

Situated Mixedness

Understanding Migration-Related Intimate Diversity in Belgium

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Introduction

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Introduction

Intimate diversity in Belgium through the optic of situated mixedness

Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot

Human migration across nation-state borders has increasingly diversified the demographic topography of and social lives in many migrant-receiving countries. This phenomenon has been widely observed in cities and other urban areas, where people mostly make their living and form or maintain social relationships. In these places, “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2007) has been on the rise, a situation in which highly complex demographic factors intersect in individual life on an everyday basis due to the “ongoing shifts in migration patterns (concerning national origins, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, age, human capital and legal status)” (Vertovec, 2015, p. 6). This complexity has been taking place alongside what Taşan-Kok and colleagues call “hyper-diversity” (2017), which is characterised by “changing patterns of behaviour, lifestyles, and activities over the life cycle of individuals” (pp. 8–9). These ongoing changes encompass the reconfiguration of the choice of partner(s) of many individuals when forming a family – the basic unit of society composed of two or more persons related to one another by virtue of biological, social, and/or legal ties.

During the last decades, the family has undergone important transformation due to its increasing democratisation (Giddens, 1992), that is, its acquisition of new and individualised meanings (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Illouz, 2007). Divorces, family blending, and non-marital arrangements (Widmer, 2010), such as cohabitation (De Jong Gierveld, 2004; Kiernan, 2004) and “living apart together” (Levin, 2004), attest to this democratisation of family life. Migration alimts this process with the formation of families characterised by “mixedness” (Varro, 2003). At the societal level, “mixedness” concerns intermarriage, formal and informal unions beyond marriage, and their underlying processes (see Chauvin et al., 2021; Collet, 2015; Fresnoza-Flot, 2017; Rodríguez-García, 2015). At the individual level, it refers to the intersecting identities in the realm of the family, which makes certain partners socially viewed as different or deviating from the normative idea(l)s about couples in the country or countries where these couples are enmeshed (Collet, 2017; de Hart et al., 2013; Fix and Zimmerman, 2001; Therrien, 2020). The simultaneous formation and existence of various configurations of mixedness in relational terms can be described as “intimate diversity”. How does this form of diversity take place?

2 *Situated mixedness*

What are its underlying processes? How do nation-states and individuals deal and live with this form of diversity?

The present volume aims to provide insights into these questions while reflecting on the transformation of intimate relationships and their connections to wider social changes. It derives the qualifier “intimate” and its signification from the concept of “intimacy”, that is, “the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality” (Jamieson, 2011, p. 151). Intimacy entails exchanges of feelings, personal information, and points of view in verbal and nonverbal ways (Reis and Shaver, 1988), which contributes to the building of a “close” interpersonal relationship in psychological and/or physical terms (p. 387). Regarding the notion of diversity, it is adopted in this volume to imply “a multitude of social categorizations and [...] their interconnections” (Jacobs, 2022, p. 107). In the literature employing the term “intimate diversity”, the categorisations brought to the fore are mainly gender, sexuality, and religious belonging. This tendency can be attributed to the fact that the term “intimate diversity” has been employed so far to refer to the following empirical phenomena: the increase of “non-normative relational forms” such as “asexuality and consensual nonmonogamies” (Hammack and Wignal, 2023, p. 2; see also Copulsky and Hammack, 2023); interreligious marriages (Smith, 2021); and “the enactment and/or narration of close and caring relationships among a racially and ethnically diverse membership” in a religious organisation (Jenkins, 2003, p. 394). In the context of migration, nationality, citizenship, social class, age, and racialisation also appear important to be considered in the analysis in addition to gender, sexuality, and religious belonging when examining intimate diversity in a given society.

When using the term “intimate diversity”, this volume does not intend to portray mixedness as a situation of pure happiness while disregarding the challenges that partners may experience at legal, socio-cultural, and emotional levels. Rather, the term is employed to encompass in the analysis the various configurations of interpersonal relationships formed within and outside the context of dynamic movements of people across nation-state borders, while identifying the processes and challenges they entail at individual and societal levels.

To grasp the dynamics of intimate diversity and the contexts that influence, stem from, or trigger it, the present volume focuses on Belgium, a country in the European Union (EU) with a long history of immigration and where an important percentage of registered marriages are international. In the EU, Belgium ranks 14th in terms of marriages by citizenship of bride and groom: 7.4 per cent of its reported 48,513 marriages involved non-EU citizens (Eurostat, 2022). Intimate diversity in this country has increasingly involved Belgian citizens and individuals from countries outside the EU, which has attracted an important political attention and control due to suspicions concerning the authenticity of some of these relationships (e.g., Dhoest, 2019; Mascia and Odasso, 2015; Mascia, 2021, 2022; Maskens, 2013, 2015; Odasso, 2021). To find out the state of intimate diversity concerning

Belgians and non-EU citizens in this country and the processes it entails, the volume examines empirically grounded cases of conjugal mixedness. The adjective “conjugal” here stems from the word “conjugality” that refers to “the existence of a couple” either within or outside the institution of marriage (see Muxel, 2015, p. 507). The volume considers conjugal mixedness as a microcosm that encapsulates the disparities of two or more societies into one coherent unit, yielding deep insights into macro-level phenomena.

The next section provides a review of the relevant literature to highlight the originality of this volume. Following this state of the art is a description of the volume’s analytical lens of “situated mixedness”, which locates both intimate diversity in general and the lived experiences of the partners in particular within wider social processes. The next section presents conjugal mixedness situations in Belgium by locating them in spatio-temporal contexts, which is useful to grasp the societal and temporal settings in which the intimate diversity phenomenon has been unfolding. The last two sections delve, respectively, into the volume’s methodology and empirical parts.

