Border Skirmishes and the Question of Belonging. An authoethnographic account of everyday exclusion in multicultural society[1]

Abstract

Transnational migration has transformed most European countries, making the problem of how to 'integrate' an increasingly popular topic in public debates and social policy. It is assumed that as long as the newcomer learns the language, adapts to the local customs, and finds work, s/he will be integrated and welcomed with open arms as a full-fledged member of society. Based on an autoethnography of our experiences as US-born, long-term, and fully 'integrated' residents of the Netherlands, one of Europe's most multicultural societies, we have explored some of the subtle, well-intentioned practices of distancing and exclusion which are part of the fabric of everyday life. We will show how - contrary to the official discourse of integration - Dutch-ness as a white/ethnic national identity is ongoingly constructed as a 'we' which excludes all 'others.' And, indeed, we have discovered that, paradoxically, the closer the 'other' comes to being completely assimilated into Dutch society, the more the symbolic borders of national belonging may need to be policed and tightened.

Introduction

While the number of immigrants and asylum seekers entering Europe has steadily dropped over the past 15 years as a result of the fortress policy of Europe, the discussion about their threat to the social coherence of European societies has become more heated than

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ever before. Currently, integration is being viewed as the Number One problem facing Europe today. It has become the dominant theme in political debates as well as social policy, displacing the earlier discourse of multiculturalism which optimistically embraced cultural diversity as enrichment and assumed that immigrants could remain connected to their countries of origin as well as to their 'new' countries. In the wake of 9/11, tensions have increased and many immigrants currently living in Europe have been faced with the necessity of choosing sides. The social cohesion of European society is thought to depend upon manifest displays of solidarity and unquestioning loyalty on the part of its more recent inhabitants (Yuval-Davis, 2006). It is not surprising that even in the second or third generation, many immigrants do not feel welcomed, let alone at home in their most recent countries of residence.

In the Netherlands, the political discourse on 'integration' is presented as a way to bridge the perceived gap between the native- born and the newcomer. The term implies that the new resident must be prepared to work (and, therefore, not be a burden for the welfare state). S/he should be willing to learn the language as well as become familiar with and accept local customs and values. In the case of most European countries, what is usually meant by values is the belief in the separation of church and state, the embrace of democracy, the acceptance of minorities (including homosexuals), and the celebration of women's emancipation. A further assumption – although this is rarely discussed explicitly – is that if newcomers fulfil these requirements, they can then expect to be welcomed and accepted by the natives as full-fledged members of (European) society.

The everyday realities of integration are more complex than this discourse suggests. Many immigrants and even Dutch citizens with migrant backgrounds feel that they will never really belong. They discover that despite all of their best efforts, they continue to be viewed by the natives as 'not-quite-Dutch' (Essed and Trienekens, 2008). Take, for example, a recent

interview with a young actress of Moroccan descent who has grown up in Amsterdam and embarked upon a successful career in Dutch TV and was even nominated for the prestigious US Emmy award for best actress in a foreign (*sic.*) series. When interviewed by a Dutch journalist shortly before the award ceremony, she was asked whether she felt 'just as Dutch as Moroccan.' With undisguised irritation, Hassouni replied:

> 'I was born in the Netherlands, studied Dutch law at a Dutch university, and speak the language better than Moroccan and yet I'm still a foreigner… a newcomer … Until I was 16, I tried my best to be accepted as a Dutch person, but that meant that I was always having to defend myself. I'm just tired of having that discussion. I've decided that I'm a Moroccan and that's that.'[2]

This example is telling for several reasons. It displays a remarkably cavalier attitude on the part of the journalist toward a Dutch citizen who has managed to transcend the borders of this small country and achieve international fame. More importantly, however, it suggests that something is clearly wrong in the Netherlands if integration proves such a mission impossible for even the most completely assimilated. Hassouni's resignation at ever becoming 'Dutch' and her defiant adoption of a Moroccan identity are a sad commentary on the success of integration policies in the Netherlands.

In this article, we explore what makes the integration of newcomers in the Netherlands such a seemingly difficult undertaking. The image of the Netherlands is of a country reputed to be tolerant, welcoming to immigrants and refugees, and successful in integrating minority groups in a truly multicultural society (Van Ginkel, 1991; Pleij, 2003; Lendering, 2005; Buruma, 2006). The Netherlands has traditionally been seen as a liberal society where gay marriages are accepted, abortion, euthanasia and soft-drugs are legal, and where a strong tradition exists of consensus and pragmatic conflict resolution. Although the Netherlands has

historically prided itself on being exceptional, it is also typically European in its more recent response to the effects of immigration. Public debates now focus on a faltering welfare state unable to meet the demands of social welfare for a growing population of immigrants and refugees, the threat of Islamic culture to the individual freedom so valued in Dutch society, and the growing necessity of developing more stringent migration policies, including the enforced deportation of illegal residents. The Netherlands now requires mandatory 'integration courses' (*inburgeringscursusen*). Recently, integration exams have been proposed which require that the newcomer knows more about Dutch society than the native born. What is perhaps distinctive about the recent Dutch discourses and practices of integration is how difficult it has become to reconcile the increasingly punitive approach to immigration with the cherished national image of a tolerant and liberal society.

This image of the Netherlands initially went hand in hand with a discourse of multiculturalism which welcomed newcomers and left space for different ways of living together (under the motto 'let 1,000 flowers bloom'). In recent years, this image was shattered by the rise of a populist politics against migration as well as the murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim extremist. The Netherlands seems to have become transformed almost overnight into an intolerant punitive country, hostile to immigrants and refugees and obsessed with shoring up its borders (Buruma, 2006). Unlike the discourse of multiculturalism, the discourse of integration focuses not on the celebration, but rather on the erasure of all differences between an ethnic white Dutch majority and a wide spectrum of newcomers who are expected to do all of the assimilating. Several authors have documented this shift in Dutch policy and have shown that . the different categories .produced by these policies to designate immigrants are not neutral, but rather create identities that contribute to their exclusion in Dutch society (de Zwart and Poppelaars, 2007; Yanow and der Haar, 2007; Saharso, 2007).

