ON BOOKS AND BELONGING

INSIGHTS FROM DUTCH-LANGUAGE PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN SUPERDIVERSE BRUSSELS

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of public libraries in Brussels in cultivating inclusive literary environments for children and their carers from diverse linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds. Staff members from sixteen out of twenty Dutch-language public libraries in Brussels have participated. By conducting semi-structured interviews and thematically analyzing them, the research investigates how library personnel navigates issues of diversity, representation, and decolonization in their efforts to promote inclusivity. The term "superdiversity" is proposed to understand the complex interactions of identity within an urban context, with Brussels as case study. Findings highlight the importance of diverse representation in children's literature to ensure both mirrors and windows for young readers. Furthermore, the study illuminates the efforts of library staff in seeking balanced representations and combating stereotypes in their collections. Through the atmospheric spatial and social dimensions and kind and helpful staff, library spaces can be seen as 'parochial atmospheres' where people can (learn) belonging and have non confrontational, comfortable encounters with others. Ultimately, the research underscores the vital role of public libraries in encouraging literacy skills and promoting the joy of reading in diverse communities.

Acknowledgements

Preface

When I finished my degree in Literary studies, I realized how the world outside the text went unaddressed in most of the classes I had. I had learned how to talk about stories and was trained to see beauty, but the political was often neglected in my professors' literary analyses. I therefore decided to enrol in Conflict and Development studies and I now know a lot more about the world and about (geo)politics. But somewhere along the way, I lost my eye for beauty and my lust for stories. Until some time ago, when I read the small but wonderful book *Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise* (2019). The title is pretty self-explanatory; Katherine Rundell, a children's book author and literary scholar, persuasively explains why adults should occasionally read children's books. "When you read children's books, you are given the space to read again as a child: to find your way back, back to the time when new discoveries came daily and when the world was colossal, before your imagination was trimmed and neatened" (2019: 44). Rundell states that her goal while writing for children is "to put down in as few words as I can the things that I most urgently and desperately want children to know and adults to remember" (2019: 4). She claims that "children's fiction necessitates distillation: at its best, it renders in their purest, most archetypal forms hope, hunger, joy, fear. Think of children's books as literary vodka" (2019: 12). I would like us to explore this world of children's literature, to see what is happening there. Let us drink together.

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1. Introduction

It is difficult to overstate the impact children's books had on my personal development. When I was around eight years old, I began visiting the local library every week, to wander the bookshelves in excitement, anticipating the new worlds that awaited me. With my eyes, I eagerly scanned the shelves, searching for books that held promise, to ultimately select around five books to bring home with me. At a time when I had limited opportunities to venture out into the world on my own, paying a visit to the library was a most enriching and thrilling event. The bag full of books I dragged home contained the ingredients I needed to fuel my imagination and transport me into various fictional worlds.

Looking back on the feeling of excitement I felt as a child and a teenager during my weekly visits to the local public library, I realized what significant impact libraries can have on individuals. In my case, these childhood library visits had a lasting effect, influencing my continued engagement with literature and culture. Libraries can shape the reading experiences of young people, and can alter their sense of self. They offer a treasure chamber of narratives, allowing young readers to explore worlds beyond their immediate surroundings. As Katherine Rundell (2019: 51) puts it, "[t]he library remains one of the few places in the world where you don't have to buy anything, know anyone or believe anything to enter in. It's our most egalitarian space. And we live in a world in which the problems that threaten to engulf us, surely, have inequality (…) at their heart." For many people, their love of reading has its origins in their early days, and in the visits to the local library. It seems fair to say that my own interest in literature and literary theory has grown out of the love for reading I developed during my childhood. In short, libraries have an immense potential, and can be inclusive spaces that cater to a wide range of interests and backgrounds, offering a diverse collection of books. "If hope is a thing with feathers, then libraries are wings", Rundell so beautifully writes (2019: 52).

It is obvious that Rundell is a great admirer of libraries, and this love for libraries is something she and I have in common. But is the library really as egalitarian a space as we want it to be? It is true that in most public libraries entrance is not contingent upon economic and social capital. But the utopian image of the library Rundell sketches hardly corresponds to the reality of the local library from my childhood. Although I lived in a neighbourhood with residents from various countries, and attended a primary school where many children had parents born outside of Europe, the characters in the stories I read hardly ever had a migration background. As Jiménez puts it in her article 'The Overwhelmingly White, Straight, and Able Face of Children's Literature', "[t]oo many students either never see themselves in the stories they are told to read, or they only see a warped and damaged view of themselves" (2018: 64-65). When I grew up, children's books indeed had an overwhelmingly white, straight and able face. And if characters did have a migration background, they were systematically portrayed as troublemakers, helpless victims in need of saving, or uncivilized savages. Shouldn't these asymmetries be analysed before we can truly speak about the library as an egalitarian space?

As children's books are inherently embedded in a social and political context, they ought to mirror the broader society. This is also the case for libraries, which are located inside communities and have a societal role, adapting to their visitors' diverse needs. As curators and developers of book collections, library staff act as gatekeepers of literature. What challenges do librarians face in ensuring a representative book supply, and how do they address them? How do libraries actively support the development of an inclusive literary environment for all children? This study delves into the actions taken by library staff to promote diversity in children's books, exploring their perceptions and navigation of issues related to diversity, representation and decolonization.

The concept of 'decolonization' often leads to heated public debates. One such example was sparked by the publication of a report by the city of Ghent (Stad Gent 2020), which compiled thirty policy recommendations to 'decolonize the city', ranging from the demand to combat ethnic profiling by the police, to the decolonization of the public library De Krook. Suggestions include providing librarians with training on decolonization, the impact of imagery, and anti-racism, as well as exploring the possibility of providing context for certain books containing racist content. In reaction to the report, opinion writer Luckas Van der Taelen (2021) warned for censorship and "the dangerous game of moral judgments". In this research paper, my intention is to go beyond these reactions of outrage, and investigate what the decolonization of a library could look like.

The emphasis in this study lies on ethnic diversity, yet I recognize the intricate and interconnected nature of race, ethnic diversity, and whiteness. Moreover, I acknowledge that individuals are not defined by a single identity category but are shaped by the intersection of various aspects of their identity, and I try to explore the varied ways in which systems of power and privilege operate. I propose the term superdiversity to come to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of how various facets of identity interact and shape individual experiences within societal structures. Focusing on Dutch-language public libraries in Brussels, I try to answer the following research questions: How do public libraries in the superdiverse city of Brussels foster inclusive literary environments for children and their carers? Through semi-structured interviews with staff members from sixteen libraries, my research seeks nuanced insights into how library workers navigate challenges and opportunities in promoting diversity and inclusion in both children's literature collections and in the library space. By delving into the intricate interplay of these two dimensions, I aim to illuminate the intricate dynamics of fostering a sense of belonging both in literary representations and within the inclusive environments cultivated by public libraries.

2. Literature review

In recent years, public discussions increasingly highlight concerns regarding the outcomes of surveys and international comparative research on reading comprehension and motivation among children and youth (De Meyer et al. 2018, Denies et al. 2023). Responding to this, Flemish Minister-President Jan Jambon and Flemish Minister of Education Ben Weyts launched 'het Leesoffensief' in December 2020. This initiative aims to "initiate a societal movement to restore the importance of reading skills and reading enjoyment in schools, libraries, and especially in the home environment" (Naar een Vlaams Leesoffensief 2021-2025: 2, my translation). The departments of Education and of Culture, Youth, and Media, together with literary organisations, as well as individuals in the field – from teachers to librarians – "must join forces to reignite the passion for reading" (Naar een Vlaams Leesoffensief 2021-2025: 2, my translation).

Het Leesoffensief strives to engage not only children and youth but also adults, with the goal of establishing high-quality reading environments for all target groups, encouraging sustained reading habits. This involves offering an "appealing, inclusive, and accessible book selection", and creating "visible, inspiring reading spaces" (Heyvaert 2021: 9). Libraries are central to the local reading network and will be reinforced in their role in promoting literacy (2021: 9). But while the importance of inclusivity is emphasized, its specific meaning remains unspecified. This paper tries to explore what these inclusive book selection and inspiring reading spaces within a library setting could look like. By bridging the academic literature on public libraries with existing research on diversity in children's literature, this study aims to shed light on the vital social role of libraries in fostering inclusive reading environments.

2.1 Children's literature

During my education in Literary Studies, children's literature was hardly ever touched upon. I remember just one brief instant, in which we discussed an early modern poem, 'De pruimeboom' by Hieronymus van Alphen. This famous Dutch poem has a strong moralistic tone, and the discussion only focused on the pedagogical function of the verse. Apart from that single moment during my four-year study period, children's literature went unaddressed. As Katherine Rundell puts it, "[c]hildren's fiction has a long and noble history of being dismissed" (2019: 2).

Prior to the 1970s, children's literature was rarely the subject of scholarly study (Ghesquiere et al. 2014: 45-46). But while children's books began to gain recognition in the field of literary studies in the 1970s, they were still not given the same level of respect or considered to be "real literature" by many literary critics and enthusiasts. Youth books were systematically excluded from overviews of literary history, indicating their perceived lack of prestige (Ghesquiere et al. 2014: 46). For the bigger part of history, the didactic potential of children's literature was considered more important than its literary merits, although this started to change from the 1980's onwards. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Dutch youth literature is faced with the challenge of competing with television, Internet, and video games. There is concern about a stagnation or decline in attention to youth literature in the media and within academia. Until today, it continues

to be a challenge to bring literary and artistic youth books to a broad audience of young readers, despite multiple awards, reading promotion projects, and subsidies (Ghesquiere et al. 2014: 52-53).

Children's literature and ideology

Ghesquiere and colleagues (2014) illuminate the formation of societal values in children's books, emphasising that children's books across generations offer an interesting look at evolving society and the values that one wishes to convey to young readers. Moreover, the ideological dimensions of children's literature play a pivotal role in shaping the worldview imparted to young readers (2014: 54). According to O'Sullivan et al. (2005), children's books are integral to the early phases of the socialization process, offering a valuable resource for examining the diverse ideologies of identity presented to children within their respective cultures (O'Sullivan et al. 2005: 17). Aligned with this stance, Pesonen (2013b: 19) writes: "Children's literature offers time-related images and stories by describing contemporary society and its values. Thus, children's literature, as a sociocultural product cannot be segregated from surrounding social reality, as all children's literature contains ideology".

In his influential book *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992), John Stephens argues that children's fiction is a cultural practice aimed at socializing its audience. Childhood is a formative period for education about the world, relationships, beliefs, and thinking. Stephens asserts that children's fiction shapes young minds, teaching them how to understand the world and interact within it. He emphasizes that "[a] narrative without an ideology is unthinkable: ideology is formulated in and by language, meanings within language are socially determined, and narratives are constructed out of language" (1992: 8).

Culture, language and representation

Let us break down the concepts of 'culture' and 'language', to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Stephens' discourse on ideology embedded within narratives. Stuart Hall characterizes culture as "a process, a set of practices", rather than "a set of things" (Hall 1997: 2). "Things 'in themselves' rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning", Hall writes (1997: 3). He argues that culture involves the creation and exchange of meanings among individuals within a society or group, requiring participants to interpret events and make sense of the world similarly (1997: 2). According to Hall, language is the quintessential means to create, exchange, and interpret meanings. Language should be understood in the broad sense of the term, encompassing words, images, sounds, and gestures. As language functions as a system of representation, it has the capability to construct meaning:

> We give things meanings by how we represent them - the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them (Hall 1997: 3).

Representation is, therefore, a crucial cultural practice through which meaning is produced. However, the connection between representations and reality is not one of perfect imitation. Representations are constructions that should not be regarded as the truth. Or, as Hall puts it, "[w]e must not confuse the material world, where things and people exist, and the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate" (1997: 25).

This definition of representation can also be applied to the representation of diverse groups of people within fiction. These portrayals are not mere reflections of objective reality; they are constructed through cultural lenses, influenced by societal norms, biases, and historical contexts. Therefore, the representation of marginalized people in fiction does not mirror reality in a neutral or straightforward way. Instead, it is a complex negotiation of meaning and it is deeply rooted in cultural attitudes, power dynamics, and the ideologies of the members of the society in which it is produced. Representations thus can impact the perceptions about, attitudes towards and experiences of individuals belonging to these groups.

In his exploration of the representation of the 'other' in popular culture, Hall asks whether and how "the repertoires of representation around 'difference' and 'otherness'" have changed throughout history, and which traces from the past persist in contemporary society (1997: 225). He examines the representation of racial 'others' in 19th-century British imperialism and the portrayal of black enslaved people in the U.S, before investigating the persistence of these racial stereotypes in modern times. Hall defines stereotypes as a particular way in which groups of people are represented, which involves reducing people to a few simple, recognizable, and flat characteristics that are portrayed as natural and unchangeable (1997: 257-258). These depictions symbolize and solidify differences, projecting fear and fantasies onto the 'other.'

In this study, I will mainly look at the representation of ethnic diversity. According to Gloria Wekker, the term ethnicity refers to the social system that assigns meaning to differences between people – differences based on origin, appearance, history, culture, language, and religion (Wekker 2016: 22). In the Netherlands, Wekker points out, terms like ethnicity and culture are more often used than race, because they are "supposedly softer entities, which, again supposedly, operate on cultural rather than on biological terrain" (2016: 22). However, they have been used "in such hardened ways that biology and culture have become interchangeable in the stability that is ascribed to the cultures of others", and as such, "the work that race used to do, ordering reality on the basis of supposed biological difference […] is still being accomplished" (2016: 22-23). Moreover, when attention is drawn to ethnicity, it is the 'other' who is referenced, and "being white is passed off as such a natural, invisible category that its significance has not been a research theme" (2016: 22).

I argue that this interpretation and use of the term ethnicity is also widespread in Belgium. Even though ethnicity is usually contrasted against race by being defined in terms of cultural and religious features, these features, described as fixed and transmitted from generation to generation, are also thought to have a genetic basis. That is why Wekker uses "race and ethnicity as two sides of the same coin, subsuming and merging a more natural, biological understanding

of race with a more cultural view" (2016: 24). Race and ethnicity are political and social constructs, used to organize and make sense of differences in society, and to support racist logics and structures of exclusion.

Mirrors and windows

In her influential essay 'Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors' (1990), Rudine Sims Bishop discusses the importance of literature in which all children see reflections of themselves: "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are part" (Bishop 1990: x). Bishop highlights how books can serve as mirrors, reflecting the experiences of readers from various cultural backgrounds, while also functioning as windows, offering insight into the lives of others:

> Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be read or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (1990: x).

Books can thus serve as a means for children to move between their own perspectives (mirrors) and those of others (windows), allowing them to explore and understand diverse identities and experiences. These now famous metaphors in the field of children's literature emphasize the potential for literature to facilitate empathy and understanding. According to Bishop, the ultimate goal is to ensure that there are enough books serving as mirrors and windows for all children, allowing them to appreciate both their unique cultural identities and the common humanity they share with others.

