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REVIEW ARTICLE

“Dutchness” and the migrant “other”:
From suppressed superiority to explicit exclusion?

Halleh Ghorashi

Peter Jan Margry and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *Reframing Dutch culture: Between otherness and authenticity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, 291 pp., ISBN 978-0-754-64705-8 (hardcover).

Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam: Liberal Europe, Islam, and the limits of tolerance*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006, 288 pp., ISBN 978-0-143-11236-5 (paperback).

Since the end of the 1990s, multiculturalism is being discussed in the Dutch media on an almost daily basis, even more so after the November 2004 murder of the filmmaker and columnist Theo van Gogh. The person charged with the murder is a young Moroccan man with Islamic convictions, Mohammed Bouyeri—often referred to in the media as an “Islamic terrorist” who committed a “ritual murder” to revenge Van Gogh’s “anti-Islamic” rhetoric. The event has once again led to Islam becoming the core issue in the political debate on migration and integration in the Netherlands. Van Gogh’s became the second such murder in two years; the first being politician Wilhelmus Simon Petrus “Pim” Fortuyn. Although Fortuyn’s murder did not have a direct link with Islam, because of its character as a political murder, it nevertheless contributed to hardening the public sphere in the Netherlands. Other events keep fueling the debate, including the dispute over the nationality of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, which led to the fall of the

Dutch Cabinet in June 2006, and the controversy over *Fitna*, a film criticizing the Qur’an, by populist anti-Islam politician Geert Wilders. A country that had an image of being open, tolerant, and liberal, seems to be in the throes of fear and protective of its “national identity” fueled by a tough rhetoric toward Muslims (see Duyvendak et al. 2008). When Princess Maxima—referring to her experience of the diversity of cultures in Dutch society and arguing that Dutch identity is too rich and complex to define as one—said “I have not found *the* Dutch identity”¹, she was attacked, sometimes indignantly, sometimes patronizingly, in almost all prominent media. Dutch society had become so defensive that it could not even accept a compliment. These developments inspired several books on the subject, two of which I review here: the 2007 *Reframing Dutch culture: Between otherness and authenticity*, edited by Peter Jan Margry and Herman Roodenburg and the 2006 best-seller by Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam*.

Reframing Dutch culture deals with diversity in the Netherlands but without the usual fixation on migrants in a negative sense. By presenting Dutch culture from a broader angle, the book provides refreshing perspectives on migration and integration in the Netherlands. Most of its contributions are not about migrants from Islamic backgrounds. When they are, they do not concern the familiar issues such as violence, honor-killing, segregation, and *burqa* and/or headscarf. Instead, they discuss the clothing styles of Moroccan-Dutch boys (ch. 2) or the interior design of Turkish-Dutch houses (ch. 5), showing how both Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch use their specific backgrounds to create a personalized, fashionable, and authentic style. By describing how authenticity is performed through clothing and design, the authors show how the boundaries of modernity and tradition are blurred and breaks with the dominant fixation on migrants from Islamic countries as bound by tradition in opposition to the “modern Dutch.”

Other chapters add to this problematization of authenticity and otherness by differentiating within native Dutch culture. Chapter 9, for instance, offers insight into the emergence of alternative spiritualities in the context of an assumed secularized Netherlands. Chapter 11 looks at the growing popularity of singing in dialects, framed as a consequence of globalization: “When a dialect threatens to disappear, people realize its value and seek to raise its status by writing, preaching and singing” (241). Chapter 12, about women wearing traditional costumes in the village of Marken, shows how certain traditional Dutch customs continue to constitute a contemporary way of life. Likewise, chapter 3 shows how a festival on the Dutch island of Texel has been shaped and reshaped through a long-term process of negotiating “difference” and how the fear of marginalization of particular points of difference contributes to strengthening those characteristics. “The more complete grows the concentration of power at the centre, the more vulnerable the periphery becomes, expressing its anxiety in a localism which stresses the distinctiveness of its character” (51).