The emergence of subtle - and not so subtle - forms of policing the borders of 'Dutch-ness' make it increasingly difficult for immigrants to feel at home in the Netherlands. As Yuval-Davis (2006) puts it, this policing of borders, which is central to the politics of belonging, is:

> 'about potentially meeting other people and deciding whether they stand inside or outside the imaginary boundary line of the nation and/or other communities of belonging, whether they are 'us' or 'them' (p. 204).

Boundaries may not be taken up explicitly as part of the national imaginary. However, their ongoing maintenance and reproduction are part and parcel of the everyday cultural politics of belonging, of what is involved in being treated as a member of the community. It is precisely the politics of belonging which shapes the newcomer's experience of being accepted, of feeling welcome and which is – along with having a job, language competency, and knowledge of local customs – an essential ingredient of true integration.

In this article, we explore the thorny issue of boundary maintenance and, more generally, the politics of belonging. We do this in an unorthodox way, drawing upon our experiences as long terms residents of the Netherlands as a case in point. Our aim is to show that even in the Netherlands – a country which has long prided itself on its tolerance of diversity - individuals of foreign descent including those belonging to a group of whom one would least expect it. - white progressive academic women of American descent are excluded from Dutch identity. We have chosen this personal approach precisely because – at first glance – we appear to meet every possible criterion for being 'integrated[3].' We have work and – indeed – have been tax-payers for many years. We both speak Dutch fluently and, indeed, both have Dutch passports. After more than thirty years, we have developed numerous and close family and friendship ties with the locals. Coming from the US and – perhaps more importantly in view of the rise of religious right – as secular feminists, we share many of the

cultural values so highly prized in the Dutch integration debate. We are wary of religious fundamentalism in all its forms, firm believers in the importance of distributive democracy, and long-time critics of all inequalities based on gender, heteronormativity, class or 'race.'

As the following will show, we are not only integrated, however; we are also privileged. As middle class professionals, we resemble the group what Favell (2008) calls the cosmopolitan 'high flyers', the educated and highly skilled migrants who take advantage of a globalizing modernity. By virtue of our skin color, we unproblematically fit the normative representation of Dutch identity as 'white' (Essed and Trienekens, 2008). As white westerners we possess an 'unmarked identity' (Yanow and der Haar 2007). Hence, in general terms we do not experience discriminatory practices that non-white, 'marked' immigrants do, something which only further attests to the privilege associated with 'whiteness'. We would seem to have, therefore, every reason to expect to feel perfectly at home in the Netherlands. We do not resemble those stereotypical 'problem' immigrants who are ostensibly so in need of integration: the first generation Turkish woman who doesn't speak the language and needs her children to help her cope with everyday life or the militant Muslim girl who refuses to discard her headscarf in order to get a job in a Dutch institution. However, it is precisely because we seem to be such unproblematic examples of successful integration, that we want to take a closer look at some of the everyday encounters we have had – encounters in which we were made to feel excluded rather than included in the national imaginary of 'Dutch-ness.' Instead of focussing on the discourse or policies of integration, we will analyze these everyday interactions as examples of boundary maintenance. This dimension is often neglected in the literature, even though it is central for understanding the subjective experiences of living in another culture. We will show how they work to construct us as 'not-quite-Dutch' and, therefore, not-quite-belonging in the Netherlands (Essed and Trienekens, 2008).

It is our contention that this policing of the borders between the Dutch and the non-Dutch, while pervasive, is by no means an intentional activity meant to exclude us or make us feel unwelcome.We realize we are walking on a thin line here and that by focusing on our experiences as privileged immigrants we may be accused of at best 'me-tooism' and at worst trivializing the struggles of minority ethnic groups . [4] Nonetheless, we believe that there are insights to be gained into social exclusion by looking at the experiences of a group from whom one would least expect it. Indeed, it is so subtle, so ostensibly well-meaning, and, above all, so utterly taken-for-granted that it tends to pass by unnoticed by the Dutch themselves. In fact, we have discovered that when we call attention to these practices – in a friendly way – we are met with reactions of doubt, disbelief, and – at time – with outright denial. Even our friends and colleagues who are invariably opposed to expressions of nationalist sentiment, are highly critical of the Dutch colonial past as well as the current Dutch migration policy, and – last but not least – are presumably happy to have us in their midst and would certainly not want us to feel unwelcome, have often responded with undisguised irritation when we bring up personal examples of everyday exclusion and border policing. Aren't we being a little too sensitive, they ask. Perhaps we are mistaking expressions of friendly interest in our past and curiosity about our cultural differences with xenophobia? Or – the clincher – have we forgotten all the 'good' things about the Netherlands – its tolerance, its multiculturalism, its love of all things foreign? While these responses were puzzling at first, we have come to see them as part of the phenomenon we are discussing here. They confirm that the moments when our belonging is called into question are neither idiosyncratic (limited to the far right or anti-migration lobby), nor exceptional, but rather part and parcel of the way Dutch-ness as a specific form of (white) ethnic identity is constructed. [5]

To accomplish the tasks put forth in this introduction, we have chosen to present and analyze these claims using an autoethnographic approach, whereby we position ourselves

both as objects and interpreters of our analysis. We use our daily experiences and biographies to make clear how the 'policing' of the borders between Dutch-ness and the non-Dutch are constructed in daily practice. After briefly positioning ourselves in the debate on autoethnography, we will use our migration biographies to explore our expectations in the initial periods of our arrival. This will illustrate that in the initial stages we considered being immigrants to be unproblematic expecting to seamlessly slip into Dutch society, perhaps causing a few ripples but certainly not any waves. This section will be followed by an account of two recent incidents that succinctly illustrate everyday practices of exclusion. A final section contextualizes these episodes within the Dutch context and relates our experiences to broader social and theoretical issues concerning integration and the politics of belonging.