Scholars and activists alike have highlighted the need for books that represent a wide range of cultures and identities (Dahlen 2020; Nel 2017). When a broader range of stories and experiences are told, children encounter a more comprehensive and representative reflection of the human experience. Although not the focus of this thesis, this is not limited solely to the representation of ethnic diversity in children's literature but also includes stories about LGBTQI+ individuals and people with disabilities, for example. Positive and authentic representations of marginalized groups can challenge stereotypes, break down biases, and offer insights into the lives, histories, and cultures of marginalized communities. Seeing positive and nuanced representations of one's own identity in stories can have a powerful impact, as it provides a sense of validation, affirmation, and empowerment, contributing to a positive self-image and a stronger sense of belonging (Pesonen 2013a). Moreover, reading and discussing books in which diversity is represented, particularly in a positive light, can be an effective tool for promoting positive intergroup attitudes among children. In essence, diverse representation in children's literature is

key in nurturing open-minded, empathetic, and culturally competent individuals (Cameron et al. 2007).

Diversity in Dutch-language children's literary studies

Most studies on youth literature are typically published in English or German, and children's literature in Dutch occupies a relatively marginal position within the broader scope of international scholarship on youth literature (Joosen & Vloeberghs 2008: 11). By consequence, research on diversity in children's literature becomes even more specialized and rare. In the following section, I will offer an overview of contemporary research on diversity in children's literature within the context of Belgium and the Netherlands, focusing specifically on ethnic-cultural diversity.

In the 1980s, early research in Belgium and the Netherlands highlighted the prevalence of ethnocentrism in children's literature, perpetuating stereotypes and hierarchies (Redmond 1980; De Sterck 1986; De Sterck 1989). By the 2000s, there was a shift towards discussing ethnic-cultural diversity in children's books (Eiselin 2002; Vloeberghs 2007), but some of these initial studies lacked a critical perspective on the dominant white norm (Van den Bossche & Klomberg 2020: 81). In more recent years, there is again growing attention for the representation of ethnic diversity in books for young children, both in academia and in Dutch and Flemish media (see, for example, Maliepaard 2012; Ould Aissa 2015; De Veen 2017; Claus 2018; Kartosen-Wong 2019; as well as the interviews by Steyaert 2023 and Van den Bosch 2023). In 2017, literary scolar Sandra van Voorst (2017) studied authors of youth literature with a non-western migration background in the Netherlands and Flanders. The study indicates that only 24 Dutch-language children's books by 18 authors with a non-Western migration background were published in the period 2006-2016.

In 2020, Sara Van den Bossche and Anne Klomberg published their book *Jeugdliteratuur door de lens van etnisch-culturele diversiteit*, in which they investigate how children's books can be used to think about diversity and inclusion. The authors provide tools to recognize and critically question the (implicit) cultural ideologies in children's books, and discuss several aspects of ethnic-cultural diversity in Dutch-language literature, such as the percentage of authors with a non-Western background in Dutch youth literature, the availability of books featuring "ethnically and culturally diverse characters", and the way in which those characters are represented (2020: 75). Van den Bossche & Klomberg observe a "certain degree of white normativity" in Dutch-language youth literature and highlight that the representation of characters of color often involves clichéd themes and stereotypes, such as restricted freedom for Muslim girls, criminalization, and a low socioeconomic status (2020: 86-87). They emphasize the necessity for narratives that defy these stereotypes, where the ethnic-cultural background of characters seamlessly integrates into the story world without causing resistance or conflict. They stress the importance of a diverse array of stories to present a more nuanced and varied portrayal of different cultures (2020: 88).

Around the same time, another study is published on ethnic diversity in books for young children. De Bruijn and colleagues (2021a) investigate the ethnic diversity of authors, illustrators, and characters in popular children's books in the Netherlands. The corpus was selected out of books for young children (6 years old and under) that (1) won awards, (2) were purchased most often, and (3) were borrowed most often from libraries in the Netherlands from 2009 to 2018 (De Bruijn et al. 2021a: 416). The analysis eventually covers 64 books published between 2009 and 2018, revealing that 84% of the characters were white, while 16% had a non-white ethnic background.

> In 27 books (42%) all characters presented were White. In another 9 books (14%), all characters presented were either White or had an unclear ethnic appearance. Further, 28 books (44%) contained at least one human character of color, but all of these also included White characters, meaning that none of the books included only human characters of color (De Bruijn et al. 2021a: 418).

De Bruijn and colleagues reveal important findings regarding the representation of characters of color and the prominent role of white characters in children's literature. Furthermore, their research shows that the disparity between white characters and characters of color was most pronounced among protagonists and secondary characters, while the gap was comparatively smaller for background characters (De Bruijn et al. 2021a: 421). Additionally, they show a significant underrepresentation of female characters, with only 39% being female (2021a: 420). Furthermore, the study observes that female characters of color were more likely to be relegated to background roles. These findings underscore the importance of adopting an intersectional approach; female characters of color appear to be undervalued in terms of the roles they assume within the narratives (421).

The study of De Bruijn and colleagues (2021a) stresses that "professionals such as publishers, authors and illustrators, as well as consumers, such as parents and other co-readers, should be aware of the current situation regarding ethnic diversity and take this information into account whenever deciding to publish, write, illustrate, or read a new book" (2021a: 422). The strength of the research of the demographic landscape of characters in recent Dutch children's books lies in its quantitative approach to literary representations. By examining ethnic diversity and gender on a larger scale than is possible in qualitative studies, a pattern becomes clear that was previously only intuitively suspected, and the underrepresentation of protagonists of color in popular recent children's books is now supported by numerical data. However, the researchers point out that it is equally important to analyse "the messages that are conveyed in the books and the role that culture or ethnicity plays".

In their next article, De Bruijn et al. (2021b) examine 18 popular children's books in the Netherlands to understand the messages about ethnic diversity and various cultures portrayed in these books. They emphasize the importance of providing children's books that include culturally specific and authentic details to improve the reflection of various cultures and experiences of characters of color. The authors point out that "mere representation is not enough for readers to identify with characters, or for books to teach children about various cultures: it is also important how these characters of color and their environments are portrayed, and what values and

messages are conveyed within the stories" (2021b: 206). The study revealed that although characters of color were present in the books, they often lacked cultural specificity and authenticity, with colorblindness being prevalent. While most books avoided portraying stereotypes at the character or plot level, they also frequently lacked culturally authentic details. Only a minority of books explicitly referenced the cultural background or nationality of characters of color. Additionally, the analysis uncovered power dynamics among characters, with some instances suggesting the influence of prevailing ideologies such as white supremacy and Eurocentrism.

2.2 Public libraries

Libraries serve as dynamic entities at the intersection of literature, education, and community engagement. As such, they play a crucial role in shaping the reading experiences of children and their carers. While some research has been conducted on ethnic diversity in Dutch-language youth literature, a noticeable gap exists in academic studies regarding the role of libraries in fostering a sense of belonging for children from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, the role of book collections often escapes scholarly attention when investigating the library as social infrastructure. This study seeks to fill these gaps in the literature by examining how libraries can effectively promote diversity and inclusion, utilizing the superdiverse city of Brussels as a compelling case study.

My research responds to the call by Vårheim et al. (2019) for additional empirical research on libraries and their contributions to the public sphere. Vårheim and colleagues (2019) advocate for studies extending beyond the predominant Anglo-Scandinavian perspectives, providing deeper insights into how today's libraries are navigating challenges related to migration and social inequality. Recognizing that the relevance of examining public libraries exceeds the realm of library and information studies is essential to developing a comprehensive understanding of contemporary urban life (Aptekar 2019: 31). To achieve this, the research will begin by providing an overview of existing academic literature highlighting the crucial role of libraries as public spaces. Subsequently, the study will delve into the atmospheric dimensions of library spaces and explore the nuanced feelings of (non)belonging.

Libraries as social infrastructure

The typical mental image of a library consists of a space filled with neatly arranged books, watched over by stern-looking librarians who are guarding the silence. However, over the last two decades, the library's role has shifted from a traditional repository of books to a vibrant hub of community engagement. There has been a "significant increase in interest in the public library's role and its potential as a meeting place, both within the field of research and the field of practice" (Aabø et al. 2010: 17). Modern public libraries have diversified their services to meet evolving societal needs, offering cultural events, workshops, and access to digital resources (Audunson 2005; Aabø and Audunson 2012; Slijkerman & van Vlimmeren 2021; Van Melik & Merry 2021; Lee 2023). As this social function of libraries becomes increasingly crucial, recent research

has shifted its focus towards libraries as institutions that actively contribute to the public sphere (Audunson et al. 2019a; Audunson et al. 2019b).

In his book *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (2018), Eric Klinenberg delves into the vital role of social infrastructure in nurturing robust and interconnected communities. He argues that spaces where people congregate, such as libraries, parks, and community centres, play a crucial role in fostering social connections, civic engagement, and a sense of belonging. According to Klinenberg, libraries are often overlooked in discussions about social capital, yet they are critical forms of social infrastructure that provide the setting and context for social participation. In an age marked by atomization and inequality, libraries can be seen as the foundation of civil society, embodying spaces where people with diverse backgrounds can access free services and goods. Libraries thus strengthen the social fabric and address contemporary societal challenges.

Aabø, Audunson, and Vårheim (2010) demonstrate the pivotal role of the public library as a meeting place. Their research, conducted through a survey in three urban districts in Oslo, characterizes the public library as "a place where people accidentally run into neighbors and friends" (2010: 26), but also as

> a place where a substantial proportion report being accidentally engaged in conversations with strangers. It appears to be a place where users are exposed to "the other," i.e., people with a background different from themselves. (…) This indicates that the library as a meeting place plays a substantial role in equalizing the possibilities of being an active citizen across social and economic differences.

Aabø and colleagues (2010) show how the library as meeting place positively correlates with involvement in enhancing the local community and trust in community institutions. Building further on these insights about the library and its role as meeting place, Aabø & Audunson (2012) explore the social activities taking place in public libraries. The library is considered a public space where most visitors are strangers to each other, but also a private space where individuals carry out their own activities, and a parochial space where community activities take place. Aabø & Audunson (2012) identify the library as a meeting point for people from different cultures, ethnic backgrounds, generations, and social groups. Their research also underscores the significance of the library as a forum for people come together to engage in collective activities and build relationships, thereby contributing to building social cohesion and community strengthening.

Sofya Aptekar (2019) points to the emancipatory potential of public libraries. According to her, the public library can function as a resistant space in the context of neoliberalism and social inequality by providing services to vulnerable communities grappling with increasing disparities and declining public services. Although the library "is not a perfect emancipatory institution", it can fill gaps in public service, provide space for inter- and intra-class solidarity, and act as a site of resistance against economic injustice. Similarly, in their research on small public libraries in the Netherlands, van Melik and Merry (2023) highlight the growing significance of libraries as

social infrastructure. They describe the library as an inclusive environment where people from various backgrounds gather, facilitating meaningful interactions among different groups, including seniors, knitting circles, students, and gamers. With accessibility for all, regardless of age or background, the library encourages connections across generations. Staff is trained to welcome and assist individuals from diverse backgrounds, illustrating the library's commitment to embracing diversity and fostering interaction and collaboration[1]. However, encounters in libraries can sometimes lead to discomfort or misunderstandings. The authors also discuss the difficulty in quantifying the value of social activities, making it hard to assess the true impact of library encounters.

Libraries as spaces of connection

Delving deeper into these 'library encounters' and the described feelings of discomfort is necessary here. In the article 'Public Libraries and Spaces of Micro Connection in the Intercultural City' (2023b), Melike Peterson describes cities as "divided/dividing settings that are shaped by fragmentation, exclusions, and parallel lives" (2023b: 2). She contends that the modern city requires 'connecting spaces': ordinary social environments that foster opportunities for encounter and connection among people. In scientific literature, these places are also referred to as 'third spaces'. Peterson advocates for the public library as one of these crucial and increasingly rare spaces of connection in modern cities. She subscribes to the idea of the city constructed through encounters, rather than the reverse – a city where these encounters merely serve as part of the decor (Peterson 2023b: 2).

In public libraries, with their diverse activities and audiences, various types of encounters take place, varying in duration and depth, Peterson writes – "from fleeting, banal, and temporary interactions to more personal, intimate, and profound exchanges" (2023b: 3). She emphasizes the value of these fleeting interactions, drawing on various researchers who affirm that a sense of connection can arise during everyday, brief interactions, where differences on a small scale can coexist without hindering a feeling of 'belonging'. The concept of 'micro connections' points to these brief moments and places of connection, "since it is *then* and *there* that people connect to the world in often profound ways" (Peterson 2023b: 3, italics in original). These 'light' connections with others lead to a sense of belonging in the city, and in the world.

The article nevertheless also cautions against romanticizing such encounters. While all the above sounds beautiful, these encounters do not exist in a vacuum. There are structural inequalities that divide people, and many experience racism on a daily basis. Peterson writes: "Micro connections thus exist alongside micro aggressions" (2023b: 4). The concept of micro-aggressions refers to these unequal power dynamics and various histories and forms of oppression that shape the past, present, and future. Peterson "takes seriously the potential of these fragile connections between people" and sees the public library as a crucial space within the urban fabric, as it fosters "a sense of familiarity with difference, a feeling of connectedness and shared emotionality with others and a notion of belonging" (2023b: 11). However, it is important to

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[1] It is important to add that membership fees are common in the Netherlands, although the authors do not

recognize that the library is not detached from excluding mechanisms. Peterson writes that "(dis)connection, (dis)identification, (non)belonging and inclusions and exclusions" are inextricably linked and that, in fact, "the mutuality of micro connections and micro aggressions foregrounds mundane and mixed spaces as political" (2023b: 4).

Libraries as spaces of non/belonging

Another 2023 article by Peterson explores the topic of 'Libraries as Felt Spaces: Atmospheres, Public Space, and Feelings of Dis/comfort'. In this piece, Peterson delves into the atmospheric and emotional qualities of public libraries. She portrays the library as a micro-urban space shaping city life. Public libraries, according her interviewees, are perceived as welcoming and warm environments, generating a sense of urban connectedness where diversity is experienced as commonplace: public libraries are "spaces of felt welcome and inclusivity in increasingly heterogeneous neighbourhoods", while also being places where "people still need to navigate their differences and similarities on a daily basis (2023a: 6). In her research, she uses three public libraries in Bremen as examples to support her argument. The article challenges Oldenburg's (1989) concept of 'third place' which argues that conviviality and comfort are the basis of community and belonging, emphasising that belonging also includes tension and friction, and "the atmospheres in public libraries become pivotal in shaping people's capacity to negotiate feelings of (non)belonging" (2023a: 8).

