



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Postcolonial Flaneur. Ramsey Nasr's 'Antwerpse stadsgedichten'
Minnaard, L.

Citation

Minnaard, L. (2013). The Postcolonial Flaneur. Ramsey Nasr's 'Antwerpse stadsgedichten'. *Dutch Crossing*, 37(1), 79-92. doi:10.1179/0309656412Z.00000000026

Version: Accepted Manuscript

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/87355>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Postcolonial Flaneur **Ramsey Nasr's *Antwerpse stadsgedichten***

Liesbeth Minnaard

Abstract

In 2005 Ramsey Nasr, poet of Palestinian-Dutch background, was appointed City Poet of Antwerp. The nine poems that he wrote during this one-year-appointment were published in his third poetry collection *onze-lieve-vrouwe-zeppelin* (2006). This paper explores the ways in which Nasr's poems explore the urban space of the Flemish city of Antwerp and represent the various inhabitants of the Flemish metropolis. It investigates the work of the poet-with-official-status, the representative poet so to speak, and scrutinises his poetic strolls through the city. Through close analysis of three selected poems the paper examines how this work represents the Antwerp cityscape and how these poems stage several urban encounters. By reading the poems as examples of a third phase of literary flanerier (whereby flanerier refers to a particularly productive combination of simultaneous moving and seeing, reading and interpreting), this paper sets out to conceptualise what could be called postcolonial flanerier. I use this concept of postcolonial flanerier to reflect on and on search for ways to process the at times overwhelming experience of the globalised (and increasingly globalising) metropolis. Nasr's *Antwerpse stadsgedichten* [Antwerp city poems] feature and perform as a poetic test case of postcolonial flanerier.

Introduction

Ramsey Nasr, actor and poet, is a well-known figure in the Dutch and Flemish public arena. Since his debut as a poet with the poetry collection *27 gedichten & Geen lied* (that was nominated for both the Hugues C. Pernath- and the C. Buddingh'-prize) in 2000, he has contributed widely – poetry and more – on various media and at various occasions. Whereas notions of the ivory-tower-poet and his ivory-tower-poetry have become rather outdated in general, Nasr takes these notions in the complete opposite realm: not only has he made himself known for his virtuoso performances of language, both in text and on stage, but in his work as 'representative poet' – poet of Antwerp and poet of the Dutch 'patria', Dutch Poet Laureate – he also persistently addresses and criticises contemporary culture and socio-political states of affairs. During his one-year term as Antwerp's City Poet he himself defined his task as writing in 'an extreme here and an extreme now.'¹ And also his most recent publication *Mijn nieuwe vaderland. Gedichten van crisis en angst* [My new fatherland. Poems of crisis and fear] (2011) testifies of his determination to write poetry that also takes position on topical matters.²

Interesting here is the role, the task, if not the obligation that poetry (apparently) has when it is written from this particular, officially representative position. An appointment as poet laureate involves answering to certain expectations, even giving in to certain demands. Poems are supposed to speak to and for 'the people' – the inhabitants of Antwerp and the citizens of the Netherlands – by addressing issues, in whatever creative form, related to these two spatial realms. In the first situation this realm is the lived space of a city, in the other it is the more imaginary construct of a national community. Obviously,

these realms accommodate many positions, identities, and voices. The difficult, if not impossible task (the challenge if you want) of being representative as a poet, is to write poetry that, in one way or another, appeals to and simultaneously gives voice to all inhabitants of these spatial realms, poetry that re-presents the full breath of this multitude.

This paper focuses on the poems that Nasr wrote during his one-year appointment as City Poet of Antwerp in 2005.³ As I aim to show in this paper, Nasr's *Antwerpse stadsgedichten* [Antwerp city poems] speak in many voices, and, in doing so, come close to being representative of the many-faced population of this multi-faceted city (again: as far as possible). They present the reader (or listener: all poems were also read at public manifestations in the city) with an image of Antwerp as a city of diversity and polyglossia that is home to many, and not only to the so-called 'Sinjoren', the proud if not arrogant class of born and bred Antwerpians, and – not unimportant when it comes to identity – the speakers of the Antwerp dialect. It is important to know here that the Antwerp population is categorised according to a strict hierarchy. This hierarchy positions the 'truly native' Sinjoren at the top. 'Pagadders', a local expression, are born in Antwerp, but of parents from elsewhere. As a result they are placed below the Sinjoren. At the very bottom of the hierarchy sit all others, including immigrants and (disputably at the lowest position) persons from the other side of the river Schelde. This stratification is a clear example of the technology of nativity at work.⁴