The making of an autoethnography

We began this autoethnography with the difficulties we have both had trying to answer what might seem to be a perfectly innocent question. When Lorraine asked Kathy: 'Do you feel Dutch?' she was unable to reply with a simple 'yes' or 'no.' Likewise, when Kathy posed the question back to her, Lorraine came up with an almost identical ambiguous answer. We called ourselves cosmopolitans or Europeans, words that allowed us to avoid calling ourselves Dutch, while making it clear that we didn't feel American either. Like the „free movers' interviewed by Favell (2008), we both avoided calling ourselves „expats.' – that stereotypical label which fixes one firmly within a specific national identity (p. 10). This struck us as strange since we had both lived for the larger part of our lives in the Netherlands. Why, then, couldn't we identify ourselves as Dutch? Why did we feel that we didn't (quite) belong? We embarked upon this project, in part, in order to find an answer to these questions. Moreover, being that we – as privileged, white middle class women –do not have to fight for recognition of our basic existential rights or against discriminatory practices in the domains of work, schooling and housing, we have more latitude to explore the less visible, less urgent, but

nonetheless, significant ways exclusion is constructed in Dutch society. Thus, we assumed that if we could understand our own *onheimisch* feelings about our 'Dutch-ness', this might give us some insight into the broader cultural dynamics at play in the daily cultural practices of exclusion as well as, more generally, the politics of belonging.

Our first step was to exchange anecdotes through the emails. These emails related incidents where we had been reminded that we were 'not-quite-Dutch.' As this correspondence piled up, our need to make sense of our stories grew. In order to deepen our understanding of these incidents, we decided to interview each other and, with that decision, our project took on a more distinct (auto)ethnographic cast.

In general, ethnography is valued for its ability to use the ongoings of daily life to analyze processes and meanings (Herbert, 2000). Here the researcher's interpretations play an essential role for creating understanding. Autoethnography does not differ in its objectives from the more commonly-used ethnography. Rather the distinction resides in the lack of separation between the researcher as subject and the subject as the researcher. Autoethnography facilitates analysis at the 'intersection between biography and society'(Anderson, 2006). In the spirit of Vyran's (2006) overview of autoethnography, it was our intention to use our theoretically informed personal stories for two different objectives: first, in order to evoke images and sensations that would create recognition and/or understanding in the reader, and, second, to seek explanations that would contribute to collective knowledge concerning the theoretical concepts of integration, exclusion, and belonging.

Although we were open to the possibilities of autoethnography as methodology for our project, as long-time critical feminist researchers, we were not entirely comfortable with the way autoethnography was often portrayed in the literature. It seemed to necessitate a choice between, on the one hand, an evocative performance approach -

'a species of narrative inquiry that has blossomed in reaction to the excesses and

limitations of theory-driven, empiricist social science. Whereas empiricist social

science fuels an appetite for abstraction, facts and control, narrative social science

feeds a hunger for details, meanings and peace of mind. In some circles, narrative has

become a rallying point for those who believe strongly that the human sciences need to

become more human' (Bochner, 2005: 55).[6]

and , on the other hand, an analytic approach which abstracted from subjective experience in

order to make broader generalizations and refine theory (Anderson 2006). In this approach,

there is no room for a text that 'dwells in the flux of lived experience' (Ellis & Bochner, 2006:

431). Our position seemed to fall between these extremes. Our aim was – as Denzin (2006)

put it - to challenge and contest 'hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other'

(p.422). We wanted to use our personal experiences as a form of knowledge without

excluding the possibility of exploring and revealing hegemonic cultural patterns, meanings

and identities. In line with the more general tradition of critical ethnography, we intended to

mobilize our personal stories to evoke reflexivity – a reflexivity which would go beyond a

personal reflection on our lives as immigrants to ultimately challenge the practices of

exclusion as well as the forms of denial and resistance which accompany them.

Biographical expectations and privilege

'To me it is more about the possibility in realizing one's self. It is the possibility to

insist on being who and what one is, to find out these things. Yet, it sounds immensely

foreign to me to declare myself Canadian. While I insist on my difference I have a

contradictory, and yet not so contradictory desire to belong. It is the contradiction of

that human being, a social animal, who has forever been unable to call any place

'home', except as the place in which her belongings have come to rest. I am used to

placelessness, or elsewhereness. …Perhaps home is the state itself, the state of

longing, longing for acceptance. (Mootoo, 2001:25)

Mootoo's description of the tug of war that exists for immigrants between wanting to

be recognized as different while at the same time wanting to belong , portrays a dilemma

which despite enormous discrepancies in immigrants' socio-economic and educational

backgrounds , is one of the idiosyncratic experiences shared by the majority of immigrants.

For us, it has meant: are we American? Are we Dutch? Are we neither, or both? Obviously,

there is no straightforward answer. On the one hand, the feeling of not belonging is rooted in

our immigrant identity. On the other hand, this state of elsewhereness is engendered by the

culture and the context in which we live. This feeling of belonging neither here nor there, has

gradually became a part of our emotional make-up. But we certainly did not envision feeling

like this when we first arrived in the Netherlands thirty years ago.

For both of us, learning Dutch as fast as possible was a prerequisite for living in the

Netherlands. We started studying the language before moving to Amsterdam. Upon arrival

Kathy already spoke Dutch and Lorraine could get by. Both of us were fluent before the

completion of the year. Each of us quickly entered the university system- Kathy studying

psychology and Lorraine anthropology. There, we were made to feel that our American

backgrounds gave us an advantage; our written and spoken English was superior to our

cohort giving us an edge over our fellow academics. This was one of the benefits of being an

American immigrant. Moments of feeling privileged were not limited to the university,

however. Lorraine recalled how being an American who spoke Dutch made a difference

when, after waiting several hours in the early morning lines with all the other immigrants to

renew her residence permit, found herself being treated differently – read: better – by the

Foreign Police. The underlying message was that she was not like the rest: read better. She was treated differently and felt ambiguous about it.