In view of exploring inclusion and diversity in public libraries, Peterson's (2023a) examination of the atmospheric and emotional dimensions of these spaces offers valuable insights. Her findings highlight public libraries as perceived havens of welcome, in which feelings of discomfort and unease can have a place, fostering a sense of urban connectedness in increasingly heterogeneous neighbourhoods. To better understand the concept of (non)belonging put forward by Peterson, I find it useful to introduce Williamson's article (2020), in which she argues that belonging is something people learn and teach. It is not just a symbolic connection to an identity or community, but also an ability to navigate and engage across various social contexts that include diverse groups of people. Studying a community library in a multicultural suburb in Sydney, Williamson shows how the library serves as a pedagogical environment in which civic belonging is taught. Various codes related to materials, spatial arrangements, and interactions within the library contribute to developing feelings of belonging.

For example, the design of a library is carefully planned to guide people and their activities (Williamson 2020: 549). Various elements, like signs, decorations, lighting, and the arrangement of furniture, are used to direct people to different areas of the library and gently suggest appropriate behaviour. Comfortable chairs in the newspaper and magazine section are there to encourage people to relax and take their time reading. A quiet study area, with individual desk spaces, is set up for those who prefer quiet, focused work. Colorful decorations in the children's area create a playful environment. Overall, these design choices, along with helpful staff, play a crucial role in helping people to understand and navigate the library space over time.

Studying public libraries and their role of meeting places has demonstrated that the library is more than just a repository of information. The library has the potential to function as a common space for social and cultural learning, where citizens are exposed to the diversity within their community, encompassing values, ethnicity, age, social class, and interests (Audunson et al. 2019a). In Williamson's words, libraries "are places where people find out about themselves as belonging (or non-belonging) subjects, and learn 'how to belong'" (2020: 545). Scholars like Williamson (2020), Peterson (2023a; 2023b), and Aabø and Audunson (2012) underline that having inclusive social structures is crucial for improving citizenship in diverse cities, creating places where a shared sense of community can develop across the city.

2.3 Superdiversity & decolonization

In 2007, Steven Vertovec introduced the term 'super-diversity' to illustrate that traditional ethnic-based approaches to diversity are inadequate for understanding complex immigration patterns in the UK, as they overlook immigrants' individual needs and the nuanced dynamics of inclusion or exclusion (2007: 1039). Factors influencing immigrants' experiences include country of origin, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, age, class, migration channel, transnational connections, social networks, legal status, education, and employment access. Recognizing these diverse factors is crucial for understanding the unequal distribution of rights and benefits in a superdiverse context. Vertovec emphasizes that superdiversity should describe and analyze "new social patterns, forms, and identities arising from migration-driven diversification" (2019: 125). I use this term to describe a nuanced reality rather than as an analytical concept[2].

In their book *Superdiversiteit en democratie* (2014), Ico Maly, Jan Blommaert, and Joachim Ben Yakoub utilize the concept of superdiversity to highlight the intricate nature of social and cultural diversity in contemporary societies, focusing on cities like Ghent, Brussels and Antwerp. Within the context of superdiversity, what was once considered exceptional, such as multilingualism and diverse group identities, is now regarded as the norm, while traditional norms, like monolingualism and a singular identity, have become exceptions in reality. Maly and colleagues also caution against idealizing superdiversity, noting that it introduces new challenges without eliminating existing inequalities (2014: 57). They advocate for openness, asserting that adjusting our thoughts, understanding, vocabulary, and actions to new realities is essential for building a society that is open, pluralistic, and democratic (2014: 203).

I argue that achieving this goal implies decolonizing our existing public institutions to provide services that more effectively meet the diverse needs and circumstances of immigrants, ethnic minorities, and the broader population they belong to. Decolonization in the broad sense can be understood as the condemnation of colonialism as a system of oppression, and the redistribution of power to strive towards social justice (Nsayi 2022: 189-190). According to the aforementioned

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[2] When revisiting his 2007 article and the multiple uses of the term afterwards, Vertovec also argues that superdiversity should be used to better describe and understand "new social patterns, forms and identities arising from migration-driven diversification" (Vertovec 2019: 125).

report by an expert panel in Ghent, decolonization means developing a critical perspective to analyse diverse, mutually reinforcing inequalities across all societal domains in an integrated manner. In the context of education, for example, the debates about decolonization often revolve around the need to incorporate diverse perspectives, experiences, and knowledge systems that have been historically marginalized or excluded (Grymonprez & Torbeyns 2020; El-Kaddouri 2021; Kanobana 2021), and to critically screen learning materials for harmful stereotypes (Desmet 2024). How do we translate this concept to the context of public libraries?

Although present in the public debate (Van der Taelen 2021; Abbeloos 2021), the decolonization of public libraries remains to my knowledge absent in academic literature. The existing literature focuses mainly on the decolonization of academic libraries and is almost exclusively located in the United States, with many studies building on the frameworks of critical librarianship and critical race theory (see, for example: Kumasi 2013; Brook et al. 2015; Hudson 2017; Leung & López-McKnight 2023). The domain of public librarianship has received insufficient scholarly attention, especially in the European context. My goal is to contribute to addressing the lacuna in academic research regarding decolonization initiatives of public libraries. I propose that the concept of superdiversity can also be valuable within public library services. Brussels, with its dynamic response to superdiversity, presents an interesting case for studying the role of public libraries in promoting inclusivity, cultural understanding, and community cohesion, and shaping evolving norms of identity, language, and diversity in the face of ever-changing demographics.

3. Context and case: superdiverse Brussels

Brussels is more than the capital of Belgium. It hosts the seats of various European institutions and international organizations, such as the European Parliament, the NATO, and the European Commission. The Brussels-Capital Region had a population of 1,222,637 in 2022, making Brussels the only Belgian city with more than one million residents. It accounts for approximately 11% of the total Belgian population, and has a larger population than Antwerp, Ghent, Charleroi, and Liège combined (Moens 2023: 7). What's more, no other Belgian city is as densely populated, diverse and young as Brussels (Moens 2023: 19).

At the beginning of 2023, nearly 77% of the population of the Brussels-Capital Region had a 'foreign background'[3]. Of these people with a foreign background, 29.9% has a country of origin within the EU, and 46.8% originates from outside the EU ('Bevolking naar herkomst' 2023). Brussels is a textbook example of a majority−minority city (Crul 2015: 57). The rapidly changing demographics in the Brussels neighbourhoods, in which there is no longer a clear majority group, create a new environment for both the children of new and established migrant communities and those of the original majority group. In this evolving landscape, the conventional majority group no longer serves as the standard for newcomers and their children to conform to (Crul 2015). The Brussels-Capital Region also exhibits a significant socio-economic disparity, marked by a pronounced division between affluent and impoverished areas (De Backer 2021: 484). Significant income disparities are evident, with affluent Sint-Pieters-Woluwe having more than double the average income of Sint-Joost-ten-Node, highlighting socio-economic divergences across Brussels municipalities (Moens 2023: 33).

3.1 Multilingual Brussels

Although Dutch and French are the official languages of Brussels, Maly et al. argue that the notion of a bilingual city is 'absolute fiction' (2014: 81). They highlight that superdiversity has led to the emergence of an organic lingua franca, facilitating communication across linguistic boundaries. Despite language surveys being prohibited in Brussels, it is noted that the majority of the population predominantly communicates in French (2014: 81). Research from the language barometer confirms that French remains the most widely known language, followed by English, Dutch, Arab, Spanish, Italian, German, and Portuguese (Janssens 2018). Despite the political system's reliance on separate language communities, language barometer surveys since 2001 demonstrate the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of Brussels. While the communal division with monolingual education and public opinion still influences group formation and identification, its overall impact is diminishing. Living together in the same city, characterized by a

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[3] The group of individuals with a foreign background includes not only those with a current foreign nationality but also individuals with a current Belgian nationality who have a foreign country of birth, and individuals with a Belgian country of birth but at least one parent with a foreign country of birth.

strong degree of diversity, is increasingly playing a crucial role in community building. More and more, a multilingual urban environment is becoming the frame of reference with which Brussels' residents identify (Janssens 2013).

3.2 Youth in Brussels

The age distribution of the Brussels population illustrates the youthful profile of its residents. In 2022, approximately half of the Brussels inhabitants (49%) are younger than 35 years old (Moens 2023: 11). Furthermore, there is a correlation between age and origin: the younger the age group, the higher the proportion of individuals of foreign origin. While among the oldest residents of Brussels, only a minority have a foreign origin (42%), this figure is significantly higher for individuals aged 18-64 (78%). This percentage is even higher for children between 0-17 years old: 89% of minors have a foreign origin (Moens 2023: 15). Sadly, 41% of children in the Brussels-Capital Region live in families with an income below the poverty risk threshold (Observatorium voor Gezondheid en Welzijn 2020).

In his study exploring 'everyday cosmopolitanism' among youth in Brussels, De Backer (2021) examines attitudes toward ethnic and cultural diversity through observations and interviews in public spaces. The focus lies on discerning forms of intercultural openness, its limitations, and the dynamics of tolerant attitudes. According to De Backer, fostering an 'everyday cosmopolitan sensibility' involves creating atmospheric conditions conducive to intercultural encounters and openness. This can be achieved by promoting recurrent activities in youth clubs and community spaces, providing a platform for young people to develop open attitudes within a secure environment and under a gentle structure.

The study introduces 'parochial atmospheres' as flexible environments shaped by diverse factors like human interactions, technology, history, and legal considerations. For example, when young people choose a hangout spot, they may subconsciously consider rules, security measures, and physical elements like benches or fences, which collectively shape the atmosphere. De Backer demonstrates how a complex mix of social and material contexts influence everyday cosmopolitanism. He argues that parochial atmospheres play a crucial role in shaping individuals' attitudes and sense of belonging, and facilitate tolerance and identity development by encouraging engagement with differences. In private realms, on the other hand, young people often maintain close ties within their ethnic group, perpetuating shared family histories, traditions, and belief systems, which can contribute to the persistence of stereotypes and racism. Although De Backer's study doesn't directly address libraries, it offers valuable insights for promoting intercultural interactions and understanding in public spaces like libraries.

3.3 Public libraries in Brussels

The Brussels-Capital Region has 57 public French-language libraries, and 20 Dutch-language libraries. According to a report by the study bureau Perspective Brussels (Hanson & Pezzuti 2021), in recent years, libraries in the Brussels region have transformed from traditional collection centres to vibrant spaces for cultural engagement and knowledge dissemination, providing a wide range of services and activities such as open lectures, workshops, or reading groups. The report concentrates on the libraries' societal roles, emphasizing their significance as inclusive spaces for social interaction and community development, and it calls for continued collaboration with relevant partners and stakeholders to enhance accessibility and expand the impact of libraries in the region.

My research exclusively focuses on Dutch-language public libraries. There are 19 community libraries situated in each of the 19 municipalities, while 'Muntpunt' serves as the main central library in the city centre. Muntpunt is an initiative of the Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie (VGC, 'Flemish Community Commission') and the Flemish Government, serving as a library, an information centre and a meeting place in the centre of Brussels. The 19 community libraries operate autonomously, each with its own vision and policy plans aligned with municipal policies, but together they constitute a connected library network. The network started in 2005. By 2016, all recognized Dutch-speaking municipal libraries in the Brussels-Capital Region were connected to the network. As of September 2023, membership to these libraries is free, and a single membership card provides access to all twenty libraries. There is a shared catalogue available online. The network receives support from 'Ondersteuning Bibliotheken in Brussel' (OBiB, 'Support for Libraries in Brussels') by the VGC. The support of OBiB focuses both on content-related aspects and on technical matters. They develop and support literacy-promoting activities and educational projects in collaboration with the libraries. In its multi-year plan, the VGC states that it supports Brussels community libraries in their role as a 'third place' where all Brussels residents can freely access stories, diverse perspectives, lifelong learning, and social interaction.

The VGC co-organized a decolonization programme for cultural participants across all Brussels municipalities, running from March to September 2023 and involving various municipal cultural organizations. The initiative began with an introductory session on decolonization and the development of a shared conceptual framework on the kickoff day. Subsequently, a comprehensive inspiration day covered topics like language, imagery, historical insights into colonial history, power and ideology, and the challenging of personal frames of reference. The concluding reflection day featured concrete insights shared through various sessions, including a library decolonization workshop. Zakayo Wandoloh examined Bib Permeke's ongoing decolonization programme, discussing lessons learned, successful and unsuccessful aspects, and presenting an actionable framework that can guide library decolonization.

3.4 Research questions

This study investigates the efforts made by library personnel to encourage diversity in children's literature, examining their perspectives and navigation of topics concerning diversity, representation, and decolonization. My main research question is: **How do public libraries in the superdiverse city of Brussels foster inclusive literary environments for children and their carers?** Subquestions are: What challenges do librarians face in ensuring a representative book supply, and how do they address them? In what ways do Dutch-language public libraries in Brussels actively engage in decolonization efforts? How do public libraries adapt to evolving community needs and which societal roles do they play within the superdiverse context of the city?

4. Methodological reflections

4.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured or in-depth interviewing is open-ended, but follows a general script and covers a list of topics (Russell 2006: 210). My aim was to capture a range of perspectives of different library staff members in several Brussels municipalities, in order to ensure diversity in my sample. I carried out interviews at 16 out of the 20 Dutch-language public libraries in different Brussels municipalities[4]. The interviews were conducted in Dutch, each taking place at the library where the interviewee was employed. The conversations centred on various types of questions: I posed some introductory questions about the library, followed by inquiries about the curation of the children's collection and challenges encountered in ensuring a representative book supply. Then we delved into questions about the library's visitors and collaborations with partners, and the role of the library as a meeting place. Finally, I asked respondents about their personal perspectives on certain topics and their vision for the future of the library. During some interviews, two staff members were present, providing insights into their collaborative dynamics. It was intriguing to observe their interactions, which ranged from mutual agreement to occasional disagreement, highlighting the diversity of perspectives within the team. It is important to note that the viewpoints expressed in the interviews may not necessarily reflect those of the municipality or the library as institution.

4.2 Positionality & ethical considerations

I was raised by two academically schooled parents, who played a pivotal role in cultivating my love for reading. Bedtime stories were a cherished tradition that not only laid the foundation for my passion for literature, but also enriched my vocabulary and nourished my interest in language. My parents could give me the chance to study what I wanted, and after finishing a master's degree in Comparative Modern Literature, they gave me the opportunity to pursue another master, in Conflict and Development Studies. In short, I am a highly privileged, white, cis, middle class, young woman, and I realize that these privileges imply blind spots regarding my understanding of social inequality, discrimination and racism.

