechelaar*, the youngsters create a platform to contest the fixed, institutionalized categories of 'allochthon/autochthon'. They prove they, despite their ethnic backgrounds, belong to the society they are born in. The title says it all: *imported goods*. It is both a reference to the way their (grand)parents were shipped as commodities to a new homeland, as well as to underline the contemporary meaning in the term *goods* since the youngsters are proving they are in fact as capable and as equal as other Belgians. *Maasmechelaars* negotiate localities, politics, language, culture, and ethnicity through the medium of hip-hop, to create, in words of Chang (2007), "the sounds of the future".

Keywords: multiple belonging, liminality, new ethnicity, bricolage, absence, collective memory, hip-hop, political subjectification, collaborative ethnography, Maasmechelen

Unfolding the project

My thesis is twofold: an audio-visual project and a written reflection. The film is a stand-alone project containing the message of the *Maasmechelaar*. Yet, a reflection in order to further conceptualize the message of the film is never a bad idea. In order to fully make sense of the combination between film and written word, it is crucial to watch the film before reading to reflections. In the first chapter, I focus on the methodological framework, in the following chapters, the message of the *Maasmechelaars* will become clear.

The power of image

Anthropology is often conceptualized as the discipline in which text is the main medium of storytelling. I respectfully disagree, from the beginning, a small group of anthropologists used with different media to conceptualize their story like taking pictures, drawings, film, etc. I am convinced that the medium of film was needed to conceptualize and tell the story of Maasmechelen because it became the way to open up the ethnographic process and give color to the lived experiences of my contributors who are featured in the film. The stories the youngsters wanted to tell are about world-building. In order to conceptualize all the mental and practical processes connected to this act, film became not only a method but also a medium for their public resistance, as their story is visualized for a broader audience (C. Russell 1999). A parallel can be drawn with film as an anthropological margin and the youngsters, in the margins of the Belgian society.

What I realized in the last couple of months, is that filmmaking is not about having a good idea, it is about getting the job done. I do not like the word ‘director’, although it was my task during the course of the project. The world is not waiting to get directed. The French understood it better when they call the director *réalisateur* because it is about searching, about creating, about becoming. I never

went into the field with a list of people that I wanted to appear in front of my camera or concepts that I wanted to be explained. Instead, the film shows life in Maasmechelen, with all its unexpected things. It may not always be filmed in the most professional way, but it gives the film character.

The audiovisual project is a combination of character -and concept-driven storytelling. The contributors who tell their stories are the ones who draw you into the film, offering the viewer everything they need to know. They tell the story because they live it. I explicitly choose not to include a *voice-over narrator*, which is normally the case within ethnographic filmmaking, because I am convinced that those living the story should be the ones telling it. As an anthropologist, I am only providing the medium to make this happen. The audiovisual project is also partly concept-driven because my contributors are telling a story in order to inform the audience about the unique concept of *Maasmechelaars*. Although the film is only zooming in on the aspect of Maasmechelaar, each of my contributor's social reality is constructed of various elements of which the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar* is only a fraction. Another important aspect of the film is the choice of music. The music brings out the magic of cinema and I wanted the music to reflect the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaars*, in order to let the audience experience *fernweh*, the feeling of homesickness to a place they have never been to. The rap collective *La Famiglia* made incredible rap songs about their lifeworlds in Maasmechelen. Their songs provided the perfect sound to complement the lived social realities of *Maasmechelaars*.

The overall film is inspired by the work of Jonas Mekas and Andy Warhol who invented a specific style of filming in which they focused on the micro-structures of the everyday. Following their vision, my focus was on youngsters who constructing an inclusive space around them, transforming micro-structures of the everyday into "forms of cultural production that lay resolutely outside the film industry and all that it represented" (C. Russell 1999, 17). Just as their subjects, visual anthropologists are also found within the margins of their discipline. They are interested in the ones, labelled as the other, challenging dominant culture, because they are able to connect to them from their position in the margins. Critical readers among you will detect a hint of utopia since this project is focused on youngsters and

their subculture that is trying to overcome dichotomies which are inherently part of our everyday life: us versus them, autochthons versus allochthons, ... (C. Russell 1999, 19).

An important remark to make is that *all* visual (anthropological) projects are performative. Although I made it my goal to stay as close to reality as possible, each person seen on screen has given his/her consent beforehand. I asked them to go on with their lives, yet, the image is still framed because the presence of the camera has an influence. The clearest example is the fact that the conversations with my contributors are framed as interviews, because of camera-placement. Although I decided to focus on a snippet out of reality, outside the frame, the social world is happening. MacDougall referred to this as *deictic*: “the act of making a film is a way of pointing out something to oneself and to others, an active shaping of experience” (MacDougall 1998, 29). In sum, the bodies on screen became an instrument to perform and create a lived reality, but it is not reality. By recreating a lived reality, the film should be experienced as authentic without being it. After careful consideration, I believe the best way to describe the film is as *realist didactic*. It is a documentary without the intervention of the director. The false feeling of authenticity is (again) very present. Although the youngsters have agency in telling their story, behind the scenes a lot of choices were made leading up to the final product: interviews were cut into parts that were considered ‘useful’ for the storytelling, often *killing my darlings* along the way. In total, I narrowed 17 hours of film down to 38 minutes. As a filmmaker, I had the power to mold the stories into one I thought needed to be heard. And although each step was negotiated with the group of contributors, I still had the final call.

Apart from the problem of authenticity, my thesis faced a second problem, the one of familiarity. As a fellow *Maasmechelaar* and result of interethnic marriages, the anthropological literature would describe me as an insider. Yet, my experiences and lived realities in Maasmechelen are different than those of my contributors; each of our stories is unique. The familiarity and positionality became the main reasons to imply the framework of collaborative ethnography instead of an auto-ethnography. Through the collaborative framework, the field can represent themselves from beginning to end.

Shared project, shared knowledge¹

I conducted fieldwork in my hometown, which makes me a *full insider* according to Wiederhold (2015) because I am inscribed in the relational networks of my contributors. I politely disagree, I am convinced that no one can ever be a *full insider*, each one experiences his/her hometown differently. For example, I am a white girl coming from a middle-class family with an Italian-Austrian heritage, although no one would ever guess my different heritage when hearing the name ‘Ine Simons’. My positionality is fundamentally different from Nihan Yilmaz, a darker skinned man from an Italian/Turkish workers’ family. Although we are both twenty-six years old and call Maasmechelen home, we experience the space differently. The familiarity had its advantages; the youngsters felt comfortable sharing their stories with me because our friendship goes way back. Especially after the passing of Aziz, I noticed that the fact that I shared their loss, pain, and grief, helped to have deep conversations about Aziz and what he meant to us. On the other hand, I was scared that they leave out important parts when telling their story, just because I know them personally. Through the framework of collaborative ethnography, it was possible to circumvent the struggle surrounding familiarity and positionality.

The collaborative framework is designed by Lassister (2005) as a research method where researchers and contributors take up equal roles at each moment of the process. I decided to apply the collaborative framework for two reasons: first, because of its systematic approach, which is vital when the researcher is personally involved. In the words of Abu-Lughod: “by working with the assumptions of difference in sameness, of a self that participates in multiple identifications, and another that is also partially the self, we might move beyond the impasse of the fixed self/other or

¹ This chapter is loosely based on my ‘Research Seminar’-paper, submitted in January 2019 under the title: “Reclaiming our voices”, part of a group project titled “Anthropology at home”

subject/object divide that's disturbs the new ethnographers (...) the creation of a self through opposition to another is blocked and therefore both the multiplicity of the self and the multiple overlapping and interacting qualities of other cannot be ignored" (Abu-Lughod 1990, 25-26). In order to move past the problem of familiarity, there is a need to find difference in sameness. Because after all, anthropology is all about making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. By involving each contributor in every stage of the research, we reached shared knowledge through the combination of our individual, lived realities. The second reason focusses on the public character of collaborative ethnography. By working collectively, it becomes possible to actively involve the public within the project (Marcus 1999). Only telling a story is not enough, I consider my task as an anthropologist to create a platform for those who live the story, to reclaim their voice and tell their own story. Anthropologists function merely as mediators, building bridges between societies and those who live it (Jaarsma 2005).