Nasr's position as a 'representative poet'

Although this paper first and foremost concentrates on (the analysis of) Nasr's *Antwerp City Poems*, in the case of a poet laureate it appears difficult to fully accept the adage that the author is dead. These are poems that Nasr in a certain sense wrote in commission, and in response to actual happenings in Antwerp during his city-poet-term.⁵ The fact that the poems explicitly stage a poet laureate called 'ramsey' further add up to the temptation to at least consider a reading that conflates the author Ramsey Nasr with the poetic persona 'ramsey'. For that reason I will start this paper with some introduction on Nasr's position as Antwerp City Poet. Following this, I will shortly examine the historical concept of flanerier and then discuss the notion of what in my paper's title I have called postcolonial flanerier, flanerier in the age of globalisation. I use the term postcolonial in this paper in a rather broad sense, as a reference to our contemporary world (or world order as described in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's highly influential *Empire*) that is after decolonisation in temporal terms, but in which power relations and inequalities established during colonialism are still in many ways determinant.⁶ This implies that the term postcolonial is not restricted to people and places that were actively involved in colonialism, but that it refers to today's globalised world order that affects us all. After this introduction on Nasr as Antwerp City Poet I will read three of Nasr's nine city poems through this conceptual lens of flanerier in order to see what these poems tell us about the contemporary Antwerp metropolis.

With the nativity-based Antwerp hierarchy that I discussed above in mind, it does not surprise that the appointment of Nasr as officially representative poet of the Flemish city of Antwerp caused quite some controversy. The differences of opinion mainly concerned the (in)appropriateness of Nasr's background. First of all, Nasr was not 'from Antwerp': he wasn't born in the city, although at the time of his nomination he had been a relatively long-term citizen of the city (he had been living in Antwerp for over a decade). Following from the fact that Nasr is not a native inhabitant of Antwerp nativity, he is not (or not considered) a 'legitimate' speaker of the Antwerp dialect.⁷ Secondly, Nasr is not Belgian but Dutch – 'een Hollander', a Dutch-man – and thirdly, Nasr is what some people call a hyphenated Dutchman (a Palestinian-Dutchman).⁸ Interestingly, this last aspect of Nasr's identity did not per definition function as a disqualification in this specific situation (as, embarrassingly, is still regularly the case in other situations). It even appeared as if Nasr's marked Dutchness brought him closer to the likewise marked Dutchophone identity of the Flemish. What did feature as an obstacle, however, was a rather outspoken essay about the Israelian-Palestinian conflict that Nasr wrote shortly before his appointment. The liberal councilman Ludo van Campenhout as well as the xenophobic right-wing party Vlaams Belang vehemently objected to Nasr's election, arguing that it appeared that Nasr was going to instrumentalise his position for propagating and furthering the Palestinian cause, thus politicising the City Poet institution in intolerable ways. Although this protest caused a roar of media attention, in the end it could not, however, prevent Nasr's appointment.

Obviously (and as mentioned before), when it comes to interpreting literature, these observations problematically emphasise the author's biography. However, in my analyses I will show that 'being foreign' is an important theme in the poems – which lends my mentioning of Nasr's much-debated 'foreignness' a content-based motivation. Moreover, the fact that these poems were written in commission and from a public position as officially appointed City Poet provides a further justification for this consideration of background. For a suchlike 'representative poet' background certainly matters.

The Concept of Flanerie

One of the earliest texts that discusses flanerie – and the figure of the flaneur – as a particularly modern practice is Charles Baudelaire's 'Le peintre de la vie moderne' [The painter of modern life], written in 1859. In this text Baudelaire distinguishes two types of specifically modern males: the dandy and the flaneur. He gives preference to the last, the prototype of the modern artist whose main talent is his passionate but uninvolved observation of the swarm of metropolitan life. It is the flaneur who, according to Baudelaire, succeeds in capturing the evanescent beauty of the early modern everyday.⁹

