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Discovering the Dutch: On Culture and Society of the Netherlands
AUP, 2024
Third, revised edition
Edited by Emmeline Besamusca and Jaap Verheul

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16 Diversity in Literature

Henriette Louwerse

Like all Western European countries, the Netherlands is a multiethnic and multicultural society. About 25 percent of its citizens have a connection with migration, either because they were born outside of the Netherlands or because their parents or grandparents were. The Netherlands has become what Steven Vertovec calls a super-diverse society with a high level of migration and a high degree of differentiation between and within groups. The us–them binary, in which newcomers are urged to adapt and assimilate, is slowly making way for the recognition that a higher degree of intercultural competence is required by all: all Dutch are part of this dynamic society, whether or not one has a migration history.

Since the early 2000s a sustained attention to sociocultural integration has dominated the political and media debate. Ethnocultural nationalist sentiments may still be on the rise, there is also a growing awareness that the way forward is to face up to the nation's colonial past and to racial and ethnic inequalities within society today. One of the manifestations of this growing awareness is a widespread acceptance of the need for diverse representation in politics, the media, and business, but especially in literature and the arts.

During the influential Frankfurter Buchmesse in Germany in 2016, the Dutch and Flemish delegation presented their authors with the slogan "This is what we share." The promotion campaign highlighted ten authors in particular; no author of color was included. Five years on, that would be unthinkable. The need for diversity and inclusion has penetrated social, political, and cultural life. Authors of color and authors with a migration background are widely and publicly recognized and celebrated. Surinamese-Dutch author Astrid Roemer was awarded the three-yearly Dutch Literature Prize in 2021, Anton de Kom—author of the seminal *We Slaves of Suriname*—was officially included in the Canon of Dutch History, and second-generation Eurasian (*Indo*) writer Alfred Birney won two national prizes for this novel *The Interpreter from Java* (*De tolk van Java*) which addresses an unprocessed and violent colonial past. Young authors and poets like Simone Atangana Bekono, Radna Fabias, and Lisette Ma Neza top the lists during literary festivals.

Whether they are postcolonial writers—a term that tends to be reserved for authors with links to the former Dutch colonies—or diasporic writers with a different migration background, their writing is considered relevant, critical, and urgent. They represent a movement that is slowly and irreversibly redrawing and redefining a cultural landscape in which the diasporic experience is no longer relegated to the periphery but is shifting from the margin to the center. Increasingly, the Netherlands is a place "where cultural hybridity and multiplicity of being and of belonging are the norm."[1]

This chapter will discuss recent expressions of diversity in Dutch literature. The debate around migration, racism, and the colonial past has become an important theme in the past decades. Although many white Dutch authors address these issues in their writing too, this chapter will focus on the diasporic authors and their literary response to issues of inclusion and exclusion. How does their work and their engagement with the public debate impact on the Dutch self-image? What is the impact of their artistic alliances? How do they redefine Dutchness? This chapter does not suggest that there is a single story to be told about diversity in Dutch literature. Each author responds to their specific situation. However, the critical frame of superdiversity reveals patterns, strategies, and alliances that have previously gone unnoticed.[2]

The Country in Me (1996)

In the 1990s, migration authors took center stage amid a flurry of publications. The appearance of these second-generation newcomers gave rise to what Liesbeth Minnaard recently called a "multicultural hype" in which multiculturalism and the multicultural society became the dominant political and social issue.[3] Publishers were looking for "migrant authors" to bring their portfolios into the modern age. No newspaper was complete without an "outsider" columnist. The new multicultural Netherlands was resolutely pinned on the

[1] Serena Scarabello and Marleen de Witte, "Afroeuropean Modes of Self-Making: Afro-Dutch and Afro-Italian Projects Compared", *Open Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 2019): 317-331.

