14 Inside out

Invaders, migrants, borders, and queering the Belgian family

Michael Gott

The family has functioned as a particularly durable metaphor for the nation and national identity in Europe. The notions of genealogical proximity, biological and terrestrial lineage, and protection from ostensibly nefarious outside contagions are particularly germane to this symbolism. The Belgian nation is a complex entity, and with its community rivalries and squabbles one might be tempted to think of Belgium as a dysfunctional, if not effectively estranged, family, the unfortunate result of an ill-conceived 1830 union. A confederation of language communities and regions, Belgium is characterised by an unusual degree of internal complexity, meaning that the very conception of Belgian identity is slippery. As a small country with three national borders in close proximity, and a federated state with three official languages, Belgium is comprised of a variety of internal frontiers, both administrative and cultural-linguistic. Nonetheless, the relationship between Belgium's insiders – the European communities that make up the nation – and its immigrants still tends to be framed as a set of intractable problems. Immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb, and Turkey in particular, are often viewed as fundamentally unassimilable and perhaps unwilling to assimilate to the national family or families. Many Belgians seem to be resistant to immigration and multiculturalism. By one measure, they were second most likely amongst Europeans to agree with the statement 'immigrants are a threat to your way of life' (Mulcahy 2011: 104–6, 159).

This complex make-up provides the ideal laboratory for cinematic interrogations of identity. Belgianness involves a number of layered and latent complexities, stemming from the aforementioned internal factors, a significant history of post-WWII immigration, and the significant presence of bureaucrats working for the EU and other international organisations. In Brussels, almost half (46%) of the capital's residents have roots outside Belgium, with the largest minority populations being Moroccan and Turkish (see Vandezande et al. 2011). Lieve Spaas suggests that Belgium's 'mosaic of different groups of people' is reflected in the diversity of the Belgian cinema industry. Internal diversity can be traced back to filmmakers Charles Dekeukeleire and Henri Stork, whose careers were both launched in the 1920s and whose filmographies comprised both Francophone and Flemish

films. Diversity with origins outside of Belgium is exemplified by the foreign origins of directors such as Boris Lehman (Switzerland), Marion Hänsel (France), Michel Khleifi (Lebanon), Fiona Gordon (Australia), Sam Garbarski (Germany), and Jessica Woodworth (America) (Spaas 2000: 13). Belgian filmmakers often cite the nation's diversity as a creative influence. For instance, Nabil Ben Yadir, who was born in Brussels to Moroccan parents and directed the successful 2009 film *Les Barons* (Belgium/France) about minorities living in the often disparaged, working-class Molenbeek community of Brussels, contends that Belgium's complexity is reflected in its cinema (see Van Hoeij 2010).

Long before the current migrant and refugee 'crisis' became the focus of intense media attention across Europe, Belgium and its cinema were dealing with a constant process of negotiating borders. In this chapter, I will suggest that tracing the trajectories of families (flexibly defined) as they come together, reunite, and/or fragment throughout six Belgian productions made by directors from Belgium's French and Flemish communities (and, in one case, by a Francophone director from Quebec) offers a way to understand the complexities and malleability of Belgian identity/ies. The films, in order of discussion, are: *King of the Belgians* (2016, Belgium/Netherlands/Bulgaria, dir. Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth), *L'Envahisseur/The Invader* (2011, Belgium, dir. Nicholas Provost), *25 degrés en hiver/25 Degrees in Winter* (2004, Belgium/France/Russia/Spain, dir. Stéphane Vuillet), *Black* (2015, Belgium, dir. Adil El Arbi and Billal Fallah), *Congorama* (2006, Canada/Belgium/France, dir. Philippe Falardeau), and *Je suis mort mais j'ai des amis/I'm Dead But I Have Friends* (2015, Belgium/France, dir. Guillaume and Stéphane Malandrin). These films reveal a varied and complex, though still contested, picture of citizenship. In the following analysis, I will also highlight some of the ways in which the production talent involved in their making exemplify the layered diversity of Belgium's cinema industries and the nation itself. This dual approach also enables us to move productively – at least to some extent – beyond what Walter Mosley has theorised as the 'split screen' of Belgian cultural identity, based on a linguistic division that has complicated the quest for any unified definition of national Belgian cinema (Mosley 2001: 5). By extension, the inherent diversity and multilayered nature of Belgianness furnishes the context for recent cinematic reactions to – and representation of – migrants.