Almost a century later it is Baudelaire himself who appears as the modern artist *par excellence* in the work of Walter Benjamin. In his texts 'Der Flaneur' [The flaneur] (1938/1967) and 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire' [On some motifs in Baudelaire] (1939/1969) Benjamin praises Baudelaire as a writer who 'placed the shock experience [the key experience of modernity according to Benjamin] at the

center of his artistic work' (Benjamin 1969: 163). Visual impressions, but also synaesthesia take center stage in the often-overwhelming experience of modern life by the flaneur who himself, however, occupies an ec-centrical position in relation to the metropolis and its inhabitants. Whereas Baudelaire's literary explorations of 19th century Paris (e.g. his *Tableaux Parisiens*) generally count as the first phase of flanerier (together with the writings of Poe), Benjamin's retrospective essay itself is considered part of the second phase of flanerier in the first half of the twentieth century. Now flanerier – as a particularly productive combination of moving and seeing – is conceptualized as paradigmatic for the experience of the modern metropolis.

In 1929 Benjamin published a review of Franz Hessel's book *Spazieren in Berlin*, the bible of modern flanerier, and titled the review: 'Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs' ['The Return of the Flaneur']. Benjamin describes how Hessel's flaneur loiters through busy Berlin, collecting impressions, observing, registering, from – and this is important – a self-chosen and mobile position in the margin. Not driven by any aim or intent, he gets lost and enjoys this, putting aside any urge to refind his way. His (flanerie) is a deliberate cultivation of disorientation. The second-phase-flaneur masters what Hessel in his *Spazieren in Berlin* calls 'die schwierige Kunst spazieren zu gehen', the difficult art of taking a walk. This difficult art comprises the narrative attempt to portray metropolitan life of transit and transition, to translate the experience of the huge transformations in modern metropolitan life into text. The act of perception during the aimless strolling through the city comes down to a kind of reading of the city, to an activity of translation. In Hessel's phrasing:

Flanieren ist eine Art Lektüre der Straße, wobei Menschengesichter, Auslagen, Schaufenster, Café-Terrassen, Bahnen, Autos, Bäume zu lauter gleichberechtigten Buchstaben werden, die zusammen Worte, Sätze und Seiten eines immer neuen Buches ergeben. (1968: 131).

Flanerier is a kind of reading the street, in such a way that human faces, displayed goods, shop windows, rails, cars, trees become genuinely equitable letters, that together make words, lines and pages of an ever new book.

In this passage Hessel seems to emphasize the parity of the various elements, and the arbitrary, incidental nature of their combination into text.

The flaneur, who by the way remains emphatically male,¹⁰ translates the overwhelming experience of the city, the kaleidoscopic succession of visual and sensory impressions into a textual narrative of modernity. In doing so, the flaneurist gaze constitutes a new form of focalisation (including a new form of subjectivity) that answers to what Benjamin calls 'the crisis of perception' in modernity. The urban structure of consciousness of the flaneur becomes a prerequisite for the literary digestion of modern metropolitan experience. His fragmentary, contingent and highly subjective impressions take leave of more realist modes of representation that have now grown insufficient. In this phase, the flaneur himself always stays at the social sideline: his flanerier is a highly individual and detached practice. He strolls through the city and loses himself in the crowd without any consequences. His flanerier remains without any substantial form of social contact, let alone commitment.

In this paper I propose to consider Nasr's *Antwerp City Poems* as part of a next, third phase of urban loitering.¹¹ Nasr's flaneur, or even Nasr as flaneur, is now walking the streets of the multicultural metropolis of the 21st century, the urban spaces of the current age of globalisation. He too, like Baudelaire and Hessel before him, combines city-strolling with a practice of reading the city and of translating urban observations into poetic texts. Obviously, times and the city have again changed. Just like the second phase of flanerier departs from the first in its assessment of early 20th century modernity and the ways in which this modernity manifests itself in urban life, also the third phase distinguishes itself from its predecessors. I will now investigate the nature of one example of this third-phase, early 21st century flanerier by turning to Nasr's *Antwerp City Poems* now.

Each of Nasr's *Antwerp City Poems* is in some way or another related to the city of Antwerp, and thus in some way or another contributes to the production of 21st century Antwerp locality. A recurring theme in several of the poems is the experience of being out of place, of non-belonging. When it comes to flanerier, this outsider status, the idea of the flaneur as someone who remains at the sideline, who is different is nothing new. However, other than with the previously described positions of flaneuristic detachment, this 'being out of place' is mostly not self-chosen. It results from processes of marginalisation and exclusion, from being perceived as non-belonging by other Antwerp citizens who appear to have older rights and more legitimate claims – Antwerp citizens who, apparently, denominative power.