In total, I spoke to 23 staff members, the majority of whom were female (78.26%). The respondents represented various library positions, including librarians, collection manager of children's books, educational staff and youth workers. To protect the anonymity of the participants, all names have been replaced with fictional ones. Before each interview, I conveyed the focus and intentions of my research. I explicitly asked the interviewees for permission to

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[4] I went to the Dutch-language public libraries of Anderlecht, Elsene, Etterbeek, Evere, Jette, Koekelberg, Laken, Schaarbeek, Sint-Agatha-Berchem, Sint-Gillis, Sint-Joost-ten-Node, Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe, Sint-Pieters-Woluwe, Ukkel, Watermaal-Bosvoorde, as well as to Muntpunt. Located in the heart of Brussels, Muntpunt not only serves a local function (for the centre of Brussels, the so called Pentagon), but also a regional one (for the Brussels-Capital Region).

record the conversation, informing them that I would anonymize the statements. During the interview, deviations from the questionnaire occurred to ask follow-up questions. A certain degree of spontaneity allowed participants to freely share their thoughts and feelings, and highlight what they consider important. In this way, respondents could raise topics I had not thought of. This approach is informed by a feminist research praxis, which emphasizes the value of co-authorship and co-production of data and creates room for different forms of lived experience and perspectives. After each interview, the collected audio recordings were transcribed into written form, in Dutch. I have translated quotes of the interviews to English. Certain characteristics of the people to whom they are attributed may have been adjusted to assure anonymity.

4.3 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (i.e. themes) within data, as well as offering an interpretation of various aspects of the research topic (2006: 6). In the thematic analysis of interview data collected from library workers in Brussels, I took a constructionist epistemological stance and therefore aimed to theorise the socio-cultural contexts and structural conditions "that enable the individual accounts that are provided" (Braun & Clarke 2006: 14). Concretely, this means I examine the ways in which the perspectives and experiences of library workers in Brussels are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. I believe that, in turn, their views can have effects on others and influence dominant discourses and narratives.

First, I made transcripts of the interviews and delved into a small text sample. Transcribing all the interviews enabled me to deepen my comprehension of the conversation content. During this process, I already marked passages that caught my attention and I formulated initial codes. In the next step, I identified potential themes, revisiting them after reading other text samples. After a while, I selected the themes that seemed most relevant to answer my research questions, and gathered and compared interesting interview excerpts within each theme. I translated these interview quotes from Dutch to English. I then reflected on the deeper meaning of these quotes, asking myself 'what are the assumptions underpinning it?' and searching for connections and contradictions. Finally, I formulated my analysis in order to puzzle together answers to my research questions, revisiting relevant literature. As thematic analysis does not prescribe a specific threshold for determining when a theme is relevant, I try to remain critical and not merely discuss the themes that aligned with my preconceived notions, but pay attention to contradictory or unexpected findings.

In the first section of my analysis, I delve deeper in the meaning of an inclusive and accessible book selection. In the second section, I explore the multifaceted roles of public libraries in Brussels. In the discussion, I highlight the importance of fostering a sense of belonging, both in stories and within library spaces, connecting both analysis sections.

5. Results and analysis

Job title interviewee(s)	*Names interviewee(s)	**Scale of the library
Educational officer	Alex	Small
Youth worker & Librarian	Isabelle & Ann	Small
Librarian & Youth librarian	Lise & Anouk	Small
Librarian & Librarian	Dominique & Hilde	Small
Youth librarian	Mireille	Small
Librarian	Els	Small
Librarian & Collection manager	Ciska & Sylvie	Medium
Educational officer	Lucas	Medium
Youth worker & Youth worker	Nathalie & Lotte	Medium
Youth worker & Librarian	Felix & Robin	Medium
Youth worker	Karen	Medium
Youth librarian & Librarian	Dorian & Marja	Medium
Youth librarian	Anja	Large
Youth librarian	Liam	Large
Youth worker	Valerie	Large
Youth librarian	Didier	Large

* Fictional names
** Small (0-4 FTE), Medium (5-10 FTE), Large (11+ FTE)

5.1 Children's literature collections

Young people constitute a significant portion of library users, comprising 48% of users in Dutch-language libraries in Brussels (Hanson & Pezzuti 2021). What emerged through the interviews was that children's collections are exceptionally popular in all libraries, since school visits are an important part of the library service and most libraries regularly receive families with young children. The people who are responsible for choosing, obtaining, and integrating books into children's library collections wield significant influence over the narratives accessible to children. As youth worker Valerie explains, the environment of the library space cannot be separated from the book collection: "not all of us are responsible for curating the collection, but it is something that is front and centre on our agenda, because we provide activities for schools and other visitors, and we want to provide a space where they feel welcome and with which they can identify. And that should also be reflected in those books".

5.1.1 The importance of diversity in children's collections

When I inquired about the significance of diversity within library youth collections, all the staff members I interviewed acknowledged the importance of offering a broad range of stories. Librarian Lise, for example, responded that "since we have an active group of young library members, it is our responsibility to periodically review what is in our collection and ask ourselves: does it reflect certain trends in society and the needs of our community?". Most library staff strives towards a youth collection in which everyone can find pieces of themselves represented. As Didier, a youth librarian in a larger-scale library, puts it: "I try to offer a selection that everyone can somewhat relate to, in which all readers finds a book that appeals to them. And to a large extent, that's because the story, characters, or author have an origin with which one can identify. So it's in our interest to offer books that readers find interesting. And because we have a diverse audience here, it's important that we also have a diverse range of offerings".

I meet youth worker Felix on his birthday. In between my questions, he hands out sweet treats and strikes up conversations with visitors to assist them with book recommendations. Felix tells me that his library tries to develop a collection "in which everyone can find their way". He says that the offer of books that depict cultural diversity is slowly growing, but hardly matches the reality in the streets surrounding the library - "Brussels' streetscape is not so well represented in all those books you see here, unfortunately." As a number of library employees point out, this superdiverse context also invites library staff to be self-reflexive. In the words of Ciska: "This context works very challenging. I can't quite imagine myself working in a small Flemish village. Here, everyone speaks a different language and everyone has different roots. So you're challenged to adapt your entire collection and operations to try to reflect society. This isn't always straightforward, which means you have to be creative and I like that a lot". Ciska acknowledges the challenges and complexities of serving a multilingual community with diverse cultural backgrounds, but she sees this as an added value to the job, requiring creativity.

Liam asserts that stories, to some extent, shape a child's world. "Just because you put super diverse books in a library doesn't mean that's going to immediately change a child's life. But I think it does play a role", he says. "A book can shape the worldview of young readers". According to him, publishers are slowly paying more attention to diversity in their books. He thinks this can also improve their sales figures. When he displays books in which diversity is more visible, they are immediately borrowed, "so parents are really looking for those books for their kids." By consequence, some libraries choose to prioritize displaying these books more prominently.

Although the majority of library personnel pay specific attention to diverse representations in their collection, they also acknowledge that the selection process is mostly based on intuition and their own personal taste. Some library staff members rely on websites, blogs, reviews and social media platforms to find these books. In Robin's experience, "after a while, you know a bit which authors or series you can follow. But often that's also based on intuition. You have an eye for that after a while, and as soon as you see it somewhere in another library or in a store, you take a picture and then it goes on the list". There has been a mindshift within the publishing world, and it is becoming increasingly easy to find books with a more balanced representation. However, Lotte points out that they also "have to purchase books with animals rather than human protagonists, to be able to cover certain themes". Her colleague Nathalie adds: "We sometimes don't purchase books because they are too white. Many children ask for books about horses, for example. But I refuse to purchase them if those protagonists continue to be only blonde girls with blue eyes."

Alex is an educational worker in a small library. She also questions the dominant image in children's books of the white, blonde child with blue eyes: "I don't think there are many children who come to this library who recognize themselves in such a stereotype. So I think that this diversity should be reflected in books, and that's something we focus on. Also other types of diversity: autism, introversion, same-sex marriage". Ciska also thinks it is essential to "seek out as many different voices as possible". Together with her colleague Sylvie, she sometimes highlights a specific theme, such as LGBTQI+ voices around Pride month. But she adds: "When people think of diversity, they often think, 'we should make a thematic display.' And that's important. But you really should just incorporate it into everything, all the time."

Normal versus different

In most libraries, children's collections are arranged according to a classifying system with different themes, such as 'nature' and 'feelings'. The different themes have different colors and icons, and subsections like 'animals' or 'feeling angry', for example. Within this ZIZO classifying system, there is also a section that used to be labelled 'being different' (*'anders zijn'*) that was recently changed into 'being yourself' (*'jezelf zijn'*). Many librarians notified me of this change, which they considered positive.

This shift, to them, reflects a more inclusive language, empowering children to embrace their unique identities rather than framing diversity as something separate or 'other'. However, youth librarian Marja thinks this is a genre that should be as small as possible. "What is 'being yourself'

when you are a toddler?", she asks me smilingly. "For example, what I found in there were books about gay relationships, which could also be put under love. So I've looked at all those books, and for anything that had an extra theme, I just changed the stickers and they're everywhere now, but no longer in that category of 'being yourself'. And I think this indicates how there's been a growing awareness in this library of asking ourselves 'what is the norm exactly?'". Marja is somewhat sceptical about the concept of 'being yourself', pointing to the complexities of identity formation and the limitations of applying such constructs to young children. She thus decided to reclassify books about gay relationships, recognizing the fluidity and multiplicity of identity categories, and questioning what is 'normal' and what isn't.

This questioning of what is 'normal' and what is 'different' is something Karen also struggles with. As an educational officer in a library located in a residential area at the outskirts of the city, she wants to offer windows and mirrors to children, but she emphasises that the literary quality is most important when she purchases books. "I do not focus on who the main character is. Whether they are - how should I put it? - gays, lesbians, the x-people of today, the *they/thems*, people with differently pigmented skin, whatever. I don't find that important, and I kind of feel that the more emphasis you put on that, the more you highlight the difference. I just want children to learn that what's in those books is just normal". Although Karen's argument focuses on going beyond a dichotomous categorization of what is 'normal' and what is not, she could unintentionally reinforce the status quo. Her preference for books that she deems "good" might reflect her internalization of certain quality norms, which may prioritize familiarity and conformity over diversity and inclusion. Karen's language choices, such as referring to LGBTQ+ people as "gays, lesbians, the x-people of today, the they/thems," suggests a discomfort or unfamiliarity with these identities.

Karen tells me that within the network of Dutch-language libraries in Brussels, "there is always the discussion of, we *must* have authors with immigrant roots and we *must* have books in which certain characters appear, and I find that wrong. Look, if those people don't write good books, why should I promote them? Just as I don't buy bad books from Flemish authors, right? I'm not going to specifically buy this or that author because they have a foreign name, or because I know they're someone with a different skin color. So, I believe that you should be able to buy a book based on the qualities of the book. Otherwise, you're engaging in discrimination, but then reverse discrimination. I don't think your book is good, you know. But that has nothing to do with skin color itself, it's just based on my starting point of whether it's a good book or not." By emphasising individual meritocracy and equating efforts to promote diversity with "reverse discrimination", Karen overlooks the systemic barriers faced by marginalized communities in the literary field. Karen's language choices, such as referring to authors with immigrant roots as "those people" and dismissing the significance of skin color, reveal underlying assumptions about identity and belonging. Her insistence on evaluating books solely based on their quality overlooks the ways in which identities shape perspectives and experiences, and erases the realities of structural racism and discrimination. This highlights the need for an analysis which takes into account power and privilege, to better understand what inclusivity and decolonisation

measures are about. We will come back to this in a later section. For now, it suffices to say that Karen's perspective does not align with the opinions of the other library staff I have spoken to.

Multilingualism

In a superdiverse city like Brussels, where the lingua franca is French and where many people speak languages which do not have an official status in Belgium, studying Dutch-language public libraries may seem counterintuitive. However, there are several compelling reasons for focusing on these libraries in the context of superdiversity. Despite the linguistic diversity of the city and the dominance of French in many aspects of public life, the presence of Dutch-language institutions underscores the importance of linguistic plurality and the recognition of Dutch as an integral part of Brussels' linguistic landscape. Moreover, within the linguistic diversity of the city, the network of Dutch-language libraries is quite elaborate and well-funded for such a small language community, and could also be of importance for other linguistic communities.

Most libraries actively adapt and respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by linguistic diversity, thereby enriching the cultural and educational resources available to the superdiverse population of Brussels. Alex, for example, observes: "in Brussels we have many libraries in a very small area". She states that, despite the relatively small target audience of Dutch-speaking users, many people visit her library. She adds that they also have a large English collection, and they communicate in whichever language is most comfortable for the visitor - "I think we speak Dutch for about a third of the time, and for the rest, we try French, English, everything in between." Thanks to school visits, children from Dutch-language schools become familiar with the library[5]. Their parents often do not speak Dutch, "and when they come here, they think it's all Dutch-speaking. But that's not the case. Because we also have an English collection. And we also have many people who are learning Dutch, who we try to attract with other activities, such as conversation groups. In the beginning, they only take textbooks to learn Dutch. Then, gradually, they also start exploring the collection." Alex's account underscores the role of libraries in facilitating language acquisition. Through activities such as conversation groups and access to multilingual resources, Brussels' Dutch-language libraries provide valuable support for individuals learning Dutch.

Youth worker Felix describes how they sometimes organize story carousels. They invite friends, parents, and other community members to tell stories in the language of their choice. This approach allows for a diverse range of languages, with up to twelve storytellers speaking in ten different languages. Surprisingly, children easily accept this multilingual storytelling format, and they listen attentively to the stories, he says. Despite adult assumptions that such diversity might

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[5] In 2020, the Dutch-speaking education system accounted for 19% of Brussels youth, with 54,102 children registered in the Brussels-Capital Region. Over the last decade, the number of Brussels children attending Dutch-language education in Flanders and Brussels has substantially increased across all educational levels (Moens 2023: 25). It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of Brussels children attending Dutch-language education do not speak Dutch at home; approximately three-quarters fall into this category (Moens 2023: 21-26).

not be suitable for them, children often stay engaged for extended periods, sometimes up to an hour, as they enjoy stories in multiple languages. Felix's account suggests that children are perfectly capable of navigating and appreciating diverse linguistic and cultural experiences, and language barriers do not hinder the pleasure of listening to stories.

By catering to the needs of diverse linguistic communities, library staff members aim to enhance inclusion. Youth librarian Didier says his library prioritizes offering picture books in as many languages as possible. While he thinks the quality of the books varies strongly, he wants to provide books in languages that may not be readily available elsewhere, such as Tagalog, Tigrinya, and Papiamento. Their goal is to ensure representation of diverse languages in their collection. Lucas, educational officer in another library, points out that the network of libraries distributes collections across different libraries based on community needs. For example, his library specializes in languages like Polish, Ukrainian, and Romanian due to significant populations in the municipality. While having limited collections in languages like Arabic, Chinese, and Russian, they acknowledge the need for expansion and sometimes refer patrons to other libraries with more extensive collections. Youth librarian Liam, on the other hand, mentions that their library has the largest diversity of languages in their collection, including languages like Pashtu and Polish. However, he notes the difficulty in acquiring books in these languages due to limited availability and challenges in finding reliable suppliers.

Involving the reader community

The collection of Ukrainian and Romanian books in Lucas's library is partly curated by readers from those backgrounds. Lucas sometimes experiences limitations in terms of diversity, since "they mostly recommend books they read themselves when they were children". Although activating readers to collaborate on the literature collection is important to enhance inclusion, Lucas also finds it crucial to ensure that the collection is up-to-date and portraying diversity.