[2] Using generic labels is always both uncomfortable and unavoidable. I follow Reni Eddo-Lodge and many others in the use of people of color to indicate anybody who is not white. Black is used for writers of African and Afro-Caribbean heritage and for people of mixed race. There is equally much debate about capitalizing Black. See, for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Case for Capitalising the *B* in Black", *The Atlantic*, 18 June 2020. After much deliberation, I opted for Black and white. Diasporic writers is used as a generic term to indicate all authors who identify with a heritage of migration.

[3] Liesbeth Minnaard, "'We doen immers niet aan ras.' Interculturaliteit, postkolonialisme en ras in de Nederlandse letterkunde," *Nederlandse letterkunde* 26, no. 22-3 (2021): 230.

second-generation authors with Moroccan or Turkish ancestry whose fathers had been recruited for a labor-hungry industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The interest arose from their "otherness" which sprung from their bicultural background, their other language (preferably Arabic), and their Islamic upbringing. It is striking that color was absent: the focus was steadfastly on language, culture, and religion.

The new authors were by no means the first authors of color who wrote in Dutch. Writers from the former Dutch colonies of Suriname and Indonesia as well as the Dutch Antilles were established, or emerging, names in Dutch literary circles: Albert Helman, Frank Martinus Arion, Bea Vianen, Astrid Roemer, Marion Bloem, and Alfred Birney. However, their work was categorized as Surinamese, Antillean, or Dutch East Indian literature, evoking the legacy of the colonial ties. This was regarded as a different category from the writing of second-generation labor migrants, or of exilic authors, such as the Iranian-born Kader Abdolah. The latter represented Dutch multicultural society, seemingly unrelated to the nation's colonial legacy.[4]

The mood of celebratory multiculturalism was reflected by the programmatic volume *Het land in mij* (*The Country in Me*), compiled and prefaced by Ayfer Ergün in 1996.[5] *The Country in Me* is a collection of twelve stories by emerging writers with a migration background with the subtitle "New stories by young writers on the borderline between two worlds." The cover shows a dark blue sky over what appears to be a desert landscape with in the bottom right corner the eye of a woman whose face blends in with the sand. Ergün describes the contributors as second-generation Turkish and Moroccan authors who publish in Dutch, and she adds: "Their stories reflect influences and impressions that are new for Dutch literature."[6] That is certainly how the new authors were hailed: new, exotic, and different. For the literary establishment they embodied successful cultural integration and a window on the experience of the "others" that increasingly filled Dutch cities, schools, and workplaces.

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[4] In contrast with the present interest in investigating rather than ignoring the colonial past, in the 1990s there was a distinct silence around colonial history. Although it is part of Dutch national history, it was not part of its consciousness or national narrative. As Gloria Wekker argues, "the loss of empire is not worked through, but simply forgotten," in *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 17.

[5] Ayfer Ergün, ed., *Het land in mij: Nieuwe verhalen van jonge schrijvers op de grens van twee werelden* (Amsterdam: Arena, 1996).

[6] Ergün, 7-8.

Ergün emphasizes that the contributors do not want to be lumped together under one convenient and reductive label: "After all, they each have their own background, create their own style and cover divergent topics."[7] She rejects categorization and labeling used to suppress the authors' individuality and artistry. "Migrant" or "allochthonous" (lit.: from elsewhere) were labels to keep the new writers in their place by focusing on their background rather than on their literary products or engagement with textuality. This rejection must also be read against the background of the literary culture at the time with multiculturalism still very much pinned on the "other." White Dutch authors enjoyed the freedom to express their individual concerns unbound by moral or social duties. Unlike today, there was little or no expectation of social or political engagement through their writing.