In the following analysis I will demonstrate how in several poems the 'lyrical subject' arguably performs as a present-day, postcolonial flaneur. On the one hand this flaneur embodies the experience of being (or feeling) out of place, an experience that, as has various scholars have repeatedly argued,¹² can be seen as paradigmatic for our current age of globalisation. On the other hand, he also questions his status of out-of-placeness by means of his literary exploration of urban space, represented by his critical and simultaneously sanctioned poems. This particular flaneuristic position is ambivalent: he is the outsider *and* the City Poet. This flaneur is without a 'legitimate' voice, given the fact that legitimacy is very much dependent on origin, on autochthony in this situation, and simultaneously he is the sanctioned city representative, Antwerp's poet laureate.

Approaching Antwerp

The very first poem that Nasr published in his official role as City Poet is 'stadplant' [city plant], in fact a response to the turbulence caused by his election. This poem consists of three parts – dissecting the city plant into roots, stem and flower – and an 'envoi', a dedication. Together these sections feature a dialogue between two distinct speakers: a City Poet that appears as 'lyrical I' in several of the poems, and what appear to be his opponents, a group of native Antwerpians who are sceptical, if not downright negative about the idea of being represented by him.

The first part of ‘stadsplant’, titled ‘de wortel’ [the root], immediately introduces the poet as a flaneur, performing the ‘difficult art’ of strolling the streets of Antwerp, and in this way negotiating his particular City Poet position. The first sentence presents us with a first person narrator, ‘ramsey’ as he names himself at the end of this poem, walking on the so-called ‘leien’, the Antwerp avenues, on a day that is described as sunny.¹³ The initial representation of the scene is one of carefree loitering. This impression is – very paradoxically so – underlined by the casual mentioning that ramsey walks there ‘without helmet’, as if this is an exception. As if the carelessness of the scene is misleading, or even fake.

The following sentence carries on in the same mode of simultaneous confirmation and deconstruction of the lyrical I’s happy-go-lucky state. It specifies ramsey’s condition in seemingly contradictory terms as: ‘ingeburgerd als altijd, vrij als een ijzeren vlinder’ [integrated as always, free as an iron butterfly] (141). It continues with the word ‘volmaakt’ [perfect(ly)] that combines with the ‘gelukkig’ [happy] in the next line:

‘ (...) volmaakt
gelukkig en op deze dag stortte ik gillend omlaag (...):
welkom in Antwerpen’ (141)

‘ (...) perfectly
happy and on this day I tumbled down screaming (...):
welcome to Antwerp’

The stanza proceeds with its sketch of apparent contradictions, as the very positive phrase ‘perfectly happy’ is followed by a fearful experience of falling. The concluding remark ‘welcome to Antwerp’ appears rather cynical in combination with the tumble and fright that come with it. Simultaneously the phrase suggests that the combined pleasant/unpleasant experience of the city is quite typical of Antwerp. In this sense the phrase ‘welcome to Antwerp’ not only welcomes ramsey and the reader to the city, but also points at the possibility to find out what Antwerp (assumedly) is like: meet Antwerp, get to know Antwerp.

Whereas the first part of the poem describes how ramsey’s attitude towards Antwerp forcedly changes from carefree enjoyment of the city to a struggling sounding out of its hidden layers, the second part of the poem, titled ‘de stengel’ [the stem], gives voice to the ‘Sinjoren’ who articulate their fear and their mistrust about what is supposed to be ‘their’ City Poet: ‘natuurlijk hadden we bang’ [of course we were afraid] (143) and ‘wat hij daar deed / we weten het niet’ [what he was doing there / we do not know] (143). As it turns out, the threat that they perceive mainly lies in ramsey’s practice of ‘versifying’ and in the way that he explore and appropriates what they consider to be their city in his poems. In their phrasing: ‘wat wil de dichter? Hij wil kansloos paren met onze stad’ [what does the poet want? He wants to mate with our city without standing a chance] (143).¹⁴ The formulation of mistrust in sexual terms that resonate the 19th century discourse of miscegenation, suggests that fear for the loss of an assumed purity is involved here. The adverb ‘kansloos’ [without standing a chance] not only gives voice to the

scepticism of the Sinjoren, but also seems to function as a kind of conjuration. It colours the attempt at union, at mating with Antwerp, as failure at forehand.

