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# Being “Both”: Identifications of Second and Third Generation Brussels Muslim Youths towards the Country of Origin and the Country of Residence

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**Abstract:** In Belgium, several incidents and public debates have highlighted ethnocentric conceptions of the nation held by public opinion and prominent politicians where immigrants and particularly Muslims are marked as the unwilling “others”. In this framework, immigrants maintaining ethnic identities and transnational ties is classically seen as weakening their integration in the receiving countries. Based on results drawn from 16 focus group discussions and 50 individual semi-structured interviews conducted in Brussels with youth with a foreign background, we show that while a minority of our respondents still identified themselves primarily in reference to the country of origin of their (grand)parents, emphasizing ethnic boundaries and family heritage, most of them have developed a multiple-identity strategy for themselves, which acknowledges both their ethnic background and their belonging to Belgium and Brussels as a multicultural city. Those involved in upward social mobility strategies through higher education or better secondary schools also have more facilities to express the double-presence narrative.

**Keywords:** youth; ethnic minorities; belonging; identity; double nationality; Brussels; Belgium



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## 1. Introduction

In Belgium, as in other European countries, Islam and immigration tend to go hand in hand. Indeed, although the presence of Muslim families has been established since 1920, the vast majority of Muslims in Belgium are in the country as a consequence of Belgian authorities’ call for an immigrant workforce in the 1960s. This paper is part of a two-year research project focused on Muslim young people in Brussels that has been financially supported by Innoviris, the public organisation that funds and supports research and innovation in the Brussels–capital region. The call we answered was entitled “making the invisible visible”. What we highlighted at the time was the paradoxical situation of Muslim (young) people of foreign origin as being both highly debated as sources of public concerns and worries and extremely invisible in those public debates as actors and representatives of their own perceptions. The context was (and still is) the increasing polarization regarding issues linked to immigration, integration, and Islam. The political atmosphere was marked by the many racist and xenophobic statements made by the Secretary of State of Asylum and Migration, Theo Francken<sup>1</sup>. Theo Francken is a member of the Flemish nationalist party and one of the most popular politicians in Flanders (Roblain et al. 2017), sometimes regarded by prominent experts as a powerful diffuser of the ideology of the far right on immigration and diversity issues<sup>2</sup>. A few days after he took office, the press revealed past Facebook statuses where he stated that he was able to imagine “the added value of Jewish, Chinese and Indian diasporas but less so the one of Moroccan, Congolese or Algerian diasporas”<sup>3</sup>, leading to an extremely heated controversy about which immigrant groups are worth of esteem and social recognition for their contribution to the nation and which

ones are not. A couple of months later, he published a short video montage showing him putting a winch on the head of a Black man present at a smart party with the hashtag “zerotolerance”<sup>4</sup>, implying that this man was in Belgium illegally. A couple of weeks later, and just after he advertised the fact that he deliberately focused on Christian minorities when granting visas in the context of the Syrian civil war, he published a survey on his social media accounts to determine whether people care about religious differences during rescue operations<sup>5</sup>. When several politicians challenged the Prime Minister, Charles Michel, regarding the fact that the Secretary of State is also the guardian of the anti-discrimination laws prohibiting any differences in public treatment based on religious affiliation, the latter affirmed that there was no intention of discrimination or stigmatization<sup>6</sup>. Of course, the terrorist attacks carried out in Brussels in 2016 and claimed by ISIS exemplified the idea of the inner threat or Trojan horse that could be represented by parts of the Muslim population. A few days after the attacks, the Minister of Justice, Jan Jambon, another prominent member of the Flemish nationalist political party NVA, while stating in the press that “integration was a failure in Belgium” also affirmed that a “significant part of the Muslim community danced after the attacks”<sup>7</sup> without being able to source his affirmation in front of Parliament<sup>8</sup>.

These examples can be regarded as an accumulation of “slips” and uncontrolled discourse, but this would mean forgetting that they are part of a clear political strategy to win electoral gains on identity issues<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, Theo Francken and Jan Jambon have distinguished themselves as prominent supporters within their political party of a reactionary and ethnocentric line where the rejection of the “other” is crucial (Delwit 2019). In the examples provided above, the “other” is represented by refugees, Muslims, and ethnic and racial communities in general, but as we have seen, those categories are sometimes intertwined in the public discourse. One could wonder whether this kind of public discourse, when commonly repeated and accumulated, affects public opinion and representation. Certain figures can be mobilized to assess that this indeed seems to be the case for Belgian public opinion. To be sure, Belgian public opinion tends to largely overestimate both immigrant (Lafleur and Marfouk 2017) and Muslim<sup>10</sup> populations. Moreover, while only a very small minority of Belgians wish to completely stop any new migrant arrivals, important portions of the population are in favor of a restrictive immigration public policy, especially in the case of immigrants of a different ethnic origin (Lafleur and Marfouk 2017). These numbers further increase if the migrants are Muslims (Lafleur and Marfouk 2017). Another survey showed that a majority of respondents felt that the presence of Muslim communities in Belgium posed a threat to Belgian identity<sup>11</sup>. Research shows that an ethnic conception of the nation, which can be observed in Belgium through the impressive scores of nationalist and extreme-right parties in elections (at least in the Flemish-speaking part of the country), correlates positively with anti-immigration attitudes (Verkuyten and Martinovic 2015). The question for us was, therefore, whether these discourses, survey results, and the broader public debate around integration, immigration, and religious and cultural diversity may reinforce a feeling of otherness for second- and third-generation Belgians with a non-European background, especially for young people who are more affected by periods of doubt and issues of identity construction.