In the adventure of mastering the cultural signs and meanings required in order to make the Netherlands our home, neither of us aspired to being given special treatment. We assumed that we shared more similarities with the Dutch than differences – from our political views and career trajectories. Neither of us gravitated toward the expat community living in the Netherlands and most of our newly found friends were Dutch. Interestingly, neither of us make any mention during the interviews of foreseeing problems on the road to being accepted as Dutch citizens. We emphasized instead how we had set things in motion and were well on our way to becoming part of a new community. We assumed that we were being accepted for who we were just as we were accepting those who we were getting to know. In essence, in the early years, we both seemed completely unreflexive about our immigrant position, simply assuming that we would in time be able to fit in.

Yet our interviews were also sprinkled with disturbing moments when we were made to realize that we were different and different in such a way that we did not entirely fit in. Comments about our accents abounded, along with remarks that called attention to our different embodiment: 'You smile a lot', 'Calm down, don't get so excited', or 'That is so-o-o-o American' were frequent reminders that we didn't (quite) belong. These comments produced a momentary consternation that clashed with our belief that the Dutch were a tolerant people, only to vanish almost as quick as it arose. We generally took these comments in stride, assuming that they would disappear as soon as we had become more 'integrated.' Looking back, however, we both discovered that the comments never disappeared and, in fact, thirty years later, we are both reminded relatively frequently that we are not Dutch.

In the course of the interviews, we realized that it had been our privileged position as white middle class immigrants which had allowed us to believe that we could just slip into the Dutch community effortlessly. In the aftermath, we have come to see that our expectations concerning integration were not only naïve but also a product of white privilege and Eurocentrism. Our unreflexive stance – born of this privilege – encouraged us to adopt the strategy of highlighting the commonalities between us and the 'native' Dutch community, creating an expectation of belonging. In contrast, Dutch culture is patterned in such a way that it emphasizes difference and calls attention to not-quite-belonging. In the following section, we take a closer look at two mundane incidents that show how the borders of Dutch-ness are policed and, ultimately, maintained in daily practice. These incidents were chosen from an array of stories we collected. We found these two to be both an example of how utterly mundane these moments of exclusion are and at the same time representative of the phenomena we discuss.

Scene One: A lunch date between two friends(Kathy Davis)

Kathy is having lunch with Hellen, a colleague of Surinamese descent in a café in Utrecht. They are speaking in Dutch about her new book, which, since it was written in English, means that their talk is punctuated with the occasional English word or phrase. A young waitress asks Hellen in English 'Where are you from?' Hellen is plainly irritated (she's heard this often enough) and says abruptly: 'Holland'. The waitress, not to be deterred, turns to Kathy and asks the same question. Kathy decides to adopt Hellen's strategy and says: 'Holland'. Now it is the waitress who appears irritated and she insists: 'No, I heard you speaking in English. You're not from here.' Kathy just wants to get it over and says (in Dutch): 'OK, originally from the US.' The waitress gives a satisfied nod and then asks how long she's 'been here.' Kathy (still speaking in Dutch) says: 'Thirty years.' The waitress, heaping injury on insult, shakes her head and says: 'And you still have an accent, after all

those years.' Finally, she leaves to get the orders and Hellen notes that she is amazed that 'this time you had to put up with even more than I did!'

On the surface, this dialogue appears to be innocent. In fact, we are all too often reminded of the good intentions motivating the question 'Where are you from?' We have been told that it is just a friendly way of showing interest. One could argue, then, that the waitress was simply curious about us and wanted to learn more about us. However, before we reach an overly-hasty conclusion, let us peel off the layers of this seemingly innocuous conversation and see what it reveals.

Through the years of our residence in the Netherlands, it is more the exception than the rule that in a new situation someone does not inquire about our origins or poses a question to find out how we ended up here. Some people express this interest indirectly as was the case recently when one of the participants of Lorraine's fitness class inquired about her 'lovely foreign sounding name,' presumably in the hope of hearing more about her background. However, it is often done directly and without warning. It happens at the most unexpected moments: in academic conferences, at restaurants, in trains, at social gatherings. It occurs so often, in fact, that it sometimes becomes a sport for us to invent new ways of answering the question or avoid answering it. Whether we like it or not and when we least expect it, our ethnic/national identity is always in play. Precisely because the question is born of the best of intentions, it is almost impossible to bring up the uncomfortableness it evokes without being called rude or 'overly-sensitive.' Unsurprisingly, our preferred strategy is to answer the question and move on to something else.

This dialogue illustrates that immigrants are automatically expected to discuss their identity or expose parts of their biographies to perfect strangers . These requests can not only be intrusive, but their unexpected occurrence make it difficult to come up with an adequate

response. The fact that they are presented as 'just' a sign of friendly interest makes it even less easy to refuse them.

This incidence also shows that t for privileged newcomers, the faulty performance of identity may be even more subject to commentary than it would be for their less privileged counterparts. For example, we suspect that most Dutch people would be wary about mentioning the accent of a second generation Dutch -Turk or -Moroccan for fear of being thought xenophobic. Analogous to the above incident, Kathy has many stories about how her American accent is attended to when she is speaking Dutch. This is invariably done in a joking way, often in the form of a George Bush imitation replete with a foolish grin and a Texan drawl. How should this calling of attention to her accent be interpreted? Is it 'just a joke', designed to enlist her in a shared moment of amusement? Or is it an implicit way of saying that she will never be able to pass as Dutch, a way of creating 'Other-ness' without having to be accountable for it?