The family as micro-border

As a metaphor for the Belgian nation and its entangled relationships, tortuous genealogies, and frequent squabbles, families offer a useful framework to question such binaries as Flemish/Walloon, French/Dutch, or insider/outsider. As Daniela Berghahn observes, the family, 'as the smallest unit of society and as the prime site of socialisation and identity formation', is crucial in debates over cultural identity, belonging and assimilation (Berghahn

2013: 2). If the family is the smallest unit of the nation or community, it is also the primary locus of the everyday elaboration and construction of the community's borders, whether ideational or – to a certain extent, at least – juridical and 'hard' borders as Klaus Eder defines them (Eder 2006), through marriage or partnerships, procreation, adoption, etc.. In this sense, they function as micro-borders, where the parameters of identity and filiation are constantly tested, resisted, and remade in the course of daily life. My suggestion is that families in Belgian film 'queer' national and community identities from the inside by elaborating new interactions and updated forms of filiation. In what follows, I hope to underscore how, through families, universal themes such as intergenerational conflict, filiation, and 'return' to origins, and techniques like multilingualism, linguistic code-switching, and 'translanguaging' (moving among language and using language in diverse ways) (King 2017: 8), can be employed to address particularly Belgian identity questions. Although there is only one character in the films I discuss that is clearly identified as queer, the families in all of these narratives, and by extension the national or community family, are to different degrees all 'queered' according to the quite flexible interpretation of the term advanced by Berghahn. Queering, she suggests, 'implies transgression, subversion and dissent, and is often conceived of as a state of "in-betweenness"', and it is 'essentially about resisting containment within clearly demarcated borders and categories' (Berghahn 2011: 133).

Through the varied narrative trajectories and multiple border-crossings involved in the creation, production, and financing of these films, the family metaphor also extends to Belgium's film industry as a component of European and global cinematic industries. In my chosen corpus, I am quite wilfully looking across the linguistic and political boundaries that often separate films funded on the one hand by Wallimages and the Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel (CCA) and aimed at Francophone audiences, and on the other those funded by Screen Flanders and the Flanders Audiovisual Fund (Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds), which now labels its productions with the slogan 'Belgian Cinema from Flanders'. The six films reveal a web or constellation circling around Belgium as one node in a particularly zigzagging family tree. Two are 'from' Wallonia, three 'from' Flanders, and another cannot be classified along this axis. In linguistic terms, they include Francophone films from Wallonia, a primarily Francophone film with some Dutch that is a Wallonia-Flanders co-production, another by a Flemish directing duo that is primarily in French, one by a Flemish director that is almost entirely in French with a small amount of English, and a multilingual film that involved Wallonia-Flanders and Bulgarian cooperation. Beyond the combinations of Dutch and French, all are multilingual to some degree and reveal multiple links to the world beyond Belgium. Thinking in terms of what some scholars have theorised as '*cinéma-monde*' (Gott and Schilt 2018; Marshall 2012) on a Belgian scale allows us to consider the porosity of the previously given economic and cultural lines, and interpret the transnational families in these

films as borderlands on several different levels between static conceptions of national or cultural identity and film industries. The *cinéma-monde* concept with its ‘web of production connections’ (Gott 2018: 149) brings together a variety of film industries and national cinemas, expanding the geographical limits of what is customarily considered the ‘Francophone world’, a preeminently heterolingual space (Gott and Schilt 2018: 5–6).

‘Families’ on the border: from the coast of Europe to the forests of Quebec

In the mockumentary *King of the Belgians* by directing duo Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth (the latter hailing from the United States), the fictional Belgian King Nicholas II finds himself stranded in Istanbul during a state visit with the humorous premise that he is gifting Brussels’s iconic Mini Europe park to Turkey in honour of that nation’s EU membership (Figure 14.1). This coincides with a declaration of independence by Wallonia that is sure to set up the implosion of his nation and a wider European natural crisis, a ‘cosmic event’ on the scale of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano eruption that wreaked havoc with communications and transportation. Desperate to return home to reunite his lands, the King and his entourage must surreptitiously depart against the wishes of Turkish security forces who claim to be sequestering all visiting dignitaries in a secure location for their safety. The Belgians manage to escape, but Turkish security follows in pursuit as they traverse the Balkans to reach their home ‘at the heart of Europe’ (as the King describes Belgium). Various misadventures in the Balkans ensue, including, but not limited to, a