Diversity of conjugal mixedness in the context of migration

The literature on conjugal mixedness has been burgeoning around the world, notably since the 1990s when many studies concentrated on the “questions of assimilation, integration and cultural (as well as racial, ethno-linguistic and religious) mixing” (Moses and Woesthoff, 2019, p. 442). It has unveiled various configurations based on intersecting social categories – nationality, ethnicity, gender, and social class, among others – that make certain unions socially viewed and treated as “different” from the normative idea(l)s of couples in a given society in a specific period of time. It illuminates several scholarly tendencies and remaining gaps to be addressed in future studies of mixedness in migration settings.

Heteronormative gaze at mixedness

One of the tendencies in the literature on conjugal mixedness is to focus on the heterosexual configuration comprising a man and a woman. This configuration exhibits four salient variations mainly based on the economic condition of the partners’ countries of origin.

First, there are heterosexual mixed couples comprising a woman of an economically developing country and a man of an economically wealthy country, which have attracted important scholarly attention. Although some situations of conjugal mixedness occur in the natal countries of the women (e.g., Keomanichanh and Fresnoza-Flot, 2022; Maher and Lafferty, 2014) and several studies conducted in those countries considered the perspectives of these women (e.g., Ricordeau, 2012), the migration of women to the countries of citizenship of their husbands/partners has been more widely examined and has become known as the phenomenon of “global hypergamy” (Constable, 2005). For instance, research works have been carried out on

4 *Situated mixedness*

women from South America in Switzerland (Schuler and da Souza Brito, 2014; Riaño, 2015), women from African countries in France (e.g., Cole, 2014; Mounchit, 2022, pp. 158–159), and Asian women in wealthy countries in the world (e.g., Faier, 2009; Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017; Haklin, 2023; Hamano, 2019; Ishii, 2013; Lauser, 2008; Piper and Roces, 2003). This body of works documents the multifaceted life of migrant spouses, who are often viewed through the victimhood framework. For example, it reveals the way their receiving states regulate their entry and incorporation into their societies, the family experiences and social challenges that these spouses encounter, and their efforts to fulfil most-often overlapping roles as spouses, mothers, and natal family members.

Second, there are couples that are composed of a man of an economically developing country and a woman of an economically wealthy country. The few available studies about them unveil mostly migrant men's experiences of conjugal life, social incorporation, and masculine identities (e.g., Fleischer, 2011; Fresnoza-Flot, 2021; Wang, 2017); a few studies also highlight their spouses' perspectives: for example, Japanese women in Japan married to Pakistani men (Kudo, 2008) and Canadian women who are applying in Canada for family reunification with their partners of the Global South, that is, "mainly Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian men" (Geoffrion, 2021, p. 9). Although there are studies showing that women or their couples live a transnational life connecting their natal countries together (see Sportel, 2013) and that women of wealthy countries also migrate to the country of their husbands (e.g., Kudo, 2022; Therrien, 2014), most research have been conducted in the country of citizenship of the women, that is, in wealthy countries and not in the countries of origin of their husbands/partners. Like their women counterparts, men of economically developing countries tend to move to the country of citizenship of their spouses.

Third, the formation of couples in which partners are both migrants originated from economically developing countries has become included in the study of conjugal mixedness: for example, Lichter and colleagues (2015) observe in the United States (USA) that a percentage of intermarriages concern migrants marrying migrants from other economically developing countries, whereas Ducu and Hossu (2016) remark that some binational couples of Romanians in Belgium and the United Kingdom were formed abroad and do not involve a partner who is national of these countries. Like the latter study, Zahedi (2010) notices that two of the Filipino-Iranian couples in her study started abroad and not in Iran. These studies that include migrant couples of economically developing countries in the analysis suggest that scholarly interest in conjugal mixedness has been expanding to include heterosexual couples in which the partner's countries of citizenship are both economically developing. It also suggests that conjugal mixedness not only implies a situation in which "one is at home and the other a foreigner or an immigrant" (Collet, 2015, p. 132) but also refers to a state in which both partners are foreigners or immigrants from different countries living in a foreign country.

Finally, the fourth variant in heterosexual mixed configuration points to couples in which the partners are both citizens of economically wealthy countries. In this variant, women are mostly the focus of analysis: for instance, Russian women partnered with men in the USA (Johnson, 2007) and in France (Sizaire, 2016), women from the USA in couple with French men in France (Varro, 1988), Japanese women with Australian partners in Australia (Hamano, 2019; Meyer, 2017), or Japanese-Korean couples in Japan (Takeda, 2014). These studies illuminate women's experiences of social stereotypes about them and/or their couples, intergenerational transmission, and conjugal power dynamics, among others. They add a nuance on the way conjugal mixedness has been understood as only involving partners with a wide economic gap between their natal or citizenship countries. They bring to the fore other "categories of difference" (Crenshaw, 1989) that can also shape the way the society of residence of the partners views them as normative or non-normative couples, such as gender and social class background.

The central place of heterosexual couples with all their variants within the literature of conjugal mixedness reflects the salient heteronormative gaze in this research field. Women, most often than not, are the usual focus of attention, leading to the neglect of men's or both partners' perspectives. What determines which mixed couples to study appears to be the economic distance between the natal or citizenship countries of the individual partners, which casts a shadow on conjugal mixedness between marginalised minorities as well as between individuals of wealthy countries. The present volume pays attention to different relationship configurations so as to avoid overlooking socially "invisible" mixed couples.

Inclusive approach on the rise

Alongside the heteronormative gaze at mixedness is the tendency of adopting an inclusive approach to conjugal mixedness in migration setting. This entails considering in the analysis the relational configurations in generational and sexuality terms, as well as the perspectives of overlooked members of mixed families and other social actors.

