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## **Political Positioning and Academic Complicity** **A Case of Plausible Deniability in Nationalistic History Writing**

*Jef Verschueren*

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# Political Positioning and Academic Complicity

## A Case of Plausible Deniability in Nationalistic History Writing

*Jef Verschueren*\*

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### Abstract

This article summarizes an analysis of a recent piece of Flemish history writing originating as a politically formulated identity-strengthening project. The recruited academics carrying out the project explicitly reject a political positioning in support of such identitarian goals. Though they succeed in establishing plausible deniability, the question is: Does the end product meet the political goals, in spite of the authors' distancing themselves from them? The analysis shows that it does, making it hard to avoid a charge of academic complicity.

**Schlagwörter:** political positioning, complicity, nationalism, identity, history writing

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## 1 Introduction

Various aspects of political positioning, mediatization, and (self-)representation have been recurrent themes throughout our honoree's significant contribution to an understanding of public discourse (as exemplified in Gruber 1993, 2015, 2019, to mention just a few milestones). This line of work is amongst the most challenging in the humanities and social sciences. Investigations of political discourse are not value-free, and it would be irresponsible to think so. Yet, we must be able to maintain that research results, which may overtly support specific political positions, are not just another opinion in the wake of a research design that already surreptitiously supports such positioning. This is even more challenging when academics engage in scholarly projects carried out at the request of politicians who also provide the financing. In this article I will focus on one such project and I will ask to what extent (hidden) academic complicity is involved with (overt) political positioning.<sup>1</sup>

The project in question was *De Canon van Vlaanderen* (Gerard et al. 2023), an historical narrative intended as a representative account of what is worth remembering about Flemish history and of the cultural knowledge that should be shared by everyone living in Flanders today. Its origin was an undisguised political attempt to formalize or officialize the essential knowledge (a *canon*) needed to be part of a common Flemish identity. I quote the Flemish government's policy statement (September 2019):

A shared society is only possible if our young generations realize where we come from. It is essential that we can unwaveringly live the Flemish identity, for instance through shared symbols. Against that background we ask a group of independent experts to set up a scientifically based Canon of Flanders. This concerns a list of anchoring points from our Flemish culture, history and sciences, which can be used to buttress education as well as integration trajectories. We also envisage a museum that opens our Flemish history for a wide public.

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1 In the context of this article only a summary of my analysis can be provided. For the full text in Dutch, see Verschueren (2024).

Also the VRT [the Flemish public broadcasting system] contributes to the Flemish identity. (*Regeerakkoord, Vlaamse regering 2019-2024*, p. 11; my translation)

We'll ask whether the committee of (recruited) 'independent experts' managed to produce a 'scientifically based' product or whether it ended up supporting a political Flemish-nationalist project. To answer the question, we will not only have to look at literal *content*, but – as every pragmatist knows – at discursive aspects that determine the book's social *resonance* or the context that (in Silverstein's words) is 'projected.'<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Plausible deniability

What strikes immediately is the complete absence – even literal denial – of an essential connection between the popularizing-academic product and the political project underlying it. The financial link is acknowledged in the Preface (“commissioned by the Flemish government”) but in the same breath conceptual imperatives are denied (the *Canon* was written “in complete freedom”). This solemn declaration of independence, which shields both the government and the committee from the suspicion of politically driven historiography, is immediately preceded by a sentence that should rebut the main possible objection:

[it was] our conviction that the *Canon van Vlaanderen* could only succeed and would only have a right to exist if it was detached from the definition of a national identity. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 6)<sup>3</sup>

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- 2 For an exposition of the concept of resonance, see David Beaver & Jason Stanley (2023). Briefly: the term *content* is a metaphor, as texts are not containers; this metaphor is usually used to refer to what is literally said; *resonance* is no more than an alternative metaphor referring to meaning that is not literally expressed but still communicated. While *content* refers to information, *resonance* emphasizes language as an act with real social consequences. About the 'projection' of context in the course of emergent textuality, see Silverstein (2023).
  - 3 References to the *Canon* are always to the original version in Dutch (Gerard et al. 2023); translations are my own.

The same point is made in the ministerial mandate letter. But are we then to believe that the committee succeeded in convincing the government to pay for pursuing a project that explicitly distances itself from the objectives that were equally explicitly behind it? Are we really to believe that the Flemish government would be satisfied with a product that would not embody its own distinct cultural-nationalist aspirations? That seems very unlikely. Politicians are not naive. It is more plausible that the political 'clients' were convinced that their identitarian goals would also be achieved without direct substantive interference and without further explicit appeal to the concept of identity.

We need not doubt the honest intentions of the members of the canon committee. As far as I know, none of them has partisan interests to defend and they have visibly done their best to offer a nuanced spectrum of historical perspectives. Yet the question remains: Does the *Canon*, as it is now before us, support a political Flemish-nationalist project?

