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'A Way of Seeing and Telling'. Resistance through language and form in the work of Dutch authors Hafid Bouazza and Ramsey Nasr

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Abstract

This article discusses the debate within the Dutch academy on the differentiation between migration and postcolonial writing as a symptom of an area of study in search of consensus. It offers a synthetic reading of the writing of two leading Dutch authors: Hafid Bouazza and Ramsey Nasr based on the assumption that both writers, through their widely different aesthetic and political negotiations, shape the discourse on multicultural literature and society in the Netherlands.

Key words

Multicultural writing, migration writing, postcolonialism, Netherlands, multicultural society, cultural memory, Hafid Bouazza, Ramsey Nasr

Few countries in Europe have seen such a pronounced swing in multicultural policies as the Netherlands: from the minority policy of the late 1970s and 1980s that recognised cultural pluralism and the right of minority groups to retain their 'own language and culture' to the integration policy of mandatory Dutch language courses and civic integration training from the mid 1990s onwards. Over a period of two decades initial optimism and celebration of multicultural bliss turned into a rhetoric of failure and discontent: the idea that the Netherlands as a nation, as a social and cultural construct and, above all, as an imagined community was in crisis due to a perceived lack of common ground between old and new Dutch and an assumed resistance on behalf of the latter to integrate into Dutch society.

Since the early 2000s a sustained attention to multicultural issues often cast in discussions on social-cultural integration has dominated the Dutch political and public debate. The views of politician Pim Fortuyn aligned multicultural discontent with suspicion towards the 'unresponsive and politically correct political elite' (Scholten 2011:187; see also Oostindie, 2011, 23-47). In 2004 the murder of Theo van Gogh, filmmaker and columnist, who had been stridently critical of Islam and multiculturalism, was widely regarded as an attack on core

Dutch values: individualism, tolerance and freedom of expression. This mood proved fertile ground for populist politics. Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party persistently fuel fears of a moral incongruity between old and new Dutch, amplified – if not caused – by Islam. The refugee crisis of 2015 and the terrorist attacks in Paris have brought anti-immigration and anti-Islam sentiments to a new climax.

Yet this upsurge in nationalist sentiment articulated and powered by the political right does not constitute the full story. The dismissal of the ‘lazy’ multiculturalism of the 1970 and 1980s, blamed for the backlash against multicultural tolerance that the Netherlands experiences today, has also given rise to a critical enquiry about the self and about national practices. There is a growing awareness that the Netherlands has failed to examine and reappraise critically the nation’s contribution to and involvement with colonialism (Hoving, 2012: 45-55; Scheffer, 2007: 149-1990). In recent years, a self-conscious and militant call for a critical investigation of embedded power-imbalance within Dutch society has emerged (Gario 2012; Bergman 2014; Blokker and Doornik, 2015). This raising of awareness of racial prejudice and implied bias is part of a wider movement in the Western world to move beyond ‘celebrating’ diversity to decolonizing society at all levels: from university curricula to top-level representation and from the narrative of the Dutch nation to cherished traditions. The call to abolish the Dutch tradition of *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete) – the blacked up helpers that are part of the traditional St Nicolas celebrations in early December – as well as the appeal for the removal of images that represent slavery on the Dutch *Gouden koets* (golden carriage) – the horse drawn carriage with which the head of state travels to the seat of government to open the parliamentary year – are part of a broader invitation to investigate racial power relations in the Netherlands and to reconsider and rewrite the history of Dutch colonialism (Oostindie, 2011; Essed and Hoving, 2014: 9-30; Luttikhuis and Moses, 2014).

Such is in crude lines the cultural-political backdrop of over three decades of migration writing in the Netherlands: from the first ‘guest labourer’ stories of

Halil Gür in 1984 and the tentative language of the early stories of Kader Abdolah in 1992, to the confident and self-aware writing of Hafid Bouazza; from the triumphant presentation of the first Dutch poet of Moroccan descent, Mustafa Stitou in 1994 to the election Ramsey Nasr as poet laureate in 2009. They are just a few examples of a much larger group of highly diverse writers whose only shared feature is that they all attract a tag that singles them out as somehow special, or at least different, from mainstream Dutch writers. Although the label has undergone several transformations over the past twenty years – ethnic, migrant, migration writers, or, more recently, multicultural, minority, diasporic or nomadic writers – the categorisation of the literature they produce relies almost exclusively on the background of the authors and not necessarily on the content of the literary text. Moreover, in the Dutch academic context there is another distinction based on heritage that configures the discussion: migration literature is generally discussed away from that other category of multicultural texts, the literary writing produced and discussed in the context of Dutch colonial history. Liesbeth Minnaard in her essay ‘Multiculturalism in the Dutch Literary Field’ offers an explanation: ‘Although in many cases writers of this kind of [postcolonial] literature have gone through processes of migration as well, the huge differences in background and history necessitate careful differentiation between postcolonial and migration literature as two particular strands of multicultural literature’ (2013: 98). Minnaard is right; of course there are ‘huge differences in background and history’ between migration writing and postcolonial writing, however, there is less consensus over whether this ‘necessitates’ differentiation into separate strands. In the following section I will draw on two recent publications in the field of multicultural literature to illustrate the way in which multicultural literature is (dis)connected with the (hi)story of the Netherlands. This will show that, in addition to the historical specificities, it is the framing of colonial and migration history within the national discourses of the Netherlands that justifies, or challenges, a strict differentiation between migration and postcolonial writing.