There has been a lot of research focusing on the becoming of migrants' children in their parents' receiving country, specifically about the question of with whom they form a couple or family later in their life. The most widely studied case so far is what Eeckhaut and colleagues (2011) call "ethnic homogamous marriage" and "ethnic heterogamous union". The former has also been known as "intraethnic marriage" (Hense and Schorch, 2013; Oduaran and Chukwudeh, 2021) or "transnational marriage" (Charsley, 2012) involving individuals (who could be migrants or part of what is known as the "second" or "third" generations) who get married to someone from the same ethnic (and/or religious) group in the origin country of themselves or their migrant (grand)parents. The latter refers to the situation when the partners do not come from the same ethnic groups or community. Nonetheless,

both cases most often entail “marriage migration” (Kofman, 2004). Marrying co-ethnics or non-co-ethnics from the origin country of one’s (grand)parents has been shown to have some positive effects, such as increased advantage in the local marriage sector and obtaining favourable position in the conjugal power relations (see Beck-Gernsheim, 2007). However, studies also reported the manifold stakes of such marriage, namely downward social class mobility, domestic violence, and other socio-economic hardships (e.g., Charsley, 2005; Oduaran and Chukwudeh, 2021). When agency of the migrants’ children is taken into account, several configurations can be observed. In France, for instance, descendants of migrants tend to form endogamous couples in three ways: by following the traditional endogamous norm; by progressively emancipating themselves by emphasising free choice but still respecting the endogamous norm; and by radically transforming the norm valorising one’s personal fulfilment (Collet and Santelli, 2015). The above-mentioned studies point to the intersecting categories of not only generation and ethnicity but also social class, gender, and religious belonging.

Aside from the generational dimension of mixedness, there are more and more studies on LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) configuration that encompasses several categories based on gender identity and/or sexual orientation. These studies unveil how their spatial mobility has been shaped by a specific factor or has been occurring at the intersection of several categories of difference. In the case of internal migration, partnered gays and lesbians has been shown to be oriented towards less populous regions in the USA that are “rich in natural amenities” (for gays) or with “large, existing, partnered lesbian population” (for lesbians) (Cooke and Rapino, 2007). When it comes to international migration, other factors appear to influence the choices of LGBTQ couples. In their study conducted in France, the Netherlands, and the USA, Chauvin and colleagues (2021) remark how social class (in terms of possession of resources) makes a lot of difference for same-sex mixed status couples: “low-resource homogamous couples” experience “forced immobility”, “separation”, and “matrimonial precarity unlike their “privileged” counterparts “who can easily access international mobility” (p. 14). This study suggests the importance of resources to mitigate receiving state’s restrictive mobility policy. As regards gay migrants, Ponce and Chen (2023) observe that the factors driving gay Chinese to migrate to France and Belgium are “sexuality, desire, and intimacy” (p. 234), but the one that weighs a lot during the process of their movement is their “status as gay men in a Chinese environment” (p. 242). In the case of transgender women, several studies on Thailand’s *kathoey* show the importance of intimate relationships allowing them to reinforce their gender identity and attain social class mobility (Pravattiyagul, 2021; Scuzzarello and Statham, 2022; Thongkrajai, 2022). Many studies on LGBTQ in the context of migration emphasise homophobia and discrimination by the state and/or larger society (see Awondo, 2016) as well as the question of sexualisation and racialisation (see Boussalem, 2021; Boussalem and Di Felicianantonio, 2024). The migration

and resettlement of LGBTQ migrants in a new country highlight their resiliency and strategies of social incorporation (e.g., Kassan and Nakamura, 2013; Nakamura et al., 2017).

Moreover, since the pioneering work of Constable (2003) that includes the perspectives of men, several studies have been highlighting the overlooked voices in the analysis of mixed couples or families. This means focusing on the points of view of men (e.g., Charsley and Liversage, 2015; Fresnoza-Flot, 2021; Maher and Lafferty, 2014), the viewpoints of both partners (e.g., Odasso, 2016; Chauvin et al., 2021; Awondo, 2016), those of their children (Gilliéron, 2022; Suzuki, 2015), and/or those of both the parents and their children (Cerchiaro et al., 2015; Fresnoza-Flot, 2023). Outside of the couple or family, a focus on the structuring role of social actors in associative milieux in support of the rights of mixed couples/families (e.g., Cerchiaro, 2019a; Odasso and Robledo, 2022) and in state institutions regulating these couples/families' reunification (e.g., D'Aoust, 2022; Bonjour and De Hart, 2021; Mascia, 2022; Maskens, 2015) has been on the rise. This tendency has brought to the fore a diversity of experiences of conjugal or familial mixedness, which nuances the social understanding of this situation. It also reveals the institutions and social entities that control or support the members of mixed couples/families in a specific societal context.

Albeit limited in scope, the above review of studies underlines the importance of an inclusive approach to conjugal or familial mixedness. First, it brings to the fore two neglected categories of difference – generation and sexuality – in conjugal-mixedness research. Second, it valorises overlooked voices and experiences in this research field, nuancing herein the salient perspectives in the field. And third, it reveals the thematic expansion of the field, which will be explored in the section below. Considering these three points, the present volume adopts an inclusive approach bringing to the fore different relationship cases and emphasising distinct voices.

Expanding themes, terms, and qualifiers

Different but most often overlapping themes can be found in studies of conjugal mixedness and its related processes. The expansion of this research field has been also evident in the variety of terms and qualifiers used to capture the realities of life of mixed couples and families.