For an analysis, we start at the broadest level: the book as a tangible object. The richly illustrated and outsized text (21 x 26 cm) of 319 pages was presented to the general public under great media interest by the publisher, the members of the canon committee, and the Flemish Minister-President (also Minister of Culture) and the Flemish Minister of Education. Since then, the *Canon* has been functioning as a flag. When we see images of the Minister of Education in his working environment, the *Canon* is visibly displayed.



**Fig. 1:** Flagging the *Canon* (source: *belga.be*).

Flags are the prime example of what Michael Billig (1995) called “banal nationalism”. Nationalism becomes ‘banal’ from the moment when a ‘nation’ begins to behave as a naturally given entity and marks this with inconspicuous but recognizable symbols. The *Canon* as a flag fits this picture, and all the better after an official denial of a link between the *Canon* and the definition of a national identity (in the ministerial mandate letter) and an honest attempt to avoid that link (by the members of the canon committee), have provided *plausible deniability*. The demining of a possible controversy allows the Ministers of Education and Culture to say that the *Canon* will not become compulsory material for education and integration projects. They now literally claim that they expect a simple exhortation to guarantee widespread use. Coming from a government, an exhortation may indeed suffice. The flag will fly, without being permanently and conspicuously waved. As a *text* the *Canon* does not merely symbolize an idea: it represents the idea’s full textual and contextual layering. In what follows we examine some of those layers of meaning.

### 3 The 'Flemishness' of history

Some time ago I pushed the *Canon* text (without the title and without the Preface) through Chat-pdf and I asked "What are the most common themes?" In the answer that was generated, nothing was said about Flanders: the text was supposed to be about the Low Countries, specifically Belgium and the Netherlands. Apparently, the naive reading of an AI language model does not immediately see the *Canon* as a grand coherent 'story of Flanders'. So, the canon committee has really done its best to make Flanders only an 'observation point' and not an 'horizon' (as solemnly promised in the Preface). But is that also the effect for the ordinary reader?

Though the recounted history goes far beyond Flanders (and is in most cases not specifically Flemish at all), the narrative is covered by a layer of 'Flemishness.' The name *Flanders* is the most common noun in this text (174 times, more or less equal to *century/centuries* and *year/years*, but ahead of the *Netherlands* and *Belgium*). Among the adjectives, *Flemish* (used 167 times) is preceded only by *big* and *new* (but it leaves *many*, *Belgian* and *European* far behind). Combine this with *Fleming* (which occurs 39 times), and the reference to Flanders as an entity does figure quite prominently. Clearly, these are the key words. The question is, then, when and how they are used. There are essentially four types of use – for a good understanding of which you need to compare Figures 2 and 3:





Fig. 2: Map of Flanders in the Middle Ages ([nl.wikisage.org](http://nl.wikisage.org))



Fig 3: Map of Flanders today ([www.geopunt.be](http://www.geopunt.be))

- a. A **referential** use in which the term refers to an entity called Flanders at the relevant historical moment. There are two possibilities here:
  - (i) literal reference to a part of present-day Flanders (whether or not including areas outside its present borders) that was called *Flanders* in the relevant period in the past

- (ii) literal reference to present-day Flanders as it took shape in the context of the Belgian state.
- b. A **descriptive** usage in which (historical or regional) comparative descriptions appear such as “the region now called Flanders” or “the territory of today’s Flanders.” With this, the authors avoid both the error of anachronism (*blended spaces*) and incorrect generalization (*totum pro parte*).
  - c. A **suggestive** use in which the (historical or regional) precision of a. and b. is lost. In other words, the impression is created that what is said is relevant to Flanders as we know that entity today.
  - d. The complete **omission** of a reference as in a., b., or c.

By way of example, in window 3 (*The settlement of Rosmeer*)<sup>4</sup> none of the key terms appear. So, this is an example of d. However, this is not to say that ‘Flanders’ does not resonate in that piece of the text. This window is about agriculture, house building and migration, phenomena that essentially have a much broader relevance, but the eye-catcher is an archaeological site in present-day Flanders, the Limburg village of Rosmeer.

Conversely, window 1 (*A Place in the World*) contains three different uses:

[...] around the year 1000, the counts of Flanders also discovered the economic potential of the coast. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 15; my emphasis)

This is an example of a.(i).

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4 The *Canon* contains 60 chapters called *windows*. Each one of these windows (containing no more than 800 words) is structured as follows:

- TITLE
- Eye-catcher (ca. 150 words)
- Theme (ca. 200 words)
- Focus points
  - Focus 1 (ca. 200 words)
  - Focus 2 (ca. 200 words)

Vast deciduous forests defined the landscape, culture and economy, also in the area we call Flanders today. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 12; my emphasis)

This is an example of b.