Lassister offers a general philosophical motivation to apply the collaborative framework in the field. In order to work collaboratively, I organized different group meetings with my contributors. In the first meeting, we decided to film the project in order to visualize the lived reality. The film introduces the reality of Maasmechelen as well as shows the characteristics of the youngsters which form the base of their exclusion: name, skin tone, different mother tongue, etc. Senem and Ritchie agreed with the film project but were not comfortable to be in front of the camera. As a result, only their hands were filmed, and voices recorded. Apart from the first meeting, I met the contributors in group three more times: a meeting after the passing of Aziz, a meeting to share the data and the last meeting to show the final draft of the film. Although I had the final call, I found it important to have the consent of each of the contributors for the final product. It was a reliever when showing the draft of the film, that everyone was excited, and no one had any doubts or criticism. These meetings constituted perfect feedback moments to involve the public within the project.

The central concepts of this project 'ethnicity' and 'multiple belonging' are broad and abstract terms. In order to make the concepts more feasible for my contributors, I applied the method of *photovoice*

and *memory walks*. Within photovoice, the contributors made photos with a disposable camera and reflected upon them. The reflection resulted in a critical consciousness of the social reality they live in and the power structures at influence (Lambert 2013). The photos which were taken play no active part in the film, they are often seen lying in front of the contributors as a gateway to tell their story.

Memory Walk is a method in order to experience the field through the eyes and experiences of the contributors. They individually mapped out a route and guided me through our hometown. This became a great way of creating B-roll that enhanced their conversations on film. For example, the part of the market vendor screaming became the perfect introduction for the youth slang. Everything we encountered along the way: materials, places, and people brought forward a narrative (Wiederhold 2015). While listening to the different stories while walking, my hometown once so familiar became a little strange. It felt like a new place, as Faier and Rofel state “by focusing on the everyday practices, anthropologists can research dynamic processes of cultural production and transformation and how the cultural is made and remade every day” (Faier en Rofel 2014 , 363-364). The shot of the mine shafts is probably the clearest example to symbolize this quote. The mine shafts are part of each individual route, because they symbolize our past and the present. They are the reason our (grand)parents took the train to a new homeland, yet they also represent our youth culture, it is the place we gather at night to share a drink during summer nights. When shooting the drone images and looking at the shafts from up top, I was able to visualize the different narratives of my contributors, constructing a meta-narrative about the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar* which is visible in the film.

Outline of the chapters

My reflexive, textual part is divided into three extended chapters and a short afterthought. Through the combination of social constructivism and postcolonialism, I research the ontological reality of *Maasmechelaars*. Social constructivism offers the advantage to research the way people work together to create and transform cultural artifacts. The postcolonial perspective is applied to research how ethnicity construction resists the dominant culture. The central focus of the project is on the human consequence of control; the youngsters are trying to open up the fixed, excluding, institutionalized categories such as allochthon/autochthon, inclusion/exclusion, us/them, self/other, ... through the new ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar*.

The first chapter *collective memory, ethnicity and brotherhood* engages broadly in the following questions: how is the ethnicity of Maasmechelen conceptualized? I use Aziz's death as a starting point to focus on how my contributors and Maasmechelen dealt with the loss of a dear friend. This chapter is mostly based around the concepts of remembrance and memorization as a way to deal with the sudden rupture in reality. In the second subchapter, Aziz's pivotal role in the youth subculture becomes clear, moreover, in spite of his passing, his ideology still lives on today. I refer to his influence as 'Aziz as a metaphor', as a constructing element in the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaars*. The other constructing element is their shared past as children of migrant workers. In order to explore the interethnic generation of youngsters, I place them in the miners' museum in the garden city district of Maasmechelen, a flight back to the roots, as a metaphor for the bodily experience of the tension between belonging to their cultural heritage while claiming inclusivity in Belgian society. This liminal space as a result of the multiple belonging is filled by creating an inclusive feeling, through the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar*. I use Hall's concept of *new ethnicities* as an analytical lens to look at the way the youngsters are creating an 'us' while considered to be 'the other' in the dominant culture.

The second chapter focusses on the practical outcome of the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaars*. Through Hebdige's concept of *bricolage* of style-elements, I research the creation of practices

implanted by *Maasmechelaars* in order to express their unique ethnicity as well as negotiate their inclusivity in the Belgian society. The chapter focuses on what materiality and locality mean for *Maasmechelaars*. Each aspect of the youth subculture is analyzed: starting from the places they meet up, their clothes, their graffiti, their unique language and their rap songs. In this subchapter, the metaphor of Aziz is also strongly present, through his absence, which becomes particularly embodied in the rap lyrics. The lyric inquiry shows the many functions of hip-hop: the songs are not only an emotional outburst but also embody the *Maasmechelaars*' way of resistance. The lyric inquiry will function as a step up to focus on the resistance and political subjectivity in the following chapter.

The third chapter *Opening up the barriers* explores the resistance of the youngsters against their exclusion in Belgian society. It highlights the relationship between *Maasmechelaars* and the 'pure Belgians', to use the term of my contributors, in order to explore how the creation of a new ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar* as a subculture disrupts and opens up the fixed, institutionalized categories of 'allochthon/autochthon'² which forms the basis of ethnic exclusion in our contemporary Belgian society.

Before moving further, I want to make a side note; the literature used in the following chapters is to construct an answer to the questions asked. I have no intention of writing a literature review. It may seem as if I am sketching a utopian picture of everyday life in Maasmechelen in this reflection, but I just wanted to portray the local realities which were shown to me. The case of Maasmechelen is unique within the research of ethnicity, multiple belonging, and political anthropology, that being said, Maasmechelen is definitely not the prototype of a perfect society. The case of the *Maasmechelaar* shows a local, creative solution for a contemporary mode of exclusion, but Maasmechelen is also known for its high percentage of poverty,

² The words 'allochthon' and 'autochthon' are not considered official English words, but are an English translation for the Dutch concept of 'allochtoon' and 'autochtoon', which are the institutionalized concepts in Belgium to exclude or include certain groups from society. In order to stay true to the struggles of my contributors and the Belgian context, I will use the terms 'allochthon/autochthon'.

youth unemployment, and crime. These struggles are inherently part of the context of Maasmechelen but not enough to claim their connection to the ethnicity and multiple belonging parts without providing the ethnographic material to back it up. I focus on the ethnicity-theme to highlight the complexity, struggles, and tensions that construct the lived experience of my contributors, but there will always be themes and connected struggles, that will move past (even in a small extent) our anthropological lenses.

Collective memory, ethnicity, and brotherhood

The loss of a friend

Fieldnote entry, 29th of July 2018³:

It's two o'clock in the afternoon on the 29th of July. Although it has been a very hot summer, today the sun shines extra bright. It's a beautiful day, and yet we are all standing in a crowd outside the mosque in Eisden-Tuinwijk. It's not my first time in a mosque, I still remember the first time I saw the white walls, the bows in the architecture and the beautiful mosaic floors, yet today, the aesthetics don't seem to catch my eye. I've never been to a Turkish funeral until now, frankly because I've been blessed with a life where death is a rare phenomenon. Right in front on a massive wooden table, underneath a yellow cloth covered with black flowers, lies Aziz. I've known Aziz my whole life, just as the rest of the youngsters in Maasmechelen. I've known him from playing in the street when we were kids to our late-night talks in the local youth club. Just one month ago, we were dancing together when Belgium beat Japan in the last minute during the Worldcup, and now I am standing at his funeral. I feel like a foreigner in my own city; I don't know the verses the Imam is citing or the words his mother is screaming. Suddenly someone grabs my hand, I look at her fingers strangled in mine, to the black shirt she is wearing, to her dark tinted face, to her dark blue veil which is placed carefully over her head, to the frown on her forehead while she tries to hold back the tears. I don't know her, but we are holding

³ Fieldnote was published in the paper 'Reclaiming our voices' for the course *Research Seminar*, as part of a groups project 'Anthropology at Home', December 2018

hands, we are different, yet we are the same. I may be a foreigner in the ongoing ritual, but we are one in our grief. For the past month, I have been researching the community among youngsters in my hometown but today is the first time I felt it. I hold her hand while looking at the sun and feel the tears and sweat melting together on my face. It's a strange collision as if the sun is trying to hide my tears. I am surprised by the little smile that is starting to take form: it is just such a beautiful day for such a beautiful soul.

On the 28th of July 2018, I received a text from Mirte, one of my contributors: *Aziz died*. No further message, no further explanation. The words slowly sunk in and for a moment, the world stopped turning. How can this be? I lost a dear friend and a key contributor. I placed my fieldwork on hold to give myself time to grieve. After three weeks, I met my contributors to talk about our project. *What happens now?*, I asked the group, after a few seconds of silence, Celeste said: *obviously we continue, this was Aziz's project too*. The group responded with nods of agreements. Although I had numerous talks with Aziz throughout the year, he died unexpectedly before he sat down in front of the camera. His passing took us by surprise. The initial goal of the thesis was to conceptualize the ethnicity and youth subculture of *Maasmechelaar* through a collaborative process. Yet, it turned out to be a reflection on the death of a friend and the influence of this tragic loss upon a unique community of youngsters.