There are numerous themes treated in the literature of conjugal mixedness. For instance, scholars have largely focused on state's control and regulation of mixed couple formation and reunification through different vantage points (e.g., Chauvin et al., 2021; Le Bail et al., 2018; Maskens, 2013; Robledo, 2011). They uncover how states govern the intimate lives of their citizens through “technologies of love” (D'Aoust, 2013) that reinforce the normative idea(l)s of marriage and the family in their respective societies. The institution of marriage appears valorised through migrant-receiving states' “marital citizenship” that grants migrants, by virtue of marriage to

their citizen partners, access to “social, political, and civic rights and other entitlements” (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017, p. 10). Interestingly, not only non-citizens but also citizen partners experience and navigate state’s control. Citizen sponsors play the role of “membership intermediaries” (Bonizzoni and Fresnoza-Flot, 2023) and the ways they deal with family migration policies demonstrate their performance of “intimate citizenship” (Bonjour and de Hart, 2021). As states’ policies on migration and marriage appear to revolve around a “constellation of security, citizenship, and rights” (D’Aoust, 2022) at the intersection of various categories of difference, conjugal mixedness continues to entail “a complex co-mingling of economic and social integration” on the one hand and “marginalisation” on the other hand (Song, 2009, p. 343).

In this vein, the theme of social incorporation (or in other word, “integration”) arises (Charsley et al., 2020; Osanami Törngren et al., 2016; Rodríguez-García, 2015), notably in the case of migrant women spouses and children of mixed couples. Social incorporation does not only mean access to citizenship and the labour market but also the capacity of the migrant spouses to interiorise the receiving state’s cultural ways of living and being (see Faier, 2009; Kim, 2008; Strasser et al., 2009) and to transmit them to their children (e.g., Cerchiaro and Odasso, 2023; Fresnoza-Flot, 2018). When the partners in the couple do not share the same religion, this question of transmission becomes central in their daily lives. It is not surprising that many studies examine the lived experiences of interfaith couples, their conjugal dynamics, and the transmission of religious values, practices, and symbols (e.g., Cerchiaro, 2019b; Puzenat, 2008; Streiff-Fénart, 1989; Therrien et al., 2022). Studies focusing on the latter aspect show that transmission can take place between partners, between parents and their children, or vice versa, both in interfaith couples and in their same-religion counterparts. This process involves the passing of language, forenames and/or surnames, foods, and nationality, from one person to another. In this context, the theme of identity construction emerges, notably concerning mixed couples’ children (Gilliéron, 2022; Seiger, 2019; Unterreiner, 2015). It unveils the socialisation of these children in transnational social spaces and their becoming (see Celero, 2022; Therrien et al., 2021). The temporal dimension of these individuals’ case also puts into limelight the necessity to study the becoming of mixed couples. In line with this necessity, several studies have tackled ruptures in mixed couples, whether in the form of separation or divorce (Fresnoza-Flot and de Hart, 2022; Parisi, 2016; Sportel, 2016). They demonstrate how marriage and divorce are intricately intertwined with each other, and how family laws in the ex-partners’ natal countries interact during and/or after rupture (Liversage, 2012; Qureshi, 2016).

The themes above are some of the salient topics in the literature of conjugal mixedness. They bring out and mobilise several terms and qualifiers of conjugal mixedness as Table 0.1 shows. When the scholarly focus is the similarity or the difference of the partners in terms of relevant social parameters,

Table 0.1 Repertoire of salient terms and qualifiers of mixedness

<i>Selected categories</i>	<i>Similarity or difference</i>	<i>In-group or out-group preference</i>	<i>Duality of difference or shared similarity</i>	<i>Border-crossing character</i>	<i>Combination of several categories</i>
Social class				hypergamy hypogamy *** hypergamous hypogamous	
Age					
Ethnicity	homogamy heterogamy ***				
Nationality	homogamous heterogamous				
Race		exogamy endogamy ***			
Culture		exogamous endogamous inter- intra- co-	bi- same-	inter- cross- trans- multi-	mixed- multi-
Religion/faith					
(Legal) status					
Gender				mixed- cisgender	
Sexual/gender orientation			same-	LGBTQ mixed heterosexual mixed gender-mixed	

scholars tend to employ the terms “homogamy” and “heterogamy” or the corresponding qualifiers *homogamous* and *heterogamous*: for example, “ethnic homogamous marriage” (Eeckhaut et al., 2011) and “educational heterogamous union” (Trilla et al., 2008). Regarding in-group or out-group preference, the terms adopted are “exogamy”, with the qualifiers *exogamous* and *inter-* (e.g., exogamous couples, interethnic unions), and “endogamy”, with the qualifiers *endogamous* and *intra-* and *co-* (e.g., intranational, co-ethnic). When duality of difference or shared similarity is concerned, *bi-* and *same-* are utilised respectively to describe specific couples (e.g., binational, same-faith couples, same-sex couples, etc.). The social class border-crossing character of conjugal mixedness is particularly evoked through the terms “hypergamy” (marrying up) and “hypogamy” (marrying down), with the corresponding qualifiers *hypergamous* and *hypogamous*. Beyond social class, there are several possible qualifiers that can be employed: *inter-*, *cross-*, *trans-*, and *multi-* for categories such as ethnicity, nationality, culture, and faith (e.g., international, cross-cultural, transnational, multicultural); *mixed-* and *cisgender* for gender (e.g., mixed-gender couples); and *LGBTQ mixed*, *heterosexual mixed*, and *gender-mixed* for sexuality/gender orientation. If several categories converge, the qualifiers *mixed-* and *multi-* are usually employed (e.g., mixed-status family, multi-ethnic couples).

All the above themes, terms, and qualifiers point out the various underlying social processes occurring in many countries. They suggest not only the diversity of conjugal mixedness situations but also the plurality of scholarly vantage points. In the analysis of intimate diversity, taking into account the salient themes from the literature means being sensitive to the plural realities that may be all present in a given society. Being sensitive entails choosing the terms and qualifiers appropriate to the contexts of the themes considered. It is through the praxis of situating in context that the ground on which to stand becomes evident and the meanings of things take form. Sensitive to the different levels of context (micro, meso, and macro), the present volume lets the relevant context(s) of a specific phenomenon determine appropriate terms and qualifiers that researchers can mobilise in their respective studies.