The use of the possessive pronoun ‘our’ [our city] in the answer functions as a means of exclusion. It constructs a ‘we’, a community to which the ‘I’ does not belong. At various instances in the poem this community is specified as:

‘(...) (wij: clémentine, thérèseke, onze frans
ons milou, marjetje, de swa, de mil, de neus, onze rudy moustache
ons florreke, de senne, de fonne, den tuur, ons yvon en de schele mon)’ (143)

‘(...) (we: clémentine, thérèseke, our frans
our milou, marjetje, the swa, the mil, the neus, our rudy moustache
our florreke, the senne, the fonne, the tuur, our yvon and the cross-eyed mon)’

The typically local names and the sense of intimacy, conveyed by the locally specific use of possessive pronouns and the diminutive form, make the ‘we’ appear as a truly native collective. However, it seems that ‘ramsey’ – the stranger, the outsider – is determined not to let himself be held back by this native ‘we’ from poetically representing Antwerp. He responds to the suspicion by, ‘ongevraagd’ [unasked for], offering his auditors a ‘citytrip *lyrisch aufsteigen*’ – and takes them with him on a ‘lyrical elevation’ in both figurative and literal terms.

The city trip of a very special kind takes place in the third part of the poem, titled ‘de bloem’ [the flower]. This part puts the city in the centre of attention. Up in the sky, looking down on the city that lies spread out below them, ramsey invites his involuntary travel companions to show him, the foreigner, her secrets. He encourages them to teach him the language of ‘their’ city and to initiate him into what he calls her ‘code’, for instance in the following stanza:

‘zeg mij a.u.b. A waar het verschil zit tussen kipdorp en klapdorp
B wat de kern is, C wat het sas is, D wat bist, E wat zand, F dries
onderwijs me in de raadsels van wapper, klipper- en klamperstraat’ (145)

‘please tell me A what the difference is between *kipdorp* and *klapdorp*
B what the *kern* is, C what the *sas* is, D what *bist*, E what *zand*, F *dries*
teach me of the mysteries of *wapper*, *klipper*- and *klamperstreet*’

The term ‘code’ in this context seems to refer to the often unspoken rules of (Antwerp) ‘autochthony’ that in current times so effectively works to exclude newcomers.¹⁵

After finishing the lyrical citytrip ramsey asks his passengers: ‘en, hebben we het gezellig gehad’ [and, did we have a good time] (146), thus inviting them to enter into a form of community based on this shared experience. The Sinjoren, however, respond with silence, until one of them, milou, softly mutters a rejection: ‘wa wette gai van ongs stad?’ [in translation into OE: what do you know of our city?] (146). This renewed expression of exclusion in the ‘purest’ Antwerp dialect, phoneticised and in this form also marked as different or even deviant, puts an end to ramsey’s patience. His initial acknowledgement of the Sinjoren’s special status and his willingness to reckon with their air of autochthony, now gives way to a strategy of subversion in a language that harks back to Antwerp’s urban cartography. Ramsey responds

in a vocabulary of Antwerp street names that reveals the Sinjoren's myth of purity as an illusion. By referring to, among others, 'de hollandstraat en de rotterdamstraat', 'de haifstraat' and 'de jeruzalemstraat' (146) ramsey demonstrates the historical presence of the foreign in the city's actual make up. In combination with more 'conceptual' street names like 'de weerstandlaan' [the resistance street], 'de goedendagstraat' [the good day street] and 'de goede hoopstraat' [the good hope street] (146), Antwerp's city map is turned into a discourse that not only features various foreign influences, but also testifies of transnational encounters in the Antwerp contact-zone.

Whereas in this third part's final stanzas the poet thus shows the actual presence of the foreign, of the world, in the names of Antwerp streets and squares, in the envoi the voice and focalisation once more shift to a Sinjoor speaker that again replies to the City Poet. He makes clear that the Sinjoren refuse to partake in what he calls 'uw zweverig straatnamen-tric-trac-spel' [your esoteric tric-trac street name game] (147), making clear that ramsey's style, however connected to Antwerpian space, is not their cup of tea. He emphasises that the Sinjoren will not give in to ramsey's playful poetic performances, unless the poet actually approaches the city, and bridges the distance between his elevated position and life, real everyday life – 'we zijn echt meneer, wij leven' [we are real, sir, we are alive] (147) – in the streets of Antwerp. Unless ramsey 'ruikt (...) de geurende boezem van onze stad' [smells (...) the scented bosom of our city] (147), the 'stadsplant' from nearby, in the capacity of a flaneur that not only comments from a distance but also mingles with the crowd, the City Poet inhabits a sideline rather than a representative position.