I still remember sitting next to each other in the youth club when I asked Aziz to be part of this project. When I decided to do fieldwork in my hometown and about our community, he was the first person to cross my mind. As the frontman of rap collective *La Famiglia* where youngsters from different (ethnic) backgrounds found their voice and his work as a youth worker, Aziz was, in my eyes, the number one person to talk about the new ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar* and the youth subculture connected to it. I still remember his response when I was explaining the first ideas around the project: *yes, finally! Let's fucking do this*. As it becomes clear in the film, Aziz grew up in a loving Turkish home in Vrijhei, a public housing project in Maasmechelen. The community the youngsters are describing nowadays was nowhere to be found a couple of decades ago. Jan Kohlbacher states in the film: *the communities were more closed than*

is the case nowadays. Aziz experienced firsthand the stereotypes surrounding children with a different ethnic background, living in a poorer area. In the past, their futures were locked in the neighborhoods they grew up in. He took the lead to fight these stereotypes and prove he was capable of achieving everything a Belgian in a middle-class family could achieve. And he succeeded, as Marco states in the film: *Aziz was one of the first with a Turkish background that could work for the municipality.* And for the last decade, Aziz was unstoppable, he became a role model embodying the idea that everyone is capable and has potential, as long as someone was willing to put in the work. Aziz's side work with *La Famiglia* became the ultimate source to spread his vision of equality. As Mirte mentions in the film: *at Aziz's everyone was welcome, not only youngsters with a migration background, even the Belgians, because for Aziz, it just did not matter, we were all the same.* By opening the doors of the youth club for everyone, Aziz was one of the first to create a platform where everyone found a home, despite his or her (ethnic) background.

The ceremony in honor of Aziz was done within the hour. It felt as if we were forced to say our goodbyes to him within this limited temporal space and get on with our lives. The public ceremony says little to nothing about the complex and embodied processes of losing a dear friend. The weeks following the ceremony, each one of us was confronted with the continuation of life without Aziz. I took the time to focus on how *Maasmechelaars* make sense of the sudden rupture in their lives and how they make sense of the new reality without Aziz. It reminded me of Lambek's theory on memory as a moral practice. He conceptualizes memories as a *poiesis*-process where the ones left behind are creating and transforming memories. We do not remember things, events and people for who they were exactly, instead, memory is our view of them, created after we lost them, often modifying as time passes (Green 2008).

Our memories of Aziz can be found in our spatially located assemblages. Memorization comes into existence through materializations (Meyer 2012, 107). Clear examples within the film are the display of photographs, drawings, mural paintings, screensavers on mobile phones, etc. Although the images can be considered static, the displays are dynamic assemblages as symbols to the relationship the youngsters had with Aziz. The dynamic

assemblages also integrate seamlessly within the interior and the personal space as well (Parrot 2010). Within the chosen images, Aziz is portrayed as looking up to the sky or singing into a microphone, because these are the images people remember him by. They represent our memorization of him. Although Aziz as a person was an assemblage of different aspects, in his remembrance, these two aspects are magnificent. The assemblages are also present when looking at online networks. In the digital world, assemblages are more dynamic, more individualized, and a-temporal (Nguyen 2015). Within the film, Celeste mentions Aziz's Facebook-page containing uncountable messages and shared images in the hours and days after his passing. When looking through his Facebook page, message after message, there is a feeling of love along with a feeling of commemorating someone special and situating him in a meshwork of friends and family (Nguyen 2015, 72).

The integration of the images, both offline as online, become part of our everyday interior. It is not helpful to talk about supernatural connections with Aziz, instead, within a less dualistic way, within the film, his passing is conceptualized as a trace; we search for a way to connect with him, even if he is not around physically. As Enrico states: *I see Aziz when I look at him (points at Alessio red.), he was his favorite. I see him when I am in the studio, I see him when I ride my motorcycle, when I look at my phone. Aziz is everywhere. On stage, he is the one we are looking for, we are searching for him, he was the frontman.* The act of searching Aziz in the everyday becomes a spatial and performative act; something that once was present, but which will be incomplete.

*Maasmechelaars and the metaphor of Aziz*⁴

The news of Aziz's passing dropped in as a bombshell in Maasmechelen. We lost a friend, a brother, a father, a beautiful soul. Aziz will live on in the stories we tell, in the memories we will recall and, in our hearts, as we grow older. To borrow the words of my nonna: *it is impossible to lose something you loved*, and Aziz was loved so much.

Yet, I argue, that although the remembrance and memorization of Aziz will stay an important part of my life like that of my contributors, his ideas and ideologies will continue even beyond our group of friends. Aziz, as a metaphor, will structure our everyday lifeworlds in Maasmechelen. In a way, this project could be considered part of his legacy. He was one of the first to snap out of the idea that ethnic communities are supposed to be closed, creating a place where everyone was welcome despite the differences. Aziz, through his ideology of being as equal as a Belgian middle-class kid although of his Turkish and public housing heritage, created a community among the youngsters in Maasmechelen on the basis of equality. He had, and still has, a structural element in our community of *Maasmechelaars*. Within the film, my different contributors tell the audience who Aziz was and how they knew him. These stories are not only ways of letting the audience meet Aziz, but they reveal more about the self-construction of the identity of *Maasmechelaars*. We need(ed) Aziz to form us. In the words of Ali (2012), the self is created through and with the other. The stories featured in the film in which the contributors tell the audience how they relate to Aziz is a way of community formation (Plummer 1995).

Ethnicity is a central concept within anthropology that highlights the notion of 'belonging', 'culture' and 'roots'. In contrast to race, which is assigned to someone, ethnicity is something one

⁴ This chapter is loosely based on my 'Race, Ethnicity and the Postcolonial condition' - paper, submitted in January 2019 under the title: "HTTP 404 Error: ethnicity not found"

identifies with. In taking the example of Rens, he identified as Belgian, yet, was considered Hungarian by others. In order to find his belonging, he created his identity around the notion of ‘*Maasmechelaar*’ because everyone living in Maasmechelen have that something different. Ethnicity beholds a form of agency because it is part of our choices to create our own identity. Within the film, the negotiation of ethnicity within Maasmechelen takes a central role. As Hille states: *I feel Greek, but I am also Belgian. You will always be partly foreign, both here as there.* People are labeled in belonging to either one group or the other. But where do you belong if neither of your nationalities recognizes you but frames you as ‘the other’? Nowadays, more and more people are travelling and settling down in new places. In contrast to popular belief, migrants do not abnegate their traditions and heritage, instead, they reproduce their ethnic heritage in future generations. In the literature, this situation is referred to as *the paradox of globalization*. Instead of the creation of a globalized, homogenous culture, there is hybridization (Romaine 2009). Homi Bhabha refers to the ambivalence of ethnicity; one becomes a hybrid; constructed on the one side out of his ethnic or cultural traditions and, on the other hand, out of influences of their new homeland (De Boeck 2016). Cavit perfectly frames this hybridity when stating *you have yellow and blue which creates green. There is still yellow and blue inside it, but it is green, you know what I mean?*

In order to conceptualize Cavit’s words, I refer to *liminality*, a term coined by Van Gennep, who saw liminality as a rite of passage, a temporal transition in which time functions as a structural element (Van Gennep 1909). By implying the term ‘liminality’ to the case of Maasmechelen, it is a way to conceptualize the struggle for belonging, meaning it is a cultural transition; the youngsters are positioned betwixt and between cultures. This can be linked to Deleuze’s *belonging*, referring to the conscious action of turning away from the historical restrictions in order to be free (Deleuze 1995). It is the move away from an exclusive environment onto an inclusive feeling. As Celeste states *In Maasmechelen people do not ask themselves the question: Am I Belgian or not? Because we are from Maasmechelen, it feels like a separate island where we don’t have to think whether we are Belgian or not.* As Lennert concludes *everyone here is a foreigner, which means that no one is.*

Fieldnote entry, 20th of July 2018:

For the past 18 years, I have been a part of Chiro Akori Eisden, the youth club based in the old garden district of the mine. Although the Chiro is considered throughout Belgium as a youth club with a Christian background, within the former garden district, there is little to nothing that points to this heritage. The Chiro, in my eyes, is the perfect mishmash of the different cultures present in Maasmechelen, who come together each Sunday to play. Each year, from the 21st of July until the 31st of July, the Chiro moves the group to the Belgian Ardennes to have ten days filled with joy, laughter, games, and brotherhood. The whole camp eats halal, so the ones of Muslim faith do not feel left out and the pastor of Eisden Tuinwijk visits the camp each year on the 27th of July to have a ceremony of friendship, without confessing to the Catholic faith. Although I quit with my Chiro membership last year, the former leaders were invited back the day before the kids arrive in Vielsalm. When sharing a drink at the bonfire, Nadir stands up: "I wanna give a toast", he smiles, "I may be a little tipsy, but I just love you guys. We are all so different, so fucked up, so unique and yet we have this amazing group of friends. I just love you and although we are moving on with our lives, quitting the Chiro and growing up, we will see each other on our way to work, on the weekends, I don't know. Our group of misfits will last through time, cheers". Everyone raises their glasses and screams: "TO THE MISFITS!" while downing their drink.