Uneven diaspora

Minnaard includes her defense of differentiation in the context of the 2013 publication *Literature, Language and Multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries* (2013). In their opening essay, Behschnitt and Nilsson outline the rationale behind the collection's 'national and simultaneously comparative' approach (2). They argue convincingly that it is still within the 'frame of the nation state' that literature is produced, read and discussed – in particular in case of texts in 'smaller languages' like Dutch, Danish and Swedish (2). Before engaging in a transnational comparative discussion, they argue, the national specificities need to be carefully mapped and analysed. This national frame is shaped by language, by cultural and public agencies, by academic institutions, by media and so on, but also by national cultural memory: by that which a nation wishes to remember about itself (9-10). Drawing on Stuart Hall's thinking about 'The Heritage', they suggest: 'Heritage, in Hall's words, is "always inflected by the power and authority of those who have colonized the past, whose version of history matters"' (10). Behschnitt and Nilsson further suggest that the emergence of migration writing runs parallel with the rise of 'discourses about cultural diversity'. Cultural diversity, – or cultural difference – is foregrounded as the essential characteristic of contemporary Western society and this sense of centrality of ethnic and cultural difference coincides, and is 'dialectically intertwined' with, the rise of and interest in 'multicultural literatures': 'The emergence of multicultural literature in recent decades is to a large extent, a product of the belief that cultural differences define our age' (8).

Although they do not say so explicitly, Behschnitt and Nilsson imply that colonial history does not 'define our age', or rather, it does not play a significant part in the contemporary discourses about cultural diversity and the multicultural society. The colonial history of the countries included in the collection does not constitute a significant part of the discussion: in the 338 pages the book comprises, the collocation 'colonial history' occurs four times and 'postcolonial literature' just three times. In other words, in *Literature, Language and Multiculturalism*, the present day multicultural condition of the Low Countries, Sweden and Denmark is not directly connected with, nor does it rise from, the colonial past – even if there is a clear colonial history to speak of. Colonial history

is touched upon but not explored, since it may be part of a nation's history, but that does not mean it part of its consciousness or national narrative, its 'Heritage'. Whereas 'the multicultural society' is integrated into the Dutch cultural memory, colonial history is far less so. The discourses of ethnic and cultural difference that are so instrumental in the rise and the construction of multicultural literature in the Netherlands, do not, or barely, recognize colonial history as one of its constituents. It is indeed considered 'hugely different' and therefore irrelevant. Yet is exactly this disjuncture between colonial past and multicultural present that *The Postcolonial Low Countries* (2012) wants to address.

The Postcolonial Low Countries is a collection of essay with the explicit intention of establishing a postcolonial frame that draws on both migration *and* postcolonial contexts. Editors Boehmer and De Mul and their contributors call for a specific Low Countries postcolonial perspective that carefully rearticulates strategies, concepts and practices from Anglophone postcolonial theory for a Low Countries' setting. Contrary to Minnaard, Boehmer and Gouda argue strongly in favour of converging the separate strands of postcolonial and migration literature under the collective heading of 'diasporic writing', not in an attempt to erases differences or obscure specificities, but in order to connect all forms of transcultural and multicultural writing in the hope that this may – at long last – trigger real engagement with the postcolonial condition of the Netherlands. Boehmer and Gouda argue that the Netherlands still lives in denial: it constructs a national narrative 'from which the colonial experience is evacuated' and it refuses to recognise its own 'postcoloniality' (37). Real engagement, the authors suggest, lies in the acknowledgement that the present day multicultural society with its perceived 'problematic' communities *is* connected with the Dutch colonial past and that Dutch colonial history *is* 'formative in the making of imaginative literature and in the construction of critical readings of that literature' (26).

It is above all the 'uneven Dutch diaspora' that has prevented critical reflection on the Netherlands as an ex-colonial power according to Boehmer and Gouda.

Unlike in the British context, the main ethnic minority groups do not share a colonial relationship with the Netherlands; it was not the end of colonialism but a shortage of unskilled labour during the economic boom of the 1960s and early 1970s that brought workers from mainly Turkey and Morocco to the Low Countries, – generally in response to government recruitment campaigns.ⁱ Falling outside of Dutch colonial structures, the cultural and historical proximity that is ‘understood’ as part of the motherland-colony relationship, does not apply. It is this perceived lack of colonial continuity that has obstructed the recognition that Dutch colonial history has inevitably shaped, and continues to shape, the Dutch self-image, the national narrative and thus the way in which the ‘other’ is integrated, or excluded from, that narrative. Maintaining discreet categories of postcolonial and migration writing, therefore continues a practice of evasion and denial according to Boehmer and Gouda (see also Hoving, 2012: 45-58). By maintaining lines of demarcation, the idea that postcolonial concepts might relate to a broader multicultural situation is foreclosed. Boehmer and Gouda therefore propose the conflation of migration and postcolonial literatures to form a new category of ‘heterogeneous diasporic writing’. From this category ‘new concepts of belonging, divided identity, resistant emotion, relationality and even Dutchness can be subversively drawn’ (40),