The poem's envoi thus encourages the City Poet to adopt an acknowledging, intersubjective gaze to forestall the situation in which the Antwerpians feel like 'gevangenen in zijn gedicht' [prisoners in his poem] (144).¹⁶ The plea does away with flanerie without commitment, with an elitist getting lost in urban space without any contact or consequences. In the words of its autochthonous representative, the city does not accept being observed from a distance, while the City Poet ramsey does not accept the claim of a pure autochthony. In the poem these two positions meet. The result of this poetic encounter is an image of diversity and polyglossia.

Further Encounters

In the poem 'Achter een vierkante vitrine' [Behind a square showcase] a similar situation of encounter appears, again an encounter between two divergent positions under the shadow of mutual mistrust.¹⁷ This second city poem was written at the occasion of the opening of the so-called Kubus at the De Coninck Square, an example of modern urban architecture, housing a city-library in an urban renewal area in Northern Antwerp. In this poem the library appears as a strange element in the urban area described: out of place, incongruous both in terms of architecture and in terms of its intellectual functionality. The library functions as the trigger that makes two discourses bounce: that of the locals of the deprived urban area and that of the readers – 'taalpooiers' [language pimps] (153) and sufferers of 'lettervraat' [letter

gluttony] (157), as they are condescendingly called in the poem – visiting the library that is newly built on the square.

The poem makes use of a racialising, xenophobic discourse to give voice to the local scepticism about the intellectual intruder: ‘t is een ander ras’ [it’s an other race] (149). And, full of nostalgia about the supposed loss of status caused by the ‘intrusion’:

‘dees hier was altijd een nette buurt
met fatsoenlijke hoeren afrikanen verslaafden
(...)
enfin marginalen gelijk gij en ik
alles ging goe en nu krijgen we dit’ (149)

‘this here used to be a neat neighbourhood
with decent hookers Africans addicts
(...)
well marginals like you and me
everything went well and now we get this’

The poem here presents the reader with a tongue-in-cheek repetition of a discourse that is ‘normally’ applied to exclude these marginals themselves. The romanticising of the past and the idealising of a lost unity (as in one of the following lines: ‘met zijn allen’ [all together]) sounds familiar, only the roles have ironically shifted. A spokesman for the original inhabitants of the square, in fact the social ‘scum’ of dominant discourse, now expresses the inhabitants’ negative feelings about what they perceive as ‘lettertuig’ [letter-trash] (150): the readers (and writers) about to seize their territory. Here it is the ‘language mafia’ – the users of a sophisticated, elitist language – that is perceived as a threat to a local Antwerpian community that, despite its marginal position, also perceives of itself as ‘native’, as the only legitimate inhabitants of the now renovated square.

Again the poem stages a collision between two different positions in the Antwerp cityscape. But what also happens again is that the collision transforms into an encounter. The city square local, after venting his anger about the readers’ invasion, is caught by the power of the written word in the moment that he aggressively, and determined to put a stop to the act of gentrification enters the library. The man of the margin meets the man of letters in this poem – what follows is a match despite his initial reluctance. This thematic of encounter across boundaries of language, class and tradition recurs in various other poems. Together they present a poetic image of a multi-faceted Antwerp that speaks in many tongues and discourses, and make this diversity audible. This image shows an Antwerp that has great difficulties straddling its diversity, but that simultaneously cannot but try.

That this diversity – cultural diversity in its broadest sense – is both a challenge and an asset, according to Nasr’s poems, becomes most clear in his final ‘Antwerp city poem.’ This poem is titled ‘voor wie in vreemde landt’ [for whom in foreign parts lands], a phrase in broken Dutch that once again evokes the position of non-belonging, of being an outsider. In the poem a speaker that identifies with a ‘we’, we Antwerpians, addresses ‘atlas.’ This name ‘atlas’ is not only a reference to the mythological