When thinking back to this moment, I cannot think of a better moment and speech to symbolize Maasmechelen. The bonfire is included in the film, the speech, unfortunately, was not recorded, mostly because we were caught off guard by the sudden spread of love by Nadir. His choice of words, to refer to our group as misfits, those who are excluded within the Belgian society but still found each other within their exclusion, is the perfect framing Anderson's concept of *imagined communities* (Anderson 1983). Through the notion of *Maasmechelaars*, the youngsters created an imagined community in order to have an inclusive feeling within an excluding society. The multiple belonging is found within the concepts of hybridity (Bhabha) and identification (Hall). Both of them challenge the idea of a territorialized fixed notion of ethnicity, instead, they focus on multiple

belonging while underscoring the notion of fluidity.

As stated above, the sense of ‘belonging’ à la Deleuze, refers to moving past historical constraints. As has become clear within the testimony of Jan Kohlbacher in the film, the first generations of migrant workers arriving in Maasmechelen stayed within their ethnic group, resulting in closed communities living side by side for many years. Only in recent years, with mixed marriages resulting in an interethnic generation of youngsters, the closed ethnic groups opened up, creating an umbrella community of *Maasmechelaars*. As Gianmarco states: *there will always be the element of difference, I see it as well with my Moroccan and Turkish friends, but at the same time, we are all children of migrants and each of our grandfathers came to Belgian to work in the mine. Our story is the same despite our different ethnic heritage, the story of being children of migrants is the one that connects us.*

To fully conceptualizes the community of *Maasmechelaars*, I use Hall’s notion of *new ethnicity* to understand the creation of a new ethnicity as a way to find a sense of belonging. It is “a consequence of a set of quite specific political and cultural practices which regulated, governed and ‘normalized’ the representational and discursive spaces” of the Belgian society (Hall 1988, 164). From the margins, the *Maasmechelaars* are reclaiming the power to challenge and transform the public discourse of representation and exclusion (Hall 1988). As Joyce and Nalin state *I don’t feel the same in Bree or Tongeren as we feel in Maasmechelen. We are no longer the outcast; we are just from Maasmechelen; it feels like an identity.* Within the politics of representation, the youngsters in Maasmechelen are excluded from the Belgian society, in order to fight this exclusion, they culturally construct their own sense of Belgiumness within the term *Maasmechelaar* where it becomes possible to be Belgian while coming from a different ethnic heritage (Hall 1988). Marco states: *people often think I am Moroccan, but I am Maasmechelaar.* The youngsters are beginning to reconceptualize a new notion of ethnicity which is focused on representation and diversity, to resist the hegemonic conception of Belgiumness, which is part of institutionalized political discourse. In the words of Hall, ethnicity moved from the public discourse on racism, to the margins where they reclaim their voices (Hall 1988).

To research the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaars*, I am following both the constructivist as the instrumentalist approach. Constructivists understand ethnicity as something created and socially constructed. By implying Halbwach's *memoire collective*, the youngsters reconstruct the past with contemporary ideas. In other words, events and ideologies from the past give answer to contemporary tensions (Wang 2018 , 13). The *Maasmechelaar* is constructed by both, being children of migrants relating to the mining past as well the metaphor of Aziz, containing his ideology of equality. When looking at our shared heritage of the mining past, Nihan is the perfect example within the film stating: *my father is Turkish, but my mother is Italian. I am part of three life worlds*. Hille states *we all find ourselves in the other because all of us have that something different*. Beyers refers to this feeling as 'general acceptance', as interethnic generations grow up with each other's, ethnic differences and communities are not present (Beyers 2004, 422). Aziz's ideas and ideologies living on in the form of Aziz as a metaphor have an influence on the *Maasmechelaars*. As Wang states, when a group encounter struggles or tensions in the past, such as tragic losses, group identity is created. The past becomes the glue to form a group (Wang 2018). At the ceremony, it became clear that the community Aziz created, through his ideology of equality, was stronger than ever. Although we were once again confronted with the small differences between the different ethnic heritages, everyone who was present, was there to mourn the death of their friend. As Nalin states in the film, *we were all there and we all knew each other, because of him. We were all there for him. It really was la Famiglia (one family red.)*. In order to fully understand the influence of the metaphor of Aziz onto the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar*, I am applying Galtung's CMT complex (1996) to understand the construction of a group's identity and the natural construction of an ethnic group as *Maasmechelaar*. Within the conversations before his death, Aziz was often mentioned, by contributors, as one of the main influences of the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaars*. After his passing, the contributors started reflecting more upon the central role Aziz played in the conceptualization and formation of the ethnicity and the ideologies behind it. Hille states in the film *it is only after his passing that we noticed how much Aziz did for the youth, both with his work and his music, to prove that we are all one*. Hille's testimony, along with the

other numerous examples in the film, proves the influence of mental representations of collective losses, shape the ethnicity and identity of *Maasmechelaars*. Even after his passing, Aziz still has a profound structural influence in the creation of the *Maasmechelaar*.

In sum, *Maasmechelaars* prove that ethnicity is locally grounded and forms a crucial factor in gaining an understanding of who we are. As their new ethnicity proves, it is both an outcome of cultural processes as well as the influence of one actor, as the carrier of the ideology behind the formation of the *Maasmechelaars*. As Gupta and Ferguson state, through the creation of *Maasmechelaars*, the youngsters constructed a platform as a way to challenge the Belgian state with its excluding mechanisms, by re-imagining and reclaiming their place within our contemporary world (Gupta en Ferguson 1992, 17).

About language, clothes, graffiti, rap and the people who create them

As stated in the previous chapter, in order to research the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaars*, I used two approaches: the constructivist and the instrumental one. They are both important when talking about our past and related collective memories within the shaping of the group identity of *Maasmechelaars*. The constructivist paradigm is already mentioned, as a tool to incorporate the struggles of hybridity, liminality and multiple belonging by creating a place where they felt included. Within this chapter, I will focus on the instrumentalist paradigm to focus both on the motivational force behind the mobilization of *Maasmechelaars* as well as the diverse practices and instruments that make up the substantial youth subculture, present in Maasmechelen (Wang 2018 , 14).

A youth subculture is a group expression of their ethnicity and identity through the creation of distinct styles (Clarke , Hall , et al. 1975). In the words of Marx: “as individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce” (Marx 1970, 42). The ethnicity of *Maasmechelaars* comes into being through the places where they meet, the clothes they design, the walls they paint, the language they speak and the rap songs they sing. In order to conceptualize the youth subculture, I am applying Hebdige’s concept of *bricolage* (1979). Through the creation of new assemblages, constructed with different elements of the dominant culture, the youngsters develop a distinctive, new style in order to challenge the hegemonic, dominant culture. They are inspired by the culture of their (grand)parents, the Belgian culture, popular culture with North-American influences, etc. An important side note is that subculture cannot exist without the dominant culture it tries to criticize. As Hebdige argues, they are representations of representations (Hebdige 1999). In other words, the tension over ‘producing culture’ by the dominant- and subculture, is not an opposition, instead, they need to

be placed within a historical and social space, in order to research their mutual influence (Clarke , Hall , et al. 1975, 11). In conclusion, youth subcultures do not own a world on their own, but they create a distinctive, coherent ethnicity and structure (Clarke , Hall , et al. 1975, 14)

In Maasmechelen, the youth subculture can be identified as a hip-hop structure, which finds its expression in music, a specific way of dressing, speaking, attitude and a way of life (Sabeta (Mau Mau) 2014). Hip-hop came up in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States as a subculture with a specific ideology to fight for Black nationalism and Afrocentrism (Swedenburg 2002). They brought forward a new race-consciousness in order to challenge the primarily white public space (Alim 2006) (Osumare 2007). Following in the footsteps of Alim, Lee and Carris (2010), it is necessary to focus on how subordinate racial cultures express and perform their ethnicities and identities, through the medium of hip-hop. In their art, they construct new meanings and conceptualizations of blackness and whiteness, outsiders and insiders (Alim , Lee en Carris 2010 , 125). Even though hip-hop gained a global image, its specific structure is still focused on localities and identity construction, through the expression of the artists' lived experiences (Seilstad 2015).