Is multiculturalism makeable?

Perhaps the most fascinating is chapter 4, which tells the story of Flevoland, the newest province in the Netherlands, created in the 1940s by the reclamation of a large part of the Zuiderzee. It shows how both land and culture were considered makeable through social engineering in this new space, considered an example for the whole country and “a test plot for the future, multicultural Netherlands” (Van Deijl 2006, cited on page 77). This optimistic project stands in contrast to the growing discomfort, and even disgust, with multiculturalism, evidenced in chapters 6 and 8. In chapter 6 we read how Pim Fortuyn became the symbol of this growing disgust, which then translated into distrust of the dominant political parties, especially after his death and its commemoration in what became “performative memorials” of political resentment. Chapter 8 shows how the boundaries of us (autochthonous Dutch) and them (Moroccans and perpetrators) are negotiated by various parties active within civil society around the commemoration of victims of “senseless violence.” Both chapters could benefit from a better contextual framing of the events within the history of migration and multicultural policies so as to situate the level of hatred both toward certain migrants (mainly Moroccans) and politicians.

With chapters 7 on crop circle tales and 8 on Mother’s and Father’s day, which both divert from the book’s theme of Dutchness and otherness, the main shortcoming of the book becomes apparent: in its effort to bring a wide range of subjects together, it stretches the limits of its title. The book presents a good ethnology of the Dutch way of life and engages the reader with detailed information on oft-forgotten aspects of Dutch society but it lacks focus, particularly where it comes to providing a deeper understanding of Dutch culture in relation to shifting constructions of otherness throughout its history. How can authenticity and otherness in the Netherlands be understood without the history of colonialization, pillarization, and migration? How can case studies of “outsiders inside” (e.g., Moroccan- and Turkish-Dutch) be

situated without in-depth attention to these histories? Contrary to what the title of the book suggests, these questions are not dealt with, though the book's strength simultaneously lies in the originality of the material and indeed its avoidance of the "usual suspects."

Murder in Amsterdam is about the core issues of the Dutch debate. It even presents interviews with some of the main participants in that public debate. The book is a well-written and engaging examination of the historical background and current perceptions Theo van Gogh's murder. It presents the way in which the Netherlands has been offering "an odd combination of charity and indifference" (19) when it comes to immigration issues. It shows, for example, how a country that has historically been considered to be open and tolerant, had the highest percentage of Jews sent to the Nazi death camps, and how the shameful reminder of this event poisons national debates in the Netherlands to this day. It also discusses the various trends in the history of migration to the Netherlands, from migration from the colonies, to the entrance of *gastarbeiders* and refugees. The book also provides insight into the global struggle of "Enlightenment values" against "radical Islam," showing how this is in fact a struggle between equally radical forces, one being radically religious, the other radically secular, representative of the rise of a new conservative force in the name of Enlightenment (34). Rather than seeing van Gogh's murder as an isolated act by an Islamic invader, Buruma insightfully links it to the Fortuyn murder (committed by an "autochthonous" animal rights activist) and places it within historical developments in the Netherlands.

New realism and the integration paradox

To understand the growing uneasiness between the native Dutch and the New Dutch, two points raised in *Murder in Amsterdam* deserve critical review. The first is the insistence on total frankness in public debate, to say everything that comes to one's mind, no matter how insult-

ing or insensitive. This is often referred to as the right to insult. Buruma situates this trend within Dutch culture: "this willful lack of delicacy is a common trait in Dutch behavior. Perhaps its roots are in Protestant pietism, a reaction to what was seen as glib Catholic hypocrisy" (94). But even if being direct is part of the Dutch way of communication, it seems facile to relate the present harshness in Dutch public debate solely to Protestantism.² Instead, it seems more accurate to see this as a trend that began at the turn of the century, which Baukje Prins (2002) calls an era of "new realism," demanding that "we must be allowed to say what we think." The new realist is someone with guts; someone who dares to call a spade a spade; someone who sets himself up as the mouthpiece of the common people and then puts up a vigorous fight against the so-called left-wing, politically correct views of cultural relativism. This bluntness is mainly directed at migrants—specifically those with an Islamic background—and anyone (politician or not) who would defend the space of migrants within Dutch society. The level of harshness and hatred toward migrants today is an unknown phenomenon in Dutch democratic history.