Figure 14.1 The royal family and entourage in *King of the Belgians* (2016)

Source: *King of the Belgians* (2016), directed by Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth © Bo Films, Entre Chien et Loup, Topkapi Films, Art Fest, and Twin Pics (Netherlands) (2017).

brief term by the group as honorary members of a Bulgarian village yogurt contest jury, and a run-in with a war criminal. Most significantly for our topic, this odd and bumbling royal odyssey involves two clandestine border crossings that recall – or perhaps reverse – the experience of undocumented migrants and refugees headed towards and through Europe. In the first, the royal troupe traverses the border between Turkey and Bulgaria by bus. They are dressed in women's clothes and mingling with a Bulgarian female folk singing group to avoid having their passports checked by Turkish border officials. Later, the party arrives by boat on the Albanian coast – which, due to a navigation foible, they believed to be Italy – and are detained because they have lost their passports and initially cannot prove their identity.

The fashion in which this darkly satirical comedy reverses roles and places the Belgians in the position of migrants is notable for two reasons. First, it alludes to the difficulty of representing the figure of the migrant in a new fashion, and one that does not repeat well-meaning but well-trodden, miserabilist tropes and images of suffering. It is difficult to view the border crossings from East to West in this film without the migrant crisis in mind, particularly given the prevalence of media images of closed borders, encampments, and other obstacles impeding the progress of migrants on the 'Balkan route' towards Western European nations. The King's itinerary even shifts in the wrong direction, compelling him to experience crossing from 'West' to 'East' as an undocumented migrant on the Albanian coast. In this sense, while no true migrants are represented, the depiction of migration is 'queered' in accordance with the transgression and subversion inherent in Berghahn's understanding of the term (Berghahn 2011: 133). Secondly, *King of the Belgians* depicts the royal family and its entourage as a symbol for the entire nation: multilingual and often fractious. The voyagers encounter various languages en route, but multilingualism is also inherently present in all of the entourage's actions. The fictional documentary director opens the film with the question: 'Belgium, is it a proper country or just some sort of geopolitical compromise?'. Belgian multilingualism is often used to comedic effect, such as the tedious countdown to 'action' by the King in all three of the nation's official languages before starting a take. However, the film also contains what can be read as a more serious message about Belgian identities. By combining the unexpected migrant experience – which situates the European 'insider' in the place of the 'outsider' – with a perhaps mildly mocking depiction of the multilayered complexity of Belgium, *King of the Belgians* blurs the distinction between inside and outside and suggests that to move across boundaries, be they cultural, physical, or linguistic, is intrinsic to Belgianness. This inherent multiplicity will be evident to some degree in each of the films I discuss.

The Invader by Nicholas Provost (born in Ronse in Flanders) follows the trajectory of an actual migrant from Africa. Amadou is played by Issaka Sawadogo, an actor originally from Burkina Faso. The film opens with a dreamy, abstract sequence in which Amadou washes up on a Southern

European beach full of nude sunbathers. From there he makes his way to Brussels, a passage represented elliptically and equally abstractly in a sequence showing the inside of a tunnel, where he insinuates himself into a variety of 'insider' situations. On one level, the film is focused on the uneasy status of migrants in Europe who, even when managing to reach their intended destination, commonly remain in flux and transit looking for steady employment and lodging. Amadou is constantly shot in motion: in the tunnel, in a van, riding the metro, running down the street. This theme, and the director's treatment of it, links *The Invader* to *25 Degrees* and a number of other Belgian films about immigrants and migrants, including *Illégal* (2010, Belgium/Luxembourg/France) by Olivier Masset-Depasse and the Dardenne brothers' *Rosetta* (1999, Belgium/France) (Gott 2016: 148–56). My primary interest in this discussion, however, centres on how the film represents Amadou's interactions with Brussels society, in particular a married couple, the primary family unit represented in the film. The opening scene is bookended by an ending that is equally unreal, perhaps a blend of dream (or European nightmare) and reality. The sequence begins in the bedroom of the elegant and successful European couple formed by Agnès de Yael, with whom Amadou has become obsessed over the course of the narrative, and Dr. Charles de Yael. A naked Amadou slips stealthily inside the rooms as the couple sleeps, and watches them before appearing, in an ellipsis or a fragmentary dream, in the spot once occupied by the husband. He thus literally (or symbolically, if it is indeed a dream) inserts himself into the European couple.