The hip hop ideology is also found in the youth subculture of *Maasmechelaars*, where they apply the many practices of hip hop in order to fight their otherness in Belgian society. They re-learned to appreciate their otherness by creating an inclusive feeling among their peers. It suddenly became cool to use your foreign name, to use the words of your mother tongue in combination with the Dutch language, to rap about the struggles one is facing, etc. The *Maasmechelaars* use hip-hop to channel their positivity and world-building (Sabeta (Mau Mau) 2014). Following the example of Wise and Velayutham, by applying the lens of multiculturalism, it becomes possible to look at “the everyday practice of diversity in specific situations and spaces of encounter” and “explore how social actors experience and negotiate cultural difference on the ground and how their social relations and identities are shaped and re-shaped in the process” (Wise en Velayutham 2009 , 3). Hip hop gives support to youngsters with hybrid identities to express their multiple belonging and be themselves (Heidegger 1967). In the following subchapters I will touch upon the

different style elements which are mentioned in the film in order to conceptualize the youth subculture of *Maasmechelaars*, they can each be seen as specific responses to the dominant culture, each with their own meaning structure.

Places and faces

Public space is theoretically constructed out of topography (space as it is) and socio-cultural communication (the metaphorical sense in order to describe the public discourse). There is no such thing as an empty, public site but it is constructed by multiple historical meanings. Through time, a site can gain a new meaning by the introduction of new elements in cohesion with the previous elements (Capaitiene 2013 , 169). The spaces present in Maasmechelen remains of the past, are made meaningful in order to support the narrative of *Maasmechelaar* and supporting its identity. The best example, also present in the film, are the mines shafts. They both represent our shared heritage as well as one of the most prominent hangout spots for the youth in Maasmechelen. People gather up at night to socialize and have a drink at the bottom of the shafts. They are the embodiment of our present and past.

The public space of Maasmechelen did not only change for social, political or demographic reasons, but they symbolize the fight against exclusion (Capaitiene 2013 , 166). The most important breeding areas of the youth subculture in Maasmechelen are leisure and recreational spaces which came into existence through the ideology of equality. As often shown in the B-roll of the film, the youngsters are often situated within shisha bars, at the youth club ‘t Alibi where Aziz worked, local basketball courts, etc. Each of these places offers a negotiable space which is characterized by togetherness and lack of discipline. By applying Fassin’s moral anthropology; through space design, we gain an understanding of the other, which leads to the construction of a ‘we’-feeling and a togetherness (Fassin 2012). Each of these spaces offers the youngsters a sacred haven where they have the room to be themselves and work together with

peers to reach a goal. The goal is often not important: winning a basketball game, winning a board game, offering consultancy to someone's problem at home, ... yet, with each act and goal, the feeling of togetherness flows. Within these intersubjective sites, the youngsters create an inclusive space where their hybridity is performed and negotiated, away from the expected assimilation by the Belgian society (Betz 2014).

Dress to impress

Dress and appearances are also under the influence of the *Maasmechelaars*. Most of them even refer to the clothes as a style, which can be distinguished from others outside of Maasmechelen. Najoua's testimony about the fact that youngsters are wearing flip flops with socks as a cultural appropriation of Morocco, is being confirmed by Nalin and Joyce as a conscious choice in Maasmechelen, attempting to initiate a new style (Jefferson 1975). Clothing is a symbolic way of expressing and negotiating their social reality. To take the example of wearing socks in flip flops, by giving cultural meaning to their situation, the understanding of wearing this fashion turns rational (Jefferson 1975 , 86). Commodities become important cultural elements, each carrying a meaning given by the dominant culture, but are being re-arranged in order to construct a youth subculture (Clarke , Hall , et al. 1975, 55). The youngsters create new meanings through the borrowed elements, creating a new distinctive style. Nihan's clothing line tries to express the struggle of *Maasmechelaars* by using quotes of famous American musicians: one t-shirt reads *we have heart*, referring to Tupac, one reads *I do it my way*, referring to Sinatra's song. Although both Sinatra and Tupac have no direct connection to Maasmechelen or wrote their songs for *Maasmechelaars* in particular, their lyrics are printed on t-shirts because they are part of the unity created among group's relations, events, and experiences. As Nihan states *we are all children of migrants, who started a new life in an unknown land with a backlog. With my clothing line, I am proving that we are all capable, we have*

talents, we are worthy. By using international slang, Nihan is placing the struggles of Maasmechelen on the map, creating a public identity.

Tagging Maasmechelen

The graffiti culture became a significant part of the youth culture in Maasmechelen, as Cavit states: *it's a part of our identity, we were proud where ever we went, we always tagged Maasmechelen.* Within the film, the artworks of Cavit are shown. The first one consists of an image of three youngsters wearing hats that resemble miners' helmets with a caption that reads: *mine history.* Pun intended. The rest of his works features the faces of the youngsters in Maasmechelen as part of the identity construction. The graffiti turns out to be a great way of expressing one's ethnicity, identity and youth subculture, but society excludes the youngsters from the street, denying them the right to perform nor construct an identity nor to be present in public life (Németh 2011). When graffiti started to appear in the early 2000s, youth clubs in Maasmechelen decided to protect the youngsters, offering graffiti workshops and locations to spray legally. It goes back to the fundamental tension between otherness and public space (Nolan 2010). Within a symbolic perspective, one could say that the youngsters who create graffiti are excluded from mainstream society, living in the margins, just as the *Maasmechelaar* is living in the margins of the Belgian society. By tagging 'Maasmechelen' in public space, the youngsters are claiming the public space by expressing their ethnicity, in the same way as they are fighting their exclusion. They are resisting the Belgian conceptualizations of 'us/them' which also leads to conceptualizations on how spaces should be used. There is no uniform set of rules across society regarding the use of space, however, there is one, dominant position who determines who and what behavior is acceptable and who/which is not (Clarke 1975 , 176). Within this argument, the aspect of graffiti within the youth culture of Maasmechelen takes up the meaning that public spaces are not uniformly produced and *Maasmechelaars* offer an alternative use of

public space in order to challenge the hegemonic character of the Belgian state.

Our language, our identity

The *citétaal* is the best example of the *bricolage* process. The language was created in the former garden district, who uses a Dutch basis filled with words of the different foreign languages present in Maasmechelen. The language is the perfect symbolization of the mishmash of cultures present in Maasmechelen. Within the film, a market vendor screams *nectarines voor 1 euro, 1 euro, gel! Gel! Gel!* which loosely translates to *nectarines for 1 euro, 1 euro, come! Come! Come!* The Turkish part is seamlessly connecting with the Dutch beginning. Later, the vendor greets a customer with *amigo, As-Salaam-Alaykum*, in which he connects the Spanish word of friend with the Arabic greeting ‘peace be upon you’. The words and sentences became generally used, without looking to the correlation between the words and the heritage of the conversation partner. Within Maasmechelen, it is an everyday situation where someone with a Slovenian background is talking to someone from a Greek background while using the Spanish word ‘amigo’ for friend and Turkish word ‘tamam’ for okay.

By applying Alim’s concept of *global illiteracies*, it becomes possible to focus on the hybrid, transcultural linguistics and practices of the hip hop youth in the context of Maasmechelen (Alim 2011). In the film, Najoua states *I don’t understand why it is so difficult for people to understand, just because we don’t use prepositions. We’ll see us, I’ll hear you, ... the meaning is pretty clear, why pretend that you (Belgian society, red.) don’t understand it.* The *cité*language is deviant from the public discourse, often conceptualized as ‘illiterate’. In Maasmechelen, they move past the institutionalized norms, by placing creativity on the foreground. The national language of the Belgian state is limited, while the *cité*language is limitless (Alim 2011). Their made-up language is not only a showcase for the linguistic skills of *Maasmechelaars* but can be considered as a

counter-language to critique the dominant discourse. Language cannot be conceptualized as a sovereign system but needs to be researched as an effect of the social context and lived experiences of the speakers. It is important to focus on these variables in order to gain an understanding of the variations and changes (Kohlbacher 1997). Within the case of Maasmechelen we can see that through the collective memory and the attached notion of equality, there are collective norms and mutual influences present which create a personal network around the speaker.