Indeed, as Levitt (2009, p. 1225) posits, “migration scholars recognize that many people maintain ties to their countries of origin at the same time as they become integrated into the countries that receive them ( . . . ) However, the same assumes that such an approach is not necessarily true when studying migrants’ children”. This observation is even more striking when considering that there are many young people with a migrant background in major European cities, which is a significant demographic evolution (Ogden and Mazzucato 2021). In 2021, 20% of people in Belgium were of foreign descent<sup>12</sup>. Of that number, 70% were born in Belgium, 20.3% have two parents with an initial foreign nationality, and 30% have one. However, these numbers significantly increase at the regional level: while the foreign-born population is only 14.7% in Flanders and 23.7% in Wallonia; this represents

39.5% of the population in Brussels. If we include the “second generation”, those with one parent who was born with a foreign nationality represent nearly three quarters of the population in Brussels<sup>13</sup>. Their relationship with both their host country and the country of their (grand)parents remains crucial. Indeed, as Wiley et al. (2019, p. 612) posit, immigrants and their descendants who hold compatible dual identities have great potential to thrive in the countries in which they live: even if they may face vulnerabilities, they are also in a position to bridge divides between the different groups to which they belong. Consequently, the goal of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the declination of multiple identities in the context of receiving societies that are intensively polarized on the issues of immigration and identities.

#### *Youth Ethnic Identities between Assimilation and Reactive Ethnicity*

There are numerous studies examining the extent to which migrants identify with their countries of origin (Fleischmann 2022). The classical perspective of diasporas and diasporic dynamics tends to take nation-states as units of analysis and assumes that immigrants make a sharp and definitive break with their homelands, that migration trajectories are unidirectional, and that migration inexorably leads to assimilation (Brubaker 2005). Here, assimilation is conceptualized as the declining significance of context-specific markers of difference—such as race, ethnicity, or religion—in the lives of immigrants and their children (Drouhot and Nee 2019). Conversely, maintaining ethnic identities and transnational ties is seen as weakening immigrants’ integration in the receiving countries (Vertovec 2001). Consequently, as the time spent in host societies increases, it is expected that the salience of ethnic boundaries and identification towards the country of origin diminishes for second and third generations. The realization that this prophecy did not exactly come true has led to political anxiety regarding the failure of integration (Mansouri and Modood 2021; Foner and Simon 2015). In many countries, heated public debates over dual nationality have been matched by a considerable academic rethinking of the rights and obligations surrounding migration, transnationalism, and national identity (Vertovec 2001). For example, Beauchemin et al. (2016), drawing on a large-scale survey from France, show that even though descendants of immigrants gradually adopt a French identity, the salience of their ethnic origin in their personal identity remains or even increases.

Holding different identities can involve contrasting meanings, competing demands, and different loyalties and allegiances to others (Verkuyten et al. 2019). However, scholars have also revealed that, even for first-generation immigrants, attachments to their home and host country are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Zimmermann et al. 2007). Three dimensions seem especially salient in the academic literature on dual identities. The first is related to discrimination. Indeed, developing what is called a “reactive ethnicity” has long been identified as one mode of ethnic identity formation, which highlights the role of a hostile context in the host country in the upsurge, rather than the erosion, of ethnicity (Rumbaut 2008). Recently, Terrasse (2021) showed that experiencing frequent identity checks is associated with an increase in the likelihood of identification with the country of origin, a decrease in the likelihood of French identification, and a decrease in the likelihood of believing others see one as French. Çelik (2015) documented how perceived discrimination accentuates group differences, heightens group consciousness of those differences, and hardens ethnic identity boundaries in the minds of the disadvantaged Turkish youth included in the study. This rejection/identification model argues that discrimination presents a threat to group identity and that members of devalued groups may cope with identity threats by adopting group-based strategies involving increased in-group identification and distancing from the majority group (Verkuyten and Martinovic 2012). Reactive ethnicity can thus also be understood as an act of resistance when the dominant group denigrates and invalidates the culture of immigrants (Çelik 2015). Baysu and Phalet (2019) consequently argue that dual identity can be beneficial in low-threat contexts when minority members can derive self-worth from their minority-group belonging, but costly in high-threat ones where they face negative stereotypes about their group’s competence.

In a multi-country study in Europe, [Van Heelsum and Koomen \(2015\)](#) show how disconcerting it is for second-generation individuals to be assigned ethnic characteristics that are typically those of their parents, especially when these stereotypes are combined with a negative public discourse on immigration. This finding introduces the second dimension highlighted by the literature: the role played by the majority group. Indeed, both qualitative and quantitative studies of immigrant identity reveal that immigrants report seeing themselves as members of the receiving society, but that they believe others do not see them as such ([Terrasse 2021](#)). Several scholars have argued that while mixed individuals experience increased personal agency when choosing how they define themselves, their ethnic options (and the validation of such options) are still constrained by many social factors ([Törngren et al. 2021](#)). Among these is external ascription, or the validation of internal identification by the other ([Friberg 2021](#)). Identity is the way in which people conceive of themselves but also how they are characterized by others ([Vertovec 2001](#)). Identity must thus be framed as a relational process ([Veerman and Platt 2021](#)). Immigrants and nonimmigrants alike debate the boundaries, relations, and meanings between social categories, and they incorporate these meanings into their sense of who they are ([Wiley et al. 2019](#)). The third dimension underlined by the literature on the dual identities of migrants is linked to context. As suggested by [Verkuyten et al. \(2019\)](#), having multiple identities is less about an integrated internal structure or creating a sense of coherence and more about how, in particular contexts, specific social identities become relevant, overlap, and interact. [Veerman and Platt \(2021\)](#) have, for example, shown that children with a migrant-origin background who are exposed to a more ethnically diverse context chose a greater number of ethnic identities. This result offers the possibility of adding local spatial dynamics to the transnational ties and identification processes of the children of migrants ([Sassen 2005](#); [Vathi 2013](#)).