Nathalie and Lotte are two library employees who are passionate about ensuring diversity in their collection. I can tell that they are on the same page regarding this topic, as they seamlessly complete each other's sentences. Situated in a neighbourhood with a significant expat population, Nathalie highlights the popularity of the English book collection, while also noting the frequent borrowing of Spanish books, which were collaboratively selected with borrowers from the community. Lotte emphasizes their approach of involving speakers of various languages in the selection process, creating a stronger connection and leading to higher circulation.

> Nathalie: That's also something we really want to focus on this year, right? It's going to be a major action point.
>
> Lotte: That the collection is shaped by the public.
>
> Nathalie: Which is why I also think you get a fairer representation overall, in themes, characters, in everything that appeals to someone. But we're still thinking about exactly how we're going to accomplish it.
>
> Lotte: So it doesn't depend on the taste of just one reader what the collection will look like.

Both Nathalie and Lotte position the library as a site for cultural exchange, where diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are valued and represented, and where community engagement is encouraged. In their opinion, co-curating the library collection might bring about a sense of ownership and belonging amongst visitors, but they also realize that some voices may be overruled by others in the decision-making process.

Librarian Dorian points out that the collection is not to be separated from the intention of the library to include everyone. Although there's one individual primarily responsible for the youth collection, input comes from various sources, such as student workers and visitors, making the collection diverse in perspectives. Furthermore, he tells me about their future plans to involve external voices in collection development by working with collection ambassadors who have specific expertise. "With collection ambassadors, we want to look at the collection together, to consider: what's here? What's missing? Why is that? What would be interesting?" He wants to engage "someone from the LGBTQ+ community, for example, or someone who knows a lot about decolonization". By emphasizing input from various sources, such as students, visitors, and often marginalized groups, Dorian highlights the importance of diverse voices in shaping the collection, thereby challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge and expertise and positioning the library as a site for collective decision-making and knowledge production.

5.1.2 Challenges and blind spots

One of the significant challenges remains the limited availability of books that represent diversity in publishers' offerings. Hilde is a librarian in a small library in a quieter neighbourhood. She notices that "compared to the large number of books being published, the number of children's books that portray diverse characters is still quite limited", adding that "a lot of those books are written by a white person about someone of color. Or someone non-disabled about someone disabled". Like most library staff, she sees room for improvement within the publishing industry in both Flanders and the Netherlands. Anja, a self-proclaimed bookworm and picture book enthousiast, explains that she often repurchases the books that portray diversity once they are worn out: "A shift is happening, but there are still too few of them. So I can't just throw them away, and I buy them again."

Mireille is a friendly and passionate youth librarian who highlights the lack of representation of urban environments in children's literature, pointing to a gap in books for young readers who identify with city life: "Usually, picture books take place in a village context, with quiet streets, where everyone knows everyone, and everything is within walking distance. It is challenging to find books that take place in a city". Moreover, the families in children's books often consist of a mother, father and two children. "But if you compare that to a Brussels context, where most children live in a small apartment and have about 3 or 4 brothers and sisters, and maybe only a mother…" She points out that this urban reality is often overlooked, and the term diversity most often implies "diversity in terms of skin color and origin". She believes children in Brussels "could more easily empathize with a story set in an apartment in a city than a story of someone with an African origin set in some village". By noting that diversity is often equated solely with differences

in skin color and origin, Mireille critiques a narrow and essentialist understanding of diversity that overlooks other dimensions such as socio-economic status and urban upbringing.

"I believe that the portrayal of diversity in children's books often starts with quickly adding color or just adding a child in a wheelchair to a drawing", librarian Ann says. "But that actually needs to evolve to make that... a fully developed character, just being themselves. The book doesn't necessarily have to be about that disability or skin color, but about a story you can relate to as a child. There's still work to be done in that area, I think". Superficial representation is not enough; there is a need for nuanced and authentic portrayals. Like a large number of her colleagues, she thinks publishers are slow to prioritize authentic representation due to rigid norms and power dynamics within the industry. This results in noticeable gaps in libraries' offerings, often related to the representation of people with disabilities or mental health problems. Furthermore, most respondents pointed out that non-fiction books and comics are two domains in which authentic and balanced representation are incredibly hard to find. Ann gives an example of one of the blind spots in children's non-fiction: "There is a lack of recent, interesting books about continents, countries, cities, or religious festivities like Ramadan". Her colleague Isabelle adds: "It's still very much from the classical Western perspective".

Lucas describes the publishing industry as "a bit of a conservative world", due to the sector's financial strain, leading to a preference for established names with proven sales records. "Not always, or not completely, of course. But this makes it difficult for new authors and thus also for new ways of storytelling". He stresses significant disparities among various publishers and the slow progress. Mireille also identifies an obstacle in "the types of people who find the time to write books, submit them to publishers, and then have them accepted", pointing out that this is often an elite not representing the broader society. A number of library workers perceives the Anglo-American and French markets as more advanced in this regard. However, the majority sees a clear and positive difference in the last five years ago in Dutch-language offerings.

In some libraries, the limited number of staff and a tight budget form another challenge. This varies across libraries, with smaller-scale libraries having less capacity to spend time and money on inclusivity and decolonization processes. For example, librarian Lise is also interested in exploring the concept of collection ambassadorship; however, the current staffing limitations make this hard. With only 2 full-time equivalents (FTE) distributed among 3 staff members, they lack the capacity to invest in a time-consuming endeavour like collection ambassadorship at the moment. On a more technical level, some libraries have a contract with a book vendor because they are bound by a public procurement. This makes it harder to buy books elsewhere when the collection of the vendor has limited availability of books in different languages or books which offer diverse representations, and also makes it impossible to support smaller local book shops.

Weeding books

Another challenge in curating an inclusive selection of books is the lack of precise knowledge about the collection's content. Lotte explains: "We don't always know exactly what the content is,

because only by reading the books you truly know. We often come across books and think 'Oops, we won't include that anymore'. Naturally, given the vast volume of material, we cannot read everything." When Lotte and Nathalie believe that the content of a book is questionable, they decide to remove it, since their aim is to have "a fresh, new collection with only new books". Since their library is not that large and they do not play an archival role, they "want to provide as recent a selection as possible."

Assessing the materials in a library's collection against specific criteria and determining whether to keep or remove them is called weeding. Dorian highlights the importance of diversity as a criterium in weeding books, particularly in children's literature, where quantitative metrics may not be sufficient due to high circulation rates and frequent replacements: "For other collections, you can use a sort of quantitative basis where you look at how many times a book has been borrowed in the past 5 years, and if it falls below this threshold we can remove it from our collection". Instead, in his library's children's collections, decisions are based on the inclusivity of representation in categories such as professions, family structures, gender identity, and relationships. Dorian refers to the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie when saying: "the problem with stereotypes is not that they are right or wrong, but that they are incomplete. So that is the first premise in our collection. You inevitably have biases and stereotypes, but we seek ways to offer as many alternative worldviews as possible so that we provide a broad perspective. So this is one criterium we have in mind, but you have to decide book per book."

This is consistent with Ciska's vision: "Stereotypes are not always bad. However, it's crucial to maintain balance. With regard to the children's collection, we discussed when to start weeding certain items. As soon as we feel it's harmful, based on our own judgment. Similar conversations have taken place with other librarians. How much autonomy do we possess in such decisions? But we are constantly removing things, so if we feel that something is no longer really appropriate… ultimately we are hired to curate a collection". Ciska asserts that librarians should have autonomy in determining the appropriateness of certain books, pointing to the responsibility of library staff in shaping the collection. These decisions are influenced by wider dialogues within the network, showing that it is a pertinent and timely topic.

Didier explains how he sometimes opens a book, looks at a page, and tries to understand "what message is the story trying to convey?", asking himself "is that a message that we find acceptable to convey to our readers?". He hesitantly adds, "it sounds a bit like censorship actually, but I think it's important that we also choose a certain quality". He positions himself as gatekeeper tasked with curating a collection that meets certain standards. "It's not because a book is written by someone with a migration background, that it's necessarily something for the library. The story must also have a certain quality. And that is of course very subjective. But I do believe that I am open-minded enough to be able to pick things, even if they are not my personal taste, when I have the idea that they will be borrowed, that they can become popular in our library, that it is something good for our collection". Didier thus acknowledges the subjective nature of quality assessment and knows that his judgements are influenced by individual preferences and biases. However, he indicates that he is committed to inclusion and representation within the library's collection.

The notion of censorship often comes back in the interviews, as library staff are well aware of their responsibility and decision-making power in curating collections. Different opinions exist on the topic of weeding based on stereotypical representations in both text and images in picture books. Lucas: "We try to remove books that portray children as 'different' in terms of their sexuality, their gender, their religion, or in general books that promote stereotypes. Without censorship, of course, because it's important to ensure everything remains accessible, but we remove books that are too stigmatizing". Lucas, like most other library workers, tries to be sensitive to the potential harm caused by discriminatory representations. His caution also points to an awareness of the controversies surrounding weeding based on stereotypical representation and the heated public debates on 'cancel culture'.

A few library staff members also point out the difference between youth and adult collections, stating that children are easily influenced since they still lack critical thinking skills. Nathalie: "Adults already have their frame of reference, and then you can say, 'We still offer this book in the library, but we are aware of certain controversies around it, and hopefully you are too.' But with children, you simply can't do that. They don't have that awareness, and they just need truthful representation of the world." Others would disagree with this logic, as this conversation between two colleagues shows:

> Hilde: I think there are simply many children whose parents don't speak Dutch and therefore don't read either. And they just don't know what's inside. So I ask myself, is it our task to thoroughly review all books with annotations? I don't believe so.

> Dominique: Then we are also imposing something on others. And other people will be guided by our personal opinion, by what we say, while we also don't have the truth in our hands. I believe people can think for themselves. We should minimize paternalism. Maybe they still need to be educated a bit more, to get the tools to think for themselves. But that is not our role.

Hilde raises concerns about children with non-Dutch-speaking parents, emphasizing the importance of considering the linguistic and cultural diversity of library users. However, she believes it is not the library's responsibility to raise awareness about certain stereotypes. Dominique responds by pointing out the potential imposition of personal opinions on others, emphasizing the importance of individual autonomy and critical thinking. She too maintains this isn't part of the jobs of library staff.

Decisions about book removal are thus subject to negotiation and debate. Another example of such discussions is a conversation between Anouk and Lise, who disagreed about whether or not to keep books with caricatural representations in their collection.

> Anouk: In my perspective, we should offer both inclusive books and more stereotypical stories, so people can choose between the two.

> Lise: I find that difficult. If a book contains racist elements, we shouldn't offer it next to more inclusive books, just because some people are more attracted to a certain ideology.

> Anouk: But it isn't always so black-and-white racist, right?

> Lise: We have a lot of children's books in the collections that focus on diversity, implicitly or explicitly. But for me, that is so undermined by the two or three books about Sinterklaas that are very stereotypical.

Anouk's viewpoint suggests a belief in offering a range of perspectives, including those that may contain stereotypes, to allow for individual choice and exploration. Lise, on the other hand, expresses concerns about the potential harm of offering books with racist elements alongside more inclusive ones, underlining the impact of literature on readers' perceptions and attitudes. Her stance reflects a critical engagement with power dynamics within literature, and the responsibility of library staff to curate the collection in order to destabilize these asymmetries. This conversation underscored the complexity of navigating inclusivity and representation in library's children's collections, and the ongoing discussions about collection curation. In conclusion, discussions about literary quality, censorship, the promotion of social justice, and responsibility will continually unfold within local libraries and across the broader Brussels network.

5.1.3 Decolonization

In the context of Brussels' public libraries, the notion of decolonization prompts us to critically evaluate the existing literature collections and identify any biases rooted in colonial ideologies, such as notions of 'white superiority' and 'black inferiority', and to acknowledge persisting power imbalances in both library practices and materials. Some libraries express their interest in collaborating on decolonization trajectories under the guidance of the VGC, while others do not see any necessity to decolonize, and in the interviews distanced themselves from the trajectory. Some staff members wished to participate but pointed to time constraints as a barrier.

A number of library workers note that there's a shift towards actively reflecting on library practices. Valerie sees positive changes within the network of Brussels libraries. "As a library network, we must work on decolonization. Which is not always easy, because some people are set in their old ways, and you have to first convince them. That's not easy. But we continue to push forward". She calls this "making waves". Describing a decolonisation trajectory in which she participated, she argues that people on the advisory panel can point to certain things that should change, but afterwards, it is the role of library staff to actually make that change happen. "You have to sit down together and think past 'that can't be done, because...'. You have to think 'But how can I make it possible?' And that's where most of those libraries get stuck". When it implies hard work or talking to people higher up the ladder, many library staff perceive this change as impossible. "It's not the priority. Because indeed, it's a lot of work and it means you have to get the alderman on board or God knows who… But sometimes you just have to say 'we're going to do it and we'll see what backlash we get from it'. Is that a good way of working? Maybe it's not ideal, but sometimes it is necessary, to move things forward." Valerie thus understands how hard it can be to "make waves", but putting in the effort is worth it, according to her. "Because we could sit here three years from now talking about it, but then three years later we still haven't actually done anything. And then we've lost another generation", she says, expressing a sense of

urgency. She subscribes to the idea that institutional norms may initially appear constraining or cause resistance, but when working together, individuals can make changes happen.

Dorian believes that today, most Brussels libraries share an attitude of active self-reflection and engagement with topics like decolonization. "You can see this reflected in technical details, like book categories being removed. For example, when you look at the icon of the category 'peoples', it is a stereotypical image of First Nations People, depicted as the Indian with three feathers." Dorian here refers to the ZIZO-classification system. He states that about seven years ago, he would reflect upon this icon, but he "didn't feel the freedom to say, 'Okay, let's just remove it because it's not appropriate,' whereas now, the discourse around it is so clear that you can simply say, 'let's remove it without waiting for policies'". According to him, in recent years, "these ideas have just been more widely embraced, allowing for a more proactive stance". Dorian's account suggests a growing acceptance of decolonial perspectives within the library network, and demonstrates the role of individual agency within this context. Challenging the status quo becomes easier when discussions and reflections on decolonization are more prominent.

Didier gives the same example of the icon of the 'peoples' label in the ZIZO classifying system, also calling it "problematic". He, however, doesn't see room to take matters in his own hands: "We can't decide on that. We can't change that. It's a whole format, a whole layout, which we use for all our materials. We can't just say, let's change this for a moment". He points to ZIZO as the organisation who can change this. At a different time in the conversation, however, he demonstrates his ability to exercise agency within certain constraints: "There's also a genre called *chick lit*. And I find that an incredibly idiotic word. What messages are we conveying with this? So I took it upon myself to manually replace every book we had, where a chick lit sticker is supposed to be. *Chick lit* about travelling, for example, becomes a travel story". This example reflects his recognition of the importance of challenging problematic language and representations within the confines of existing systems, highlighting the complex interplay between individual agency and institutional structures. It also shows how the perception of having agency depends on the topics that individuals are most passionate about to struggle for.