So is there a theoretical and political controversy within Dutch postcolonial and multicultural discourse? I do not think so. Both Behschnitt and Nilsson and Boehmer and Gouda recognise the importance of the national narrative, the national condition from which the colonial history is at best marginalised. Boehmer and Gouda’s politically engaged appeal to embed postcolonial perspectives within the research and the curriculum of Dutch language and culture departments is opportune; their demand to engage with the Dutch colonial history as part of the national narrative is timely and necessary as the recent debates on ‘Black Pete’ illustrate. Nor is their position fundamentally at odds with Behschnitt and Nilsson’s appeal to take seriously the national context before engaging in broad comparative exercises. Rather than a methodological or ideological rift, the discussion indicates that the field of multicultural or diasporic literature is in the process of questioning, renewing and reinventing

itself. The debate revolves around fundamental questions such as what is multicultural literature? What are our basic concepts? What are our basic questions? The differences also reveal the complexities that arise from the 'nowness', the immediacy, of multicultural literature. Multicultural literature, as a discursive construction within contemporary literary discourse and practice, is inextricably connected with the here and now, with 'social totality in general' (Behschnitt and Nilsson, 2013: 11). As a 'category' it resists demarcation, – as the lack of consensus over the correct terminology testifies – it is open ended, permeable, and it spills over into other fields, it escapes familiar critical and theoretical frameworks. Minnaard quite rightly observes: 'it seems that every particular case requires a new decision for the most suitable term in that particular case. Meaning, connotations and boundaries change over time' (2013: n3).

In what follows I want to offer a synthetic reading of the work of two leading Dutch literary authors: Hafid Bouazza and Ramsey Nasr. They differ greatly in their posture, their writing, their concern with the national narrative, their view on the role and function of literature in society as well as in their personal background. Yet I propose a 'subversive' reading of these divergent authors that assumes that their work, as examples of multicultural literature, resists and shapes national, transnational, comparative, postcolonial, multicultural frames. My underlying assumption is that texts – in a complicated and multifaceted way, but still – relate to social reality and that they are produced within a literary tradition and critical discourse that is shaped by specific national historical, institutional and socio-political conditions. I will read the work of these very different diasporic authors through a frame of resistance: how do they, each in their individual way, confront the literary norm as well as the literary establishment and the expectations of their readers through their writing. I will argue that their writing shares a diasporic, or belated postcolonial, concern in a sustained engagement with oppositionality and resistance. Resistance to the still often encountered assumption that the identity of the multicultural authors is somehow challenged or confused or at least different from the well-defined and supposedly culturally continuous identity of a non-migration author. Resistance

to boundaries and strictures that are, (un)wittingly, put on their literary production based on expectations and assumption about the authors' background. Opposition to the given that their ability to produce 'textuality' away from assumed cultural heritage or present situation is still not a given. I believe that 'form is a way of seeing and telling' (Eaglestone, 2013a: 8) and it is the way in which Bouazza and Nasr confront the norm through their form and language that is my main focus in this contribution.

'Another poet, at last'

In 1994 during the annual festival Poetry International in Rotterdam the doyen of Dutch poetry Remco Campert introduced to the audience a young, up and coming colleague: Mustafa Stitou. Campert chose his words the way a poet does, carefully and for effect: 'another poet, at last' (Louwerse, 2007b: 1). Campert's enthusiasm was first and foremost based on the quality of Stitou's poetry, but it was Stitou's personal context combined with the 1990s *zeitgeist* that gave Campert's words a clear additional charge. Stitou, the 19-year-old debutant poet was of Moroccan-Dutch origin was presented as a 'new' phenomenon. Of course, the Dutch literary landscape was familiar with 'outsiders' before Stitou. Authors from the former Dutch colonies had made a name for themselves and in 1993 the Iranian-Dutch author Kader Abdolah published his first collection of short stories. But Stitou, as a homegrown poet of Moroccan descent, was regarded as an expression of a modern multicultural Netherlands. As the son of Moroccan labour-migrants of the 1970s, he was hailed as the first poet of a new generation of authors that fell outside of Dutch (post)colonial structures.