Situated mixedness: a framework to understand intimate diversity

The salience of the relational and interactional dimensions of conjugal mixedness as the literature suggested prompts the present volume to adopt an analytical optic sensitive to these dimensions to understand intimate diversity. Since the phenomenon it examines unfolds in a nation-state with clearly defined geopolitical borders and consisting of multiple simultaneously existing social contexts within its frontiers, the volume draws from the phenomenological approach to the subjective experience of what Husserl (2008) calls “lifeworld” (*Lebenswelt*) and pays attention to its “situatedness” (*Situietheit*).

Als in leiblich erfahrenden und gemeinschaftlich handelnden Subjekten zentrierte Umwelt ist die Lebenswelt für jedes sie erfahrende Subjekt immer in konkreten „Situationen“ gegeben, die die Lebensbedeutsamkeit seiner aktuellen Lage ausmachen und es in seinem Handeln bestimmen; sie sind vielfach ineinander gestaffelt und letztlich alle eingegliedert in die „Allsituation“, in das Sinn Ganze der jeweils geltenden Lebenswelt, durch das jede aktuell bewusste Situation bedeutungsmäßig mitbestimmt ist.

(Husserl, 2008, p. LXVI)

Husserl underlines in the excerpt above the interconnectedness of micro-level concrete situations (*konkreten Situationen*) that constitute together an “all-situation” (*Allsituation*). In line with this perspective, conjugal mixedness can be considered as a concrete situation with its own dynamics grounded in a specific lifeworld. Individuals in this situation create and recreate in their everyday lives such dynamics in more or less different fashion contingent on various social parameters (e.g., gender, ethnicity, social class, and so on), conditions, and temporalities, among others. The ensemble of multiple conjugal mixedness cases taking place in and (re)constructing their respective variegated lifeworlds form a larger encompassing situation (i.e., “all-situation”) that can be qualified as intimate diversity. The contours of this diversity can be fully captured through the foregrounding of the concrete situations (i.e., conjugal mixedness cases) that compose it. What transpires in these conjugal mixedness cases in terms of practices and the (inter)subjective meanings individual partners or couples ascribe to them can reflect the wider processes of “all-situation”. A couple socially perceived as “mixed” can find itself in a demanding lifeworld, as Collet (2015) explains below:

When ethno-cultural, religious identifications, or national belonging differ, living together as a couple and as a family is put to the test. [...] The couples concerned represent a double challenge: they have to deal with the ways their choice is perceived by society at large and with endogamous norms in their enlarged family circle on the one hand, and they need to find intercultural solutions in their daily life on the other.

(pp. 129–130)

The double challenge of “mixed” couples as Collet pointed out suggests the strength of the deeply seated norms of endogamy characterising the “society at large” and the social control involved. Thus, the “mixed” couples’ practice of finding “intercultural solutions in their daily life” can make sense by paying attention to the society at large in which they live, notably its possible structuring effects on the said practice. In other words, it is important to be sensitive to where and when conjugal mixedness as a concrete situation transpires or has been unfolding. The “where” here denotes a physical place that is understood “in Anglo-Saxon geography” as “a holistic and concrete

place” (Kühne and Berr, 2022, p. 180). A physical place is a “geopolitical location” that could be “a nation at the macro level, or a city, village, or home at the micro level” (Fresnoza-Flot and Liu-Farrer, 2022, p. 5). In the present volume, it specifically refers to Belgium, to this country’s localities (regions, cities), and homes within them. The “where” of a concrete situation also signifies social space, which in a Bourdieusian sense represents the totality of available positions for individuals to occupy “at any one time and place” (Hardy, 2014, p. 231). Social space is characterised by power dynamics, and individuals’ occupation of available positions depends on the volume and configurations of their capital (Bourdieu, 1979; see also Bourdieu, 1997). Social space also points to a site of interpersonal interactions and practices both individual and collective. Considering the above-mentioned definitions of a social space, the volume highlights various social spaces: associative, institutional, virtual, transnational, and domestic. Regarding the “when” of concrete situations, it implies temporality in the sense of Heidegger (1988), who defines it in relation to time in a phenomenological manner:

temporality is the condition of the possibility of all understanding of being; *being is understood conceptually comprehended by means of time*. When temporality functions as such a condition we call it Temporality.

(p. 274)

Human being living in a world (i.e., “Dasein” in Heidegger’s work) “ascribes to time a particular temporal significance for existence”, and time is reckoned – “spanned”, “dated”, and “given a *periodicity*” – “to feel and suppose what the being of time means *for-the-sake-of* Da-sein” (Scott, 2006, pp. 193–194). In this case, it is crucial to consider the temporal significance that individuals give to time and the way they reckon and view it to capture their existential experiences of the lifeworld. Hence, understanding the state of being-in-the-world requires being attuned to and mindful of the place, space, and temporality of a given concrete situation and its underlying processes.

The fact of locating, positioning, or grounding a concrete situation in a given physical place, social space, and/or temporality can be wholly called as “situatedness”. For Hünefeldt and Schlitte (2018), “situatedness may refer not only to the contingent relationship to some particular place in the world” (i.e., lifeworld), “but also to the necessary relationship to the all-encompassing place of the world” that is, the all-situation (p. 8). Applied to the analysis of intimate diversity, “situatedness” entails locating, positioning, or grounding of conjugal mixedness in relevant physical place, social space, and/or temporality. This framework is called in the present volume as “situated mixedness”. It pays attention to the connection and disconnection between conjugal mixedness and a lifeworld including its temporality, as well as between conjugal mixedness and intimate diversity – the “all-situation”. Bringing together mutually reinforcing or often contradicting emic and etic

perspectives, the “situated mixedness” lens illuminates in this volume how specific physical places, social spaces, and temporality in socio-historical term not only can influence, stem from, produce, or trigger a social phenomenon and practice but also can bring no (evident) impact on individuals’ lived experiences. It brings out in subtle ways the agency and subjectivities of individuals, nuancing thereby common-held views on socially “othered” couples.