Hip-hop constantly invents neologism as a way to describe their everchanging, fluid social realities they live in (Pennycook 2003). The language symbolically expresses the new ethnicity of *Maasmechelaars* by combining the languages of the migrants with the Belgian national language. They are consciously creating a language which embodies their lived experiences of exclusions and places the diversity in their lifeworld central, instead of merely reflecting upon it (Sarkar 2009). As a way, they are building their life-worlds, linguistically, by conceptualizing their social realities in terms which are only meaningful within the group *Maasmechelaars*.

Agency, Hip Hop and the Maasmechelaars’ imagination

The main goal of this textual reflection is to further conceptualize the ethnicity creation as part of identity construction in order to find inclusivity for their multiple belonging. Hip-hop is often conceptualized as creative world-building where youngsters create a world of freedom where they can be whoever they want to be by re-imagining identities (Love 2017 , 541). Hip hop’s imaginative and performative space offers room where youngsters take the lead to challenge the hegemonic and normative ideas of exclusion. Hip hop, and, in particular, rap music has pioneered in the resistance of subordinate groups. Rap music in particular has the ability to motivate those who are excluded in a primarily white society and give them the

space to ventilate these tensions (Clay 2003).

In the case of Maasmechelen, the studio Aziz founded, attached to the youth club 't Alibi, became the breeding ground for young talent to 'spit some lines'. Aziz took the lead and created *la Famiglia* (the family) with his partner in crime, Enrico. For them, performing and practicing hip-hop was an exciting way to negotiate their cultural background, which is found in their songs about racial prejudiced and the formation of bonds over ethnic boundaries (Morgan en Warren 2011). In the following years, more youngsters joined the group, resulting in the creation of a rap collective existing out of youngsters from different ethnic backgrounds who work together to perform their art. They were and still are the perfect metaphor for the generation of *Maasmechelaars* we are discussing. By voicing their struggles against the dominant order, their songs create feelings of togetherness, often mentioned in the film. Hip-hop entails a paradox, it is a way for self-expression and self-affiliation, while, at the same time creating solidarity, togetherness, and brotherhood (Stavrias 2005). The work of *La Famiglia* proves how hip-hop is performed to create a collective identification and a collective belonging to a local community. In a multicultural city, like Maasmechelen, hip hop plays a central role in shaping their new ethnicity through their common language (Betz 2014).

Francesco's answer to my question: how would you describe the hip hop scene in Maasmechelen was *small, local, not reaching further than Maasmechelen, because the lyrics are about Maasmechelen*. His testimony proves that young subculturalists are shaping their own sense of hip hop through the notion of agency in order to find a solution to inequality (Demant 2011 , 511). Within the songs, the life of the *Maasmechelaar* is on the foreground. As Gianmarco states: *within the song 'Ik blijf wie ik ben' or 'het leven van MM' (I stay who I am, the life of MM) the Maasmechelaar is central. Wherever I go, that's the song I play. Our background is represented. The music has become the expression of the identity of Maasmechelaars, part of a world characterized by social and racial divisions (Chambers 1975). This becomes clear in the song zie je mij (do you see me red.) where Alessio raps life wanted to test me, mother. I am different than the others who stand beside me. Within the music, his experiences of the present, relating to the past, can be found while*

he reflects on the division between ‘us/them’. It revolves around the experience of the *Maasmechelaar* and the continuing subordination within the dominant ideology of the nation-state. The rappers of the collective *La Famiglia* are creating their own voice and own style by interacting with different languages and communicative elements to express themselves (Alim 2006).

The songs are present throughout the film because they tell the story about Maasmechelen and the attached ethnicity of *Maasmechelaars*. I want to focus on each of the songs used, to give depth to the lyric inquiry and choice of words, as a way to reflect on the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar* as well as to gain an understanding of the ways in which these youngsters cope with the exclusions and struggles (Gitonga en Delport 2015). The first song featured is *Dankbaar* (grateful red.) by Ché where he focusses on the loss of Aziz and how he is thankful for everything in his life. Within the song, the quickness and unpreparedness of the passing of Aziz are sensed. As he raps, *I’m often too busy with living my life, that I often forget what I truly mean within this life. I want to be able to talk to those who passed away and ask for forgiveness for the mistakes I made.* The feelings Ché is describing are recognizable for all those who loved a dear one. The pain of missing someone who passed on and the feelings of regret are universal. As Enrico states in the film: *My heart is beating like crazy, I cannot talk too much about him (Aziz red.). it drives me crazy.* Enrico is referring to the experience of phantom pains in the form of missing his deceased friend. By taking Enrico’s words to heart, it becomes clear through the song that Aziz’s absence still has an effect on the everyday lives in Maasmechelen. In the words of Bille, Hastrup and Sorensen (2010, 4): “what may be materially absent still influences people’s experience of the material world”. Absence has an agency, it does things, it is performative and something we engage with. This becomes clear in the second part of the Ché’s lyrics where he raps *thank you for the love you gave us, thank you for the effort that you made. I am grateful, until I lie in my grave, for everything that I have ever learned.* The fact that Ché raps in the second person as if he is having a conversation with Aziz to thank him for the time they spent together, proves that friendship does not end where life ends.

The next song following the section about the uniqueness of the society of Maasmechelen is Enrico rap from the song *Zie je mij* (do you see me red.). I choose this part because it encompasses the struggles of the *Maasmechelaar* perfectly. In the first part, Enrico raps *you don't have to see me; you will hear about me. From the underground, I move straight up. I don't rap very often anymore, but when I do, I come to kill*. Especially in the first sentence, he refers to the exclusion coming from the dominant, hegemonic Belgian culture who does not see the youngsters with a different background as Belgian. As Enrico states, even if the Belgian state ignores us, we are reclaiming our voices. The following part: *I push the old gang from the Vrijhei (public housing red.) to the front*. Enrico shamelessly focusses on his background which is still part of his life. Within this sentence, you find the metaphor of Aziz, what once was considered a degrading aspect of our lives (race and poverty) is now pushed to the foreground as a way to embrace our heritage. The last verse speaks for itself: *I come from the place where you don't want to come from, but now I am doing everything I dreamed of*.

The following song I used is *Ik blijf wie ik ben (het leven van MM)* or I stay who I am (life of MM). As Gianmarco states: *this has become the anthem of the youngsters of Maasmechelen. Each one of us can sing it back to front*. This was one of the first songs *La Famiglia* made public, turning it into an online phenomenon overnight. *Life of MM (Maasmechelen, red.) is the only life I know. Everything else, outside of us, are just fucking whispers. I stay true to who I am*. The song represents everything my contributors and I have been talking about. The case of Maasmechelen and *Maasmechelaars* is unique. They refer to the exclusions and racial and social division from the outside, hegemonic world, but refer to them as whispers, something that is told about us but is not important enough to be said out loud because eventually, we stay true to who we are, hybrids, and we are proud of it. As Celeste states, *this song, together with La Famiglia created a great sense of togetherness among youngsters. This is who we are*.

Bordel is the next used song, which is also the most recent one. It was published on December 31st, 2018, part of Alessio's debut solo album. The song was written as an entertainment song as he sings: *é facima bordel. I come with my entourage and it may be the booze,*

but we will destroy everything. I ask everyone to move aside because I am here with my entourage, we will destroy everything. Yet, after everything that has happened in the last year, the song has been interpreted in different ways. I, therefore, decided to put the song under images of La Famiglia's performance during *Zwart Goud* (Black Gold – another name for coal red.), a small festival organized in the summer in Maasmechelen. Alessio sings about him going out with his group of friends and bring the fire, which was exactly the thing La Famiglia did. The song became the symbolic representation of what the group stood for: fun, friendship and voicing their struggles. The song is also the perfect example of the *cit * language and the bricolage process of seamlessly and effortlessly combining multiple languages: *Ik ben hier met mijn entourage and het kan liggen aan de drank vandaag maar   facima bordel.* The beginning of the sentence is Dutch, with the French-inspired word 'entourage', leading to the end of the sentence which starts in Italian but ends again in French with 'bordel', means, literally translated 'mess' but is used in the *cite* language as 'a break down' or 'a fight'. The lyrics and tone of the song symbolize the youth subculture in Maasmechelen perfectly.