With the initial multicultural optimism of the 1970s and 80s waning, this appearance of a poet of migrant origin on the Dutch literary stage was considered a welcome sign of successful social and cultural integration. And more 'new' authors would follow soon: Naima el Bezaz, Hans Sahar, Abdelkader Benali and Hafid Bouazza all published their debut prose in 1995 and 1996. The writing of these new 'exotic' authors gave rise to high hopes and expectations. Its potential was believed to stretch far beyond merely literary-aesthetic values: their multicultural literature was destined to change general conceptions of

literature and rewrite literary canons. It was believed that it would further understanding and social tolerance, to impact on the emancipatory trajectories of all minority groups, to globalize Dutch literature. Yet the expectations also underlined a critical problem concerning the new writing: it was inextricably linked with the biography and social context of its creators. The emergence of multicultural literature is paralleled by – and contributed to – a sustained focus on cultural identity as the defining feature of our times (see Behschnitt and Nilsson, 2013: 6-11). With the social and political focus fixed firmly on multiculturalism, the specific circumstances of the author could not be ignored. Yet it was exactly the fact that the literature of ‘outsiders’ was seen as a social – and increasingly political – as well as a literary phenomenon that created an uncomfortable or even undesirable situation for many authors. And they offered resistance, in their extra-literary commentaries, expressions and performances but above all, I argue, through their literary writing.

Setting the tone

In the early debate on the position of the migrant author, it was Hafid Bouazza who set the tone. From his earliest appearance Hafid Bouazza – born in Morocco in 1970 and bred in the Netherlands from the age of seven – has shown a desire to carve out an alternative space away from stock expectations and unspoken boundaries put on content, style and language. At the earliest opportunity Bouazza vociferously resisted the ways in which he and his novels were received and to the labels attached to his writing. He strongly objected to being considered a migrant author or a ‘Moroccan-Dutch’ author. He argued that since he wrote in Dutch, he was a Dutch writer and that no further qualifications were required. Moreover, he insisted that his art had nothing to do with his personal background: He positioned himself as an ‘ordinary’, autonomous author giving expression to a highly individual artistic drive through literary texts (see Louwerse 2007a, 12-17; Minnaard 2008, 107-111).

Bouazza's reputation as a word-painter was established with the flowery style of his debut *De voeten van Abdullah*. Bouazza's use of archaic Dutch words, neologisms and unexpected word combinations, as well as his baroque style and

his preference for long descriptions attracted much critical attention. It was readily assumed that classic and modern Arabic literature provided the explanation for what was clearly a very un-Dutch style of writing. For example, Reinjan Mulder in his review of *De voeten van Abdullah* for *NRC Handelsblad* remarks: 'His writing reminds you of the baroque quality of classical and modern Arabic literature, with a pronounced preference for metaphor and long sentences' (Mulder, 1996). Bouazza himself has always categorically denied that his writing style was inspired by this knowledge of Arabic, on the contrary, it was the Dutch language and its literary tradition that shaped his voice:

Readers who recognize an exotic melody in Hafid Bouazza's style and ascribe this to his Arabic background forget that that melody is played on the viol and trombone of the Dutch language [...] They are blind to and even repelled by the abundance that typifies the Dutch language but are mesmerized by the frills of dreamt up exotica (Bouazza, 2004:101).

Bouazza confronts the readers with words that will be unfamiliar to the average Dutch reader. Some of these words are of his own creation such as *minnelonken* ('to flirt') and *gratsjpen* ('biting in an apple'). However, the majority of Bouazza's unfamiliar words, which may at first appear to be wilful neologisms, are in fact obsolete Dutch words, such as *daljen* ('playful fighting'), *monkelen* ('to smile') and *nes* ('moist'). Bouazza's world of words is extra-ordinary, exotic and thus appears to reflect the biographical situation of the author. However, the crucial point is that instead of using unknown words from Arabic, his 'other' language, Bouazza uses strange words from the Dutch language itself. He confronts the reader with the unfamiliar, which on closer inspection turns out to be homegrown, sprouting from the Dutch linguistic heritage. Bouazza thus challenges the received native-migrant opposition by exploring known and unknown, otherness and 'own-ness' within the same culture, thus challenging the expectation of 'otherness'.

Een beer in bontjas (A Bear in a Fur Coat, 2004) combines fiction with autobiographical detail, a commentary on the reception of his writing, and his personal views on literature and the literary world. Significantly, this publication was a commissioned essay as part of the annual Book Week organized by the

Collective Promotion of the Dutch Book (CPNB). Each year the Book Week revolves around a carefully chosen theme, which feeds into a wide variety of book related events. In 2001, the CPNB opted for: 'Country of origin: Writing between two cultures' and Hafid Bouazza was commissioned to write the Book Week essay, one of the two flagship publications (see Louwerse, 2007a; 31-48; Minnaard, 2008: 108-112; Breure and Brouwer, 2004: 381-396). Bouazza turns the 'essay' into a fictional manifesto-cum-memoir he energetically states that real art can only be inspired and borne from art, not from personal trauma, 'authorship does not arise from the first trauma, but from the first discovery of literature' (16). The background of the author, his or her social environment, religious beliefs, sexual preference or skin colour are all irrelevant when it comes to producing literature because an author is a creature of language and not a biographical person (94-95). Bouazza rejects the special category that has been reserved for him as a Moroccan-born author or a Dutch-Moroccan author and he points out that, although he recognises that these labels should not be seen as deliberately malicious attempts to keep the author in his or her place, he considers his assigned space as a migrant author to be undeserved and restrictive: 'What is wrong with just 'author' or 'writer' without the weight of a topographical hump?':