And, finally, the comment made by Kathy's colleague Hellen gives even more insight into the practices of exclusion which operate on a daily basis in the Netherlands. It shows that she – as a woman of color – is used to being treated as the 'other.' She expects it. However, she is also a little surprised to see that Kathy, as a white woman, is encountering some of the same. Obviously, their experiences of exclusion and inclusion are different. Given the legacy of racism in the Netherlands, different processes of racialization and exclusion are involved. Nevertheless, their experiences share the common feature of being made aware of the fact that one doesn't quite belong in Dutch society. This, we would argue, is how everyday practices of exclusion operate. While these practices have been historically more devastating for people of color, they are not limited to racialized minorities. Rather they are part of the social fabric of Dutch society.

Scene Two: A drink among colleagues (Lorraine Nencel)

Lorraine is attending an overnight training on academic leadership, intended for members of her university to strengthen their management capacities. At the end of the evening, the participants are having a drink at the bar. Lorraine tells some of the participants about the project she is doing with Kathy, having gotten into the habit of wanting to observe the type of reactions it evokes. Her objective is to come to a further understanding of the resilient, tacit processes underlying the question 'where do you actually come from?' At first, she is pleasantly surprised when one of her colleagues makes the refreshing comment that it is 'a bit rude that people asked that question.' He elaborates saying that it is unnecessary because 'When you introduced yourself in the morning, I immediately heard that you were not from here. You know, you still have an accent, but I just left it at that'. He made sure to add that I spoke very good Dutch, which another colleague reiterated. The conversation took a different turn, however, when Jan, one of the participants and also a colleague from Lorraine's department, noted (parenthetically, not for the first time): 'For someone living here for twenty nine years, you speak Bad Dutch.' Lorraine came to her own defense, listing all the things she did in Dutch (including teaching) and explaining that she didn't see it as such a problem. The conversation shifted and the others began to name 'foreigners who speak excellent Dutch.' The participants who had initially claimed that Lorraine's Dutch was so good remained silent. As the wine continued to flow, Lorraine's initial assertion that the question 'where do you actually come from?' was problematic was challenged and whittled down to a matter of personal opinion. She was given examples of other foreigners who didn't mind being asked this question and was assured that the question was simply a show of interest. When she tried to shake the foundations of this line of argument with a 'Why can't you just accept that this is how I experience it, that I'm the one who has the experience of being excluded here, not you,'[7] she did not get a response.

This conversation shares many similarities with the first example. It shows that Lorraine's colleagues, like the waitress in Kathy's story, considered speaking 'good Dutch' - both in terms of grammar and accent - an important evaluative criterion for judging their performance of identity as residents of the Netherlands. The assumption is that if immigrants want to belong, they will have to speak Dutch without an accent. It is never questioned whether this is essential to 'Dutch-ness'- and, indeed, most native Dutch speak with some accent and many make grammatical mistakes. Moreover, the question is never raised whether speaking Dutch without an accent is important to our conception of our identity as long term residents in Holland. Most importantly, however, it avoids the issue of whether other aspects of our lives and 'integration' in Dutch society should count more toward our belonging than whether we speak flawless, accentless Dutch.

These stories illustrate different, but intricately related ways in which feelings of not-belonging are created in daily practice. The question, 'where are you from?' is posed in many different circumstances and by different kinds of people. While the meanings depend on the context, the question can – as we have shown – function to create and maintain distance. The first example does this by disrupting the ongoing social interaction in order to define the participants as non-Dutch, while the second illustrates how difficult it is to problematize such incidences once they have occurred.

The concept boundary object can be useful for understanding the ubiquitous and taken-for-granted policing of the border of 'Dutch-ness' in everyday interaction. It refers to 'vehicles for the translation and interpretation of meanings in intersubjective collaborations between knowledge domains' (Simpson and Carroll, 2008: 36). It is used to show how different groups create meanings concerning the same object. While the object may have very different meanings for different groups, it appears within the interaction as shared; i.e. we are all talking about the same thing. This presumed consensus masks the ways that the differences

in the participants' social location shape the meanings that they attribute to the object in question as well as how the context of power enables certain meanings to gain legitimacy, while others are silenced. For example, individuals born in the Netherlands may perceive the question 'Where do you come from?' as merely a demonstration of interest, while for many immigrants on the receiving end of the same question, it may be viewed as a sign that they do not quite belong. The fact that the discrepancy in these perceived meanings is not exposed at the moment the question is asked enables the conversation to continue as if there were a consensus concerning its meaning – a consensus which supports and reinforces power relations between those who belong and do not (quite) belong.

When a white ethnic Dutch individual poses the infamous question 'where do you really come from?' to someone who has not been born in the Netherlands, different meanings immediately come into play and have to be negotiated.[8] It may be regarded as a more or less irritating platitude deserving an answer in automatic pilot. Or it may be seen as a rude and ill-mannered intrusion in whatever s/he is doing at that particular moment. Or it may be a sign that s/he has failed in her attempts at assimilation and has been 'caught out.' It may be experienced as exclusion ('you are not one of us') or as inclusion (friendly interest). For the person asking the question, it may be intended as a expression of interest and/or curiosity about the immigrant. Or it may be taken as an occasion to proudly display his or her own fluency in English. It may be experienced as a slight sense of discrepancy in how the newcomer is perceived (speaking Dutch, but not entirely correctly) accompanied by a desire to check, to set the record straight, or to create order in a situation which is unclear.

As boundary object, the question reiterates difference and creates distance, working as a 'symbolic border guard' not unlike 'traffic lights warning a group member when he (or she) is approaching a barrier separating his (or her) group from another' (Armstrong, 1982: 8 quoted in Ralston 2001: 222). A barrier is constructed not only between the Dutch and the

non-Dutch (Kathy's story), but also between foreigners – for example those considered 'successful' who speak excellent Dutch and foreigners who are considered 'less successful' because their Dutch is not excellent (Lorraine's story)

In short, while the stories are different, they both illustrate the ways that exclusion is at work in daily practices. It involves not only the constant monitoring and marking of the boundary between the Dutch and the not-quite-Dutch. It also operates through the reluctance of the white ethnic Dutch majority to acknowledge that seemingly innocuous and even well-intentioned questions like 'Where are you from?' may work in exclusionary ways, thereby creating a feeling of not-belonging. Reducing such feeling to a matter of personal sensitivity or opinion not only denies the validity of the immigration experience. It also denies the dominant position of white ethnic Dutch and their ongoing participation in keeping the borders of 'Dutch-ness' intact.