The following extract played in the film is from the song *waar ben jij* (where are you, red.) of La Famiglia. The song was originally written as a break-up song but gained a deeper meaning when we lost Aziz. Within the film, the bridge of the song is featured which goes *a do stai? Te pense ancora ogni giorno amore mio dimmi che fai. Ik heb alles wat ik wil in mijn leven, mijn lieve schat, ma tu che ci stai* (Where are you? I still think about you every day, my love, tell me what you are doing. My life is filled with everything that I need, but love, you are over there) Leading up to the chorus: *Ik heb alles wat ik wil in mijn leven, mijn lieve schat, maar waar ben jij? Ik moet je even zien, al is het even, mijn lieve schat, maar waar ben jij?* (My life is filled with everything that I need, but love, where are you. I just need to see you, if only for a moment, my love, where are you?). Within the song, Alessio is searching for his loved one, who is not there. In the moments before the song is played in the film, the youngsters are telling the influence of Aziz within the hip hop scene of Maasmechelen, as Rens states *why do they take someone who was telling our story through the art of music?*, a statement which refers to the concept of Aziz as a metaphor. Part of his legacy is resting with his closest friends, who are

eager and motivated to keep the studio open and spread Aziz's message in the future through music. Although Aziz is no longer physically with us, his absence is still present. As Enrico states *you still search for him (Aziz, red.) on stage, he was the frontman*. The active searching for his friend, is also present within the sentiment of the song where Alessio asks 'where are you?'. Within the film, Ché asks the audience for a minute of silence for his friend. Throughout the performance, Aziz absence was felt, but in that minute, he was present among us, as Alessio says on stage: *Aziz, I see you*. In the words of Porteous (1987) and Kong (2012) the stage can be seen as a *deathscape*. Deathscapes are multifaceted collections of places, things, and materials which are combined to construct sites of memory (Cloke en Pawson 2008). The studio can also be conceptualized as a deathscape, with all the pictures, wall paintings, and remembrances of Aziz, which have become part of the interior. Each of them is an example of the individual, local, informal remembrances to express their friendship. They also bring forward an active sense of presencing absence (Maddrell 2013, 510). Aziz's absence is the next stage of the present, there is no timeline, it is conceptualized as a break of the presence (Derrida 2003). Remembering and memorization form the foundation of a lifelong friendship. As Cavit states *Aziz is present, he is in here and in here (pointing at head and heart). Through the stories we tell, people who never met him can meet him. That is powerful*.

The last extracts that are featured in the film, are a reference to the exclusion the youngsters face in the Belgian society. Alessio's *life wanted to test me mama, but I feel it calls me. I am different than the others who stand next to me*, as well as the song of Black and White Maasmechelen who scream for recognition when rapping *let it be, leave us to be, let us exist*. The songs portray the madness and tired feelings of the youngsters when referring to their exclusions. As the testimonies of Rens, Najoua, Joyce and Nalin state: *It is tiring to always explain my nationality. What does it even matter? I was born in Belgium, so I am a Belgian*. These songs voice the protest and resistance within the youth subculture of Maasmechelen. Hip-hop becomes the medium through which youngsters are able to occupy space within society to counter the hegemonic, racial discourses of the Belgian state. These youngsters are building bridges between those living in the margins and those who are included in society, to expand

the concept of space and place in order to find exclusion. By focusing on ethnicity and racialization, hip-hop functions as a way to let youngsters create new conceptualizations of the self and their ethnic identity and gain an understanding of who they are and what it means to be a racialized subject in our contemporary society. In the words of Khabeer “Hip hop operates epistemologically to ‘reorganize conceptions’ of the self and the world in ways that ‘radically challenge sanctioned forms of knowledge’” (Khabeer 2018 , 144). By reclaiming and reconstructing space, these youngsters are taking a stance against racialized, institutionalized norms.

In the words of Black and White Maasmechelen: *bruin, rood, wit of zwart. Ieder ras heeft zijn stijl apart. Van die culturen kunnen we nog iets leren, dat is voor ons pas samenleven* (brown, red, white or black, every race has a different style. We can learn a lot from all the different cultures, that is our definition of ‘living together’). The local, small hip-hop community in Maasmechelen is drenched with agency and resistance, which creates a strong sense of subcultural identity. They create a space for resistance and identity formation.

Opening up the barriers

Maasmechelaars versus the Belgian identity

The struggle of the youngsters in Maasmechelen is best voiced by Najoua, when she states that is important to which society you belong. When asking her to which society she belongs, when she has two cultures, she responds: *neither of them wants us*. Although Najoua identifies as a Moroccan Belgian, she is accepted in neither of her countries as one of them. As Celeste states: *I don't feel Belgian, but if I am in Italy, I am not a true Italian either*. Her feeling is a part of a wider contemporary claim in our globalized, diverse world, in which racial differences take the lead. The superdiversity creates majority and minority movements, conceptualized in the term autochthons and allochthons. Geschiere and Ceuppens are conceptualizing autochthons as a group of people who see themselves belonging to one nation-state and the connected traditions, while, in reality, they are creating particularities (Geschiere en Ceuppens 2005). Although these supergroups are institutionalized, there are possible ways to demolish them, but stays a challenge.

The arguments: who is autochthon who is not, have changed over the years. They used to be based on racial theories. Nowadays, racism moved towards an imperialistic ideology of culturalism in which the 'clash of civilizations' is the most popular argument (Harari 2014, 326). Right-wing populist persona's like Marine Le Pen, Dries Van Langenhove, Geert Wilders and Tom Van Grieken's arguments will not refer to 'blood and soil', instead they will argue to protect our Western norms and values in Europe since migrants cannot 'adjust' to 'our Western values'. Their ideology is based on the idea of a nation-state as a natural, eternal entity, which is, in reality, an imagination, an intersubjective reality (Harari 2014, 390). Nowadays, the culturalist arguments have become part of hegemonic discourse, present in our everyday lives. As part of the dominant discourse, it becomes harder each day to disprove the culturalist arguments. The *Maasmechelaar*

may offer argumentation to problematize the dominant case: the liminal space these youngsters are experiencing because of their ethnic difference although they were born and raised in Belgium, lies at the center of the culturalist argument. In the words of Ceuppens “since 1998, the Flemish administration officially recognizes allochthons as individuals who are legal residents in Belgium, who have at least one parent who was born outside the country and who are discriminated against on the basis of their ethnic descent and/or weak socioeconomic status” (Ceuppens 2011, 162). The term allochthon is seen as an offensive, culturalist way of excluding people on the basis of their ethnic descent. In Maasmechelen the children of migrants fight the criteria of the fixed categories of ‘allochthon/autochthon’ together.

*Reclaiming our voices*⁵

If I had to choose one quote out of the whole film to summarize the struggle of the youngsters in Maasmechelen, it would be Ritchie’s, almost at the end of the film. He reacted to the death of Aziz and the thousand reactions which were posted on Facebook after he died by stating: *this is the proof that someone with a different origin can be loved in Belgium*. This statement is not only heartbreaking but highlights the struggle *Maasmechelaars* are dealing with.

Youth gained a global image of change, from the 1950s onwards, since they try to demolish society’s normative discourse. Their resistance is based on their shared past and collective memory, which enables political action (Jasiewicz 2015). Through the creation of a new ethnicity and youth subculture, the *Maasmechelaar* embodied the ideology of equality to challenge their exclusion. Hebdige argues that subcultures uphold “a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions

⁵ This chapter is loosely based on my ‘Race, Ethnicity and the Postcolonial condition’-paper, submitted in January 2019 under the title: “HTTP 404 Error: ethnicity not found”

and second-class lives” (Hebdige 1999, 132). By applying Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, it is possible to see youth subcultures as a symptom of contemporary times where displaced people are proving that they deserve a place.

As stated before, I used Van Gennep’s liminality (1909) in order to describe the position of the youngsters of Maasmechelen with a multiple belonging in our contemporary Belgian society. They were situated betwixt and between cultures, with their social position framed by culture as a structural element. The film is about youngsters turning their social position and using their hybridity as a strength to challenge the fixed categories, institutionalized by the state. Their struggle is linked to racial and class politics, which finds its expression in hip-hop practices (Alim 2011). The youth subculture shows, on the one hand, challenges the public, institutionalized discourse, while on the other hand, creatively express their lived experiences. Their ethnicity and subculture of *Maasmechelaars* can be referred to as *liminoid*, a term coined by Turner, to describe the social space -and connections as a result from the struggles in liminal space. Turner applied the term liminoid in order to construct a community logic within the margins, representing radical critiques to the central structures and proposing utopian alternative models (Turner 1977). As *Maasmechelaars*, they liminoid space and relations by proving that inclusiveness and togetherness over ethnic boundaries are possible. It can be considered as a peaceful form of resistance against the exclusive character of the state. Important to note is that the Gramscian terms ‘conjuncture’ and ‘specificity’ are often linked to youth subculture to highlight that they come and go; they give “a particular response to a particular set of circumstances” (Hebdige 1979, 84). The hip-hop based community of *Maasmechelaars* can be identified as, in the words of Hunter, “a performance practice for the contemporary expression of diversity” (Hunter 2005 , 152). The *Maasmechelaars* created a space where cultures could meaningfully meet and exchange experiences. Chances are that the *Maasmechelaar* will fade when their sense of inclusivity within the Belgian society is found.