Thus, in the Middle Ages, forested Flanders turned into a highly urbanized region. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 14; my emphasis)

This is an example of c. It suggests relevance to what we now know as 'Flanders.' But since that Flanders did not yet exist at all in the Middle Ages, this cannot be an ordinary referential usage (of type a.(ii)), while the urbanization referred to was not limited to the county of Flanders (which would require an interpretation of type a.(i)).

When we map those uses for *Flanders*, *Flemish* and '*Fleming*' (plus *Flemish/Dutch* as a language<sup>5</sup>) throughout the narrative of the *Canon*, we get some striking patterns.

Of the 60 windows, there are 12 without any explicit reference to Flanders, Flemish or Flemings, 7 without any referential use of any of these terms, and another 7 in which the proper name *Flanders* does not appear. Together, these windows cover more than a third of the *Canon*. A superficial interpretation of this could be that the *Canon* indeed does *not* write a 'Flemishized' history. However, as already shown, a general theme can easily be turned 'Flemish' without explicitly talking about Flanders. It suffices to ensure an embedding in the broader discourse where the *tone* is set by the context of the *Canon* as a flag (see Section 2), by the global framing of the text (see Section 4), and by a number of aspects discussed further in this section. That tone inevitably shines through in the non-explicitly Flemish themes that are addressed. Moreover, those themes (most of which represent a European narrative), are always firmly anchored as 'geographically Flemish,' even if only by approximation. For instance, in the window with humanism as a theme, the authors do not fail to mention that Rotterdam, where Erasmus (the eye-catcher) was born, belonged to the Burgundian Netherlands at the

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5 Dutch is the official language of the Flemish part of Belgium. Sometimes, to stress the regional variety, it is called *Flemish*.

time, i.e., the same political territory as most of what was then Flanders. Similarly, the window dealing with the modernization of the sciences uses Simon Stevin as eye-catcher; Stevin indeed grew up in Bruges and Antwerp, but he spent most of his working life (the bits relevant to science) in what is today *The Netherlands*.

The same mechanism comes into play in windows where there is no referential use of the key words. This is the case, for example, in the passage on the Franco-Flemish polyphony. Its role on both sides of the Dutch-French language border – even its origin in Paris – is fully acknowledged. Yet this is dealt with in a window entitled *The Mechelen choirbook*<sup>6</sup> and the spotlight is entirely on Dutch-language work, in particular the only Dutch-language song by Pierre de la Rue, who wrote mainly in Latin and French.

Note that the implicit task of the canon committee to present – without committing historical errors in the process – a largely general history as a Flemish history is facilitated by the fact that correct use could be made of reference to an entity that does not correspond at all to present-day Flanders (Fig. 3) but was already called *Flanders* (Fig. 2). The global perspective is indeed to superimpose ‘Flemishness’ on the past: a story that is only very partially Flemish in the contemporary sense of that word is suggestively presented as in its totality Flemish, in that same contemporary sense, without the need to engage in punctual historical manipulation.

There are also 13 windows in which *Flanders*, *Flemish*, *Fleming* (often in combination with *Flemish/Dutch* as a language and/or *Dutch-speaking*) appear at least 10 times. Almost all of them (with only two exceptions) relate to themes that, for the current Flemish government, play a key role in their identity-promoting policies:

- historical symbolism (e.g., a battle from 1302 that is at the basis of the Flemish national holiday)
- cultural symbolism (e.g., the cycling classic ‘The Tour of Flanders’)

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6 Mechelen is now a fully Flemish city half-way between Antwerp and Brussels.

- Flemish emancipation (within the context of an earlier French-dominated Belgium)
- economic-technological success
- education and media
- the Flemish/Dutch language (no less than four windows)

Five of these windows have top scores of 30 to 42 appearances of the keywords. At an average of 800 words per window, this means the density can go up to 1/19. It would be naive to think that this has no impact on the interpretation of the *Canon* as a whole.

#### 4 The teleological framing

In the Preface to the *Canon* we read:

Historical benchmarks are ordered chronologically, but this ordering has no teleological significance, as if the passage of time would lead inexorably to a particular outcome. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 4)

A denial always implies that some might think the opposite. And indeed, accusations of teleological (and even anachronistic) intentions have been made (Stabel & Puttevils 2023: 59). As to intentions, the Minister's mandate letter says “[i]t is important in this regard that both teleological interpretations of history and forms of *hineininterpretierung* be avoided”<sup>7</sup> – which fits the overall attempt to create plausible deniability. But officially declared intentions may not match the meaning potential of the text.

The main question is again: what tone dominates the *Canon*? To answer this, we take a quick look at the two windows that literally ‘frame’ the whole text: window 1 *A Place in the World* and window 60 *The World in Flanders*.

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7 The Minister's mandate letter can be found as an appendix to a report to be found here:  
[https://www.canonvanvlaanderen.be/content/uploads/2023/05/Canon\\_Rapport-aan-de-minister\\_7MEI.pdf](https://www.canonvanvlaanderen.be/content/uploads/2023/05/Canon_Rapport-aan-de-minister_7MEI.pdf) (accessed: 11. June 2024).