With these three dimensions in mind, we wish to focus on the dynamics of identification and perception of the second- and third-generation youths in Brussels regarding the city and country they live in, as well as the country of origin of their (grand)parents.

## 2. Methods and Data

The results presented in this paper are drawn from 16 focus group discussions and 50 individual semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a two-year research project. The fieldwork was carried out between April 2019 and February 2020, just before the confinement related to the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of the project, 124 young people had actively taken part in the study. The aim of the focus groups was to uncover collective dynamics of construction and sharing of meaning ([Farnsworth and Boon 2010](#)). During the fieldwork, we were careful to ensure a certain degree of representativeness among our participants even if qualitative research tends to reach exemplarity instead of pure representativity. First, their ages ranged between 16 and 25, with most of them being between 16 and 19 (see [Table 1](#)). This range offered a great diversity of profiles regarding whether the participants were still in high school, enrolled in higher education, or in the early stages of their working life. Second, we ensured that, both in the various group interviews and in individual interviews, there was a relatively equal representation of both sexes in order to determine whether gender influenced the answers to some of our questions (see [Table 2](#)). We contacted many structures working with immigrant youths that we knew from previous fieldwork, through personal networks or that were recommended to us by our partner for this research, the Children and Youth Representative<sup>14</sup>. We expanded the type of venue in which we conducted interviews (led in French and Flemish) to include youth centres, schools, tutoring-oriented structures, more 'community-based' organisations (in the sense that they were more directly linked to a particular ethnic-religious movement), mosques and more informal places of conversation. We used interviews and focus groups with these structures that positively answered our request without any kind of preselection. Discussions focused on the experiences of our respondents as young people with a foreign and Muslim background in Brussels. After explaining the goals of the research, we let our

respondents present themselves and express how they feel about this study to answer any questions and issues they might have about the research. Our approach was inductive, looking for key topics that emerged from the field. We often asked our respondents how they would present themselves abroad to someone they were meeting for the first time in order to start the conversation. Most often, the discussion continued naturally by answering participants' questions or bouncing off some elements brought up by the participants. All interviews and group discussions were transcribed and coded for analysis purposes. At the end of this process, 22 thematic topics<sup>15</sup> were identified through the corpus of the transcripts and compiled in more conceptual categories such as: 1. religious belonging and practices; 2. experiences of discrimination; 3. attachment to the neighbourhood; 4. relationship with the host culture and country and those of their parents and grandparents, and 5. views about marriage and (homo)sexuality. For the purpose of this article, we chose to focus on the results of the third and fourth categories.

**Table 1.** Number of respondents according to age (when information was available).

Age	Number	%
12	1	1.0%
13	1	1.0%
14	4	4.0%
15	3	3.0%
16	17	16.8%
17	21	20.8%
18	16	15.8%
19	8	7.9%
20	5	4.9%
21	10	9.9%
22	6	5.9%
23	3	3.0%
24	3	3.0%
25	2	2.0%
26	1	1.0%
TOTAL	101	100%

**Table 2.** Number of respondents according to gender.

Gender	Number	%
Male	62	50%
Female	62	50%
TOTAL	124	100%

Despite these diversification efforts during data collection, a significant number of the young people we met shared certain characteristics. Most of those who participated in our survey are of Moroccan descent (see Table 3), which reflects not only historical but also demographic realities. Indeed, as a result of the bilateral agreements signed in the 1960s between Belgium, on the one hand, and Turkey and Morocco, on the other, migrants or children of migrants from these two countries represent the largest groups of foreigners and Belgians of foreign descent in Brussels. However, the Moroccan and Moroccan-born population is much larger than the Turkish one<sup>16</sup>. Additionally, the vast majority of our respondents were second and third generation. In fact, an overwhelming share of them hold dual nationalities. The bulk of the young people we met also lived in neighbourhoods in the so-called 'poor crescent of Brussels', an area which is itself located in the heart of the city. These neighbourhoods are socially degraded urban spaces with various forms of deprivation (Van Hamme et al. 2016). They bear witness to the weight of Brussels' spatial division between 'high' and 'low' neighbourhoods alongside a period of immigration that



was conceived, above all, as a contribution to the labour force. Despite our efforts, some young people remained out of reach. For example, we could not reach those who did not attend community structures, those who left school early, or ethnic groups from countries with a much smaller population in Brussels (such as Algerians, Pakistanis, and Syrians for example). Despite these unavoidable biases, we believe that we can provide an accurate and nuanced portrait of a significant part of Muslim youth in Brussels of a foreign background. Indeed, the young people we reached offered very diverse examples of identification and self-presentation. All things considered, group interviews offer the advantage of allowing for a variety of opinions on a given topic to be recorded and differences in perspective between different types of participants to be highlighted. When they involve respondents with different profiles, they also provide an opportunity to objectify the factors related to the opinions and practices of various groups. The individual counterpoints expressed in the semi-structured interviews shed more light on the representations highlighted in the group sessions. It is important to note that the empirical material was collected by two researchers with a foreign background. Some collective discussions were also conducted with the help of a non-foreign and non-racialized researcher. We have been very careful with how the identity and positionality of the researchers may impact the different narratives that are collected and the analysis of the results (which has remained a collective effort). Despite one collective discussion that was more focused on the essentialized differences between “White” and “Native” Belgians and the youth in attendance, we did not notice any major change in the way the conversations were framed. We will come back to this point in the analysis.