Situating conjugal mixedness in Belgium

Conjugal mixedness involving Belgian citizens and their foreign partners has been observed since the colonial period. It has occurred against the backdrop of people’s spatial movements from Belgium to its African colonies and vice versa, from nearby European countries to Belgium (notably following World War II), and from countries of other continents to Belgium. It has increasingly become the focus of the state’s preoccupation and control.

Historically speaking, several accounts unravel that Belgian colonial rulers viewed “interracial relationships” in their colonies in Africa as an effective way not only to understand and “control” its colonial subjects (Heynssens, 2016), but also to ensure the well-being of its men agents. For instance, “mistresses” (*ménagères*) were considered crucial for the sexual satisfaction of Belgian colonial agents in Congo, for hygiene purposes, protecting them from venereal diseases, and for moral and practical support when they fall ill (Lauro, 2005). These reasons, among others, explain why such a relationship was tolerated during the early Belgian colonial period in Congo. The situation changed in 1919 when Ruanda-Urundi became subjected to Belgian colonial rule, during which Belgian colonizers started to consider interracial relationships a threat to their power (Heynssens, 2016). The subsequent restrictions of interracial relationships in the colonies occurred alongside the stigmatisation and marginalisation of children called *mulâtres*, *bastaards*, or *métis* born of these unions (Ghali, 2016; Ghequière and Kanobana, 2010; Heynssens, 2016, 2017). Since these children were socially considered as “errors” or “accidents”, many of them were sent to Belgium during the latter part of the 1950s and early 1960s to “whiten” their “souls” (Ghali, 2016, p. 56; see also Heynssens, 2016). They were forcibly sent for adoption, separated from their siblings and mothers, acquired new family names, and dispatched throughout the country (Odasso, 2020).

Outside of the Belgian colonies, Belgian nationals were also forming couples with foreigners in Europe. Venken (2011a) brings to attention the mixed marriages between about 300 Polish soldiers called “liberators” and Belgian Flemish women, as well as between about 4,000 Soviet women (Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians) called *Ostarbeiterinnen* (i.e., Eastern workers in “Nazi war industry”) who “chose to travel with their Belgian partners to Belgium” from Germany after the end of World War II (p. 55). In this context, Polish liberators and Soviet women differently experienced the Belgian state’s control of binational unions: for instance, whereas the former “had

to prove their economic usefulness”, the latter “had to marry or to give birth to Belgian citizens” (ibid., p. 70). This gendered approach to intermarriage is evidently encapsulated in the term “derivative marital citizenship” (Irving, 2012); that is, women marrying foreign men automatically lose their citizenship and acquire that of their husbands’. In the case of Soviet women who married Belgian men, “the combination of Soviet equal citizenship rights and the acquisition of Belgian citizenship could lead to the risk of being repatriated” (Venken, 2011a, p. 70, 2011b). It was only in 1984 that the Belgian state ended the application of derivative marital citizenship to binational marriages.

Restrictions of access to Belgian nationality were heightened specifically in 1993 and 2012, during which foreign partners of Belgians were required to meet several conditions to apply for Belgian nationality (e.g., five-year legal residence in Belgium and three-year couple life together). Interestingly, many cases of conjugal mixedness have occurred since the 1990s onwards: for example, Belgian men partnered with Russian-speaking women (Heyse, 2010), Southeast Asian women (Fresnoza-Flot, 2018), and other nationalities (Statbel, 2011, 2023a). Many Belgians who are descendants of immigrants also pursue binational endogamous marriages (Bensaid, 2019; Van Landschoot et al., 2018). On 1 June 2003, Belgium implemented its law on same-sex marriage (see Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011; Fiorini, 2003), which opened a legal possibility for same-sex couples, including binational ones, to formalise their unions. The Belgian state’s control of binational unions involves investigating the authenticity of such relationships to avoid sham marriages (see Mascia and Odasso, 2015; Mascia, 2021, 2022; Maskens, 2013, 2015; Odasso, 2021). Not only Belgians’ foreign partners but also the children born of their binational unions become targets of important state control. For example, the Immigration Office requires a DNA test to prove child-parent biological filiation if a child’s birth certificate used for reunification application with the Belgian parent is not conclusive (see DOFI, 2024). While restrictions are imposed on binational couples and their offsprings regarding access to Belgian territory and nationality, the Belgian state starts to recognise the forced adoptions and segregations of mixed-parentage children of the former colonies: for instance, via public apologies of “the Flemish Parliament and the bishops” and a voted resolution of the Belgian Parliament (Odasso, 2020, p. 284).

Within the context of ongoing immigration restrictions in EU countries like Belgium, marriage and family reunification have become the widely taken routes of non-EU people aspiring to (re)form a couple or family with EU nationals. In 2023, Belgium recorded 2,297 marriages (2,225 heterosexual and 72 same sex) of Belgians with non-EU nationals (Statbel, 2023b, 2023c), equivalent to 5.9 per cent of the 38,775 Belgian-non-EU foreigner marriages. This percentage is slightly higher than that (5.2 per cent) of Belgian-EU national marriages that have been part of the larger intra-European marriage phenomenon (see Gaspar, 2008; Medrano, 2020). The Belgian-non-EU

foreigner marriages mostly occurred in Flanders (Statbel, 2023d, 2023e), where the local marriage sphere has become globalised due to international mobilities and European integration (Deschamps, 2005; Dumont, 2005). Beyond nationality and sexuality, statistical data reveal that among registered couples several configurations exist based on overlapping factors such as age, previous civil status, and registered residence of the partners. These configurations indicate the diversity of the characteristics of intimate relationships involving Belgians and non-EU nationals, which the present volume will further unpack.