To a naive reader, *A place in the world* is the most neutral possible opening for a piece of history writing. The emphasis is on the landscape and what people have made of it. What we get is a description of what is or was characteristic of all of northwestern Europe: after the last Ice Age, “the landscape, culture and economy” were defined by “vast deciduous forests,” but forests shrink in Roman times and reach “an initial historic low” by the 13<sup>th</sup> century as a result of a growing population in need of timber and farmland. So indeed, what is now called Flanders seems to be just “a place in the world.”

But after the introductory 149 words, the real theme of this window is announced as “Crossroads of people and goods.” This also is a description that (even with the details given – location by the sea with numerous waterways facilitating transportation of people and goods) is in fact applicable to endless places in the world. But its choice as a theme suggests that something special is going on after all. Not surprisingly, the word *eigenheid* (Dutch for ‘identity’), which appears only three times in the entire *Canon*, immediately appears twice in the next few paragraphs: a unique interaction between humans and nature is said to give rise to “cultural landscapes such as the Kempen, the Hageland, the Maasland, Haspengouw and the Kustpolders.” At least the suggestion of a teleological narrative is hidden underneath this leap from the melting of the ice caps to what we now know as the Kempen or Haspengouw, each with their *eigenheid* which they owe to “both the landscape elements present and the traces of human intervention.” Even that general statement about specific regions applies to endless places in the world. The authors realize this. Therefore, *eigenheid* is:

- (i) further emphasized in the focus point *A Region of Cities* with a clear emphasis on uniqueness (“[...] but nowhere did the concentration of cities and townspeople become as great as in the southern parts of the Low Countries”) without the suggestion that this might be a coincidence;
- (ii) elaborated more concretely in the focus point *Working with water*, by pointing to the development of a special ability (“The inhabitants of the Low Countries by the sea had meanwhile

grown into good dyke-builders”) without recalling that this applied only to a very small part of what is now called Flanders but was representative of the entire coastal region from Flanders to the northernmost tip of the Wadden Sea.

Is there a problem here? Hardly, as long as you look at the individual facts. But what happens when they are piled up, and particularly under the title of this window?

The expression *a place in the world* does not exude the unencumbered neutrality that the authors may have wanted to achieve with it. *A place in the world* in itself means nothing, because it literally refers to any and every place in the world. When it is used, therefore, it always means more; here we stumble upon one of the most elementary processes in communication with language. At a minimum, *a place in the world* (sometimes in the form of *a place under the sun*) refers to a ‘home’: it is about ‘our’ place in the world. Often this is metaphorical, with *identity* then playing the leading role, whether or not in combination with *territoriality*. Usually this is also accompanied by the suggestion of a struggle: it is not easy to find and keep one’s place in the world. In books and films about this universal theme, the struggle may be personal, but also political. Thus, the resonance of territorially anchored identity – a natural fact present from the beginning (at least in a dormant state) – sounds loud and clear.

The (provisional) end point is the final window, *The World in Flanders*, which literally ‘concludes’ the (evasive) teleological narrative. The key concepts here are ‘globalization’ and ‘diversity.’ Both terms occur only once before, giving the impression that what we are dealing with is (the emergence of) a new reality.

Nowhere is it denied that migration is of all times. On the contrary, this is stated explicitly. But the *intersection of people and goods* that already characterized our *place in the world* in the first window leads to the following result:

Today, Flanders is a superdiverse region. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 311; my emphasis)

Today there are many traces of diversity in Flanders. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 313)

Even though it is theoretically recognized that this is not so exceptional, the authors, who place so much emphasis on *today*, seem to forget for a moment what was described in windows 2 through 59.

Is the present degree of diversity, relative to population density, really that much greater than when – around 5,000 B.C. – farmers from Eastern Europe arrived in northwestern Europe, where a local population had been living for centuries? (Those farmers are rightly called ‘immigrants’ in the *Canon*.) Or when Celts originating from the Danube Valley settled on the Kemmel Hill while maintaining “a wide network of trade contacts”? (The window on the Kemmel Hill is one of the pieces referred to by the keyword *Migration* in the website version of the *Canon*.) Or when Roman armies with soldiers from all corners of the Roman Empire held sway in ‘our’ regions? (Roman traders who emerged in the wake of Roman armies are referred to in the *Canon* as *southern newcomers* who brought “their ideas and customs.”) Or when Germanic tribes slowly began to displace that Roman power? (The *Canon* calls the Germanic tribes invading the Roman Empire ‘newcomers.’) Or when the Normans arrived in the 9<sup>th</sup> century? Or when rural dwellers flocked *en masse* to the cities that already had a crowded and diversified population? Or when Bruges became “the hub of European trade networks and financial flows” in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, “a cosmopolitan region where the visitor could hear many languages”? Or when Van Eyck “could only [develop] into the artist he was thanks to [...] the Burgundian Netherlands, with their urban network with much immigration and cultural exchange.” Or when the Antwerp of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the historical equivalent of today’s Wall Street, a melting pot of merchants (and their entourage) from all over the world?