Figure 14.2 Amadou (Issaka Sawadogo) takes the place in bed of the white Belgian in *The Invader* (2011)

Source: *L'Envahisseur/The Invader* (2011), directed by Nicholas Provost © Versus Production, Prime Time, Hepp Film, and O'Brother Distribution (Belgium) (2011).

This image perfectly encapsulates Amadou's eerie accommodation between inside and outside, a key preoccupation of *The Invader*. While marginal to Belgian society and the economy, Amadou takes things in his own hands (or tries to) and does manage initially to insert himself into a variety of spaces and go unnoticed when desired, or fit in well enough not to raise alarm. Charming, handsome, well-spoken in French (the film's dialogue is almost exclusively in French, with English in one scene), and, having absconded with some designer clothes stolen from the exploitative landlord and boss where he initially worked in veritable indentured servitude, Amadou is equipped to pose as an insider, at least at first glance. Most significantly, he charms Agnès into having sex in a classy apartment that she 'lends to visiting friends', and where he will subsequently outstay his welcome. As in the concluding scene that I have already described, in this instance Amadou literally positions himself inside the symbolically charged location of the native Belgian's home. This intrusion is perhaps more complex than the title's 'invasion' label suggests for, despite the economic disparities, Belgium is diverse enough for the Francophone usurper to feign at least provisional insider status. As in *King of the Belgians*, the commonplace figure of the migrant is to some degree reformulated and inverted, for, although Amadou faces many typical migrant travails, his potential insider status, added to the sexualised representation that is much more typical of female migrant narratives, marks him out as an unusual representative of on-screen migrants.

Stéphane Vuillet's *25 Degrees in Winter* links the Spanish roots of its family of protagonists – an example of Belgium's preexisting diversity – to the story of a woman from Ukraine, and explores the difficulties that migration places on families and couples through the story of several generations and waves of immigrants or migrants in Belgium. *25 Degrees* is a compressed variation of the road movie template that follows a Ukrainian migrant named Sonia, a second generation Belgian of Spanish origins named Miguel, and his daughter and mother as they search for Sonia's husband. Yevgeny emigrated to Belgium several years earlier, and Sonia came recently to join him but was detained by the authorities and spent three months in a detention centre. The film's narrative and aesthetic elaboration of confinement and escape is introduced from the opening scene, in which we witness Sonia as she is loaded into a van taking her to the airport to be deported back to Ukraine. Throughout the film, she is constantly moving and hiding to avoid the police or, later, Miguel's landlord, who comes looking for past rent that is due. When Sonia finally finds Yevgeny after having followed a trail through a series of past addresses and workplaces, she discovers that he is living with a Belgian woman and her son and that they have forged a family of their own. His explanation underscores that this arrangement, including the marriage with Estelle and the papers that came with it, offered him a previously unobtainable degree of stability and a fixed address. This aspect of Yevgeny's experience offers a reminder that borders persist as a delimiting concept well past the end of the spatial act of border crossing. Postcolonial subjects in particular, but also Eastern Europeans and others,

are commonly confronted with societal and institutional mentalities that effectively reproduce revisionist narratives about the imperviousness and stability of national borders (Gott 2016: 164). Yevgeny's infidelity is contextualised within this reality.

25 Degrees employs multilingual dialogues in several ways. Dialogues in French, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Flemish (and sometimes combinations of two languages) display the linguistic diversity of Belgium, both from internal and external sources. The film also demonstrates the importance of language in expressions of identity and the power that linguistic proficiency affords. For instance, Sonia explains that her French skills helped her navigate the system. Nonetheless, French is just one of the languages that immigrants need to master in order to find gainful employment in an official capacity in Brussels, where jobs require fluency in French and Dutch. Finally, the language dynamics within Miguel's family and the Spanish community offers insight into how generational vantage points differ. Miguel and his mother (who is only credited as 'Abuelita', the Spanish diminutive for grandma – a choice that highlights her importance as a pillar of the family more so than her identity as an individual) frequently move between Spanish and French in their conversations and arguments. The mother-son discussions and the choice of languages used at different points reveal disparate generational outlooks on citizenship. As Gemma King argues, code-switching between languages is, in itself, a form of 'sociocultural boundary-crossing' (King 2017: 8). The addition of one more instance of multilingualism (in this case internal) illustrates the link between the family and the Belgian nation. Sonia discovers that Yevgeny has another wife well after Miguel (and the viewer) because the revelation comes in a discussion in Flemish – which Miguel speaks competently but with evident reserve and a marked accent – with some of Yevgeny's co-workers. Thus Miguel's competency as a Belgian citizen of multilingual Brussels becomes a stepping-stone in Sonia's process of finding the truth and reconstructing her life.

