

ANTWERPEN - THE CITY, ITS GHOSTS AND THE FUTURE. AND WHAT GENDER AND ETHNICITY HAS TO DO WITH IT

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How do you imagine the future of a city? Cities are made of bricks and concrete, of labour and industry, of capital and bureaucracy, but also of memories and imagination, of communities and identification. How do you imagine the future of a city so haunted by the spectre of nationalism and racism that it makes us anxious, restless, repulsed and, most of the time, utterly immobilized and passive? The decision to anchor *Stitch and Split* in Antwerpen for a number of months was informed by such feelings and an urge to do something, to carve out more possible strategies of intervention in this urban landscape. Science-fiction has not only become increasingly popular as a focus of critical thought, it also stimulates us to create new visions of others worlds possible. The lens of science-fiction allows us to put centre-stage the imaginaries, politics and ethics that shape the urban landscape which we seek to transform.

The landing of *Stitch and Split* in Antwerpen provided an opportunity to take a camera and start asking those whom we crossed in the streets about the city and its future. *The Future of Antwerpen - De toekomst van Antwerpen* is the working title of a project which we barely began. [1] The conversations we had were not many, but they made us uneasy. The story of a young African man who arrived in the country nine years ago and the great difficulties he faced in finding work (mainly through temp agencies). He (carefully) avoided terms as discrimination and racism, and when we (carefully) suggested them his gaze fell to the ground. “It shouldn’t be like that”, he added, “I speak four languages. I should have a chance like anybody else. But I don’t”. The story of a Lebanese man who lived many years in this city which he loved so very much, if only Moroccans would create less trouble. The story of two teenage girls from Mechelen, white and of Moroccan descent, who were truly enchanted by the big city where they came to spend their free afternoons. The story of a bright homeless Romanian child who had come to Antwerpen two years ago and spoke to us in fluent Flemish about how life was better here than in the village back home, and about her plans to get a good education and set up a project for homeless people. The story of a night shop keeper from Bangladesh who emphasized the good opportunities for trade and commerce in the city, and insisted upon the contribution of night shops to the city. (Our conversation took place shortly after the demonstration of mainly Pakistani night shop keepers against accusations from members of the city administration that night shops in Antwerpen would be involved in financial flows to extremist groups). Not to forget the white provincial ladies who came to Antwerpen for shopping, insisting to us that they were unable to say anything about the city since “we are not from here”.

We were struck, in these and other conversations, by what in first instance seemed to be a lack of imagination about the future. Repeatedly our questions about the future of the city were met with the response that things were “more or less okay” as they were. *If only the city were a bit safer*. Safety and security dominated throughout the stories about contemporary life in the city; the theme has been dominating the political discourse in the city for years now, as a corner-stone of Vlaams Blok’s programme, upon which the other political parties, turning their noses to the wind of electoral success, unashamedly cashed in. The set-up of a hegemonic security discourse informed our street conversations in disturbing ways. On the one hand, the persistent dynamic of

locating the cause of insecurity in the presence of “others” (the Moroccans, the prostitution neighbourhood,...), on the other, the persistent ‘solution’ of securing the city through more regulations and more police. At the same time we must insist: for a Romanian homeless girl, a young African looking for a job, a Bangladeshi night shop keeper (now that the Vlaams Belang has opened its campaign against the ‘proliferation’ of night shops and international phoning shops...) etc. safety clearly means something different than the anti-immigrant security discourse marked by racist and nationalist political motives.

The two things that first struck us beg to be connected: the lack of future visions and the pervasive feeling of insecurity. Who really dares to imagine Antwerpen differently these days? How much has the nationalist and racist grip on the city immobilized our imagination and political yearnings? Perhaps this is the quotidian disaster that has been taking place in Antwerpen for many years now and that has come to leave us so disarmed and scattered in our resistance, and ultimately increasingly passive against the continuous attacks of new laws and regulations turning the city into an even more nationalist and racist place. Examples of this resignation abound, let’s think for instance of the ease with which a year ago the knowledge of Flemish was made into a criteria of access to social housing.