figure carrying the globe, but also refers to the Antwerp centre for integration and equal opportunities of that name, that commissioned this city poem. Referring to Antwerp's past as an enterprising mercantile city, prosperous as a result of its outgoing and open character, the poem again draws on a nostalgic discourse. This time, however, an idealising discourse is used that harks back to days of 'mildheid' [mildness] (207), to Antwerp as a welcoming city that profited from as well as enjoyed its cultural mixing. Throughout the poem it becomes clear that this attitude has now been lost. The speaker in the poem solicits atlas to help the self-estranged Antwerp to replace its current narrow-mindedness and xenophobic arrogance for 'gloednieuwe mythen / van gemengde komaf' [brand-new myths / of mixed origin] (207). The we of this last city poem is an inclusive 'we':

hier zijn we
onder ons

daar zijt ge
onder ons (205)

here we are
among us

there we are
among us

As this passage demonstrates, the poem explicitly includes the newcomers, foreigners, the poet. They all contribute to replenishing Antwerp's open-to-the-world fame and glory. In this sense this final city poem, the poem with which Nasr concluded his term as Antwerp City Poet, is a welcoming poem: welcoming diversity.

Conclusion

It seems as if all three poems that I discussed in this paper feature a particular discourse of nostalgia: the nostalgia of autochthony, the nostalgia of the margin, and the nostalgic mourning of the loss of Antwerp's open-to-the-world attitude. Simultaneously each poem and (ironically) disrupts the nostalgic discourse that it gives voice to by also bringing in other, alternative voices, thus opening a discursive space for dialogic exchange. As a result the sometimes strongly divergent discourses establish an image of a dynamic and multi-faceted city, of an Antwerp that accommodates many voices.

In all three poems the position of ramsey, the poet in the poems, shifts: he finds himself in changing constellations with more or less legitimate speakers and Antwerp citizens, and lends his ear to them all. In this sense Nasr's 'representative poems' do not speak exclusively on behalf of any of the (groups of) inhabitants, but imagine their *interaction* in the far from homogenous Antwerp contact-zone. The City Poet himself – in the poems as well as in the extra-textual world – occupies an ambivalent position: he is out of place (as outsider) and representative (as City Poet) at the same time. His 'flaneurship' adds to the

ambivalence of his position: he is constantly on the move, partaking in Antwerp city life, but never settling, never rooting. This, however, does not mean that he, the flaneur, is only observing the swarm from a distance. On the contrary, ramsey models Hessel's free-floating 'wo gehen statt wohin' (1968: 11), just going rather than going somewhere, into a combined practice of walking and writing that aims at intersubjectivity. This flaneur aims at relation, despite difference(s). It is in this sense that this contemporary, postcolonial flaneur clearly departs from his 19th and 20th predecessors: he turns his 'involuntary' position of displacement into the opposite of a disengaged mode of looking. Rather than strolling the streets but keeping to himself, this postcolonial flaneur emphatically pursues moments of encounter and interaction in an urban contact-zone that has clearly been touched by the transformative effects of globalisation. This is the Antwerp of the 21st century.

Bibliography

- Appadurai, A. (2006). *Fear of Small Numbers. An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.
- Baudelaire, C. (1998). 'The Painter of Modern Life'. In C. Harrison & P. Wood (Eds.), *Art in Theory 1815-1900. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (pp. 493-506). London: Blackwell Publishers.
- Benjamin, W. (1967). Der Flaneur. *Die neue Rundschau*, 78, 549-574.
- Benjamin, W. (1969). On Some Motifs in Baudelaire. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 155-200). New York: Schocken Books.
- Benjamin, W. (1972). Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Vol. 3, pp. 194-199). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Bonfiglio, T. P. (2010). Nativity and the nation state, *Mother Tongues aand Nations. The Invention of the Native Speaker* (pp. 21-40). New York: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Ceuppens, B. (2006). Allochthons, Colonizers and Scroungers: Exclusionary Populism in Belgium. *African Studies Review*, 49(2), 147-186.
- Gilroy, P. (2004). *After Empire. Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia*. London: Routledge.
- Geschiere, P. (2009). *The Perils of Belonging. Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*. Chicago: London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gleber, A. (1999). *The Art of Taking a Walk. Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Goebel, R. J. (2001). *Benjamin heute: Großstadtdiskurs, Postkolonialität und Flanerie zwischen den Kulturen*. München: Iudicium.
- Ham, L. (2011). (Niet) van deze tijd, (niet) van deze wereld. Over het werk van 'pletterloper' Ramsey Nasr. *Ons Erfdeel*, 54(1), 50-57.
- Hessel, F. (1968). *Spazieren in Berlin. Mit einem Nachwort von Janos Frecot und 24 Photographien der Zeit*. München: Rogner & Bernhard.
- Kaminski, W. (2004). Großstadterfahrung männlich/weiblich? Die Darstellung Berlins in den Werken Irmgard Keuns und Erich Kästners, *Erich Kästner Jahrbuch* (Vol. 4, pp. 145-154). Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Konst, J., & Adrichem, A. v. (2010). Skerious ben geen racist. Het politieke dichterschap van Ramsey Nasr. *Parmentier*, 19 (2), 52-61.
- Nasr, R. (2009). *Tussen lelie en waterstofbom. The early years*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.
- Nasr, R. (2012). *Mijn nieuwe vaderland. Gedichten van crisis en angst*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.
- Parsons, D. L. (2000). *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reynebeau, M. (2006, 12 May). I am sorry zenne - de stadsgedichten van Ramsey Nasr. *De Standaard*. Visited at <http://www.standaard.be/artikel/detail.aspx?artikelid=GP7S60NI> on 18 May 2012.
- Young, R. (2012). Postcolonial Remains. *New Literary History*, 43, 19-42.