If I were to believe most critics then I am a Moroccan writer. But I do not believe most critics. According to other, well-disposed people, I am a Moroccan-Dutch author. But that label sounds uncomfortable. It hobbles around in a slipper and a clog – and that makes walking bloody tricky. Then there are the careful people (they are a minority) for whom I have coined the title D.A.M.D.D.N. [Dutch Author of Moroccan Descent with Dutch Nationality]. That is the only politically correct designation, but it will not make you very popular. It sounds like a rare disease. (15)

All labels are to Bouazza restrictions placed on his art whereas Bouazza is looking for the freedom that a world of language can offer. He wishes to create a 'literary homeland' where the author can shape and colour the landscape according to their own will: language 'is the only place where the writer feels at home. Language is his identity, style his passport' (67).

However, there is more to Bouazza's poetic craft than this advocated, radical separation of the private circumstances of the author and his writing might suggest. Remarkably, the plea to disregard biographical knowledge appears in a publication with the subtitle *Autobiografische beschouwingen (Autobiographical Reflections)*. A paradox appears: Bouazza articulates his call for a strict division between the author as an ordinary member of society and the author as an artist in a publication featuring the story of the author's migration and early authorship. In other words, *Een beer in bontjas* is (also) an autobiography designed to underline that the author's life-story is irrelevant when it comes to writing or reading literature. He activates and rejects a biographical reading in the same gesture and this 'game of deception', this type of double-dealing is central to Bouazza's art that refuses to fit into any prescribed or predesigned categories. In his debut collection he had already shown a similar move: although most of the stories are set in Bertollo, the same name as the village where Bouazza briefly lived as a child, and although the narrator-protagonist of several stories is referred to as Hafid, Bouazza steadfastly rejected any suggestions of a link between his biography and his stories. *Een beer in bontjas* is another expression of Bouazza's playful duplicity, not just in content but also in form: *Een beer in bontjas* is autobiography, essay and fiction, and none of the above. Categories are only there to be transgressed; genres are there to be reinvented.

Performance of unfitting

Bouazza's work could be described as an exquisite performance of unfitting, both in content and in form. In his more recent work, the novella *Spotvogel* (2009, Mockingbird) and the novel *Meriswin* (2014), underscore Bouazza's position as a highly original voice within Dutch literature. In these carefully constructed novels, Bouazza continues to embrace and explore the richness of language and the power of the imagination. The novels simultaneously trigger and reject an autobiographical reading confirming a typical Bouazzian position namely that the distinction between fact and fiction, or imagination is a construct: imagination is part of the human experience and therefore a fact of life.

In order to draw the full picture of Bouazza's position in the Dutch literary, political and media landscape, I have to add a few words on Bouazza's reputation away from his literary production. Bouazza joined the Dutch multicultural and integration debate in 2002 and he is famous, or infamous, for his polemical tone and his unrelenting attack on, what he considers, Dutch weak-kneed multicultural tolerance, on the aggressive machismo of Arab culture and, in particular, on the systemic cruelty and denigration of women rising from and intrinsic to Islam (Bouazza, 2015). He is an advocate of total freedom of expression, which includes the right to insult other religions and cultures. In a recent interview with he says provocatively, 'One day I would really love to drop a bomb with what I write' (Van den Blink, 2015). He is a radical individualist; he rejects all forms of cultural collectivity: cultural politics equals oppression. The right to choose one's own path also includes the right to self destruction: Bouazza is very open about his alcohol dependency and throughout his writing he embraces the human need for intoxication through art, music, and language, but equally through alcohol, drugs, and sex.

Meriswin is a case in point. The novel is a fusion of an ode to drinking and (male) camaraderie; it contains flashes of a love story and it is the fragmented account of a hospitalization as a result of advanced liver failure. In interviews around the publication of the novel, much attention was paid to the hospital sequence, which Bouazza presented as a lived experience. What caused concern was that Bouazza appeared to share his protagonist's unwillingness to show regret (*Pauwen Witteman* 2014; *VPRO Boeken* 2014). In the novel the protagonist records without regret or anger what he sees as as inevitable predetermination: 'This was the way his life had to go. Let's be honest: this is the life we all must lead or suffer, each in their own individual way, of course, so he saw no harm in his ways' (193).

A faint plotline could be reconstructed, but in spite of the clear indication 'novel' on the cover, *Meriswin* shows few traditional characteristics of the genre. Form, plotline, characters, style are all in service of evoking a sense of unboundedness that suspends the search for linear connections. *Meriswin* is about the flow of

language, about imagery and about escape; about the out-of body experience if you like, where the pursuit of meaning is suspended. Here is one long sentence at a pivotal point in the novel: the protagonist is taken to hospital and finds himself in a hallucinatory state that gives a dreamlike quality to the shards of reality he manages to pick up. There is the reality of pain, the reality of the trip in the ambulance to hospital mixed in with memories, hallucinations and a mysterious thunderstorm. The gaze of the long sentences ends up with Meriswin, the loved-one, who rises above the chaos:

It all happened at once: he managed to climb down from the chair which he knocked on the kitchen floor, it slumped like a felled tree slowly and noisily, tubes were pushed up his nostrils, he drew a gulf of cold, freshly released air, he was placed on a stretcher, she beckoned him down there by the river and suddenly the thunder struck and for a brief moment it seemed as if rampant lions rolled out tongues of lightening and the rain lashed a way through the woods, he saw this from the kitchen window and the hospital window, and when they were in the city centre, the brown stripes had changed into dots, from etching to pointillism, but without gaining colours, it remained grey, drips falling from awnings and from the trees that were blow-dried by the wind and it seemed as if the drizzle was sprinkled over everybody except for her, with droplets on her blue wool coat that suggested she was covered in dandelion pollen and never did I see such edible feet in such shoes with goose pimples manage to be quicker than the drops and the puddles and such a laugh of arched eyelashes stare higher than where the rain and my gaze came down from (93)

Meriswin, the lost lover mainly performs the role of muse: she embodies the escape that language and literature offers a failing body. Present misery and pain is transcended by a focus on beauty and imagination, by a gaze that reaches higher than the rain, stretching beyond the gaze of the protagonist. This is vintage Bouazza; reaching for the unattainable, or, as one of the doctors in the novel describes it: 'On a high reaching for the heavens, in which you don't even believe' (202). The lure of the sky, the desire to reach higher spheres, the will to escape from the strictures of reality and the everyday, is a recurrent theme in Bouazza's work. In *A Bear in a Fur Coat*, Bouazza evokes the story of Icarus to describe this drive. The appeal of the parallel is clear; it is the attraction of a transgressive gesture caught in the dream of the boy who wants to transcend his human limitations and who responds to the lure of higher flights, of a movement

bigger than him. Bouazza catches the appeal of Icarus emphatically when he writes: 'A mere lad with wax wings, between sea and light, beneath him the pavement of the earth and above him an incensed sun: emblem of all my worlds!' (95). Icarus – suspended in mid-air, exhilarated by the power to fly, unbound, untied, and free, if only temporarily and artificially – indeed appears a fitting metaphor for Bouazza art and his artistic position. His work is pervaded with a desire to escape, to revel in artistic freedom and to oppose the expectations and restrictions to which his personal life-story may give rise. However, there is always the recognition that escape is temporary, that the wings are unreliable; that the reality of the pavement will never go away, that there are no heavens. But that does not take anything away from the sincerity or the intensity of the desire to escape, the will to unfit, the drive to transform, the infinite resistance to categorisation, the demand to be regarded as a minority of one.

'Mi have een droom'

Bouazza is a productive author across many genres. In addition to his literary prose he publishes newspaper articles, essays on literature, film and broader cultural topics. He is a prolific translator of Arabic poetry and Shakespeare; he writes for the stage, plays and even libretto; he has written a political pamphlet. In 2004 Bouazza was awarded the prestigious *Gouden Uil* literary prize for his novel *Paravion*, which remains his critically most acclaimed work to date. Although Bouazza frequently contributes to the public debates, as a literary artist he maintains his – strategic – stance of a strict separation between politics and art. This is very different from the highly successful writer and actor, Ramsey Nasr, who is probably the most outspoken and politically engaged Dutch author of the moment.

In 2009 the author, actor, director, translator and political activist Ramsey Nasr, son of a Dutch mother and a Palestinian father, was voted Poet Laureate of the Netherlands after a troubled public campaign during which the nominees were encouraged to tout for the public vote. Nasr publically denounced the election procedure and, in a powerful and rather ironic move, published his refusal to

engage with the process in a national newspaper. The elections should be about poetry, he stated, about the evocative and transformative power of language, and not about media exposure or the person behind the poetry. The Netherlands is 'in need of a poet' who is willing to use his or her poetry for the benefit of a nation in search of itself:

Why is it that we are now electing the greatest Dutch person that ever lived? Why are we, at this very point in time, engaged in drawing up national canons? [...] Dutch people want better education, better politicians, better citizens – and we end up with ourselves. Who are we? What is it, the Netherlands? I think in all modesty that a poet can help with that search. Not by providing answers, but by asking questions. The Netherlands needs a poet (Nasr, 2009a).

Nasr won the vote. Nasr's verbalisation of the state of a nation 'adrift'; his drive for poetic meaning outside the strictly aesthetic; his experience as a performer; and, not unimportantly, his bicultural background that granted him a 'natural' authority to address all things multicultural made him the ideal candidate to speak to and for the nation. And he fulfilled the role with gusto. His legacy as the national poet (from 2009 to 2013) comprises of some twenty-three poems, seven cds with selected Dutch poetry from the Middle-Ages to the present day, all selected and read by Nasr (2012) and twenty-one poetry videos aimed at promoting poetry among young people (Nasr and Nasr, 2013). Making full use of digital environments, Nasr reintroduces orality and performance as vital components in the transmission of meaning and his best-known poem as poet laureate, 'Mi have een droom' (2009b) is no exception. The poem – like much of Nasr's work – appears driven by the urgency of content, but it is the powerful form – of which Nasr's performance is an integral part – that determines its impact.