Methodological notes

The analysed data in this volume originate from different studies conducted separately in time and space in a common national setting – Belgium. This setting, where the authors were physically present when gathering data for their respective studies, embeds a virtual space that a few studies in the volume frequented as either a main or supplementary site for data collection. The author’s adopted research methods and the type of data they obtained indicate that their studies can be described as either qualitative or quantitative.

All but one study in this volume is qualitative in nature, meaning that the depth and breadth of data are the focus rather than their quantity. Interviewing is the widely employed method of these studies to gather biographical information, variegated vantage points regarding specific themes, or contextual data (historical, socio-legal, and so on). It is generally combined with ethnographic observations (participant for some, non-participant for others) carried out onsite, during which the authors immersed themselves in the social space(s) of their target study group(s) or individuals. These spaces encompass associative milieus, institutional settings, public meeting spots, and homes of the study participants. They can be found in urban areas within Belgium (mostly in Flanders and Brussels-Capital regions) or a more transnational locations connected through digital and transportation technologies. In three studies, several online platforms served as fieldwork sites. To meet potential study participants, the authors of the volume’s qualitative studies relied mainly on the snowball approach, allowing them to meet a group of individual participants, numbering between 12 and 52. If couples were interviewed, their number ranged from 12 to 66. Aside from the above-mentioned data-gathering methods, one study also drew from the researcher’s personal experiences (see Chapter 7 of the volume) – an autobiographic approach to conjugal mixedness similar to previous studies (e.g., Geoffrion, 2016; Meyer, 2017; Therrien, 2008). The qualitative data in the studies mentioned above are thematically analysed. In one study, the author utilised Apitzsch and colleagues’ “biographical policy evaluation” method (2008) to find out the interlinks among “individual experiences, administrative practices, and the legal framework” (see Chapter 2).

Only one study in the volume can be qualified as quantitative (see Chapter 5), as it mobilised official statistical data in aggregated form. The data came from the Belgian statistical office and underwent descriptive analysis of Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness formed between 1992 and 2020.

Regardless of their defining characteristic as either qualitative or quantitative, all the studies featured in the volume also drew from secondary data in different forms (e.g., scientific and journalistic literature, legal documents, and so on). Ethically speaking, those who examined empirical data from interviews and observations obtained their participants' consent prior to data collection. To protect the private lives of these participants, they pseudonymised them in their respective chapters. In the case of the quantitative study in the volume, only macro-level data are presented to avoid identifying specific individuals or couples (see Chapter 5).

Contents of the volume

The present volume comprises two parts with empirical-research-based contributions at the crossroads of anthropology and sociology of intimate relationships in the context of migration. The volume's Part I, entitled "Mixed couples living the context(s) of regulations", highlights how the Belgian State and society view and/or treat intimate diversity and how "mixed" couples experience, contest, or navigate such a context. Part II, entitled "Temporal unfolding of intimate diversity", takes a closer look at the often-overlooked cases of Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness, notably its evolution and underlying processes at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. In line with the volume's "situated mixedness" framework, all the authors in this volume are attuned to the significance of locating their study of concrete situations (*konkreten Situationen*) of conjugal mixedness within relevant contexts (scientific, socio-legal, spatio-temporal, historical, and cultural, among others).

Four chapters of Part I of the volume brilliantly describe the processes that mixed couples experience in Belgian society and/or their encounters with the state's governmentality of intimate relationships. Chapter 1 by Cerchiaro sheds light on the phenomenon of religious diversity in Belgium, specifically by analysing the question of religious secularisation and spiritualisation in Muslim-Christian couples in Brussels and Antwerp. On the one hand, Cerchiaro finds out that partners' "loss" of religiosity is a process that may often predate their relationship and constitutes, then, not a consequence but a common ground between them. On the other hand, he remarks that couples who avoid losing religiosity tend to focus on a "spirituality" that de-institutionalises religion and reshapes religious experience in a more "mystical", "anti-dogmatic", and "contemplative" way. These are the two main processes identified in Belgium, where interfaith couples, in which one partner is Muslim, particularly experience social "disapproval and sometimes hostility" (p. 35). Interestingly, Cerchiaro observes that it is not such a social context targeting Muslim minorities that shapes Muslim-Christian couples'

coping strategies to religious diversity but rather religious norms and the social networks of mixed families' associations. The presence of Christian-Muslim families association(s) may, for instance, constitute an element that promotes the "spiritualisation" of religion. His chapter brings to reflection the role of external factors in mitigating or countering the impact of social context on mixed couples. The family's religious sphere emerges as a sort of protection and relatively independent space.

Chapter 2 by Odasso examines the income requirement of the Belgian migration legislation of 2011 that targets Belgian citizens applying for family reunification with their non-EU partners. Examining the perspectives and experiences of foreign-Belgian couples and selected "socio-legal intermediaries" in metropolitan Brussels, Odasso situates mixed couples in institutional and intersectional spheres. By doing so, she demonstrates how the income requirement creates a "bordering" process, "migrantises" citizen sponsors, and transforms them into "internal undesirables" at the intersection of gender, social class, and race. Her empirical data suggest that conjugal mixedness is "a delicate social status", as Belgium's family reunification policy and the bureaucratic process involved in it affect Belgian citizens' sense of belonging and inform their infra-political strategies. Chapter 2 demonstrates how socio-legal context affects the lives of not only the migrant foreign partners but also the Belgian citizens in mixed couples, and how these couples and selected intermediaries react to and navigate the said context.