Of course, people have become more mobile due to modern transportation and communication technologies. Yet global migration is a



relatively stable phenomenon, with temporary ups and downs.<sup>8</sup> And greater diversity only exists if an imaginary homogeneous community, product of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century European nation-state (combined – as far as Europe is concerned – with the temporary dominance of emigration in the wake of colonization), is used as a yardstick. In fact, only the face of diversity has changed, change sometimes accelerates, and we have yet to get used to the fact that decolonization has somewhat rebalanced the direction of migratory flows.

Even more important than this obliviousness about historical diversity is the attempt to make ‘the world in Flanders’ into a success story – though not too enthusiastically.<sup>9</sup> Most of the text is neutral-descriptive: a few words on post-war migration dynamics, the numbers of people with a migrant background, the context of (de)colonization and globalization, sectors of employment for migrants, culinary and religious diversity. This text is accompanied by images of hospitality. The eye-catcher is giant Fatima, with headscarf, co-responsible for the revival of the giant parade of Borgerhout in 2012, a parade that also welcomed Little Amal, “a giant doll representing a Syrian refugee girl” in 2021.

Accompanying this textually-neutral and multimedially-positive picture there is only a brief reference to the colonial past and, in the last paragraph, the identification of problems and challenges:

Growing diversity boosts rejuvenation, supports the economy and enriches culture, but it also brings along societal problems. Initially, governmental integration policies for ‘guest workers’ were hardly provided. This caused conflict, alienation, racism and later religious

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8 See Hein de Haas (2023) on the myths surrounding migration, such as the idea that we live in an era of unrivalled mass migration, or the idea that our current societies are more diverse than ever.

9 Enthusiasm about migration is kept sufficiently restrained, if only not to antagonize current political leaders who just a few years earlier brought down the Belgian government because of the migration-friendly tone of the so-called Marrakesh Pact (in full: *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*; [https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/180713\\_agreed\\_outcome\\_global\\_compact\\_for\\_migration.pdf](https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/180713_agreed_outcome_global_compact_for_migration.pdf) (accessed: 11. June 2024)).

fundamentalism. ‘Integration’ has now become a policy focus. But migration poses serious challenges for education, housing and the labor market. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 313)

The government’s responsibility is recognized, and it now seems to be doing its job. Moreover:

Surely, the Giant Parade of Borgerhout has already found a formula to connect different communities. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 313)

This is the very last sentence of the *Canon*. Thus, the reader can rest assured that everything will be alright. And this reassurance is all the more powerful because problems and challenges are not denied. But whose problems are really dealt with?

Not a word is said about the sub-standard reception of asylum seekers. The word *refugee* appears twice in this last window, once in a list of categories that perpetuate the “migration dynamic” and once in the reference to giant doll Little Amal who has found a warm home in the Borgerhout giant parade. (Before that, the term appears only in an account of Belgians who spent time abroad during World War I.)

The same silence surrounds forms of discrimination related to perceived ‘superdiversity.’<sup>10</sup> However, the term *discrimination* does appear five times in the *Canon*. Once with reference to the position of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – apparently no longer a problem. Four times with reference to LGBTQIA+ people, a community around whose rights there is an easier political consensus in today’s Flanders. In the LGBTQIA+ context it is recognized that – although the discrimination issue actually belongs to a past that has been legally transcended – individuals may still face discrimination. Even the word homophobia is used. Islamophobia, on the other hand, does not seem to exist (nor does racism<sup>11</sup>). Not a word about the institutionalized suspicion to which the

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10 For comments on the misleading notion ‘superdiversity,’ see Verschueren (2022: 12–13).

11 Racism is mentioned three times: twice in a window about colonization (a transcended past); once in an enumeration of what is presented as an epiphenomenon of an unsuccessful integration policy (the one-before-last quote in this section).

Islamic community is subjected. Not a word about the enlightened condescension with which certainly Muslim women are treated.<sup>12</sup> The question is, then: how does the real-world Fatima from Borgerhout benefit from her namesake in the giant parade when she is not even allowed to teach or provide services at a counter with a headscarf? This is far from the only type of discrimination minorities face in Flanders. But for the *Canon*, none of this exists, and it is no coincidence that this blind spot corresponds perfectly with a dominant political consensus.

## 5 Buttressing Flemish identity

So far, we have seen how a general (Western) history is turned 'Flemish' in the *Canon* and how the opening and closing windows construct an unspoken teleological perspective. But the analysis cannot end there. There are at least three additional interesting angles.