Librarian Ciska points to the sensitivity surrounding the term "decolonization". She says that "decolonization is a very trendy word right now, and we also wanted to see how we can improve ourselves in that regard. But we quickly understood that it was a touchy subject within the political sphere of the municipality. If you say 'we're going to do a gender project', everyone is on board. There's even a yearly gender policy rapport we have to write. But if you say 'we want to do something about decolonization', that is something else." This observation underscores the power dynamics at play within institutional contexts. In this case, the municipal political sphere is resistant to social justice in this respect, while encouraging initiatives regarding gender equality. It shows how gender has to some extent been appropriated within mainstream politics and can be made a priority, while decolonization efforts are perceived as unnecessary or even a threat to social order and thus are not supported. It has also come to my attention that *The Gaza Monologues* were read aloud in one of the Dutch-speaking libraries in Brussels, whereas the text

was considered too political in another[6]. Here, the political climate within a municipality plays a significant role, and this initiative demonstrates that certain employees were eager to support it, while others were not.

Alex notes that decolonization is indeed a hot topic at the moment, and a lot of decolonization projects are being launched. The board of directors of her library has also expressed interest, asking questions like "What would it mean in concrete terms? How do you do that?". She describes the decolonization trajectory organized by the VGC as theoretically interesting, but not very applicable to the context of the library. It could be argued that the decolonization trajectory was only partially successful; a lot depended on whether the librarians could make time to participate, and whether they subsequently took initiative within their own libraries to address the topic. Alex tells me that she realised in meetings with library youth workers that some didn't even know that the trajectory had taken place, "or that they haven't found the time for it, or that no conclusion was reached. And then they are left to their own devices, thinking 'what should I do now with my youth collection?'".

Alex shows a lot of understanding, as there are more issues worthy of attention, such as media literacy. "So I have this feeling that there are so many priorities. But I wouldn't mind if we could really delve into this, because I personally think this is a very important topic, and it isn't a finished business. We need a little more guidance". This is a shared sentiment among a number of library workers, who are in doubt about which books to keep, which to remove, and whether they should add an explanation or warning in certain books. To 'decolonize' the library, a more conscious approach is needed regarding concepts such as literary quality (does a white norm continue to prevail?), the canon (which authors are considered classics?), or the materiality of the building and architecture (how is this space designed? who faces which barriers?). The majority of library workers reflect upon these questions, but not all staff members are aboard on this discussion. Although most library employees actively strive towards a more balanced representation of characters from different ethnic backgrounds in their children's books collections, and scrutinize these for stereotypical imagery and story lines, others find this unnecessary.

White innocence and restorative nostalgia: the case of Sinterklaas

I would like to reference Gloria Wekker's concept of 'White Innocence,' which refers to the way in which white people often see themselves as innocent and free of racism. White Innocence "encapsulates a dominant way in which the Dutch think of themselves, as being a small, but just, ethical nation; color-blind, thus free of racism; as being inherently on the moral and ethical high ground, thus a guiding light to other folks and nations" (Wekker 2016: 2). Although Belgium has a partly different history from the Netherlands, it is useful to draw a parallel here. We do share the

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[6] *The Gaza Monologues* is a theatre text comprising 31 monologues by children and young people recounting their experiences during the 2008 and 2009 Gaza war. On Wednesday, November 29, 2023, the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, these monologues were read aloud worldwide in cultural and social organizations.

tradition of 'Sinterklaas', for example, which proves to be an interesting topic on which all of my library staff respondents have articulated opinions.

Educational officer Karen believes that children do not see color: "For children, especially for pre-schoolers, everything is normal. The world's problems don't exist for those children, so everyone is the same. And if they have an argument with someone, it's not about the fact that the person has a different skin color or thinks differently. It's about the fact that they kicked someone for example, but it doesn't have anything to do with how diverse they are, right? I mean, 'diverse' like we interpret it". Karen's idea that "children do not see color" is a common belief, meaning they are not aware of race and treat everyone the same. However, Wekker argues that this belief is used to deny the experiences of people of color and to protect the innocence of white children (2016: 150-151). Wekker maintains that when people claim "children do not see color," they are trying to protect their own innocence and avoid confronting racism. They might argue that talking about race with children will ruin their childhood memories and make them aware of unpleasant realities. "Here a white self-image is presented that insists on seeing itself and children as innocent, small, inherently good, color-blind, and antiracist", Wekker writes (151).

Nel (2017) also discusses the concept of racial innocence, highlighting how many people feel uncomfortable revising children's books because of the belief in the innocent child, a powerful set of ideas promoted by Locke, Rousseau, and Wordsworth. The problem with enforcing innocence, as Nel points out, is that as children grow up, they gain experience and knowledge, some of which may be painful or saddening. The intertwining of white innocence and childlike innocence adds an intriguing layer to the study of children's books. In this context, the tradition around 'Sinterklaas' and Black Pete ('zwarte piet') emerges as a compelling case study for further exploration[7]. This yearly tradition is very important in most families and deeply ingrained in Belgian and Dutch culture. In recent years, the colonial and racist aspects to this tradition have been discussed within public debate, leading to huge controversies and people feeling attacked in their cultural identity. For a very thorough analysis of this phenomenon within Dutch culture, I refer to chapter 5 in Wekker's book (2016: 139-167). For information on the evolution, diversity and reception of Zwarte Piet in Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia, I recommend Bambi Ceuppens's book *Pietpraat* (2018).

Important to mention is that many black people who grew up in the Netherlands and in Belgium suffered from racist remarks and bullying during their childhood as a direct result from this "children's celebration" ('kinderfeest'). An alternative to this racist caricature has been called to life in the form of Sooty Pete ('roetpiet'). By now, many schools, television programmes and picture books have replaced Black Pete by Sooty Pete, but there are still a lot of people clinging to

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[7] Within this tradition, a white bishop called Sinterklaas or Saint Nicolas brings presents to children in the Netherlands and in Belgium, on the evenings of 5 and 6 December respectively. Sinterklaas, the story goes, arrives by boat from Spain or from Turkey on horseback and has servants who are called Black Petes. Traditionally, these servants are role-played by white people in Moors' costumes, wearing Afro wigs, golden earrings and lipstick, and with blackened faces, which is said to be the result of going down the chimney to deliver the presents.

the original figure. More so, Black Pete has now become a symbol of pride for some people, and Flemish nationalist and right-wing politicians have used this controversy in their "anti-woke" discourse. In Brussels, most Dutch-language libraries have removed Sinterklaas books with the stereotypical images of Black Pete from their collections, but this action is not uniform across all libraries.

In one library, someone from the organization 'Het is een kinderfeest' came by to give some information and a list with inclusive Sinterklaas books, after which certain books were taken out. In another library, the rule was that books that depicted a blackface Zwarte Piet had to be removed from the collection. Yet another library worker tells me she still has to wait for the bigger decolonisation trajectory to take place in her library, and that before this she cannot remove any books in the collection: "The entire collection will then be analysed, including Sinterklaas. So *my hands are tied*." And Lucas tells me that there has been a brief discussion amongst his colleagues about books that depict Zwarte Piet: "there are staff members who don't see this as an issue, but then we discussed it and made a decision, and then they were removed anyways. Of course, it's important that it's discussed. There are as many opinions as there are staff members, as in any workplace." The same applies for Alex, who finds it "difficult to decide with the entire team what can and cannot be included. We tried to find a kind of middle ground. But personally, I would draw a much harder line. What we're doing now is definitely removing any stereotypical portrayal of Zwarte Piet. Plus, I'm also removing all books in which the words 'Zwarte Piet' appear. But there are some books that are kept where only the black figures are the helpers. I wouldn't do that either. But it's really about speaking with colleagues. And honestly, it's very subjective. Because if we had different colleagues, it would be a different story." Much depends on the viewpoints of staff members.

As Mireille found it hard to throw away books she had purchased herself, her colleague screened the youth collection for anything that portrayed stereotypical images, "such as thick red lips, gold earrings, and completely black figures, and anything that mentioned 'Zwarte Piet' and 'knecht' in the text as well". This has resulted in a removal of half of the Sinterklaas books, "which was really difficult because then I wanted to buy new books, and I started looking at 'what has been released about Sinterklaas in the last 3 years?', but half of those were books that we had decided to get rid of". Mireille had to make some guesses, because "when they arrive, we still have to decide whether we will actually register them or just get rid of them right away, because you really can't judge just by the cover". Struggling with the same problem, one of Lotte's colleagues wrote to certain publishers to ask if they could guarantee whether new books would be free of Zwarte Piet depictions, "and there were publishing houses that said they could not guarantee that". Nathalie adds: "there was also quite a long period where hardly any Sinterklaas books were released precisely because it was a very sensitive topic". Lotte also observes that new books that portray 'roetpieten' are not necessarily inclusive books: "I found that those children's stories were all very white. It still seems like it's only a celebration for white children".

Librarian Els says that she and her colleagues have only taken out a few books from the collection "but not many yet, because I find it a bit... I struggle with it. Those books from a few years ago, about Zwarte Piet, they were black because they came from the chimney, from soot,

but they were not Africans, so we still leave them in. Of course, when purchasing new books, we consider this. But we're not going to immediately censor all our books... We have grown up with it, it's part of our history and our culture." Els acknowledges the need to consider these representations when purchasing new books, indicating a recognition of changing sensitivities. However, she is reluctant to immediately "censor" existing books and she emphasizes the importance of cultural heritage.

"Lacking experience in thinking about race, [white people] bristle at the suggestion that their cherished memories, or works from which they derive personal meaning, may reinforce structural racism", Philip Nel writes (2017: 210). Nel discusses how racially influenced aesthetics, or the way books represent race, have deep emotional roots that make them resistant to change. He introduces the concept of "restorative nostalgia," which is the tendency to look back at the past with a desire to restore it to its perceived former glory. In this context, racial nostalgia persists because people are emotionally attached to representations of race in art and media that reinforce their own biases. Nel explains that this unconscious racism often goes unacknowledged because creators and audiences insist that they are not personally racist (Nel 2017: 118-119). This restorative nostalgia is especially applicable in the tradition of Sinterklaas, but can also be related to children's books that gained an iconic status over the years[8].

5.2 Public library spaces

Beyond book repositories, libraries can be active and vibrant community spaces contributing to social development and inclusion. In this chapter, I explore the diverse roles that libraries aim to play for their visitors, both young and old. As I have conducted interviews with library staff, the research primarily centres on the intentions of the staff and their perception of the library's role, rather than on quantifying whether their objectives are met. Furthermore, my aim is not to sketch a normative image of what an inclusive library place should look like, but rather explore which inclusivity measures are implemented by library staff.

Librarian Dorian, for one, believes inclusivity and diversity "sit on different levels". Although the book collection is an important starting point, everything depends on the question 'what kind of environment do you want to be as a library?'. By emphasizing that inclusivity and diversity operate on different levels, Dorian acknowledges the nuanced nature of creating an inclusive environment beyond merely diversifying the book collection. In his library, "there is a strong emphasis on the library as a third place and a safe place, where you really try to think for all audiences: how can we be there for them, and how do we make that known to them? How do we show them: we are here to think together about how we can welcome everyone?". Dorian emphasises the importance of actively considering the needs of diverse audiences.

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[8] For instance, in *Pippi Langkous in Taka-Tukaland*, the n-word is used and colonial stereotypes occur. Bringing this to the attention in the aforementioned report (Stad Gent 2021) has sparked public debates (Van der Taelen 2021). Another example can be found in the stories by Roald Dahl, which were recently republished and slightly adapted with more inclusive formulations. This has caused a lot of controversy (Vanden Bosch 2023, De Vos 2023).

Dorian also has his doubts about seeing the library collection as if were a lifeless object representing an ideology and influencing people. "You can activate engagement by discussing it with visitors. For instance, a child might come with a huge book with lots of purple and pink on the cover, saying, 'Can I take this because it's all pink here?' How the library staff responds in such situations matters a lot. You can curate your collections as you wish, but it's crucial to maintain a connection with your visitors and discuss books together." Dorian's emphasis on maintaining a connection with visitors and fostering dialogue about books suggests a recognition of the library's role in facilitating critical engagement and active participation in knowledge creation and dissemination. The collection is thus not to be separated from the staff's visions and attitudes. They greatly influence how well the library functions as a social space within the community. As Marja puts it: "We are both part of, and also a sort of reflection of society. But we also *shape* society here. That's the strange and beautiful thing about libraries." By stating that libraries are "part of" society, she acknowledges their embeddedness within societal structures and norms. However, by also asserting that libraries "shape society," she emphasizes their agency in challenging or perpetuating existing power dynamics and ideologies.

5.2.1 The library as social infrastructure

Library staff frequently extends a warm welcome to local citizens, actively building and nurturing relationships with their visitors. Felix, for example, spends a lot of time at reception, talking to people, which is also his favourite part of the job. "Working in the library is always a social job. Actually, it's essential that the door is open to the street and anyone who wants to can come in, and that the person should be able to find their place here".

After being a librarian in another city for years, Ann recently started working in a small library at the outskirts of Brussels. She says that the familiar atmosphere there surprised her and smiles when she tells me that "there are some visitors who address us by our first names, which I've never experienced before. But I think that's actually very illustrative of the role we have. You notice that many people value that social contact a lot. And I think that's not a trivial detail, I find it really meaningful. People don't address you by name if they don't feel at home here". After pausing to reflect, she adds: "We are not just a library, but also a bit of a small community centre. And I believe we also do social work. I think it's necessary, permissible, and something that should actually happen in all libraries." Although the neighbourhood where the library is located is not considered a typical "problem area" ('probleembuurt') for Brussels, there is indeed poverty in all its forms, her colleague Isabelle points out. She noticed "people also come for basic things, like using the computer, to quickly check their emails. So I suspect there's still a significant number of people who don't have internet access or their own computer". Accessing resources and technologies at the library helps people with their day-to-day tasks. Essentially, it shows how public libraries can help people navigate daily life. In this case, the description of Aptekar (2019: 23) of the library "as a local node for access to information and resources for adults" is applicable. Aptekar thus argues that it is crucial to expand "the study of public libraries beyond the field of library and information studies […] to create a fuller portrait of the contemporary city life" (2019: 31).

This social infrastructure role is codependent on the visions and sensibilities of the staff. At times, some staff members flex the rules to meet the needs of individuals. For example, library personnel might choose to ignore it when children eat or drink in the library, and they accept a considerable amount of noise and running during the afterschool hours. Some library staff bends the rules by waiving fees when a child damages a picture book or by overlooking late returns of borrowed books. Alex tells me that in their small library, they employ a personal approach towards each visitor: "There are strict rules in a library, but because we do everything manually, we are very... accommodating." She gives the example of extending the loan period of materials: "You can only renew twice. But if you ask nicely, we extend indefinitely. That way, you really develop a personal bond with the library users." She continues: "There was also a lady who used to come every Monday for her emails because she was quite elderly and couldn't access the Internet. So, we would check her emails for certain invitations and print them out. But last year, in January, she didn't come anymore. And we wonder where she went..."