Chapter 3 by Maskens illuminates the role of state agents as "gatekeepers" of the Belgian nation. Analysing the interactions of these agents in the city of Brussels during interviews with two couples, Maskens observes that the interviews were not conducted merely to find out the authenticity of the relationship but rather to evaluate the desirability of the migrant spouses. Based on the "normative, rigid or even pedantic view that intimacy is something shared" (p. 80), the agents decide which couples are the "good" ones to be welcomed in the country and which are not. Evidently, the partners categorised as falling into what is called "arranged marriages" do not get favourable opinions, unlike their expatriate counterparts occupying a position of power and displaying a romantic sense of relationship. The preoccupation of state agents to "protect" the country from what is perceived as "parasites" is connected to the larger context of the Belgian government's fight against sham marriages, which leads to the reproduction of "social and racial hierarchies" in the country.

Chapter 4 by Blockx concludes Part I of the volume. It investigates the impact of the Belgian state's legal measures during the COVID-19 pandemic on "intimate transnational relationships". Blockx conducted a case study of the physical separation experiences of two couples (Belgian-Filipino and Belgian-Gambian) in which one partner resides in Belgium. She locates the couples' situation within the context of the Belgian state's travel restrictions and border closures. These state's measures affected the couples' plans and "legal consciousness", prompting them to rely on digital technology to

maintain intimacy across borders. Blockx reveals that it is not only the legal restrictions on international travels of the receiving country but also those of the country of origin that affect the couples. The coping strategies of the partners are the manifestations of their agency against the backdrop of the Belgian state's governmentality of intimate transnational relationships. As they adjust to this governmentality, the couples contribute to the rise of "new forms and ways of experiencing intimacy" (p. 104).

After exploring intimate diversity in its challenging contexts, Part II delves into the emerging Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness in Belgium. It explores this phenomenon, adopting a multi-level analysis. At the macro level, Chapter 1 by Monteil provides an overall view of the phenomenon from a quantitative perspective from 1992 to 2020. Taking it as an encompassing situation comprising different nationalities from East and Southeast Asia, Monteil pays attention to the temporal and demographic evolution of the phenomenon. He analyses selected aggregate data from the Belgian statistical office (Statbel) on seven nationalities in couple with Belgians: Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Laotians, South Koreans, Thais, and Vietnamese. Specifically, he examines the place of women in the phenomenon by looking at the sex ratio and its evolution among the selected couples. He observes fluctuating patterns in terms of the number of couples and sex ratio through time, with Southeast Asians (specifically Thais and Laotians) as the most feminised populations. To explain the statistical trends he observed, Monteil situates them in the broader social realities in Belgium by linking them to Belgian migration policies and salient migratory movements from Asia involving students and (highly) skilled workers.

At the meso level, Chapter 2 by Fresnoza-Flot, in collaboration with Keomanichanh, Ponce, and Kawase, highlights the perspectives of social actors who are well immersed in selected East and Southeast Asian immigrant populations in Belgium. Adopting a "situated mixedness" framework, Fresnoza-Flot locates her analysis of 35 expert interview dataset within the historical and social contexts of Asian immigration, which provides interesting insights into the formation of Belgian-Asian couples through time. She remarks that although the migrant partners in these couples have different immigration trajectories, their unions with Belgians have certain similarities or "points of convergence" with one another: they display intimate diversity *outside* and *within* (i.e., the *Allsituation* in Husserl sense) accompanied with interpersonal and social incorporation challenges. On the one hand, intimate diversity *outside* encapsulates the various conjugal mixedness situations within each group studied and highlights their common characteristics: heterosexual, urban-oriented, and social network-shape. On the other hand, intimate diversity *within* encompasses the couples' shared socio-demographic features and the existence of different relationship configurations.

At the micro-level, two chapters explore the relational aspects of Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness. Chapter 7 by Ponce examines the migratory and relationship trajectories of gay Asian migrant men by considering their

sexuality and ethno-racial self-identification while situating their case within the larger phenomenon of gay migration to Belgium. Drawing from his ethnographic fieldwork online and onsite among 33 gay Asian informants, Ponce describes his informants' trajectories as comprising the following stages: rapture, rupture, and reconstruction. The first stage (rapture) refers to the period during which the informants left their cultural and ethnic origin, whereas the second stage (rupture) points to the period during which informants underwent emotional trauma because of disillusionment and violent encounters in relationships. These stages of ruptures culminate in what Ponce called "reconstruction" that entails "framing future possibilities" and "rethinking expectations and desires" (p. 174). The author also illuminates the impact of his informants' intersecting identities as gay and Asian foreigners on their relationship trajectories in the Belgian sexual field.

Chapter 8 by Keomanichanh scrutinises the meanings of food consumption of Laotian-Belgian couples in Belgium, notably their eating habits around dinner and the food practices of the Laotian migrant spouses. The author's ethnographic data gathered from 12 heterosexual Belgian-Laotian couples indicates that food is not only a source of emotional comfort and a seduction tool for the Laotian spouses, but also a means of becoming a "good husband" and a "lucky wife". Situating the food practices of the studied couples within their transnational life context, Keomanichanh uncovers the importance of Asian immigrant supermarkets in Belgium, where Laotian migrant women procure the needed ingredients for their cooking. She also observes the influence of gender ideology in Laos, where women are the ones responsible for household chores. Interestingly, the author brings to attention that Laotian migrant spouses consider the preferences of their Belgian husbands and children. She emphasises that individual freedom and adaptation are the constitutive elements of a sustainable conjugal relationship.

Finally, the volume concludes with a summary of key findings from its case studies, the theoretical and policy implications of a "situated mixedness" framework, and future research tracks in the study of intimate diversity in Belgium and other migrant-receiving countries.

Overall, with its two empirical parts, the volume offers a panorama of the dynamics of intimate diversity in Belgium, an EU country with high rates of immigration and intermarriages. Focusing on the intimate sphere of individuals' lives, it contributes fresh insights not only to the study of migration and intermarriage but also to the burgeoning literature on (super-)diversity at large. It will interest scholars, students, and social actors working on family-related migration, State policies, and social cohesion.

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