'Mi have een droom' is a poem that has both an existence as a video and in printed form. First published on the digital channel of the national newspaper *NRC* the video shows Nasr perform his poem against the backdrop of the city of Rotterdam, also the setting of the poem. Projected into the future to 2059, the poem is the lament of an elderly male speaker who feels that his beloved city

Roffadam has changed beyond recognition. In an emotional monologue he blames the immigrants, the newcomers, for acting as if they own the place and for a lack of respect and manners. They have destroyed the city: 'di hebben da dockz in da fitti gezet'.ⁱⁱ He combines nostalgic longing and regret over his loss of youth with feelings of resentment and discontent about multicultural Rotterdam. The poem culminates in a vision, his 'droom': to put back the clock to the times of his youth when, at least in his memory, that city was still a well-organized space where the lines between 'blakka-zwart & wit lijk snow' were clear and definitive. It is worth noticing at this point that the time the speaker longs back to, the time of his youth when he ruled the roost, is none other than our present-day. The memories of the 66-year old speaker, born in 1993, put the time of his childhood and adolescence in our present tense. Yet, his description of contemporary Rotterdam as a place where everything stays the same ('daar bleef alles lijk het was') is not likely to correspond with our perception and experience of urban life today. Rotterdam, like all bigger cities in the Netherlands, is a multicultural and multi-ethnic space with around 40% its population of multicultural heritage.

The aggrieved tone of the speaker, his all pervasive sense of lost ownership, the drawing on clichés from the multicultural debate ('vol is vol'), even the inclusion of snippets of local football songs ('hand in hand'), it all contributes to a mood of anger and pent-up frustration. The speaker's dream is 'lang bewaard & opgezwollen' (long stored away and swollen) and the connotation of swelling and release with the male sexual organ is no coincidence here. The speaker imagines Rotterdam as an available female, a temptress who lures the speaker into her dark allies to offer sexual fulfilment. It is significant that in his male phantasy, it is the city that asks to be possessed ('play mi down op plattegrond, breek mi billen, gimmi bossi') and that it is his mother who gives her approval as long as he treats the women politely ('prick die chickes met 2 woorden'). The 'possessing' of the city under the license of the mother confirms the natural rights of the speaker: this is *his* Rotterdam.

The white male speaker claims his stake through the repeated phrase 'Mi have een droom', which immediately activates the subtext of Martin Luther King's

famous speech. Whereas King's 'I have a dream' framed his vision of a future of racial equality and tolerance, the speaker's 'droom' is an expression of the opposite: he 'dreams backwards' and wishes for a city that is frozen in time and passively awaiting his return: 'ik droom achteruit, van een stittie die stilstaat & thuis op mi wacht (I dream backwards of a city that does not change and waits for me at home). This closing line in which the city waits at 'home' for the speaker to return from his exploits in the city, extends the earlier personification but equally underlines the impossibility of his wish.

Colonial nostalgia

The speaker's lament of the lost sexual domination over a beloved pure and structured city shows considerable overlap with that other mood of loss and longing within Dutch society: colonial nostalgia. Pamela Pattynama has noted that in Indies literature – generally understood to cover the writing about or connected with the former Dutch East Indies and present-day Indonesia – 'nostalgic tales persist in spite of studies and representations that tell opposite stories' (2012, 97; see also Pattynama 2007: 69-82). The most widespread metaphor of colonial nostalgia is the evocation of the beloved colony as a 'mysterious Other, a female space awaiting Dutch male enterprise, adventure and sexuality' (2012: 99). It is this image that Nasr adopts when he constructs his speaker's lament for a lost Rotterdam. The 'love affair', to represent the stages of colonial conquest, possession and loss, is first of all echoed in the speaker's sense of 'natural' entitlement: he can 'take' the city as he desires. The speaker performs his role as a 'big white native male' ('mi was die grote otochtone condoekoe') through the sexual subjugation of the female city; the master who claims the 'hood' as his possession. Moreover, the way in which the speaker mourns the loss of the Roffadam of his youth also aligns with colonial nostalgia. According to Paul Bijl, 'Dutch colonial nostalgia has shown itself to include a mourning element for the loss of a past which, in comparison to the present, seemed more settled and ordered, particularly in racial terms' (2013: 129). Nasr's plays out all three elements Bijl identifies here: nostalgic Roffadam used to be more settled ('everything stayed the same there' ('daar bleef alles lijk het was')) the people were still clean and organised ('keurig en strak') and, most

importantly, everybody stayed in their own ethnic community 'blakka-zwart & wit lijkt snow'.

In the closing lines of the poem the speaker draws on another powerful collective memory to underline his natural claim to the city. He uses the word 'vroeger' (in the olden days) three times in quick succession to focus the reader's gaze on the past to a time 'when the day did not blow straight through me like grit in my wide open heart'. The image of an open heart in the context of Rotterdam immediately evokes the city's best-known monument, 'The Destroyed City' (1953). This statue to commemorate the bombing of Rotterdam in May 1940 depicts a human figure with its heart ripped out reaching up to the sky in a gesture of despair. It is an important visualisation of World War II memory culture in the Netherlands. Nasr's speaker uses the image of the open heart ('me wijdopen hart') to stake his claim: he suggests a continuity between himself and the city's devastated, yet heroic, past when the city was also overrun by strangers, in this case the Nazi occupiers.