**Table 3.** Division of respondents according to origin (when information was available).

Origin	Number	%
Moroccan	63	70%
Turkish	17	19%
Algerian	2	2%
Guinean	2	2%
Eritrean	3	3%
Albanian	1	1%
Lebanon	1	1%
Libyan	1	1%
Mauritanian	1	1%
TOTAL	90	100%

### 3. Results: A Multiplicity of Self-Presentation

Our research project focused on young Muslims in Brussels. This is relevant for the purpose of this article since religion, and Islam in particular, is often mentioned in prominent academic research as a barrier to integration (Alba and Foner 2014), especially when we look at national identification (Fleischmann and Phalet 2018; Beek and Fleischmann 2020). In Belgium, immigration and Islam tend to go hand in hand, since the majority of the immigrant population is related to the bilateral agreements signed with Morocco and Turkey in 1964. The discussions in the focus groups and semi-structured interviews were often started with an open question about how our participants defined themselves, in most cases asking how they would present themselves to a stranger. Indeed, academic publications such as Gallant’s (2008) underline the risks involved in relying on essentialized categories that attribute memberships to participants inferred from their migratory biographies at the expense of their own definitions. Consequently, we chose to rely on self-definition, understood as a process in which members of a group signal to others who they are (Friberg 2021). We want to insist on the fact that we never made any prescriptive suggestions as to what type of identification they might hold. A significant proportion of our participants defined themselves primarily as Muslims, and for some this was the sole

identity they claimed (Torrekens et al. 2022). However, most of them chose a multiplicity of identities, with their (grand)parents's country of origin being one among others:

Leah<sup>17</sup> (Female, 20 years old): "I feel I am from Brussels, Belgian, from Molenbeek<sup>18</sup> and Muslim. Well, for me there is no worry. Some say that, as we have several identities, it can put us in personal trouble. But I don't think that. It is just that we have grown up there, we lived with this, we have grown up with an origin and a religion. So, I feel a bit from everywhere, it is perfect"

Amira (Female, 18 years old): "I feel Belgian, Moroccan, Muslim, from Brussels and from Molenbeek also"

Wassim (Male, 17 years old): "I am Moroccan, from Rif and I am Belgian. I am born in Belgium with Moroccan roots. That's it. I am born here but my parents are . . . . Me, my culture it is, I don't know, the planet let's say"

Regarding the link with the country of origin of their (grand)parents, time spent vacationing there seemed worth taking into consideration for at least two reasons. The first one is to insist on the fact that physical travel is qualitatively different from other mobilities, with embodied, sensorial experiences that cannot be substituted by other transnational practices (Ogden and Mazzucato 2021). Indeed, Bidet and Wagner (2012) remind us that, in France, a huge majority of people of Moroccan descent spent holidays in Morocco during their childhood and that many of them continue to do so each year, confirming the importance of this practice in the maintenance of transnational ties. The continuity of familial practices and the weight of familial relations were confirmed for our respondents:

Safae (Female, 19 years old): "We have our house in Tetouan. Before, when we did not have our house, we stayed with the family. And we lived there. But now that we have our own house, it is fun because we stay together, we laugh and then everybody goes back home"

Leah (Female, 20 years old): "I go every year to Libanon with my parents and I will continue to do so. I really love the country. And I still have family living there so I often go to visit them"

Samira (Female, 18 years old): "I love to go there, especially on my father's side. There is the farm, the nature, it is cool. If I could, I would go every year"

In their discourse, we noticed the extent to which the connection with the country of origin of their (grand)parents can be described as sentimental, a testament to family fidelity (Ribert 2009), and confirming that the vector of this relationship is the migrant parent (Barthou 2019). This type of transnational tie is certainly facilitated by the modern technologies of mobility and communication (Caneva and Ambrosini 2012). However, despite the pleasure our participants took in relating their stay in the country of origin of their (grand)parents, this is also a place where they experience a sense of otherness:

Yousra (Female, 18 years old): "In Morocco, we are foreigners"

Nabil (Male, 20 years old): "When we go to Turkey, they see us as Belgian. When we go there, they call us 'the Belgians'"

Adil (Male, 16 years old): "In Morocco they say 'the Belgian' to me"

In their own words, our respondents remind us that they are born, raised, and socialized in Belgium and that despite their (grand)parents' origin, they carry signs of this education and socialization in the way they speak, dress, and behave. In essence, their "Europeanness" is noticeable to their co-ethnics. Indeed, this feeling of otherness is aggravated by their lack of knowledge of the language of their (grand)parents or, in other cases, their accent:

Lamia (Female, 17 years old): "For example, a couple of years ago, we were, with my mother, in a cab in Morocco. And she told me to remain silent because when

I speak Arabic, well I don't speak it like the people of the country. So, my mother told me to stay silent so she was the only one to speak in order to avoid the driver increasing the price"