We suspended *The Future of Antwerpen* as we were reflecting on ways to engage our interlocutors in the streets into elaborating more of a future vision on the city they inhabit. What one wants to know and how one asks the questions is of course crucial to such reflections, but our concern went beyond the realm of methodology. Very soon we were confronted with questions concerning the framework of the project. Asking people in the street to speculate upon the future of their city seemed to pose a number of problems and the spectre and language of science-fiction did not help us out at all. Meanwhile some of us were engaged in two other film projects, and I propose to read the suspension of *The Future of Antwerpen* through the lens of those projects, which were also conceived as brief journeys through the city, urban encounters with a camera and a similar set of questions and concerns. In the summer of 2005 Next Generation Brussels, with its crucial anchor in Antwerpen, embarked upon a project called *Gebroken wit – Blanc cassé*. This is a project about whiteness, which seeks to open and create ways to talk about positions and dynamics of supremacy within the power relations of ethnicity. Turning the spot-light on positions of power tends to meet with great resistance: there is something infinitely more comfortable in supporting oppressed or subaltern subjects in their struggle for emancipation and liberation, than in scrutinizing one’s own privileges and connecting to liberation struggles through de-constructing and giving up such privileges. Too often we find ourselves surrounded by, and relying upon, white anti-racist strategies that remain entirely blind to questions of white privilege and are consequently complicit in the reproduction of everyday racism. Yet in the context of our women’s movements and feminist struggles we must insist that for white women it should not be so difficult to understand the dynamics at least in theory: [2] in the process of our feminist struggles we do not only ask for men’s solidarity, but we demand real change and giving up of privileges. Just like the struggle for global justice and against capitalism does not ask for support and sympathy from the rich countries and the rich elites, but for serious material and symbolic redistribution.

Gebroken wit – Blanc cassé is an attempt to seek and create a language, methodology and practices informed by the awareness and urgency to address white privileges, in particular in the context of left-wing and women’s movements. [3] We chose to start the project with street interviews that might give us a better understanding of the words and discourses on ethnicity and whiteness that circulate among white people in this country in general; and we decided to do a first session of these street interviews in Antwerpen. During a late summer rainy afternoon we set up a camera at an entrance to the central train station and convinced as many white people we could to answer three questions for what we presented, very vaguely, as a school project on the city. There is something discomfiting about selecting people on the basis of how their looks speak to our imaginaries about ethnicity. This is a practice which of course happens all the time, and which is indeed central to the very construction of ethnicity in our societies. But like other operations of ideology and hegemony, at least a part of this dynamic is obscured and not acknowledged as such. Police practices of targeting people with an Arab or Middle-Eastern appearance in the streets, for instance, are mediated through a dense web of social phenomena that

are believed to be connected to each other, such as illegality, criminality and terrorism, and linked through a set of statistical correlations to certain categories of people. These imaginaries usually 'work', meaning, among other things, that their truth is recognized without too many questions (about e.g. the arbitrariness of many statistical operations). Underlying assumptions and their political character become visible only in those instances when the imaginary stutters, stumbles or fails in relation to reality. A story about a police action at a *Blokker* shop a number of years ago illustrates the point. Motivated by rumours of *Blokker's* employment of workers without papers or legal residency, the police raided the shop and separated the workers according to the colour of their skin. After having extensively checked the non-white workers, the police left the premises unable to find the "illegals" they were looking for. Yet there had been workers without necessary papers, the rumours say, only they came from various East European countries and in the moment of the raid they found themselves protected by the privilege of whiteness.

In the case of *Gebroken wit – Blanc cassé* the "ethnic screening" was quite naked: there was no other reason for stopping people than the mere fact of them *looking* white. Addressing white people as white is not a common practice at all. It is our experience that people get upset and even angry when we do. Most often whiteness is equally veiled by an entire web of mediating notions that allow us to avoid bringing up ethnicity in direct ways; in the Belgian context these include references to names, neighbourhoods or socio-economic positions that are implicitly understood as white. Moreover, our discomfort in assuming this conscious ethnic screening on the streets was matched with a number of instances that reminded us of the unstable and contested nature of ethnicity. As I was addressing passengers on their way in and out of the central station, on more than one occasion the consciousness of specifically addressing white people simply left me, and I found myself responding to a friendly face and friendly eyes only to 'see' that the person was not white when it was 'too late' and I had already asked him or her to participate. Also, on more than one occasion the person in front of the camera they would say that he or she was, "as you can see", not white. (These were people with an East European background.)