Defining 'Dutch-ness'

Practices of exclusion and inclusion require contextualization if they are to be understood and explained. They need to be situated in the historical, social, cultural, and interactive contexts in which they occur and are given meaning (Henry, 2004). Belonging – the experience of feeling of 'at home' – cannot be separated from the national imaginary of a specific collectivity. It is intimately linked to how membership to a particular community is defined and to how this community constructs boundaries between those who are part of it and those who are not. [9]

The most telling example of this is the term 'allochthone' which was coined in the late 1980's and used to designate all individuals who were foreign-born, but had been living extended amount of time in Holland. While, in theory, the term would include anyone born in another country, in practice it was used to refer to immigrants from North Africa, Turkey, Somalia or individuals from former Dutch colonies (Surinam). In other words, it was

employed for minorities who were considered to be lagging behind native-born Dutch in terms of language, participation in the labor market, or education and consequently in need of 'integration.' . The term was drawn upon to support policies for channeling government funds to projects intended to speed up the integration of underprivileged minorities into Dutch society and improve their social and economic positions. Americans, Australians, Japanese, and economically privileged individuals from other European countries did not fall under this category. Originally, their nationalities did not even appear in the long list of countries from which allochthone individuals originated. It was only in the last three years that the government began to recognize that the term itself had racist implications and some municipalities (notably Amsterdam) scratched the term out of all official documents.

Interestingly, however, the solution to the problems with the term was not to get rid of it altogether, but rather to expand it. Now US-Americans and all others who originally were not labeled allochthone have now been included in the category, with an explicit distinction being made between „western' and „non-western' allochthones. It goes beyond the scope of this article to explore the ways these distinctions have been – and continue to be - problematic; however, none of the attempts at categorization have eliminated the border ambiguity which the presence of relatively privileged newcomers in the Netherlands evokes.

In the national imaginary, being 'Dutch' means being white.[10] As Essed and Trienekens (2008) somewhat cynically note: 'The offspring of a white Dutch diplomat born and (partly) raised in, say, Brazil, would not be called 'allochtoon', but considered as Dutch as Gouda cheese.' (p. 4). The dominant ethnic group, numerically and ideologically, is white. Whiteness belongs to the taken-for-granted normativity of Dutch culture, ensuring the right to represent and define a specific location as normatively dominant, as the universal 'we' of Dutch society. The Dutch majority does not, however, speak of itself as white and few members of the white majority would regard themselves as the recipients of white privilege.

Indeed, critical Dutch intellectuals frequently distance themselves from discussions on racism, defining it as a problem 'over there' (in the US or in South Africa) rather than 'here,' in the Netherlands. The wide-spread resistance among white Dutch that their skin color might in any way constitute an ethnicized or racialized identity which provides them with a privileged social position allows the widespread denial of the everyday exclusions which are a regular occurrence in everyday life in the Netherlands.[11]

Historically, the mainstay of Dutch national identity has been its image of tolerance. The history of tolerance in the Netherlands can be traced back to the final decades of the 16th through the 17th century (the Dutch Golden Age). In 1579, the Union of Utrecht guaranteed that minority religions would be tolerated provided that their religious practices remained private. As a result, many persecuted religious minorities from other countries found shelter in the Netherlands.

This same image of religious tolerance formed the basis of the more recent practice of 'pillarization,' in which institutional arrangements and cultural life in the Netherlands were organized along the lines of religion or political persuasion. Catholics, Protestants, socialists, and humanists all had their own schools, their own trade unions, their own television stations. By placing people in clearly demarcated compartments (pillars), the precondition for the tolerance of difference was ensured, together with the need for a consensual approach to policy making and a marked preference for conflict avoidance.

In the wake of the secularization of Dutch society, pillarization continues to inform institutional arrangements and politics in the Netherlands. For example, the so-called 'polder model', drawing upon the time-honored traits of tolerance and moderation, is intended to ensure that through dialogue and consensus-seeking all parties will be able to participate equally in decision making and that the outcome will, consequently, be acceptable to all concerned.

The legacy of pillarization is ambivalent, however. While it is an expression of the social acceptance of diversity, hence expressing a pluralist notion of the nation, the recognition of group-based identities also creates strong group boundaries. As Ghorashi (2006) has noted, pillarization leads to categorization. This can also create a public space for collective identities from which, for example, Islamic groups in the Netherlands have benefited. At the same time, however, it has allowed for an exclusive ethno-cultural notion of national Dutch identity. While for the earlier religious domination (Catholics, protestants), their Dutchness was not at stake, this is not the case for Muslim groups today. They have become locked into their ethno-cultural identities and locked out of Dutch identity (Saharso, 2007).

In addition to the double-edged legacy of pillarization, the legendary pretention of tolerance among the Dutch has been met with skepticism. Salemink (2006) and Essed and Nimako(2006) have argued that the so-called Dutch tolerance is little more than the belief that the Dutch are *better* than members of other nations. The insistence on the inherent 'goodness' of the Dutch and their invariantly benevolent intentions also serves to protect them from accusations of exclusionary, let alone, racist behavior. This 'culture of ignorance' is endemic in the Netherlands and – as many critical race scholars would argue - part and parcel of what white privilege is all about (Delgado and Stefanicic,1997; Frankenberg, 1997; Rasmussen *et al,* 2001; Ware and Back, 2005).