In 'Mi have een droom' Nasr connects the national narrative of lost empire and Dutch World War II memory culture with personal nostalgia as expressed by the speaker. Thus he not only reveals an interconnectedness of individual and cultural discourses, but he also points towards historical continuity: the way the Netherlands remembers its history emerges from the musings of a speaker projected forward to 2059. And this is where Nasr's resistance breaks out: the way we 'speak the nation' now will determine our future.

This leads me to the most striking element of Nasr's performance poem: its language. Nasr's attack on the way contemporary Netherlands 'speaks the nation' is through his representations of the nation's speak. For 'mi have een droom' Nasr coined what you could call a made-up urban language: Dutch, English, German, Surinamese, Arabic, and various other languages combined with neologisms and made up words fused into a multilingual slang. Thus the speaker expresses his nostalgia for 'die goede oude klok' through a highly hybrid language, his own language, his mother tongue. And it is his own language in

particular that makes his longing for the good old mono-cultural times suspect: not because his longing is unreal but because the cultural purity he longs for never existed. Between *what* is said and *how* it is said stretches an ironic gap that exposes his dream for what is really is: not vision but narrow nationalism. It is language that resists and opposes the speaker's sense of entitlement and belonging; this is poetry to squash the persistent myth of purity and continuity.

Conclusion

Robert Eaglestone in his thought-provoking essay 'Contemporary fiction in the academy: towards a manifesto' suggests that critics of contemporary fiction have a double task: 'to engage with contemporary fiction and simultaneously to develop new ways of understanding it' (2013b: 1100). The latter is necessary because contemporary literature is not a 'real' discipline according to Eaglestone. There are no clear questions, no real problems, 'we do not even know to what extent we agree or disagree as to what 'contemporary' means even in the mundane sense of 'when' it is' (1093). In order to become a viable field of study, Eaglestone calls for a 'rough field of consensus and dissensus' around nine questions or loci of concern.

The study of multicultural literature, as an integral and shaping constituent of contemporary fiction, is covered by the same questions. The debates discussed above around what multicultural literature is, how it should be read and theorized, should be seen as an expression of exactly what Eaglestone calls for: engagement with new ways of reading and understanding that strive to create and shape a permeable, but none the less loosely conceived 'area of study'. This article aims to respond to the Eaglestone's double task, in particular with the first element: to engage with the writing. I have applied a common frame to the work of Bouazza and Nasr. This broad approach may not render concrete theoretical concepts but it does reveal connectivity between two major Dutch authors within the wider networks of multicultural writing and Dutch contemporary literature; a connection that might otherwise have remained hidden.

It is the mode of resistance that connects the writing of Hafid Bouazza and Ramsey Nasr: resistance against labels and categories, against the myth of purity, expectations of readers, against simplification and reduction even resistance against the idea that poetry is elitist and difficult. New meanings emerge when rigid demarcation lines are transgressed and when fixed categories collapse. The perceived failure of the Dutch multicultural experiment, for example, releases a new engagement with postcoloniality which emerges in Ramsey Nasr's 'Mi have een droom' when Nasr places multicultural discontent at the heart of historically sanctioned power relations. The expression of present-day nostalgia for cultural and ethnic purity is expressed through the most prevalent metaphor from colonial representations, shot through with reference to World War II remembrance culture. This heady mix exposes the suppressed fears and concerns that drive and shape Dutch national narratives. Bouazza's literary work shows a sustained engagement with the desire to escape and transcend. Genre demarcations are resisted, attempts at demarcation and categorisation crossed, and expectations thwarted.

It is their way of 'seeing and telling', the infinite resistance through form and language displayed by these authors, that marks their engagement with the Dutch language, with the Dutch literary tradition, with the Dutch self image, Dutch society and multicultural debate. Yet their work is more than opposition and resistance: it is also a celebration of the richness of language, of the possibilities of storytelling, and of the enjoyment and significance of performance, the potential to transform, to generate new meanings. An integral part of their resistance lies exactly in their engagement with language and form, in exploring and stretching the potential of language and form to evoke and transform. It is their expression of resistance *and* celebration that has rendered some of the most exciting writing contemporary Dutch literature has to offer.

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ⁱ The latest figures from Statistics Netherlands (CBS, 2015) indicate that the largest group of so-called autochthonous Dutch (born outside of the Netherlands or with at least one parent born outside of the Netherlands) has a Turkish background (396.555) and that Dutch-Moroccan is the second largest with 380.755. The third group is Dutch with a Surinamese, and thus a postcolonial, connection: 348.662.

ⁱⁱ Because of the highly complicated language mix that Nasr uses, it is possible to translate the text into Standard English and do justice to the impact of the poem. Language and meaning are inextricably interwoven. The (inadequate) translations are mine [HL].