The penultimate scene of the film, the reunion of Sonia with Yevgeny, takes place against the backdrop of a barbed-wire fence that separates them from the beach in the background. Although two families fall apart over the course of the narrative, the film ends on an ultimately optimistic note as another family unit is reconstituted. Sonia and Miguel fill their respective voids by coming together in a happy, and perhaps not very surprising, ending on the coast (Figure 14.3). That space offers the dual symbolism of potential physical limitation and symbolic openness and possibility: it is a gateway to the rest of the wider world that is metonymically present in the small but diverse swathe of Belgium covered in the narrative. The film then closes with a medium shot of the newly forged family unit travelling together in Miguel's vehicle, in sharp contrast with the opening close-up of a solitary Sonia in the van driving her towards her planned deportation. The new family picture serves as a microcosm of Belgian identity: a multilingual group, half of whom have foreign origins.

Figure 14.3 The family is reconstructed on the beach in *25 Degrees in Winter* (2004)

Source: *25 degrés en hiver/25 Degrees in Winter* (2004), directed by Stéphane Vuillet © Man's Films, Lancelot Films, Alokatu S.L., and Paradiso Home Entertainment (Netherlands) (2004).

The highly controversial film *Black* by Belgian directing duo Adil El Arbi and Billal Fallah (both from Edegem in Flanders with Moroccan origins) tells the explosive story of forbidden love in Brussels between Marwan, a teenager with Moroccan roots, and Mavela, a teen of Congolese origins. Marwan is involved in mostly petty crime with a group of other Moroccans while Mavela is dangerously enmeshed – thanks to an older male cousin – in a Congolese gang known as the ‘Black Bronx’. *Black* intervenes in discussions of identity in Belgium in several ways, each of which alludes to different potential family frameworks. One is diasporic: we witness inter-generational conflicts within the families of Moroccan and Congolese origins, and struggles between gangs of Moroccans and Congolese as well as between two rival Congolese groups. An ‘extended family’ metaphor is an apt way to approach the intersection of these diasporic networks with Belgium: Congo is, of course, an erstwhile Belgian colony, while Morocco is more distantly related as a former French protectorate and a nation where French is still widely spoken. The gangs function as families of sorts, sometimes overlapping with traditional families (Marwan and his brother are in the same group) and at other times competing with them (Mavela’s gang forces her to leave her mother’s house to prove her loyalty to them). Interwoven into this are debates over the parameters of the Belgian nation as an imperfect family, with points of contention loosely organised around the topic of ‘integration’, a term used by several characters. Rivalling languages play an important role in this as well.

The film opens with exclamations in Flemish, but the youth prefer to speak French because it has more street credibility in their view, while their parents espouse the idea that Flemish is important for job opportunities. Language choices are not all binary. There is a significant element of code-switching and particularly translanguaging that puts on display some of the competing, complex vantage points on identity. An early scene in which Marwan and Mavela first meet in a Brussels police station – a building clearly representative of state authority – demonstrates how language use allows the youthful protagonists in *Black* to negotiate a variety of different stances towards identity. The first utterances of the film are in Flemish, but once inside the police station Mavela is interpellated in French by an officer. Next, when waiting on a bench next to Marwan, the two strike up a conversation in French that moves in ludic fashion into Flemish, which the two use to exchange a variety of playful insults and curses. Marwan is then approached by a female police officer familiar with him and his family who proceeds to chastise him in Arabic. The scene ends when Mavela's mother comes to pick her up and berates her daughter in Lingala.

Just as they are shifting between languages, so the young protagonists are in constant movement. Although not a straightforward example of a road movie, the film is replete with transit images: shots inside the metro, train station platforms, aerial shots of train stations, and a beautiful scene in front of a departure board, a symbolic and literal connection to the outside world. One wants to go to Bruges while the other sees that as boring and counters with a suggestion of Paris. Unlike *25 Degrees*, this film ends in a decidedly pessimistic note with a deadly confrontation between the Moroccan and Congolese gangs. If citizenship in Belgium is fraught with conflict and socioeconomic exclusion, *Black* nonetheless demonstrates that the Belgian family encompasses a multiplicity defined by constant, if unsettled, movement.¹