Lamia's anecdote is interesting, as she explains her discomfort with not being taken for a local but for a tourist, or at least for a Moroccan living abroad in front of her mother, being seen as having better living standards, and thus being able to pay the same high price as tourists. These different quotes of Lamia, Adil, Nabil and Yousra stress the role of the other in the dynamics of identification understood as the dialectical processes described above. Additionally, despite appreciating their holidays, most of our respondents do not want to live in the country of origin of their (grand)parents:

Safae (Female, 19 years old): "I could not live there. Mentalities is more related to the father; the men and I am not like that. I appreciate doing things myself"

Leah (Female, 20 years old): "I do not want to live there. I have some difficulties with the country. There is a lot of sexism and there is a lot of racism too. So, I have some difficulties with the mentality"

Samira (Female, 18 years old): "I could not live in Morocco, no. It is a beautiful country, but I could not. They are too strict, and it shocks me"

It is clear that Safae, Leah, and Samira explicitly differentiate themselves from the inhabitants of the origin country by using the term "mentality" to refer to a set of characteristics that they attribute to them. It also appears that they perceive these characteristics as absolute differences between the latter and themselves, born and raised in Europe. This is also a way of affirming their attachment to Belgium and the quality of life from which they spontaneously claim to benefit:

Selma (Female, 18 years old): "I don't think I could live in Morocco. I think I feel better here. If I could live elsewhere it will be in another country but not Morocco. I would not feel in my place. Here, it is home for me, and I feel good at home"

Adil (Male, 16 years old): "I would not like to live in Morocco because I don't speak Arabic. And here we have the chance to pursue higher education ( . . . ) There, you can pursue higher education and finally not even work"

Lylia (Female, 17 years old): "Even if we complain a lot about discriminations, we have several opportunities here which are not necessarily there in the 'bled'<sup>19</sup>. And even regarding schools, education, all of this, it is really better here. Even the hospitals. There are a lot of advantages to be here. Me, personally, I do not feel really good in Morocco because I do not know the language very well. Often they call me 'Jacqueline' in the bled because I don't speak Arabic"

These statements should not be understood as the simple desire to take advantage of the social security system but instead, as stressed by Ribert (2009), as forms of recognition of the prerogatives and opportunities that can be found in their destination societies compared to their (grand)parents' origin countries. While migrant youth often have strong attachments to the country of origin, they do not necessarily consider it home, nor are their visits there always perceived as a possible 'return' (Ogden and Mazzucato 2021). Despite their ambivalence towards the country of origin of their (grand)parents, our respondents choose to define themselves as "both." In other words, they decide to articulate a "double presence" rather than the "double absence" supposed to describe their (grand)parents's situation between leaving the country of origin and the lasting condition of foreigner in their country of residence (Sayad 1999).

### 3.1. Reactive Ethnicity: The Role of Discrimination and Outgroups

In contrast with what we have described above, a minority of our respondents identified primarily in reference to the country of origin of their (grand)parents, sometimes to the exclusion of any other form of identity:



Souhail (Male, 18 years old): “I feel I am from Molenbeek and Turk”

Alia (Female, 17 years old): “I am from Morocco, my parents were born in Morocco. I love the fact of belonging to a community, that of Moroccans of Brussels, or of Moroccans in general”

Omar (Male, 16 years old): “In Morocco, we really feel more at home”

Here, the statements of our respondents refer more to a cultural and ethnic definition of identity content that emphasizes cultural traits that exclude non-immigrant individuals and makes the boundary between destination and origin national identities more impermeable (Fleischmann 2022). The rhetoric of «us» used here is constructed on a double reference: the one of kinship and the one of territory. Kinship refers to the affirmation of a common origin inherited from the parents and reinforced by discourses of belonging to a broader group (Belkacem 2010). Territory raises the image of an original and protective homeland. By preferring a label of ethnic identity that references their (grand)parents’ country of origin, our respondents typically choose to stress family ties and cultural attachments (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2019) at the expense of socialization in the host society.

We noticed that the youth who include themselves in this type of self-identification also make much more use of reification processes to describe the identity of the other; in this case, the majority society and Belgians with no foreign background:

Rachid (Male, 18 years old): “In my school, there were mainly White people. Let’s say ‘Flemish’. I do not feel particularly comfortable, I don’t know. Because it is not the same culture, for example we do not have the same humor. With White people we do not have the same humor or the same education”

Saliha (Female, 16 years old): “We are not like the ‘Flemish’. We do not have the same manners. We do not live like them. It is the Belgo-Belgian, you see. The ‘Gallic’. The 100% Belgian, you see. We do not have the same way of life. For example, you, the education you give your children, it is not the same education that Soufiane’s mum or Salima’s mum give. There is a difference in mentality, in principles. We meet on a lot of things but . . . for example your children you let them go in nightclubs or you allow to go out in the evening. For us, it is taboo”

It is important to stress that the word ‘Flemish’ used by Rachid and Saliha does not describe the Dutch-speaking part of the Belgian population, which would refer to the classic French/Dutch-speaking divide in Belgian political life, but rather includes all Belgians with no foreign descent. We observe here that Rachid and Saliha emphasize what they perceive as distinct cultural characteristics in order to produce reverse racializing categories: the culture, humor, and way of life of “White” people are presented in quasi-natural and biological terms that are reproduced automatically and relate to all the members of the group (Modood 2005), despite obvious gender or class differences. Indeed, for example, the term “Gallic” used in their discourses refers to a history and cultural landscape they do not seem to identify with. For Saliha especially, the presence of a “native” researcher leading the conversation and representing the “you” she refers to in her discourse certainly amplified the elaboration of these cultural barriers. This observation is in line with the findings of Hamel (2006), who identified an essentializing counter-racism in response to processes of stigmatization. Villechaise and Bucaille (2020) have also recently shown that their interlocutors from ethnic minorities were not fully devoid of an essentializing and reductive construction of ‘the White’, mirroring the stereotypes attributed to them. Rachid and Saliha’s words are useful here because they emphasize the dialectic construction of ethnic boundaries, with the minority group both reclaiming the ethnic categories produced by the public debate and returning them to sender.