First, if it is the intention to create or reinforce an identity, a useful tool is always the consistent use of the first-person plural to construct a collective social order ('we') that can be contrasted with 'others' (the famous *us-them* polarization). Does this happen in the *Canon*?

Second, for identitarian-nationalist purposes, an historical text must generate some pride. Toward one's 'own' history, then, a predominantly positive attitude must be adopted. Therefore, we must examine whether the *Canon* contains evaluative statements and/or patterns that can bring about what the authors of the 2019 Flemish government program dreamed of: getting Flemish people to live their Flemish identity 'unwaveringly.'

Third, also with a view to a *strengthening of identity*, it is important to zoom in on the contributions of one's 'own' region and its inhabitants when that reinforces a positive (self-) image, and to zoom out again to a broader level when image damage might occur. Again, we need to see if this is how the *Canon* works.

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12 For more about institutionalized suspicion and enlightened condescension, see Verschuere (1922).

## 5.1 The first-person plural

The canon committee chose to avoid an imaginary, collective, anachronistic *we* as much as possible. Therefore, the first-person plural is used sparingly. Most of its occurrences bear on a nuanced knowledge perspective (often as the subject of verbs such as *see* and *know*). In other cases, it is not nearly as easy to interpret its use. As we all know, the first-person plural suffers from an ambiguity based on differing views of society: it may include literally everyone, or it may be exclusive by opposing one group of people ('we/us') to 'others.'

The only place where *we* is used truly exclusively is found in reference to ourselves as a human species ("For thousands of years, we, modern humans or homo sapiens, were not the only human species on Earth."). The canon committee has succeeded in avoiding gross distinctions within the category of homo sapiens. Does that mean the perspective is otherwise fully inclusive? Unfortunately, that is not entirely the case.

In particular, ethno-linguistic normative uniformity is assumed by the consistent reference to Dutch as "our language." This is hardly surprisingly in the context of the political dogma of a monolingual society. The same non-inclusive majority perspective is also reflected in domains other than language:

After World War II, the colonized territories demanded independence, but today we are still struggling with that painful past. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 312)

Who is struggling with the colonial past? That's 'us,' the former colonizers, who now experience the memory of that past as embarrassing or painful. But what about the pain of the former colonized, who do not 'struggle' with 'that painful past,' but still bear some of the consequences (which then perhaps empathically leads 'us' to experience the past as painful so that we struggle with it)?

Even when explicitly trying to look outward, a 'we' majority remains the landmark. In a window on the 13<sup>th</sup>-century piece of Dutch literature figuring the fox Reynaert:

Very often it [this type of literature] involves a fox. For example, more than a thousand years before our era, a story of a fox who manages to evade punishment at a trial circulated in Mesopotamia. Closer to us, it often appears in the fables of the Greek poet Aesopos. Berbers, in turn, have a wealth of stories about the cunning fox Ucchen. When the Disney cartoon studio made an animal version of the Robin Hood legend in 1973, they did not accidentally give the title role to a fox. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 73; my emphasis)

*Closer to us* is perhaps meant purely geographically. But the jump to *Berbers, in turn, ...* gives the impression that Aesopos is *closer to us* than the Berbers, despite the large population of Berber origin in Flanders.

Finally, a Flemish-territorial orientation is expressed when migration is discussed, both in the distant and near past:

Moreover, during the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the [Roman] empire itself often organized campaigns across the Rhine in order to forcibly deport such groups to our regions and present-day France with the intention of putting them to work as farmers or soldiers. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 37; my emphasis)

From 1945 to 1975, organized labor migration brought tens of thousands of migrants, especially from countries around the Mediterranean, to our regions. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 311; my emphasis)

Immigration from Morocco and Turkey since 1964 also brought Islam to our country. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 313; my emphasis)

Thus, there is a territory that is 'ours,' and the 'us' referred to is clearly distinct from migrant workers and the Islam they bring with them.

## 5.2 Evaluative historiography

The essence of nationalist historiography is to let people experience their 'own' identity with pride. The *Canon* does not shy away from explicit evaluation. What happens in Flanders is overwhelmingly *first, big(ger/gest), important, famous, unique, and a sign of wealth*. Sometimes the points of comparison are clear, sometimes not. Adding to this the superlatives in many of the descriptions (of Van Eyck, the Franco-

Flemish polyphony, the role of Margaret of Austria, Erasmus, Rubens – to name just a few), we do indeed get an historiography that can only support pride. Authoritative appreciation from the outside helps, which is why there are references to UNESCO and its recognition of cultural heritage as often as possible.