We asked three questions. *Introduce yourself*. The politics of presentation: what do you say when you present yourself? We were interested in finding out whether some notion of ethnicity would be brought up in any kind of way. It mostly wasn't; the absence of ethnic references was indeed very marked. Rare exceptions occurred when people mentioned an East-European background, which tells us something about different shades of whiteness. *What do you understand by ethnicity?* What we suspected was the case: many people had no clue. An odd one here or there asked hesitantly whether it had "something to do with races?" The adjective "ethnic" provoked more signs of recognition: ethnic food, ethnic music – "yes, we have many festivals here in Antwerpen". This shift is not innocent: more than ethnicity "ethnic" refers to the ethnic "other", and thus whiteness – as a dominant position within a set of social relations of power – disappears again. This disjuncture between the concepts we rely upon in order to do our critical work and politics, and the concepts that white passengers through Antwerpen Centraal on a rainy Wednesday afternoon and early evening needs to be taken very seriously. We thought of alternatives, words that we know ring a bell, but in first instance we were discouraged by the weight of these words and the ghosts they summon up. There's an understanding of "where one is from", which grounds the institutionalized *allochtoon-autochtoon* distinction that functions in a clearly racist way without acknowledging it. And there's a notion of "people" (volk), which is over determined by the rally cry "eigen volk eerst" ("our own people first") of the Vlaams Blok, now Vlaams Belang, and its racist imaginary. *What does it mean to you to be white?* Our last question caused much incomprehension, astonishment, bewilderment, also anger. Clearly nobody was very used to be addressed in those terms; nobody seemed to have a response that could build on earlier reflections or elaborations on the matter (except for those with an East European background). Some white folks didn't want to comment, others got very defensive. "I am not a racist!" Some quickly moved into a power-evasive humanist discourse: "All people are all human beings; we shouldn't be making these differences". Others embarked upon their reflections through comparison, speculating how their lives would be different if they would have been born as a black person. We noted that in some of these speculations the social landscape changed to the South or a Third World country, revealing a greater imaginary on being non-white outside of Belgium, than being part of Belgian society as a non-white person. One white young man, one of

the leaders of a boy scouts group that was visiting the Antwerpen Zoo next to the station, responded through a reference to colonialism. It was the only reference to the extremely bloody and still mainly silenced colonial past of this country, and its legacy on, among other things, the supremacy and privileges intertwined with whiteness in Belgium. Distancing provided yet another position vis-à-vis being addressed as white. “As you can see”, a young woman from Slovenia said, “I am not white”, thus pointing to the different “shades” of whiteness, i.e. different positionings within a complex net of power structures around ethnicity.

The second project I wish to bring into relation to *The Future of Antwerpen* is a video made in October and November 2005 in the context of five years of Steunpunt voor Allochtone Meisjes en Vrouwen (SAMV). [4] This joyful anniversary was celebrated in many ways all throughout Flemish cities and Brussels, bringing together an impressive network of friends and political allies that conglomerate around SAMV. For the celebrations Antwerpen SAMV wanted to organize, besides the theatre play on the basis of women’s stories of migration which toured in all of the cities, a debate on how women from various minority groups inhabit the city. From the beginning we felt a strong desire to get a larger number of women involved in such conversations, notably through gathering and recording what women had to tell about the city. We were invited to meet women at the Internationaal Vrouwen Centrum Antwerpen and the Koerdisch Centrum Antwerpen Noord, also SAMV members and friends in Antwerpen offered us their stories, and once again we took the camera to the streets and parks and interviewed women we encountered on our wanderings. *Haar Antwerpen* is the result, a film made of the narratives of women mostly, but not only, from ethnic and/or religious minorities. *Haar Antwerpen* speaks back to hegemonic discourses on the city in different and complex ways. The film interpellates the city’s latest campaign against the sustained rise of racist sentiments and politics – a campaign which is paradigmatic of the conditions of late capitalism. While the city government implements measures that further institutionalize nationalist and racist politics on the one hand, and undermine economic and social security on the other, it simultaneously commissions an advertisement agency to develop a campaign that could refashion the city’s image and foster “inclusion” and “participation” of the city’s inhabitants. Some time and a great amount of euros later Antwerpen is filled with posters and billboards announcing that *’t Stad is van iedereen*. (“The city belongs to everybody”). The narratives of *Haar Antwerpen* demonstrate, directly and indirectly, that the city does not belong to everybody: neighbourhoods, streets (at night), jobs, etc. are clearly marked in terms of who is welcome and who is not, on which conditions. The conversations which ground the film project revolve around three themes. *Space*. Which spaces are used by whom and accessible to whom? Which spaces do women inhabit easily, which spaces make us more anxious? What are the spaces for meeting others? *The freedom to move*. How do we go around in the city? What limits and what enhances our freedom to move? *Security/safety*. Where and when do we feel safe? Where and when not?