It is not simply that white Dutch ethnicity is treated as the measure of who belongs (or doesn't belong) in Dutch society. Unlike the US, which has historically considered itself a nation of immigrants, the Netherlands has only recently begun to acknowledge that it is becoming an 'immigration country' and there are still those who believe that it is possible to 'stem the tide' and return to some pristine state free of unruly newcomers. In the Netherlands, hyphenated identities (like American-Dutch) do not exist (Ghorashi, 2006). In short, despite

its national image of tolerance for differences, consensus, and conflict avoidance, the Dutch also display a marked uneasiness toward anything which cannot be subsumed under 'Dutch-ness' – because it does not fit neatly into the appropriate 'pillar', because it is foreign-born, or because it is not white (or not white enough). An insider-outsider model, far from being antithetical to the Dutch national imaginary, not only pervades policy and public debate, but it is integral to everyday interaction in which belonging is established and contested.

The Politics of Belonging

According to Yuval-Davis (2006), the politics of belonging are central to understanding issues of migration, multiculturalism, and citizenship. Belonging is a combination of the subjective sense of feeling 'at home' in a particular place as well as the social divisions that shape people's sense of membership within specific communities and locations. Belonging is integral to the normative and political discourses which draw boundaries between people in more or less exclusionary ways. It is a dynamic process, involving acts of active and situated imagination which construct national imagined communities with different boundaries depending on people's locations, their experiences and definitions of self, and their values and ethics (p. 204).

In the Netherlands, the politics of belonging is constructed in various ways, whereby different political projects throughout the past decades have mobilized specific assumptions concerning who belongs to the Dutch national imaginary and who does not. These boundaries are not written in stone, but require careful and systematic management according to the conventions of the day. These projects range from treating newcomers as disadvantaged and in need of help (deficit model) to embracing diversity as a positive feature of society (multiculturalism) to the more recent integration model which assumes that individuals who do not speak Dutch or are unfamiliar with Dutch customs will become of a threat to the

nation's resources by virtue of their unemployability or to the cohesion of the community by virtue of their 'otherness.' (Essed and Nimako, 2006; de Zwart and Poppelaars, 2007).

Our own case provides an example of what happens in the Netherlands to newcomers who do not fit neatly into the space provided by the integration discourse. Obviously, it is not a dramatic case; many other newcomers have found themselves faced with forms of 'othering' that are far more dire and even life-threatening than what we have experienced. Nevertheless, our experiences of being cast into the position of 'other' expose the unexamined expectations (including our own) that go along with the discourse of integration as well as the the fallacy that with the elimination of deprivation (economic, linguistic, cultural), inclusion will automatically follow. As we have shown, meeting the the implicit and explicit criteria of integration does not ensure that newcomer can be taken up into the national imaginary of available for thinking about 'Dutch-ness' in the Netherlands. Nor does it account for the pervasive resistance toward thinking critically about the limits of this 'Dutch-ness' and the persistence with which many well-meaning Dutch engage in the everyday policing of borders.

Our experiences of having our identities 'policed' in everyday interactions with ethnic Dutch provides a specific, and yet telling, illustration of the flip side of the Dutch model of tolerance-through-compartmentalization. are not considered allochthone' because of our privilege and yet, we are clearly 'foreign born.' We are white and western, yet, by virtue of our accents, we do not (quite) fit the category of (white) ethnic Dutch. We seem to evoke uneasiness precisely because we cannot be placed neatly into an appropriate compartment, conjuring up what Julia Kristeva (1982) has called 'border ambiguity.' In her powerful critique of zenophobia in the affluent Western world, she argues that potential threats to a subject's identity may require distancing in order to restore the border separating the self and the other. Applied to the Dutch context, this would mean that when immigrants become so

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assimilated that they seem 'almost Dutch', an anxiety-provoking fuzziness emerges, requiring an automatic re-drawing of boundaries between 'us' and 'them.'

In this context, the question 'where are you from?' is anything but an innocuous expression of friendly curiosity. It allows participants in the encounter to establish a specific social division – between the person who unproblematically belongs and the person who does (not quite) belong. It does not need to be done in an unfriendly way - and, once it is accomplished, there is no need for the person to vacate the premises, to pack up her bags and catch the next flight back 'home'(i.e. the place where she came from). As Iris Young (1990) has pointed out, dominant groups define norms which exclude marginalized individuals from the community. However, processes of 'othering' often occur at the gut-level of practical consciousness rather than at the level of discursively held beliefs. Thus, when a member of the dominant white ethnic Dutch majority asks the question 'where are you from,' s/he may consciously intend to express interest in the newcomer and be strongly committed to multiculturalism, yet, at the level of practical consciousness, be expressing an uneasiness and aversion toward someone who is perceived as different. Attempts to bring the exclusionary effects of what is perceived as well-intentioned and even ideologically progressive behavior to the person's attention may, therefore, be met with denial and powerful gestures of silencing – something which makes the marginalized other 'feel slightly crazy' (Young, 1990:134).[12]

Conclusion

In the Dutch context, cultural unfamiliarity has different meanings and evokes different responses. On one level, it is generates curiosity, the desire to learn more about the 'other,' and possibilities for interaction. However, this particular expression of curiosity can easily become transformed into an expression of social exclusion. As our autoethnographic narratives show, even after thirty years we are still struggling to find a way to feel at home in Dutch society. Moreover, our stories relate how this feeling is relationally constructed in daily

practice. We are not suggesting that newcomers want to be the same as Dutch people who were born into families who have lived in the Netherlands for generations. Neither of us is trying to 'pass' as a white, ethnic Dutch and, indeed, we have our own idiosyncratic and socially patterned histories that shape who we are and who we have become. However, as long-term residents of the Netherlands, we do have certain expectations. We expect to be accepted and to have the legitimacy of our presence here acknowledged (rather than ongoingly disputed). In short, we want to feel that we 'belong' in the place where we have lived most of our lives. This belonging would, however, require an acceptance of our hybrid identities as Dutch-Americans. It would involve, at the very least, a recognition of the effort we have had to put into learning the language, into figuring out how to get around in a new culture, and into building a meaningful and socially active life for ourselves in another country. In short, it is not the recognition of difference that is in and of itself problematic. Rather it is what is done with this recognition afterwards that transforms a simple question or comment into a policing mechanism. The recognition of who we are is the prerequisite for inclusion, while the reminder of what we are not is the condition of exclusion.