In order to describe their resistance, I apply the notion of *political subjectivity* of Rancière (1992). The nation-state is a political construction focused around the ethnocentric ideal: one people, one

territory. Through the act of social sorting: a group of minorities is created by applying internal cultural discrimination strategies. Political subjectivity is based, according to Rancière, on the principle of equality and on the principle of majority. The latter focuses on the institutionalized social sorting in which the majority is in power to outline the boundaries of the in -and out-group, creating a division along the way. The principle of equality is evoked by the minorities, who are considered the out-group, who fight for recognition and being part of the community (Rancière 1992). They try their best to prove that they are just as equal and capable to belong in the in-group as the ones who are considered autochthons. *Maasmechelaars* are the ones born in Belgium, with the Belgian identity, who speak the language, in short, who belong here. They criticize the very criteria of their exclusion: different skin tones, different heritage, different names, etc. They challenge the dichotomy of allochthon/autochthon. As Celeste states: *we need a mishmash of people; we need to look for similarities instead of differences. The more the government speaks about you as a foreigner, the more these feelings are internalized. We need to counter this, there is only we.* Cavit follows with: *words like “integration” and “allochthon” are stamps upon us. The best integration is a world where these words do not exist.*

A parallel can be drawn between the political subjectification of *Maasmechelaars* described above and Spivak’s notion of the *deconstructive predicament of the post-colonial*. The resistance is a paradoxical one. The youngsters are fighting for inclusion by proving they are as equal as autochthons, but at the same time, they acknowledge their difference and otherness (Fernando 2014, 65). The *Maasmechelaars* are influenced by and part of institutionalized power structures they are trying to fight. Francesco’s statement *I don’t feel Belgian, but I know I am*, is one of the clearest examples. Although he is fighting for recognition by the Belgian state, he is also acknowledging that he is not ‘pure Belgian’.

As stated above, the *Maasmechelaars* as political subjectivities are fighting against the dichotomy allochthon/autochthon. Garelli and Tazzioli’s research focused on the way these institutionalized categories are constructed and can be transformed (Garelli en Tazzioli 2013). Through the voicing of their multiple belonging, the youngsters are creating a counter-

governmentality, in order to open up the fixed, institutionalized categories. Their acts of painting illegal on walls, giving new meaning to historical spaces, creating new sites in the process, creating clothes with inclusive sayings printed on them, rapping about their struggles, speaking the language of your conversation partner as a sign of respect, ... these are all examples of the youth subculture in Maasmechelen proving that there alternatives. The public discourse pushes a certain image to the front of how society should be organized and who should be included. Maasmechelaars prove that there is an alternative to this hegemonic discourse. *Maasmechelaars* created their new ethnicity in order to voice their struggles and challenge the way the public and people see them. As Senem states: *we in Maasmechelen, coming from two cultures are an added value. With one foot in each culture, we can understand the different worlds. It is our job to show the beautiful encounter of these cultures*⁶. The act of opening up the fixed categories of allochthons/autochthons is best seen through the symbolic of the national soccer team. They take a symbol of the nation-state and prove that they belong, by implying that this symbol symbolizes their multiple belonging. As Celeste states: *You have the players as Fellaini and Kompany who also migrated to Belgium and that there are the pure Belgian players like Jan Vertonghen. And as a team, they all work together, and that's how Belgium should be as well. Maasmechelaars bridges the two worlds in order to create a combined future. Because, as the soccer team proves: the fixed categories of 'allochthon/autochthon' do not count (as long as you score goals for the nation).*

To conclude, Hall coined the notion of *new ethnicity* to reframe the social and political debates about race through new forms of racial and ethnic identities. As the *Maasmechelaar* shows, with new conceptualizations of ethnicity, a new cultural politics can be constructed that fights the differences and look for togetherness (Hall 2006). As Gökhan concludes *we form Belgium together. That's how it is and that's how it will be.*

⁶ Quote used on page 6; in my 'Race, Ethnicity and the Postcolonial condition' -paper, submitted in January 2019 under the title: "HTTP 404 Error: ethnicity not found"

Afterthought

I started with the reflection by focusing on my motivations, thoughts, and reasons on the used methods. As stated, I argue that film is a medium with the ability to open up an ethnography by offering a story including images and sound. Yet it is important to note that film is a performative medium that gives you a snippet out of a lived reality that is framed within the film. Although I tried to stay as close to the reality of *Maasmechelaars*, the film is constructed by making choices, cutting images, leaving parts in/out. In order to give agency and voice to ‘subjects’, I implemented the methodology of collective ethnography in order to turn my participants into contributors, giving them more say in the project than in a classic ethnography. Yet, the goal remained to stay critical. As the final editor, I was always looking for a way in order to create a project in which every contributor recognizes him/herself in.

In the first textual chapter, I started with describing the event that shaped the lives of Maasmechelaars in the last year: the passing of Aziz. In the first subchapter, the focus was on Aziz as a person and how his passing affected us in the past couple of months. I made the distinction between Aziz as a person and friend and Aziz as a metaphor which focused on the way his passing and absence influences and constructs the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar*. The ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar* takes up a central place in the second subchapter, where the focus lays on the other element to construct the *Maasmechelaar* which is our shared past as children of migrants. By placing my contributors in meaningful places, was to focus on the relationship with their bodies and how they experience the social milieu around them. The background of the *miner’s museum*, the shafts, the graffiti wall, the studio, etc. are analogies to their lived experiences which unknots the symbolic and experiential aspects of their multiple belonging, which is first and foremost felt and experienced. From their individual experiences, we move towards the creation of a new ethnicity in order to create a platform against the exclusion by the Belgian state and public discourse. By turning their exclusion into a strength, this thesis became the testimony on the fight

of minorities for an inclusive, equal space in society.

In the following chapter I focused on the creation of a youth subculture using the ethnicity of *Maasmechelaar* as a basis in which the youngsters express their multiple belonging through the language they use, the songs they sing, the graffiti on the walls and the clothes they wear. I divided the chapter into multiple subchapters to discuss each aspect of the youth subculture in detail. By focusing on these different activities as excesses of a hip-hop subculture, it became clear that hip-hop provided spaces where youngsters could reflect on the different dimensions which make up their lives and identities. The metaphor of Aziz and the accompanying ideology of equality is found within each style-element. The youth subculture brings forward agency, empowerment, and liberation.

Going forward on the idea of togetherness, empowerment, and liberation through the creating of a new ethnicity and youth subculture, the youngsters try to fight their temporal exclusion of the Belgian society within the state itself. By implementing Rancière's notion of political subjectivity, I argue that the institutionalized language of 'us/them', 'autochthon/allochthon', is part of our everyday life, but is also found in state mechanisms. It is an impossible task to escape the power discourse that divides our contemporary society, but by focusing on the alternatives the *Maasmechelaars* are showing, the power discourse becomes visible. Through their ideology of equality, the youngsters are trying to open up the institutionalized, fixed categories. The thesis project is a tribute to the collaboration of individual bodies, and the effects of doing things together. It is the multiplication of one could do, into many. The act of opening up the categories is made possible by a re-imagination of space by the youngsters. The title says it all: *imported goods*. The sentence is both a reference to the way their (grand)parents were shipped as commodities to a new homeland, as well as to underline the contemporary meaning of the term *goods*, since the youngsters are proving they are in fact Belgian. *Maasmechelaars* negotiate localities, politics, language, culture and ethnicity through the medium of hip-hop in order to create what Chang (2007) refers to as "the sounds of the future".

Before ending my reflection, I want to state that, in the words of Geertz (1988, 71) I was close to ‘epistemological hypochondria’ while writing the thesis, yet it is mostly because “greater ethnographic knowledge revealed only that, in the end, matters were as unclear to ‘the locals’ as they were to me” (Stewart 2007). As you will read this, the lives of *Maasmechelaars* are continuing. Yet, it would not be fair to you as to my contributors to paint a utopian picture of all the potentialities that they encounter to open up their lives, without also focusing on the powerful, hegemonic, institutionalized forces that will obstruct their movements. The resistance of *Maasmechelaars* is a statement against the forces that excludes them, but there need to be more statements before the utopian picture turns into a reality. To end with the words of Stewart (2007, 9): “everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes up everything we have”.

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