Once more we were up against a strong hegemonic discourse of insecurity – as one of the women put it “I don’t think anybody feels safe any more in Antwerpen”. We were also confronted with the dynamic of pointing to ‘others’ as the cause of insecurity. But the narratives of how women inhabit the city also explicitly reclaims the question of security: among other things, women point to a lack of recognition for and institutionalization of diversity as the cause of not feeling at home, they denounce a lack of legal residency and paper as a factor of extreme precariousness, they consider the continuous electoral success of what now is called the Vlaams Belang as a great source of insecurity, they identify social control and the fear for gossip as a restriction of one’s freedom of movement, they insist on how cultural associations and women’s spaces are necessary for empowerment and the sharing of language, experience and strength. The film does not sketch a happy future for Antwerpen, on the contrary, but it does convey a strong sense of women’s strategies of doing daily life and fighting to make space for their concerns, needs and identities.

These brief impressions of two projects have lead us far from the language or genre of science-fiction, far from direct questions about the future. Yet in different ways they offer us glimpses of futures in the making; this is especially the case for *Haar Antwerpen*. As our cities are not only build, but also told, the question of *which narratives and conversations to start from*, and to build our alliances and politics on, must be central to our concerns. *Gebroken wit* draws our attention to

another crucial point of departure: the need to unpack the privileges and positions of dominance, which usually remain invisible to a 'self' invested with those privileges, as the centre of power is blind. In sum, we are talking, once more, about the need to think and act in a situated way. The ways we inhabit the city, the ways we speak about our desires and yearnings but also about what we dread, the language and genres that we draw upon, indeed the very way we talk about the future, are situated and marked by number of axes of power. If this discussion of recent investigations in the streets of Antwerpen of narratives, concepts and imaginaries of its inhabitants brought us far from science-fiction, it is because the languages and frameworks of science-fiction did not prove to be useful tools in our conversations. Thus we came to understand how culturally situated the language of science-fiction was. And as it was important to us to establish the connection between the heavy spectre of security discourse in the city and what seemed a lack of a direct imaginary on the future of Antwerpen, we need to consider the relation between the security spectre haunting the city and the resignation of remaining within a certain cultural niche – not in the least that of high cultural capital. After all, it is less discomfoting – safer one could say – to keep our cultural frameworks that sustain our imaginaries and critiques, intact. Once more the burning question: Who really dares to imagine, and to do, Antwerpen differently these days? We believe we need to seek for alliances, not on the basis of remaining on the safe grounds of our comfortable notions, frameworks and privileges, but on the basis of unpacking and undoing these. During the journey of our various Antwerpen conversations, the figure of the daring one that emerges is, perhaps not inappropriate in these times of global war, that of a female Kurdish warrior, Héline, in the song of a woman sings in *Haar Antwerpen*. Paraphrasing the words of Héline, who decides to go to the mountains to fight for her rights as a woman and as part of an ethnic minority, the city will either have to accept those who live there, its subaltern or minority subjects, or it will be destroyed, or they will leave, and leave a dessert behind.

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[1] The Future of Antwerpen was a collaboration between Constantvzw and Next Generation Brussels.

[2] Peggy McIntosh (1989) takes as a point of departure in “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”

[3] Gebroken wit – Blanc cassé is an on-going project started by Next Generation Brussels and joined friends.

[4] Haar Antwerpen was a collaborative project of Constantvzw, NextGeneration Brussels and SAMV.

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