According to Alex, one of the key priorities for their library is to make Dutch more accessible by reducing barriers. She emphasizes the success of their efforts, particularly with the introduction of conversation salons since last June. For her, the popularity of these conversation tables, despite existing classes nearby, show how their inclusive approach is working; attendees don't need to meet specific language proficiency criteria. "And I think that's where the library can play an important role. We're against formal things. Some young children want to read English books, or read books from the adult section, and we tell them that's allowed. Everything's allowed. Just do it. If you have a book you want to try, go ahead and try it".

Some libraries offer language workshops for children needing extra assistance with Dutch, while others provide personalized storytime sessions, or collective storytelling moments in several languages. A number of library workers note that the audience engaging in activities differs from those visiting to use computers or spending time with their children. One library organizes chess lessons for children, while other library workers want to ensure that all activities relate to language or literature to avoid overlap with the programmes of local community centres[9]. Thirteen out of the twenty Dutch-language public libraries also participate in 'Boekenbende aan Huis', a literacy initiative targeting 5- and 6-year-olds in the Brussels-Capital Region. Over a minimum of five consecutive weeks, these children receive visits from storytellers at home, typically higher education students and volunteers. The programme ends with a closing event at the local public library, introducing the children and their parents to the library space.

Partnerships and school visits

Every five years, each municipality draws up a cultural policy plan, which also includes objectives for the library ('Lokaal cultuurbeleid van de VGC' 2020). For example, in one such plan the aim is

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[9] Muntpunt is an exception to this, organizing numerous activities which are not necessarily related to literature. Given its larger number of staff and resources, their event calendar cannot be compared to those of smaller local libraries.

that "unemployed individuals and single parents can turn to the library for additional support." The focus varies from one municipality to another, but each plan is the result of a participatory process with the surrounding sociocultural organizations and articulates the desire to respond to the superdiverse needs of the inhabitants. By reading through these policy reports and by conducting interviews, it became clear that libraries are increasingly forming partnerships with community centres, schools, 'brede scholen', and other socio-cultural organizations and services[10].

"We try to collaborate with as many different partners as possible to keep the threshold as low as possible, so that there is as much diversity here as possible", Lucas explains, showing an awareness of socio-economic barriers that may prevent certain groups from accessing the library. "Is that a reflection of the municipality? Not entirely yet. And that will always be difficult because you are not a priority for many people, especially not for those who sometimes need it the most." Lucas expresses his doubt that people who struggle make ends meet do not necessarily see the relevance of public libraries offerings, as they might perceive the library as an environment in which one would not feel at home. Nathalie and Lotte also explain their efforts to establish partnerships with various organizations to reach out to new audiences. Nathalie adds that this is often very challenging. Lotte elaborates, emphasizing, "It may seem self-evident to us, but we often need to explain the essence of a library. For instance, it's okay if your child puts a book in their mouth, or if a book occasionally sustains damage." Nathalie notes: "A lot of parents tend to visit the library only when there's a pressing need, when their children are in the first grade and learning to read. However, we want to show to them that the library is accessible for their children even at an earlier age."

Alex refers to the specificity of the neighbourhood in which his library is located, close to the European quarter: "We have a highly educated audience, and that's not necessarily what you want as a library. You really want to be open to everyone. And that's why we really like going to those schools, because you have a much more diverse audience there". There is a great diversity of mostly European nationalities, with many people working for the European institutions nearby. The library wants to not only attract these expats with high socio-economic status, and tries to include other groups by organizing activities and by partnering up with other socio-cultural organizations. Alex gives an example: "Recently, a partner organization had planned a walk for people with fewer resources. Parents were picked up at the school gate after dropping off their children and a teacher accompanied them on a walk to all the Dutch-speaking social organizations in the neighbourhood. They came here and we explained how the library works, that it's free and that there are no obligations here". Alex adds that she doesn't really care much about technicalities like loan figures, but that to her the job is about these initiatives – "It's about people feeling like, 'oh, I can come in here and just sit down, it's a nice place'". She believes the library plays a crucial role in fostering this inclusive atmosphere by avoiding formalities and encouraging exploration. Alex underscores that their library's focus is on serving children who attend nearby

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[10] 'Brede school' is a collaboration between various organizations or associations from the same neighborhood, including multiple schools.

schools. "Often, their parents accompany them somewhat reluctantly or settle into a cosy corner in the children's area. Eventually, we sometimes hear them saying, 'You stay here. I'm going to explore upstairs for a bit'." Consequently, they find themselves exploring other sections of the library independently, possibly even picking up a book along the way.

Most libraries thus collaborate with schools in their municipality, introducing them to the library and educating them on how to navigate the library space. Because the schools automatically attract a diverse group of children, Didier explains that class visits implicate the possibility to encourage children to return with their parents outside of school hours. On the day Didier and I meet, Brussels school registrations are starting and are facilitated by the library, providing an opportunity for parents to become familiar with the library's offerings. Additionally, teacher cards are distributed there, prompting teachers to visit the library. "And in this way, all those groups are somewhat drawn in and hopefully converted to regular library visitors," Didier concludes.

The approach to classroom visits varies across libraries. Some libraries first have a short sitdown during which a story is read to the children, before letting them explore on their own. Other libraries offer very close guidance. In some libraries, school visits only imply a very short visit in which old books are returned and new books are borrowed. Didier mentions that they are increasingly assisting the children in selecting books and guiding them to the best sources for the knowledge they need for presentations or assignments. Dorian says that their more personal approach and guidance "creates so many small rich moments that don't appear anywhere in progress reports, it's solely in the interaction with them, but I think it shouldn't be underestimated how much impact that has". Marja adds: "Previously, it was just: a class comes in, they throw the books on the counter, they grab new books and they're outside again. And I remember thinking, what is the added value? So I really wanted to incorporate a moment of calm, and the class visits steadily grew into beautiful moments".

5.2.2 The library as meeting place

The majority of staff members recognize the importance of the library as a space for social interaction, where people from all walks of life can meet and engage in conversations. For example, through weekly storytime hours for their children, parents sometimes start talking and slowly get to know each other throughout the year. Encounters often happen through organized activities, but they can also unfold more spontaneously. Working in a small library located right in the middle of a municipality, youth librarian Anouk says their library serves as a place where unplanned interactions often occur, such as when children from the neighbourhood greet each other. "That happens quite often, people start talking to each other here. So it's definitely a meeting spot. Even for students who come here to study, they might strike up a conversation. There's always some sort of interaction happening". She emphasizes this social aspect as something quite common, while also commenting that there may be room for her library to further foster such connections in the future.

Reflecting on the evolution of the library in recent years, Ciska describes the shift from being primarily focused on lending books to emphasizing experiences and activities. There certainly is a growing emphasis on fostering encounters, even beyond structured activities. Yet the library is careful not to become too focused on activities to the point of resembling a cultural or community centre. Despite this, the library continues to offer a variety of activities while also striving to promote social interactions: "we still do a lot of activities, and we also try to stimulate those encounters. But that mainly happens in the form of activities organized for specific target groups."

Architecture and its atmospheric impact

Mireille, a youth librarian who works in a very small library, would like to have more space to let encounters happen. The limited space available hardly allows people to hang around for long. However, "on Wednesdays and Sundays, families come here and chat with each other. So it really works out, no matter how small we are". The staff saw a noticeable difference in library usage after the redesign of the youth section. Previously, without benches or play areas, parents tended to quickly grab books and leave. However, with the addition of seating and play spaces, parents now linger longer while children play or read. The new layout has extended people's time spent in the library, with the addition of a table further contributing to this effect. "The redesign has had a significant impact, far more than initially anticipated", she says.

Appropriate furniture and shelving for different age groups are crucial elements of the children's room. After restructuring, library spaces become increasingly accessible to children. Anja tells me that she found it important to build a lot of shelves during the renovation, where books can easily be displayed with their cover visible, "because I know that children choose based on what catches their eye." Isabelle and Ann also explain that their library underwent a transformation about a year and a half ago, creating additional cosy corners and spacing the shelves further apart to accommodate families. There is a corner where kids can play surrounded by books at their eye-level. Ann appreciates this accessibility of the picture books at a lower level, allowing children to select their own reads. Isabelle acknowledges that the occasional untidiness is intentional, aiming to create a welcoming environment where children feel comfortable exploring without strict restrictions. She laughingly adds, "it's not because we're lazy, at least not entirely".

This suggests that the spatial layout of public libraries can play a significant role in making visitors feel more at home. By making children's corners more enjoyable and captivating, the time children and their carers spend at the library is prolonged. This can lead to more moments of connection between visitors, as well as giving an incentive to adults to also explore the library. As Williamson puts it, "the whole ecology of the contemporary public library" is crafted to promote closeness among people (2020: 553). Libraries are often designed to facilitate various forms of social interaction and chance meetings. This goes beyond planned library events and programmes; it is about creating an environment that naturally encourages people to come together, interact, and share moments of connection and mutual understanding. The goal is to foster a sense of community and conviviality within the library space. Libraries are "shared

spaces" which "must balance managing an everyday public order with the ability to accommodate messy togetherness and individual trajectories of self-development" (2020: 555).

Isabelle explains that during exam periods, the library becomes crowded with young people studying, and there isn't enough space to accommodate everyone. Ann agrees, stating that this space shortage is common in libraries, particularly in cities where not all children have their own room or desk. "We also attract people who aren't necessarily here for books, but rather for computer use or study space", Ann says. "I believe these aspects of the library complement each other perfectly. The library is such a unique institution within a municipality. It's simply a place where - during opening hours - anyone can walk in. There's no obligation. You just sit down and do as you please. No membership is required. There are no expectations. And a library is something universal. Once people have visited one library, they understand what a library is."

In contrast to the norm, some libraries prioritize a lending desk over automated self-checkout systems. Ann: "We don't have self-checkout. Perhaps that's not a minor detail, as almost all libraries do. It's actually intentional. It fosters genuine personal contact." Isabelle adds, "You know the people. You can tell who wants to chat and who doesn't." Alex also stresses the fact that their reception desk is staffed rather than automated, allowing for interaction between people quieing. Sylvie explains their library recently installed self-checkout. "Previously, people always went to the desk. So the desk staff had the best contact. We still have a pretty good idea of what people want, but it's slightly diminished now." The front desk thus remains a crucial point for personal interaction.

Throughout most conversations, libraries are referred to as third spaces, offering individuals a place to simply exist. "Where else can you just... simply be? Without consuming anything or having to do something", Hilde rhetorically asks. Her questions aligns with Williamson's description of the public library as a place that offers a break or a moment to step back from the fast-paced and commercially driven environments outside. It provides individuals with the freedom and flexibility to simply exist, explore, and connect with others (Williamson 2020: 551). Felix would like his library to increasingly become a place "where people can linger much longer, in whatever way they prefer, where they can possibly enjoy coffee or tea, where people get to know each other". He thinks that is occasionally happening already, thanks to children and their interactions with other children and their carers. Lucas's vision is quite similar: "a meeting place, where there are books and media, where you can come to do your homework or to talk, where you can read and be read to, where your language can be stimulated. But where you can also just be. And where you can come into contact with as many other opinions, other worlds, other ways of thinking, of living. You don't have that many places where this is possible, you know?"

5.2.3 The library as place of belonging

"The library has become much more of a second living room". Alex looks at me in an almost apologizing way, adding that she thinks it sounds *fuzzy* but it's true. "For example, you have a lot of students here who don't come for books, who are not Dutch-speaking, or who don't speak English. They come here to study, from the moment we open until we close. We have also created

cosy corners everywhere, and you notice that there are a lot of people who just come here to sit somewhere, especially in winter. Their child is busy downstairs in the children's collection, while they are upstairs, just on their phone or something". She adds that the space is beautiful, which "attracts a lot of people who aren't necessarily here to borrow a book. So the strict meaning of the library has been evolving into something else." She concludes: "people just like staying here".

When I meet children's librarian Marja, I immediately feel at ease in her friendly presence. Together with her colleague Dorian, we sit down in the kids' play corner, where cushions and gymnastics mats lay on the floor. Two soft stuffed dogs look at me from their basket. Dorian is the head librarian and tells me about the ins and outs of their library. "We have a very engaged core group of people who come here to do their activities, to play Scrabble or chess, to read, to teach... It's busy in the sense that for many people, this is a fixed place in their daily routine", he says. Dorian started working here recently and he searches for the right words to describe the place to me: "What strikes me as beautiful since my arrival is the reception desk over there, serving as a sort of ritual space for human connection. Most of the people who walk in carry their own story... and when they come in, it's simply about personally figuring out how we can help each other here."

The conversation meanders further until Marja describes the library as "a personal bond established with someone". She expresses her desire "to work in a place where people feel at home" and emphasizes that she doesn't "care what they come here for, as long as they feel at home. And then diversity isn't an issue anymore, because it applies to everyone." Marja's description of the library as a "personal bond" highlights the relational aspect of library services, emphasizing the importance of creating a welcoming environment where patrons feel a sense of belonging. Her focus on people feeling at home underscores the interactions within libraries, where diversity becomes a non-issue when visitors feel accepted and valued. Dorian pauses for a moment before adding that he believes diversity is always an issue - "or wait, let me put it this way: by doing that, you're always making it important, because you're defending its naturalness, even though you might not realize it. Here, that is truly the mindset of everyone, including our student workers. When someone walks in, you immerse yourself in that relationship, in that interaction with the person". Dorian thus challenges the idea that diversity could ever be completely disregarded. He suggests that by normalizing diverse experiences, individuals are actively affirming the importance of diversity. Dorian gives the example of one of their homeless visitors, a regular at the library, who came in at the time of a school visit, "and you could see 20 fearful faces staring, but if the simple reaction is, 'Ah, good morning [name of the person]', and it's clear that he's just at home here and goes to get his coffee and settle in, it normalizes the whole situation. And that's what you call normalcy, but it's your way of saying 'this is a place for everyone.'"

Dorian's idea aligns closely with Williamson (2020: 548), who argues that the trust established in a library is not merely cognitive but is deeply rooted in emotional and sensory experiences. This notion resonates with Marja's description of the library as a space where people feel at home and form personal bonds. Williamson (2020) also suggests that for certain library users, the sense of security and belonging found within library spaces contrasts starkly with the uncertainties and

disruptions they may encounter in external public spaces. Dorian's description about the homeless visitor who finds solace and acceptance within the library is a good illustration.