The second point is the sense of non-belonging felt by the "new Dutch," who are seen as not being a worthy part of Dutch society. *Murder in Amsterdam* presents the earliest memory of one Moroccan-Dutch man, which occurred when he was six. "It still fills him with anger. The parents of his best friend, a Dutch kid, wouldn't let them play together. He wasn't even invited to his friend's birthday party. It was clear that he was not wanted. 'That's something you never forget. Even though I wasn't so aware of what it meant at the time, it haunted me when I was a teenager. The worst thing is to be put in a box, to be told you don't belong. So you join others who're in the same box'" (114). This frustration of the second-generation migrants increases when they see that their parents are treated like children and publicly humiliated.

"New realism" and non-belonging may partly explain how a second-generation migrant, born and educated in the Netherlands, could not only become a religious fanatic, but even commit

murder. As the Dutch public space becomes increasingly insulting toward migrants with an Islamic background, new Dutch citizens feel increasingly out of place and humiliated and this became even worse after 9/11. One of Buruma’s interviewees calls 9/11 a “switch.” “Before 9/11, well-educated Moroccans had confidence in their future in Dutch society. This is where they felt they belonged. [Now] they have become frightened to be identified as Muslims and Moroccans. Yet it is precisely those people who should be given every chance, those young people who have tried so hard to succeed” (138–39). Paradoxically, new Dutch citizens are thus losing the sense of belonging they once had precisely at a time when they are being forced more than ever to assimilate.

These observations are supported by another book, on radicalization processes among Muslims in the Netherlands (Buijs et al. 2006). Here the authors introduce the concept of the “integration paradox”: when migrants are actually eager to integrate in dominant society, they are most sensitive to feelings of exclusion (ibid.: 202). The radicalization of Muslim youth is not due to their assumed isolation, educational backwardness or anti-social attitude but happens to youth who are active, socially involved, sensitive to societal recognition, and eager to become successful and respected members of the dominant society but face unfair treatment, daily public insults, and disrespect for their parents, despite their parents’ hard work in post–World War II Dutch society.

In addition, it must be noted that, as *Reframing Dutch culture* shows, people tend to defend what they consider their roots when there is a growing sense of their marginalization by national or global forces. Any pressure from outside means redefining the meaning of authentic practices and strengthening the boundaries of otherness and this is true for migrant’s culture as well. When migrants sense that their cultural and religious background is threatened within the Dutch public sphere, it seems logical that they would choose a protectionist attitude. Even though it does not directly refer to the processes of boundary construction between the Dutch

versus the migrant other, *Reframing Dutch culture* in this sense does provide important insights into the processes of inclusion and exclusion in the Netherlands with regard to migrants.

What about Dutchness?

The two books under review fail to provide enough material to understand the severity of the relation of Dutch society to its migrants. What is missing, and important to contextualize in these processes, is a discussion of the dominant discourses on migration in relation to the construction of Dutchness. In fact migration has had a predominantly negative connotation in the Netherlands for decades. This is probably the most obvious—though least outspoken—in terms of the Dutch sense of superiority over the “colonized other.” The history of colonization has shaped the positioning of both parties and this did not disappear when colonialism formally ended or when new groups of migrants entered the Netherlands: the gasterbeiters of the 1950s and refugees of the 1980s. Gasterbeiters (guest workers) came to the country when cheap labor was needed. They had little education and came from the most traditional parts of their homeland, thus strengthening the superior feelings of the Dutch versus the migrant other. The notion of “guest” added another negative connotation as it supposed a temporary stay rather than permanent settlement. Likewise, refugees also began their stay in the Netherlands under the notion of impermanence. The humanitarian aspect of the condition of refugees easily identifies them as “victims,” which in turn “reinforces the view of their incapability” (Harrell-Bond 1999: 150). Assistance moreover creates a hierarchical relationship between the giver and the receiver and develops the expectation that refugees should be grateful.