The truth is not obviously violated anywhere. But what about evaluative opposites? The adjective *small* is reserved for Belgium (three times) and for the corner of West Flanders south of the Yser that remained unoccupied during World War I. When Flanders is called *poor*, this is due to the fungal disease that caused the potato harvest to fail in large parts of northwestern Europe, with more severe consequences in Flanders which was heavily dependent on agriculture after the demise of the linen industry. After that, only the province of Limburg is mentioned once as *poor*. An explicit mention of what was *first* elsewhere is always framed in relation to an achievement on the Flemish side – *similar* if that achievement is in a different domain (the first machine-building factory outside Britain was in Wallonia – counterbalanced by Ghent pioneering with the introduction of a new British invention for spinning cotton), or *better* if in the same domain (the first contraceptive pill was American, but a Flemish doctor was responsible for a much improved version). When we are truly ‘later’ or ‘lagging behind,’ this is either in a distant past (12<sup>th</sup> century literature in the vernacular was first in French, only later in Dutch), or it is not to be located in present-day Flanders but on a wider (Belgian or European) level (“Much of that classical knowledge was nevertheless lost in Western Europe and would partially return centuries later thanks to Arab scholars.”).

Explicit praise is rarely bestowed upon ‘others’ without adding a negative note. For example:

Muhammad Al-Idrisi performed a feat. In a time of limited information, he managed to map the world known to him. (Gerard at al. 2023, p. 60)

But:

His description was not always accurate because he relied on incorrect testimony. (Gerard at al. 2023, p. 60)

In the same vein, it could have been pointed out that the Mercator projection (a ‘Flemish’ invention – though developed when Mercator was working in Duisburg, Germany) also directly gave rise to the Mercator distortion (and that Mercator’s maps were still far from accurate). Of course, this is not mentioned.

Does this mean that negatively evaluated elements related to ‘us’ are concealed? Not at all. However, when they are brought up, interesting discursive processes come into play. One is the ***externalization of agentivity***:

Machines determined the rhythm from now on, leading to long working hours. For children in particular, factory work was miserable. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 153; my emphasis)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, working conditions in Ghent’s cotton mills were particularly bad. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 186; my emphasis)

No one seems directly responsible. In cases where some (category of) persons is named as the one(s) responsible for a negatively evaluated act or event, the negative influence comes from outside (the Habsburg rulers, the French ...).

A second process we may call ***concessive contrast***. Its general structure is as follows:

**Tab. 1:** Types of concessive contrast.

|        |                             |                          |
|--------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Type 1 | <b>‘Others’ (negative!)</b> | <i>but ‘us’ too</i>      |
| Type 2 | <i>‘We’ (negative)</i>      | <b>but ‘others’ too!</b> |

For an example of Type 1, we again turn to Al-Idrisi:

Sicily was an ideal place for Al-Idrisi to learn about areas where he had never been. Much knowledge converged on that island, which was a melting pot of Christians, Muslims and Jews with numerous merchants and travelers passing through. Presumably Al-Idrisi questioned them about cities in the Low Countries that he considered important enough to include on his map. **His description was not always accurate because he relied on incorrect testimony**. This was not exceptional: *Western scholars used equally questionable sources*

when writing about distant lands. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 60; my emphasis)

An example of Type 2:

The inquisitive Van Rubroeck regularly engaged in dialogue with local people and showed interest in the faith and culture of Muslims, Eastern Christians and Buddhists. *But his prejudices remained strong, **as did those of his interlocutors***. All felt their own faith was superior. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 65; my emphasis)

In both cases, the negative judgment of ‘us’ is mitigated by the fact that ‘others’ are no better.

### 5.3 Zooming in and zooming out as an evaluative strategy

A third process that is functionally comparable to the externalization of agentivity and concessive contrast is zooming in (foregrounding) and zooming out (backgrounding) as evaluative strategy. This works as follows (Table 2):



**Tab. 2:** Zooming in/out as a rhetorical strategy.

| Described event or development   | Strategy  | Example   |
|--|---|---|
| Inherently <b>image-enhancing</b> (because now with positive connotations)   | <b>Zooming in</b> on something ‘Flemish,’ even if the event/development is to be situated at a much broader level | Innovation in agriculture from the 11 <sup>th</sup> through the 19 <sup>th</sup> century (which took place in various parts of Europe and elsewhere) is handled with the <u>windmill of Wormhout</u> as eye-catcher and with almost exclusively <u>Flemish</u> supporting imagery |
| Inherently <b>harmful to image</b> (because now generally viewed negatively) | <b>Zooming out</b> to a higher level (Belgium, Europe, the Western world)   | “At the beginning of the Middle Ages, <u>Western Europe</u> was not a very fertile area for science and culture.”   |

The most striking example of how this strategy is used for Flemish image management relates to the history of colonization.