Dis/comfort and non/belonging

While the portrayal of the public library as a hub for social inclusion and diversity is compelling, several challenges may hinder the realization of this potential. Limited funding and staffing for example may limit the library's ability to offer diverse collections, programmes, and services tailored to various community needs. In some cases, there might be cultural or linguistic barriers that pose challenges in fully engaging certain members of the municipality in which the library is located. Ann also mentions the lack of diversity within their team as a challenge to enhancing feelings of belonging: "Actually, having a diverse group of volunteers and employees is almost as important as your book collection, but it remains difficult". Ciska is also aware that the whiteness of their staff stands in the way of creating an inclusive space. "As a team, you also need to be representative, and actually, we are all white. Especially in a role where you have a lot of contact with the public... people would actually like to see themselves represented." Out of the 23 people I spoke to, 22 were in fact white. Of course, there is some diversity within teams beyond the participants of the interviews, but this figure certainly implies that staff members in superdiverse Brussels are still mostly white.

What can also cause discomfort or feelings of nonbelonging are conflicting expectations about the role the library should play. The library space needs to cater to various activities such as solitary reading, computer usage, as well as providing a space for children accompanied by their parents or carers, teenagers with their friends, and youth who visit the library because they have no adult supervision at home or nowhere else to go. In some libraries, all these needs can be met as the space is large enough and the architectural shape adapts to these different activities. In other libraries, tensions between different groups of users may arise and expectations may clash.

One of these challenges is the level of noise that is allowed. A number of staff members report that they try to organize this throughout the available space. "We try to literally make space for noise. Up front is really about meeting, chatting, collaborating, playing games. And the further back in the library, the quieter it should become," Nathalie tells me. Lotte adds, "we want the library to remain a calming place for people, because the city can be very busy. But on the other hand, there are often families here, and the children are very lively and having a lot of fun. I don't want to say, 'that's not allowed,' but the actual goal is to be a place of peacefulness. In some libraries, the space cannot be compartmentalized. This is the case in Ciska's library, where "there are no real conflicts, but there is some tension". She explains: "Some people come to the computers to write job application letters and really want silence. Sometimes you have children sitting next to them playing games. Ultimately, we have decided that those younger than fourteen are no longer allowed on the computer. Some time ago, there was the possibility to play games, which attracted lots of young people. But it was too loud, and people started leaving. And then you have to think, is the library the place where you should be able to play games or not?"

Some tensions and discomfort may also arise when homeless people with mental health issues enter the library. Valerie mentions challenges posed by homeless visitors with mental health and addiction issues and acknowledges the delicate balance between inclusivity and ensuring the safety and comfort of other visitors. Sylvie underscores the importance of managing these situations sensitively, affirming the library's policy of welcoming homeless individuals while also ensuring they do not disrupt others: "Homeless people are allowed to be here, but of course, they must not disturb other people. It's very delicate." Maintaining a welcoming and secure environment for all visitors is thus quite complex. Moreover, this example shows that there are both spatial and social norms to adhere to when participating in semi-public spaces like the library. "Those who fail to comport themselves according to the rules are excluded: ocasionally by physical exclusion, or more often, through the policing of behaviour by staff or members of the public, or through more subtle experiences of 'out-of-placeness'", Williamson writes (2020: 546).

Learning to belong

Williamson contends that belonging implies both acquisition and transmission through learning and teaching. Learning to belong thus involves the capacity to interact and integrate within diverse social settings and different groups. Public libraries, being public institutions and communal spaces, need to navigate between maintaining order in everyday interactions and allowing for diverse social dynamics and personal feelings of security. Studying public libraries from this perspective provides valuable insights into the everyday pedagogies of social spaces. Williamson argues that "interwoven into their daily functioning are cultural narratives about belonging and becoming" (2020: 555). This brings up questions about "Who is targeted and accommodated? How are forms of civic instruction received and reimagined?" (2020: 546).

Karen feels that she treats all children in the same way, "whoever they are or whatever they are". But then she adds that "unfortunately, I do notice that children from a certain background, not to say a Maghrebi background, often tend to exclude themselves from the group". This remark lays bare implicit biases towards certain ethnic groups. By singling out children with a Maghrebi background and portraying them as a distinct group which behaves badly, Karen reinforces stereotypes. She regards this as an unfortunate but unavoidable reality. "Here in the library, we want everyone to feel equally welcome, but we believe that we can make certain agreements and that these are respected. We do expect that the people who come here also show respect towards us, or towards their classmates, right?" Karen's treatment of children who were, according to her, from "Maghreb descent", reflects tensions about discourses of integration which are dominant in the public debate.

This narrative emerged only in this interview, so I don't think it is central to the inclusivity efforts of public libraries in Brussels. As De Backer puts it: "Conflict and unrest should not be understood as bothersome side effects of the urban condition; they are the driving creative forces that may materialise both in courage and in lethargy, in commitment and withdrawal. In this regard, attitudes of cosmopolitan openness are never fully realised. For none of us" (2021: 496). Most libraries can be described as public spaces where visitors transition between various activities

and spheres of life, encountering the community's diversity and learning about others. The public library can be "a place for non confrontational, comfortable encounters with 'Otherness' that can contribute to people becoming habituated with difference and diversity" (Williamson 2020: 554).

6. Discussion

6.1 Belonging in books

In the interviews, I delved into the daily responsibilities of staff in Dutch-language public libraries in Brussels, exploring their views on the importance of diversity in children's literature and the crucial role of promoting inclusion within the library setting. In an increasingly diverse society, it is essential to see that diversity reflected in books for young people. Offering children diverse stories and characters can help them develop empathy and understanding, as well as provide them with role models with which they can identify. According to Williamson (2020), belonging is not simply about feeling connected to a particular identity or community symbolically. It is a learned and taught skill, rather than an inherent or fixed trait. In the context of children's books, exposure to diverse characters, settings, and experiences in picture books plays a crucial role in teaching children about belonging.

By depicting a variety of social contexts and relationships, these books provide children with opportunities to learn about different ways of life and perspectives. Nel writes that books "tell children they belong (or don't belong) not only to a broader community of readers, but also in their neighbourhoods, their schools, and their country" (2017: 224). Consequently, through "diverse books and their advocates", we can – and must – nurture a new generation that is less susceptible to bigotry and the many wounds it inflicts" (2017: 224)[11]. Nel also writes that "[o]ne of the places that racism hides – and one of the best places to oppose it – is books for young people" (2017: 1). He emphasizes the profound impact of childhood reading in shaping individuals: "What we read when we are young shapes us deeply because, when we are children, we are still very much in the process of becoming. That is why children's literature is one of the most important arenas in which to combat prejudice" (2017: 202).

Decolonization means recognizing the imbalances in power that are still engrained in certain library practices and books, and seeking ways to offer a more diverse range of resources and services, ensuring that everyone feels equally included. Dorian explains that he personally finds it wonderful to live in a time where so many things are questioned: "We are compelled, or rather, we are allowed to engage hesitantly with certain questions. I experience this as a privilege: we are truly allowed to search and take cautious steps. And sometimes create controversy and then resolve it, and through trial and error, ultimately arrive at the answer, 'What should we do?'". He believes in taking a "hesitant starting point", "just searching together with your visitors and those who are not yet visitors for what the relevance of the library is in this changing world".

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[11] When we talk about "diverse books," this often implies that books with white characters are the default or the norm, while books that portray non-white backgrounds are seen as different or "diverse." The language we use can reproduce a racial logic in which certain groups are automatically seen as the norm, while others are seen as different or "other." This logic is ingrained in our language, and it's important to pay attention to it and question it.

While the main emphasis of this paper was on ethnic diversity, there is an intriguing avenue for further research into diverse representations, including the portrayal of LGBTQI+ characters in children's literature and the inclusion of stories featuring children with disabilities. Let's turn back to the words of Rundell once more, who writes that children do not need to see

> exact replicas of themselves in every story they read - fiction, in giving you a front-row seat to another person's heart, allows you to be male, female, armoured bear - but every child does urgently need to be able to find themselves somewhere. As the world transforms so swiftly, children's fiction needs new, ever-more-various stories, from all across this kaleidoscopic planet on which we stand - already it has begun, but we need more; new ideas, new mediums, from places and voices we've hitherto failed to listen to: new jokes, new riches. (Rundell 2019: 58-59)

6.2 Belonging in libraries

Public libraries are crucial to some and overlooked by others. But to imply that a library's essence lays solely in the books it houses is incorrect. They curate accessible knowledge, and can thus influence perspectives and contribute to community and citizenship construction. My findings indicate that Dutch-language public libraries in Brussels try to attract diverse user groups, who use the space for individual activities such as studying, reading, and computer use. Like Aabø & Audunson (2012) suggest, there is a broad diversity of activities and interactions taking place, ranging from individual study and reading activities to group interactions and community-focused events. This underscores the multifunctionality of the library as a space that tries to support the various needs and goals of the community. Additionally, libraries often serve as meeting places, where families spend time together and friends gather.

My research also highlights the role of the library as a space where visitors are exposed to diversity, where people with minimal shared interests or commonalities, who would typically not interact, find themselves briefly connected through the shared space of the library (Williamson 2020; Peterson 2023a). Libraries can thus be inclusive social infrastructures in superdiverse cities, and contribute to the emergence of a shared communal identity across urban spaces by fostering an 'everyday cosmopolitan sensibility'. Through the atmospheric spatial and social dimensions and kind and helpful staff, library spaces can be seen as 'parochial atmospheres' where people can (learn) belonging and have non-confrontational, comfortable encounters with others.

For children, the library can be a welcoming environment where they can explore, learn, and connect with a diverse collection of stories and ideas. In this way, the library has the potential to be a transformative force in shaping a more inclusive and diverse future for the community's youngest members. Isabelle and Ann are convinced that children today still are enthousiastic about books. Ann tells me she often thinks to herself "Would it not be everything but the children themselves that is causing the decline in reading motivation?", adding: "Children don't change

that much over the years. They are readily satisfied[12]. And in such a diverse collection, there's always something that will make a child happy. Initially, children will always experience reading pleasure, but you have to guide them properly, and help them along the way." Ann's questioning of the causes behind the decline in reading motivation suggests a critical stance towards mainstream narratives that blame children themselves for this decline. Instead, she hints at broader societal factors that may contribute to this trend. Isabelle and Ann's insistence on the role of libraries as welcoming environments for children underscores a discourse of optimism and agency, suggesting that libraries have the potential to counteract negative trends in reading motivation, by guiding children towards diverse and engaging stories.

6.3 Library joy

The aim of this study was to investigate how Dutch-language public libraries in Brussels perceive and prioritize their role in establishing inclusive social infrastructure to foster a sense of belonging within the superdiverse urban community. The findings show how most library workers try to build relationships centred on care, belonging, and connection with members of the community they serve. The changing demographics and the evolving cultural landscape of the city invite the libraries to adapt their services and activities to different audiences. In some libraries, their social role is deemed more important, while other libraries see themselves as a trusted bastion of literature and tranquility amidst the busy city. The size and architectural features of the library play a significant role, but ultimately, it is the staff members and their vision that primarily define the function of the public library. Among most library employees, there is a collective sense of pride in contributing to the diverse fabric of an inclusive society. However, it is important to point to the white staff in today's public libraries in superdiverse Brussels, and the resulting blind spots stemming from this whiteness.

There is a red thread that runs through all staff members' testimonials, and which connects the chapter on children's book collections with the chapter of the library space and its atmosphere. I would propose to name this common characteristic 'library joy', a term I borrow from Instagram icon and passionate librarian Mychal Threets (@mychal3ts). In his short videos on Instagram and TikTok, Threets enthusiastically shares stories about the "library-kids" and "library-grownups" he encounters every day at his job (Mayorquin 2024).

This library joy takes on different shapes and forms. Many library workers love the fact that their job covers a variety of tasks. Librarian Els is one of these people: "you can spend a few hours at your desk, and then you can be around people, and you can organize all sorts of things for young and old. It's just a great job". Others really enjoy reading stories to children and seeing the enchantment on their faces. Lucas tells me, "passing on the joy of stories, the joy of reading, that's what I find most important. Because someone who is literate has more opportunities." Some derive pleasure from helping children pick the right book. Karen, for example, aims to assist "as many children as possible" in their search for their favourite book. She hopes that when they

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[12] Original expression in Dutch: "Een kinderhand is snel gevuld".

have found it, they will occasionally read again – "not to ensure that they keep reading novels their whole life, but just to ensure that they are adequately equipped to… stay afloat in this world. Which is difficult enough." Alex is most happy when people come have a chat with her, or tell her what an amazing book they read. "Or those children who come up to you and act all clever, telling you how the world works - that can make me very happy." For Nathalie, the favourite part of her job occurs the moment that a newly purchased book is immediately borrowed: "When a child chooses that book and leaves with a big smile on their face. That's a mental high five, saying: job well done." And Anja smiles widely when telling me what she loves most about her job is unpacking newly delivered books – "it is like Sinterklaas delivering packages, even though I ordered the books myself".

The list goes on, but I have made my point. The library thrives on the dedicated efforts of individuals committed to creating a welcoming environment. The atmospheric qualities of the library are intricately tied to the passion and contributions of both staff members and regular visitors. By consequence, the space is dynamic and responsive to change, with its success as a community space heavily reliant on the collective engagement and commitment of library staff workers, *library-kids* and *library-grownups*.

7. Conclusion

My research aim was to understand how Dutch-language public libraries in Brussels adapt their services and programmes to align with the changing demographics and to explore the strategies employed by library staff to enhance inclusion and create a welcoming environment for individuals from diverse linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds. Firstly, this study has pointed to the importance of diversity in children's literature, and advocates for books that represent a wide range of identities. Reading pleasure can only be achieved by offering both windows and mirrors. Most of my interviewees actively search for books with balanced representation, being mindful of stereotypes that continue to persist in children's literature.

Secondly, I wanted to address the gap in academic literature about decolonization in public libraries. Promoting diverse narratives and challenging Eurocentric perspectives are crucial steps in making the library a more inclusive environment, but the atmospheric qualities within a library space, too, are crucial. Much depends on the staff and the topics they are most passionate about. It is essential that topics like decolonization and inclusion are discussed within libraries and the broader library network, in order to self-critically reflect on library practices and attitudes towards visitors.

Lastly, I hope I have distorted the stereotypical image one might have of the classic librarian as a grey mouse, and have shown how every single library staff member is passionate and enthusiastic about their job. Through their daily efforts, they strive to contribute to the personal growth of visitors and enhance the well-being of the communities they engage with. Their goal is to establish a safe haven where individuals can simply be themselves, fostering literacy skills, promoting the joy of reading, and, significantly, providing a secure space not only for young members of society but also for parents and other carers. During the interviews, I hope I have further inspired them to think critically about their collections and encouraged them to reflect on decolonization processes and inclusivity efforts.

Being a lover of books, I can't help but leave the last words to a writer. As a novelist, Elif Shafak believes in the transformative power of stories. In *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division*, she writes:

> In the swirl of news that surrounds us - the inequalities, the injustices, the seemingly unstoppable turning away from the path of co-existence and diversity and inclusion - it is easy to feel like the story we are living in is not the one we would have chosen. (…) Until we open our ears to the vast, the endless, the multiple belongings and multiple stories the world has for us, we will find only a false version of sanity, a hall of mirrors that reflects ourselves but never offers us a way out. (Shafak 2020: 88-89)

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