What appears to be crucial in the difference in self-identification among our respondents, especially for those who identify primarily with the country of origin of their (grand)parents, is the experience of discrimination, available economic resources, and perspectives. Indeed, from the 1960s onwards, in Belgium, as in the Netherlands, migration

from Muslim-majority countries consisted mainly of Turkish and Moroccan ‘guest workers’, followed by continuing waves of immigrants who came through family reunification and family formation (Maliepaard et al. 2015). In Belgian society, those of Turkish and Moroccan descent face frequent discrimination. The socioeconomic disadvantage of the first generation persists into the second, as evidenced by their low educational attainment levels, high unemployment rates, and high degrees of urban concentration and residential segregation (Güngör et al. 2011). As in other several countries, several studies report gaps in employment rates between natives and immigrants (Drouhot and Nee 2019). Discrimination primarily involves unfair treatment, and this signals to people that they are not equal members of society (Verkuyten and Martinovic 2012). Discrimination seems even more unfair to young people who were born and raised in a country which, through numerous public discourses and policies, continues to deny that they are part of it. As a result, they may promote a “reactive ethnicity”. Over the course of our discussions with our participants, many expressed the idea that discrimination may occur in their future, either as one possible event or as an eventuality for which one must be prepared. They highlighted the idea that the formal equality acquired with Belgian nationality and citizenship does not necessarily go hand in hand with genuine equality (Torrekens et al. 2022). However, individuals are not equal in the face of discrimination and do not have the same resources and opportunities to cope with these experiences. We have already underlined that a huge majority of our respondents share a certain number of socio-economic characteristics, such as living in quite deprived neighborhoods. It is striking that, among our respondents, those who stressed the “being both” self-identification were most often involved in strategies of emancipation through education. For example, many with a mother who is a housewife and an unemployed or laborer father were pursuing degrees in higher education in technology, industry, medicine, law, etc. Others chose ‘selective’ secondary schools in the strongly segregated Belgian school market<sup>20</sup>, even if this meant a longer commute. On the contrary, those who more strongly identified with the country of origin of their (grand)parents were the ones who experienced stronger feelings of discrimination, whose leisure activities were in the most deprived urban areas, and who were presented with fewer opportunities or had lower expectations regarding higher education.

### 3.2. The City: Where Self-Identification as “Both” Is Made Possible

The vast majority of the young people we met expressed a strong attachment to Brussels as a whole and/or to their neighborhood in particular. A survey of pupils from 24 high schools in the Brussels region conducted in parallel with ours revealed that students with a foreign background feel more at ease in Brussels than those without: 76% of youths of Moroccan descent and 74% of Turkish descent compared to 69% of native Belgians that were surveyed (Mansoury et al. 2020)<sup>21</sup>. They were eager to stress their feeling of being at home in Brussels, more so than in other regions:

Ihsane (Female, 21 years old): “Brussels is beautiful. There is everything. There are all colours, all languages. I think it is more lively. I am proud to be from Brussels”

Lamia (Female, 17 years old): “In Brussels, racism is less present than, for example, in Antwerp<sup>22</sup> where I believe it is a little bit harder”

Alia (Female, 17 years old): “Maybe in Wallonia and in Flanders it is different. I had the occasion to go to Bruges<sup>23</sup> with my veil and it was clearly not the same looks people gave me”.

Through their discourses, the youth we met demonstrated a strong territorial anchoring to Brussels (Teney and Hanquinet 2015). Being from Brussels is another part of their identity. They explain this feeling of belonging as being due to the multicultural climate in Brussels, its strong diversity, the many languages spoken there, the much greater feeling of tolerance, and the lower level of discrimination they perceive in contrast to other Belgian regions and cities. Indeed, youths see and compare themselves in relation to those around

them, based on their social similarity or dissimilarity with the reference groups that most directly affect their experiences, especially with regard to such socially visible and categorized markers as gender, phenotype, accent, language, name, and nationality (Rumbaut 2008). In Brussels, encountering otherness is much more common than in other parts of the country. This relative regularity creates a feeling of familiarity and well-being. In a way, their ethnic and religious background is invisible in the neighborhood of Brussels where they circulate. However, this comfort is not a reality when they speak of other Belgian cities or of other parts of Brussels with a much lower level of ethnic and religious diversity:

Wassim (Male, 17 years old): “I never go to Uccle, it is too far, I do not know it well and I get lost easily. Uccle, I have the feeling it is strange, it is cleaner but it is not like the center”.