These two components of viewing migration in the Netherlands—a sense of superiority and the notion of temporary settlement—contribute to an image of migrants as entirely different from the Dutch and as belonging to the place they come from and to which they will,

supposedly, eventually return.³ As Ulrich Beck's joke goes:

A black man in Germany is asked: "Where are you from?"

He answers: "From Munich."

Q: "And your parents?"

A: "Also from Munich."

Q: "And where were they born?"

A: "My mother in Munich."

Q: "And your father?"

A: "In Ghana."

Q: "Ah, so you're from Ghana."

In such ways one's identity becomes fixed and migrants will always feel out of place in their new country, because they in fact belong somewhere else and cannot be considered "real" Dutch.

This only becomes worse with the fact that the Dutch are supposedly not nationally oriented. As Prins puts it, "the essential trait of Dutch identity is assumed to be its non-identity, its fluidity, its openness to 'others'" (1997: 120). But this has a reverse: "By assuming that Dutchness is an unmarked category, a subject position that does not strike the eye because it does not differ from modern culture in general, it turns out to coincide with what is considered the norm or normal. Hence, everything not-Dutch gets marked as 'other,' as different from that norm" (ibid.: 126).

Until recently the general perception of the Dutch was that they lacked a strong national identity—perhaps as a reaction to the experience of World War II when national (German) identity served as a basis for exclusion and terrible violence. But this claim of non-identity and manifest dislike of national identity does not mean that the notion of Dutchness has not been present in public discourse and daily practice. On the contrary, the question of proper and improper behavior in public life is closely linked to the notion of Dutchness, regulating society in a latent manner. The "real" Dutch moreover do have a religion and a body. According to Wekker (1995: 78), the image of Dutchness is at the very least one of being white and

Christian. The latentness of these assumptions in combination with the public claim to non-identity make Dutch identity quite unreachable and "thick" (see Ghorashi 2003)⁴ and in fact not comprehensive enough to embrace the diversity of cultures present in the Netherlands.

The unspoken, but all the same "thick," notion of Dutch national identity has become more explicit over the past few years. The result of this exclusive construction of Dutchness is that even migrants who have been born and raised here do not feel able or inclined to position themselves as Dutch. What we observed after 9/11 is that when a sense of threat becomes attached to the "absolute other," there is no space left for tolerance; what is left is fear and anger. We read about these emotions in *Reframing Dutch culture* and *Murder in Amsterdam* but we need to know more about the reasons underlying these negative feelings in order to understand the recent dynamics of Dutch society. Doing this will help us understand why the divide between us (the "real" Dutch) and them (the "others") is becoming ever wider. The Netherlands will never find a peaceful solution for the culturally complex country it has become if it is incapable of putting its own latent and "self-evident" assumptions up for discussion. In order to do that we need more research on how Dutchness is constructed specifically in relation to different migrants who have settled in the Netherlands over the years.

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exclusion and inclusion in the context of increasing culturalism.

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Notes

1. Princess Maxima made this point during her speech on 25 September 2007 in The Hague.
2. If one could point to any group in current Dutch society issuing the fewest insults in public it would be religious Protestant groups like the Christen Unie and the SGP (Conservative Christian Party).
3. For experiences of migrants in the Netherlands, see Botman et al. 2001; Essed 1991; Lutz 1997.
4. In making a distinction between “thin” and “thick” constructions of national identities, I was inspired by Rawls’s (1971, 1980) distinction between thin universalism and thick particularism in relation to pluralism. In addition, Stratton and Ang’s (1998) work also helped me to get a handle on the relation between cultural diversity and national identity.

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