¹ Cited in Reynebeau (2006).

² In their insightful article on Nasr's thought-provoking poem 'mi have een droom' (2009), Jan Konst and Arnoud van Adrichem argue that Nasr opts for a 'politically motivated authorship' (2010: 52). See also the interesting reflection on Nasr's poetics by Laurens Ham (2011).

³ The ten poems that Nasr wrote during his one-year-appointment as Antwerp City Poet (nine so-called city poems and one poem on personal title) were first published in Nasr's third poetry collection *onze-lieve-vrouwe-zeppelin* (2006) and reprinted in the anthology *Tussen lelie en waterstofbom. The early years* (2009). All *Antwerp City Poems* are also available on the website of Antwerp Book City:

<http://www.antwerpenboekenstad.be/stadsdichters/4/ramsey-nasr>. Two of the city poems ('UtopiA' and 'Een minimum') are still present as murals in the Antwerp cityscape.

⁴ For a discussion of this technology of nativity see the insightful study by Thomas P. Bonfiglio (2010).

⁵ During his term as Antwerp City Poet Nasr is bound by contract to write at least six city poems.

⁶ For an assessment of what remain of postcolonialism and the postcolonial in the 21st century see Robert Young (2012).

⁷ It is striking to notice that the language of several of the poems has a strong Flemish touch to it. The poems make use of a vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and forms of address that qualify as typically Flemish. This is true not only to my Dutch ears, which is quite easy, but also to the ears of several native Antwerpians who I asked for their opinion.

⁸ The fact that Nasr is a hyphenated Dutchman makes him, in the eyes of strict believers in the fable of the priority of the mother tongue, a disjunctive speaker of the Dutch language: someone whose relation to this language is (for various reasons) not always culturally sanctioned (Yildiz 2012).

Nasr's mixed Palestinian-Dutch descent officially makes him a non-western 'allochtoon' (as opposed to the so-called 'autochtoon' – in the identitarian vocabulary used by the Dutch state).

⁹ Baudelaire's main example of a modern artist is the painter Constant Guys.

¹⁰ See, a.o. Gleber (1999).

¹¹ Compare Goebel (2001).

¹² See, for instance, Appadurai (2006) and Gilroy (2004).

¹³ The word 'leien' refers to the lanes that are considered typical of the city of Antwerp. Thus it immediately works to produce Antwerp locality. In the following I use the non-capitalised first name ramsey to refer to the lyrical I in the poem 'stadsplant' and Nasr to refer to the author of the poem.

¹⁴ Here as well as in several other passages, the poem reverts to a strongly sexualised (and also very common) imagination of the urban space as female: the city as a woman, lasciviously waiting to be explored, to be penetrated – by the male flaneur. See e.g. Gleber (1999), Kaminski (2004) and Parsons (2000).

¹⁵ For a discussion of the divisive use of the concept of autochthony in the Netherlands and Flanders see Ceuppens (2006) and Geschiere (2009).

¹⁶ Simultaneously the Sinjoor begins to open the door for the City Poet: if ramsey makes sure to forestall the situation in which the Antwerpians feel like "prisoners in his poem", a stifling form of representation, they will consider joining him on another citytrip *lyrisch opsteigen*.

¹⁷ 'Vitrine' is also the term that in Flemish is used to denote the windows behind which prostitutes offer themselves to passers-by. The area that features in the poem is well known as a red-light district.