The earliest colonization of the ‘New World’ is described entirely as a European (and particularly Spanish and Portuguese) affair. Flemings seem to have played the role of casual extras in the Azores for a while:

Portugal maintained good trade relations with the Burgundian Netherlands. And so, several hundred Flemings also ended up in the Azores. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 113)

Those Flemings simply *ended up* in the Azores, at the encouragement of Portugal which itself was too sparsely populated to fulfill its colonial ambitions with only Portuguese people, and they don’t seem to bear any responsibility at all for the less laudable aspects:

But the Portuguese also transported enslaved Africans to the area. They experimented with sugar plantations and slave labor, which

would later be widely used in the Americas. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 113; my emphasis)

This is a clear case of **zooming out**.

**Zooming in** is reserved entirely for Pedro de Gante – title and eye-catcher of the relevant window, with an accompanying photo of his statue in Mexico City:

On the American continent, he was one of the first Flemish witnesses to the devastation wrought by the European colonizers. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 110; my emphasis)

That he was, as a missionary, not just a detached ‘witness’ but one of the standard-bearers of the sense of superiority that motivated many of the colonizers, is not denied. On the contrary:

The superiority of Christian civilization was unassailable to him. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 110)

But this is at the same time presented as one of the reasons why he could play the positive role that is then highlighted:

*Partly as a result of this*, he was shocked by the devastation caused by Europeans and by the ruthless exploitation of the local population. He denounced the abuses in letters to Charles V and to his successor Philip II. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 110; my emphasis)

This critique of colonization – profiled as Flemish (though not exclusively Flemish) – thus overshadows any direct involvement in conquest, exploitation and slavery.

This exclusive focus on positive contributions becomes more difficult in the chapter on the Belgian Congo. That is why **nowhere** does the relevant window **zoom in** on Flanders, which is explicitly mentioned only briefly *in parentheses* (!) when discussing the role of missionaries:

In places where Belgian missionaries (the vast majority Flemish) founded schools, children were taught the Catholic faith and a Western way of living and thinking. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 219; my emphasis)

The whole story of colonization of the Congo is **zoomed out** to the Belgian level. Nowhere does Flanders seem to play a role of significance in exploitation, repression, racism. Nowhere is there any mention of the enthusiasm with which also the Flemish (intellectual) elite supported the colonial project, or of the way in which Flemish foremen, sergeants and functionaries kept the repression machine running (even if it was often at the behest of a French-speaking superior). No doubt this facilitates the sustained negative and critical tone that colors this window. This critical piece of history seems to come easy, one of the reasons being that responsibility is identified as facelessly Belgian (an identity that is avoided in other parts of the *Canon*).

When colonization returns one more time in the closing window (even though the title is *The World in Flanders*), it zooms out even further:

For a long time, the West was the engine of that globalization. European countries colonized large parts of the world. That led to slavery, exploitation and large-scale theft of local raw materials, which benefited European industry. (Gerard et al. 2023, p. 312; my emphasis)

## 6 Concluding remarks

A number of topics are remarkably absent from the *Canon*. There is no attempt at a socio-cultural analysis of present-day Flanders. Poverty, for instance, seems to be mainly a phenomenon of the past. Similarly, Islam looks like a marginal phenomenon, mentioned mainly in relation to a distant past (when it did not really play a major role in 'our' part of the world) and – somewhat trivially – in relation to the Ramadan. Islam is said to have been recognized as a religion in 1974, but nothing is said about the decades it took to practically implement this recognition (and the lingering institutionalized suspicion). Also absent are the crusades, except in a completely zoomed-out reference in a piece on a Flemish monk in Mongolia:

Through travel, the medieval West got to know the world better. Many already had an image of the Middle East through the Crusades. When those came to an end in the 13th century, Western travelers headed to Asia.

Thus, Crusades as educational journeys. The Second Crusade (1147–1149) is also briefly mentioned as a possible source for the relic in Bruges' Holy Blood Chapel. But the Crusades themselves? Those seem to be of no importance. However, these are not negligible matters, and Flemings did play a prominent role. What people do or do not want to remember is obviously of great importance for identity-supporting nationalist historiography. As suggested earlier, the Canon's blind spots fit well with a dominant political consensus.

Combining such oblivion with the details already described, the only conclusion can be that the *Canon of Flanders* does have great identity-building potential. This is independent of the authors' intentions. Nor does this tell us about the identity-strengthening effects. Given this meaning potential, however, the current Flemish government has gotten exactly what it asked for and what it announced as an objective in its policy statements.

Authors let themselves be recruited, which makes them complicit in the achievement of a political goal, even if they officially distance themselves. The next step (in full swing) is the recruitment of an audience – through education and integration programs – for whom the content of the *Canon* should become a “shared frame of reference.” But how should the entire population of Flanders recognize themselves in this *Canon*? Flanders has a problem with inclusion. Just think of the discriminatory principle – accepted by just about all Flemish political parties – that access to social housing can be denied on the basis of language. Perhaps it is not really intended that everyone should identify with the *Canon*. Rather, the *Canon*'s real function may be to mold this so-called “shared frame of reference” – a somewhat anachronistic civilizational mission.

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