Our individual stories, which are only two among the many that can be told regarding the daily practices of social exclusion and belonging, also enable us to address collective social issues. While our privileged positions does not easily allow a comparison to be made with other more disadvantaged immigrant groups, our narratives share commonalities with many immigrants' experiences in their relations with white ethnic Dutch. The repeated reminder that who you are requires explaining one's origins or roots (whether that question is 'where are you from?' 'or where are your (grand)parents from?' is not a serendipitous, casual moment in a conversation. Its repetitive nature marks it as a cultural pattern, endemic to Dutch society more generally. The question functions as a policing mechanism that identifies and calls attention to anyone who appears different and by doing so, subtly but persistently

works to maintain the appearance of the Dutch as a homogenous group. In a globalizing world, the idea of such a homogeneity is not only erroneous; it is deeply problematic. While we believe that the perception of difference is an unavoidable part of social interaction, it is what is done with this recognition that concerns us here. As the Dutch case shows, the recognition of difference can create processes of 'othering' and exclusion or it might be the first step in advancing social inclusion

The seemingly innocuous question 'Where are you from? 'may create an illusion of consensus, thereby silencing the 'Other' and subtly reproduce power relations that strengthen the idea of an 'unmarked' Dutch identity. These power relations are not only part and parcel of the ordinary dynamics of everyday social relations,; they are played out throughout Dutch society, within different social institutions and organizational cultures.

We argue that what is missing from the 'integration' discourse and, more generally, discussions about the problems of newcomers being taken up into Dutch society is a consideration of what is necessary if newcomers and even immigrants of several generations are to feel 'at home' in the Netherlands. In order for immigrants to feel that they belong in the Netherlands, Dutch identity would not only need to include a space for hybridity. There would need to be a much more sustained consideration of how everyone's identities are less a matter of 'roots' than a matter of the different 'routes' and which have different 'roots.' (Hall 1996). By opening itself to the possibility of hybridity, 'Dutch-ness' would need less 'policing' It is only then that the question 'Where are you actually from?' could take on a different meaning – becoming a sign of friendly curiosity and a desire to get to know another person rather than a distancing from the 'Other.'

Notes

[2] Interview with Maryam Hassouni in *NRC* (17 November 2006)

[3] As it will become clear in this article, we do not consider this checklist of criterion for "successful integration" an effective measurement for evaluating one's integration. It leaves little room to include the subjective experiences of the immigrant and additionally as the article will further show, possessing these attributes is no guarantee for social inclusion.

[4] This is a criticism which is frequently leveled at critical race studies of whiteness. See, for example, Frankenburg (1997); Gallagher (2000); Rasmussen *et al* (2001); Wiegman (1999).

[5] The Dutch media is full of examples of how long term residents of the Netherlands are reminded that they do not belong. Just a few examples: Nausicaa Marbe, a journalist who has lived in the Netherlands for more than 25 years, complains that the Dutch „fixation on other-ness" which requires her year after year, day after day, to tell her life history to strangers who are obsessed with „where she is from"(*Volkskrant*, 13.01.2007). After living in the Netherlands since 1989 and still being asked when „he was going home again," the psychologist Rob de Jardin asks with undisguised despair „what more he can do." „You can become a Dutch person in heart and soul, but they still see you as a foreigner."(*Trouw*, 12.05.2007). It's worse for a Turkish or Moroccan Dutch immigrant. After thirty years, the journalist Ahmet Olgun notes that it's a wonder he hasn't become schizophrenic with the constant barrage of remarks about whether he felt more „at home" here or there. „As Dutchified Turk, I'll never be admitted to the mysterious guild of The Dutch."(*NRC*, 06.04.07*).

[6] See, also Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Denzin 2006.

[7] There is a nice Dutch expression for this: *Ervaringsdeskundige* which means something like "experiential expert." While the terms is commonly employed in other situations, it does not seem to apply in the case of newcomers experiencing exclusion. The "experience"does not make them experts.

[8] We are, by no means, suggesting that this question is not posed by members of minorized ethnic groups in the Netherlands. However, the meaning of the question changes depending on the context in which it is asked as well as the specific locations of the participants engaged in the interaction.

[9] We are aware that we are walking on thin ice here. There has been considerable discussion among sociologists and anthropologists about the problems associated with terms like "national identity" or – even worse – "national character"(see Zwaan, 1986; Van Ginkel, 1991).

[10] Race is not an easy concept in Europe – carrying as it does the legacy of the Holocaust and the more recent examples of ethnic cleansing. Most Europeans prefer to speak of Whiteness is not an easy concept in Europe, where the notion of "race" carries so much historical baggage that it tends to be subsumed under "culture" or "ethnicity"(See Knapp, 2005; Davis, 2008).

[11] One could argue that this denial is also reflected in the unwillingness to confront the less-than-fortuitous aspects of Dutch history – its role as a colonial power, its participation in the international slave trade, and its collaboration with the deportation of the Jews during the German occupation in World War II.Oscar Salemink criticizes the "pretention of tolerance" among the Dutch as little more than the belief that they are *better* than other nations. Essed and Nimako (2006) also refer to the insistence on the inherent "goodness" of the Dutch, their benevolent intentions presumably protecting them from any accusation of exclusionary, let alone, racist behavior.

[12] According to Young, the fact that exclusionary behavior is not intentional does not absolve an individual from responsibility for his or her actions. She believes calling people to take responsibility for their actions includes requiring them to submit their unconscious behavior, habits and attitudes to critical reflection. "If unconscious reactions, habits, and stereotypes reproduce the oppression of some gr4oups, then they should be judged unjust, and therefore should be changed."(Young, 1990:150).

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