Quebecois director Philippe Falardeau's 2006 Canadian-Belgian-French co-production *Congorama* opens with Michel (played by Belgian actor Olivier Gourmet) rehearsing for a speech he is planning to give at a ceremony honouring his father, a celebrated novelist: 'on this day that the French community of Belgium honours your work, I am proud to be your son'. It is perhaps odd that amongst all my examples, a film made by a Quebecois filmmaker draws the most explicit link between a Belgian national community and the family. The film recounts Michel's quest for his biological parents after his father reveals to him that he was adopted after being born to a single mother in Quebec. Yet *Congorama* is far from a linear 'return' narrative. As the subsequent narrative reveals, Michel's father Hervé has strong connections to the Congo, and Michel has also lived there. In its triangular Quebec-Belgium-Congo narrative structure, *Congorama* completely undermines the notion of 'return' in a binary division between present and past and '(new) home' and 'origins'. To where does one return? And what is the point of origins? Michel does eventually encounter his parents and

a brother he never knew he had, but he doesn't realise it, although we as viewers – and likely his son Jules – know the man's relationship to Michel by the end. However, the biological links between Michel and Jules, the son that he and his Congolese wife Alice are raising in Liège, are left deliberately ambiguous.

As Thibaut Schilt argues, the point of the film is to rethink filiation and family as multifaceted and multi-local phenomena (Schilt 2018: 208). Belgium is central to the film's narrative as the starting point and end-point, but the story could not take place without the connections to Quebec or the Congo. There is only one line in Dutch spoken in the film, but in Quebec Michel does utter an awkward but significant phrase in German, one of Belgium's three official languages: 'ich bin ein Quebecker'. The fact that this consequential affirmation of his newfound identity is not uttered in Michel's native language, which is also, of course, the primary and official language spoken in Quebec, might be interpreted as a commentary on the complexity of identity and the director Falardeau's belief that language does not align directly with – at least not monolingually – to a particular national or cultural identity. Falardeau has suggested in interviews that he was interested in telling this story in Belgium because of that nation's similarities to Quebec, starting with bilingualism (or multilingualism). He also expressed a wilful desire to avoid France and the French industry, which he contends is 'linguistically intolerant' (Schilt 2018: 209). The choice of Quebec for the source – or one of the sources – of Michel's origins, and the triangulation of Quebec, Belgium, and the Congo, nonetheless demonstrate that cultural affinities are often mapped along linguistic lines because language is a factor in cultural affinity. Moreover, speaking the same language does facilitate productive encounters in *Congorama*, in this case within what scholars have theorised as the 'Francosphere' (see Marshall 2012).

My final example once again involves a voyage to Quebec – this time directed by Belgians – but offers an immediate reminder that linguistic affinities need not be connected to monolingualism. The 2015 comedy *I'm Dead But I Have Friends*, by the brothers Guillaume and Stéphane Malandrin, opens with a humorous monologue by an elderly Innu man framed by a vast and wild, and decidedly un-Belgian looking, landscape. The film explores the diverse meanings of 'family' by following a Belgian punk rock band's trip to North America. When the lead singer Jipé dies after an absurd string of events, his band-mates are cut out of his funeral by his biological brother and family. They proceed to abscond with his ashes and hit the road to embark on a previously scheduled North American tour, which they see as a last hurrah for the band and a way for them to process the death of their musical brother. This premise links *I'm Dead* to a preponderant current of grimly funny Belgian films as well as one of their key sources of inspiration, the quixotic Finnish road movie *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989, dir. Aki Kaurismäki), in which the eponymous band undertakes a tour of the United States with a dead member in tow. Beyond this inspirational,

transnational filiation, the make-up of the band in *I'm Dead* is particularly notable in the context of our Belgian discussion: the key surviving members are played by Belgian actors Bouli Lanners (from Wallonia) and Wim Willelaert (from Flanders).