Othmane (Male, 18 years old): “I never went in neighbourhoods like Uccle or Watermael. I do not like them at all”

Adem (Male, 16 years old): “There are municipalities where we cannot hang out ( . . . ) For example, in Uccle, you are going to hang out there and they will call the cops. It is true! (laugh)”

Adem, Othmane and Wassim express, in their own words, the fact that Brussels is characterized by a high level of spatial and ethnic segregation and concentration (Van Hamme et al. 2016; Sacco et al. 2016). Due to factors ranging from historical stratification and labor migration to spatial infrastructure, ethnic minorities live in the poorest municipalities in the center of Brussels, with socio-economic difficulties such as extremely high unemployment rates, school dropouts, and drug trafficking. The municipalities of Uccle and Watermael were mentioned by our young interviewees to stress their unease; these are typical examples of bourgeois and upper-class environments with low levels of ethnic diversity, as well as limited public transportation options, making them less accessible to disadvantaged groups. As stated by Rumbaut (2008), the contextual dissonance experienced or planned in these upper-class neighborhoods heightens the salience of ethnicity and of ethnic group boundaries compared to the localities used for school, leisure, or living purposes. These contrasting quotes about Brussels as a lived spatial structure emphasize the fact that all geographical spaces are also socially constructed and structured. Therefore, this spatial dimension of identity should be recognized and understood as a supplementary independent force affecting the construction of self-identification (Vathi 2013). Indeed, it seems that Brussels is not only a part of the identity of our young respondents but the very place facilitating their belonging to the host country of their (grand)parents and their self-expression of “being both”, precisely because of its inherent diversity. For those who stress the country of origin of their (grand)parents as a primary means of self-identification, Brussels, and more so their specific neighborhood, remain a strong anchor.

#### 4. Discussion

Our results show that processes of identity and experiences of being mixed are very heterogeneous and multifaceted (Rodríguez-García et al. 2021) among the youth with a migratory background living in Brussels. While a minority of our respondents identified themselves primarily in reference to the country of origin of their (grand)parents, emphasizing ethnic boundaries and family heritage, most of them have developed a multiple-identity strategy that acknowledges both their ethnic background and their belonging to Belgium. The time spent during the holidays in the country of origin of their (grand)parents is used to maintain a link in which family ties seem crucial. However, they mainly do not see this country of origin as a possible option for return. Instead, most of them see their future in Belgium. What we have framed as the affirmation of a “double presence”, or in other words, as a feeling of “being both” rather than a “feeling of being neither”, confirms the fact that an ethnic identity related to the country of origin can develop largely independently from the identification with the country of settlement (Friberg 2021). Of course, our results show

that individuals have more choices or fewer opportunities when navigating mixedness. A crucial factor affecting these outcomes is visibility—i.e., visible markers of difference from the native society, such as phenotype, language, or religious affiliation (Rodríguez-García et al. 2021). We have seen that one aspect of this process of multiple-identity formation is a strong attachment to the space, the region of Brussels in our case, and/or the neighborhood in which they live, characterized by a strong multicultural “spirit”. In these urban spaces where multiple languages are spoken, and there are phenotypes and forms of dress, they are more or less “invisible”. This self-confidence disappears when they travel to other Belgian cities or municipalities in Brussels with lower levels of ethnic and religious diversity. There, their otherness as youths with a foreign background expressed in visible signs is once again noticed by the others, the ‘Flemish’ or the ‘Gallic’, in their own terms, raising the salience of ethnic boundaries in specific contexts. This contrast stresses not only the importance of the urban space as one part of their identity, but more importantly as the place allowing or denying the expression of a process of self-definition of multiple identities. The same is true for the country of origin of their (grand)parents, where they also express feelings of otherness due to language difficulties and their socialization as Europeans, which is visibly inscribed in their clothes, manners, practices, and cultural tastes. Consequently, both the territory and the other surrounding groups are important to take into consideration when studying the transnational identity formation processes of young people. In this sense, heterogeneous results in the types and profiles of identification towards host and origin countries indicate that second- and third-generation immigrants differ not only in the extent of their ethnic group identification but also in their definition of group belonging (Rodríguez-García et al. 2021; Verkuyten et al. 2019; Wessendorf 2007).

Further research will be needed to explore the extent to which these young people will (or will not) definitively turn their back on diaspora formation and diasporic trends, or if their identification with the country of origin of their (grand)parents will be decoupled from diasporic stances and claim-making (Brubaker 2005; Alexander 2017). Finally, in both classical and neo-assimilation theory, national identity formation is closely related to the accumulation of cultural and economic capital, along with upward social mobility, through the education system (Friberg 2021). Our results show that this is also the case for Brussels youth with a foreign and Muslim background: those involved in upward social mobility strategies through higher education or better secondary schools are also those who have more facilities to express the double-presence narrative.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> «Theo Francken, l’homme aux mille et une polémiques», Rtfb.be, 30 October 2017, <https://www.rtfb.be/article/theo-francken-l-homme-aux-mille-et-une-polemiques-9750334> (accessed on 28 April 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> «Dirk Jacobs (ULB): “La N-VA est aujourd’hui un parti d’extrême droite”», Rtfb.be, 24 September 2015, <https://www.rtfb.be/article/dirk-jacobs-ulb-la-n-va-est-aujourd-hui-un-parti-d-extreme-droite-9089358> (accessed on 30 May 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> «Theo Francken doute de la “valeur ajoutée” des Marocains et des Congolais», Rtfb.be, 15 October 2014, <https://www.rtfb.be/article/theo-francken-doute-de-la-valeur-ajoutee-des-marocains-et-des-congolais-8378856> (accessed on 28 April 2023).