Once again, the family unit in this film (if unconventional and an alternative to the biological family) represents a microcosm of Belgium. As with the Belgian nation, the reality of this familial fabric is more diverse than initial appearances would suggest. After pinching Jipé's ash urn from his brother's home, the remaining band members and some other close friends retreat to their deceased comrade's house to hold a wake. There they discover that Jipé had been living for five years with his partner, a man named Karim (who goes by 'Dany'), played by Algerian-born actor Lyès Salem. Dany wears a uniform with the NATO insignia, marking him potentially as a representative of Belgium's large population of people employed by international organisations. Although the ending (as I discuss later) allows us to extrapolate that all of the band-mates represent the Belgian nation, because the couple's relationship is only revealed after Dany's death, Jipé and Dany's mixed-race, queer relationship is never overtly situated within the wider context of Belgian society. In this sense, it is comparable to the relationship in the 2012 Flemish-language Belgian drama *Mixed Kebab* (dir. Guy Lee Thys) between Ibrahim (aka Bram), whose family background is Turkish, and the white Kevin. In that film, Bram grapples with what he feels are contrasting facets of his identity: Turkish versus Belgian and Muslim versus gay.²

Returning to *I'm Dead*, the band's notion that they are Jipé's true 'family' is shaken up by the discovery of his secret relationship with Dany, and an agreement is reached to split the ashes in equal parts. Dany, however, is not content to let the brash musicians handle his partner's burial and follows them on their flight to Los Angeles. As presaged by the prologue in the Innu-aimun language, a mechanical problem leads the California-bound plane to make an emergency landing in Sept-Îles, Quebec, from where the ragtag band makes its way north through stunning landscapes but, unbeknownst to them, in the opposite direction from their intended destination of Montreal. The voyage through vast spaces and expansive forests does have the effect of bringing the two band members and Dany together (Figure 14.4). It also puts all of them in contact with hospitable members of the Innu First Nations community through their shared understanding of French, following the lines of non-exclusive linguistic affinity (given that many of the characters, whether Innu or Belgian, are multilingual). Before the film ends with the newly formed trio walking off together into the horizon, Wim (Wim Willelaert's character) shares what he introduces as a 'great Belgian story' about the band around a campfire. As in *Congorama*, Quebec is the backdrop for the essentially Belgian story narrated in *I'm Dead*. Beyond the (at least) bilingual connection discussed in relation to that previous film, the directors are perhaps suggesting that Belgium is a complex and multifaceted concept

Figure 14.4 Wim (Wim Willaert), Dany (Lyès Salem), and Yvan (Bouli Lanners) walk into the Quebec sunset in *I'm Dead But I Have Friends* (2015)

Source: *Je suis mort mais j'ai des amis/I'm Dead But I Have Friends* (2015), directed by Guillaume and Stéphane Malandrin © Versus Production, TS Productions, Altitude 100 Production, Minds Meet, BE TV, Proximus, and Blaq Out (2016).

based on the notion of a group of people choosing to come together, rather than a geographic or linguistically premised union.

The Belgian (cinematic) family in the border

If Belgian cinema is characterised by a 'split' screen, as Mosley suggests, that screen is divided into more than just two segments and encompasses varied layers of often overlapping complexity. Each of the cinematic family units outlined in my analysis presents new contours for the possible parameters of Belgian identity or identities. The Flemish actor Wim Willaert won the best actor in 2016 at the *Magritte du cinéma* (the Belgian French-language industry's awards) for his role in *I'm Dead*. In his acceptance speech, he quoted a Dutch-language author when he affirmed: 'We are a mix. The writer Walter van den Broeck said that we aren't a country but the world's widest border. I'm proud to live in this border' (Bradfer and Moury 2016). All the components that make up *I'm Dead* and the other Belgian productions addressed here – from the narrative space to the production team – inhabit a border (geographic, linguistic, cultural, ideational), and Belgium is revealed to itself function as a border, both in the open (borderland) and closed (filtering and containing) sense of the term. The figure of the migrant who crosses

official borders must be contextualised within the complexity of what they are crossing into. Despite Belgium's official adherence to the European 'Fortress' mentality that often leads to policies of restriction, policing, and containment of migration, the nation is revealed in these films as an inherently open zone where being a 'migrant' of some sort is the norm, marking Willelaert's 'we' (that is, Belgians) as potentially open.

Notes

- 1 For an extended analysis of *Black* focusing on the film's transnational and trans-cultural presentation of the areas of Molenbeek and Matonge, see Steele (2018).
- 2 *Mixed Kebab* opens with a close-up on Ibrahim/Bram, while he introduces himself in a voiceover: 'I'm Ibrahim, I'm Turkish', followed by 'I'm Bram, I'm Belgian', 'I'm a Muslim', and 'I'm gay'. Each pronouncement is divided by a wipe that displaces the film image with a coloured credit screen, emphasising a division between each aspect of Ibrahim's identity.