- 4 «Theo Francken, l'homme aux mille et une polémiques», op cit.
- 5 See note 4.
- 6 «Sondage polémique de Theo Francken: Charles Michel défend l'initiative», Rtb.be, 20 April 2017, <https://www.rtb.be/article/sondage-polemique-de-theo-francken-charles-michel-defend-le-secretaire-d-etat-9585540> (accessed on 28 April 2023).
- 7 «Selon Jan Jambon, beaucoup de musulmans "ont dansé" après les attentats», La Libre, 17 April 2016, <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/2016/04/17/selon-jan-jambon-beaucoup-de-musulmans-ont-danse-apres-les-attentats-S6WSV3DS2REOBL5LNHAPMTEHMY/> (accessed on 28 April 2023).
- 8 «"Des musulmans ont dansé lors des attentats": Jan Jambon se refuse à avancer des chiffres à la Chambre», DH.be, 20 April 2016, <https://www.dhnet.be/actu/belgique/2016/04/20/des-musulmans-ont-danse-lors-des-attentats-jan-jambon-se-refuse-a-avancer-des-chiffres-a-la-chambre-OX73DD3EMVEVCZHYTNQKH5BS5Y/> (accessed on 28 April 2023).
- 9 «Puisque le fascisme arrive», Politique, 19 December 2018, <https://www.revuepolitique.be/puisque-le-fascisme-arrive/> (accessed on 28 April 2023).
- 10 «Les Belges surestiment grandement le nombre de musulmans en Belgique», Le Soir, 14 Décembre 2016, <https://www.lesoir.be/art/1391637/article/actualite/belgique/2016-12-14/belges-surestiment-grandement-nombre-musulmans-en-belgique> (accessed on 28 April 2023).
- 11 «Noir Jaune Blues: constat d'échec pour le vivre-ensemble en Belgique», Rtb.be, 9 January 2017, [https://www.rtb.be/info/societe/detail\\_noir-jaune-blues-constat-d-echec-pour-le-vivre-ensemble-en-belgique?id=9497247](https://www.rtb.be/info/societe/detail_noir-jaune-blues-constat-d-echec-pour-le-vivre-ensemble-en-belgique?id=9497247) (accessed on 28 April 2023).
- 12 "Diversity according to origin in Belgium", Statbel Belgium in figures, <https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/themes/population/origine> (accessed on 16 December 2021).
- 13 "Population selon la nationalité actuelle et la nationalité à la naissance", Institut bruxellois de statistique et d'analyse, <https://ibsa.brussels/themes/population/nationalites> (accessed on 16 December 2021).
- 14 The Children and Youth Representative, Délégué general aux droits de l'enfant, is an independent institution of the government of the Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles created in 2002 and aimed at the safeguard of the rights and interests of children and youth, see <http://www.dgde.cfwb.be> (accessed on 16 December 2021).
- 15 Relationships (Family and Friends), Relations with Brussels, Neighborhood, Language spoken, (Future) job, Socialization in childhood, Perception of discrimination, Experiences of discrimination, Identity, Religious affiliation and belonging, Religious practices, Religious practices debated in public sphere, Perception of politics, Perception of media, Ethnic and racial stigma, Relations with country of the (grand)parents, Homosexuality, Gender equality, Marriage (their vision), Marriage (what they think their parents expect), Sexuality, Opinion regarding the research.
- 16 Population selon la nationalité actuelle et la nationalité à la naissance, Institut bruxellois de statistique et d'analyse, <https://ibsa.brussels/themes/population/nationalites> (accessed on 19 February 2021).
- 17 All names used in this publication are pseudonyms.
- 18 Molenbeek is one of the 19 localities comprising the Brussels region. It is also one of the poorest and youngest. The reputation of Molenbeek has been largely mishandled in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016. See for example "Brussels Neighborhood Struggles to Break Ties to Terrorism. Molenbeek confronts legacy as caldron of Paris and Brussels attacks with policing and job training", Wall Street Journal, 8 February 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/brussels-neighborhood-struggles-to-break-ties-to-terrorism-1518085801> (accessed on 28 September 2021). For example, a highly mediatized and controversial French polemicist, Eric Zemmour, declared on a prominent French radio in November 2015 that France should better bombard Molenbeek than Raqqa (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=px9LzRmevgY>, accessed on 12 October 2021).
- 19 The word bled comes from Arabic "balad" and is used in slang to mean "town" or "country" and refer more precisely to the place of origin of the parents and grandparents.
- 20 "Education and Training Monitor 2020", European Commission, <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor-2020/countries/belgium.html> (accessed on 4 October 2021).
- 21 The DEBEST-dataset is based on a sample of 1883 pupils of grade 10 from 24 schools in Brussels. 1261 completed the questions on Brussels. The differences between the youngsters with a Belgian ( $n = 365$  in this sample), Turkish ( $n = 154$ ) and Moroccan background ( $n = 538$ ), on the question recoded in three answer categories (negative, moderate, positive) are significant at a level of  $p < 0.05$  (Likelihood chi-square of 10.91 with 4 df –  $p = 0.03$ ).
- 22 Antwerp is a Flemish city in the North of the country and the most populated Belgian municipality with an important level of ethnic diversity. Its mayor is also the leader of the Flemish Nationalist Party with a strong discourse regarding immigration and the integration of migrants.
- 23 Bruges is a well-known and highly touristic Flemish city due to its importance for the Primitive painters during the Middle Ages. Bruges is sometimes dubbed the "Venice of the North".



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