In 1997, when Dutch-Surinamese columnist and author Anil Ramdas suggested that white Dutch authors were shirking their moral responsibility as society's mediators by either erasing or stereotyping the presence of race in their writing, he encountered fierce opposition.[8] Many felt that Ramdas was undermining the fundamental right of an author to produce art away from transient political issues or societal discontent.[9] In practice, however, this autonomy was reserved for white authors only: the "newcomers" were expected to use their specific position in society as the driving force behind their writing. They were either the ethnic informant, allowing readers a glimpse into their "other" world, or the cultural bridge, aiming to further societal cohesion. When Ergün rejects labeling based on cultural background, it is this differentiation between "real literature" and "intercultural writing" that she rallies against.

Hafid Bouazza

One of the contributors to *Het land in mij*, Hafid Bouazza, could not agree more. Bouazza would develop into the most remarkable and outspoken writer of this generation. His oeuvre

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[7] Ergün, 8-9.
[8] Ranil Ramdas, "Moedwil en kwade trouw bij blanke schrijvers; Niemand heeft oog voor het vreemde," *NRC Handelsblad*, 14 March 1997. The most outspoken response to Ramdas' article came from Joost Zwagerman whose novel *De buitenvrouw* had been taken as an example of bad faith in Ramdas' article. See, for example Sjoerd de Jong, "Zwagerman verdedigt zijn integriteit," *NRC Handelsblad*, 7 April 1997.
[9] According to Zwagerman, writers are "on call" to comment on social issues. In his defense, Zwagerman was one of the few white authors who introduced Black characters in his novels in the 1990s. Joost Zwagerman, "Literatuur als inloopcentrum," *NRC Handelsblad*, 28 March 1997.

covers short stories, novels, essays, columns, literary reviews, as well as a theater play and a libretto. He translated and adapted plays by Shakespeare and Marlowe into Dutch and was an avid promoter and translator of Arabic poetry. In 2004, he was awarded the Amsterdam Prize for the Arts (*De Amsterdamse Prijs voor de Kunsten*) and the prestigious literary prize *De Gouden Uil* for his novel *Paravion*. In 2014, he was laureled as the Free Thinker of the Year, by the atheist-humanist society *Het Vrije Woord.* His writing, and at times his public personae, attracted much attention. Bouazza courted controversy with his unrelenting criticism of what he believed were the strictures imposed on individual freedom by Islam. He celebrated intemperance and excess; his alcohol dependency was a recurrent topic during interviews.

Bouazza and his work underline that the relationship between the literary work and the context of its creator is a complicated and delicate issue. The tension between the literary and the extra-literary is a feature of all writing, but during the multicultural hype of the mid-1990s, this tension became critical. The work of these "new" authors could not be read just aesthetically; their work and their presence were too closely connected with the social and political realities of the time. Bouazza opted for radical assimilation. He demanded to be taken seriously as an author, without adjectives or qualifications. His insistence that "real" literature operated in a realm far removed from the messy contingencies of the present, must also be seen as a response to a literary landscape that had not adapted to the new multicultural reality. Bouazza exposed the inequality of a predominantly monocultural system, through his public performance, but above all through his writing.

From his earliest appearance on the literary scene, Bouazza stressed that he neither felt a spokesperson for the Dutch-Moroccan segment of Dutch society nor aimed to further the understanding between cultures: "I am not a social worker."[10] For him, the world of literature was a world of the individual artist's imagination, a realm away from the real life of biographically or multiculturally inspired assumptions: "I solemnly believe in the individual expression of the individual artist. I solemnly believe in the personal universe created by the author."[11] Yet, as an author, Bouazza was acutely aware of his position within the literary field and as part of a society that was looking for multicultural success. His response as an artist

[10] Wilma Kieskamp, "Bekroonde Hafid Bouazza gebruikt archaïsch Nederlands in sprookjesachtige verhalen," *Trouw*, 21 January 1997.
[11] Hafid Bouazza, *Een beer in bontjas: Autobiografische beschouwingen*, 2nd rev. ed. (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2004), 62.

was to use his *context* as part of his *text*. In particular his early work revolves around what he would call a "game of deception," a playful misleading of the reader by confirming *and* undermining their expectations.[12]

Bouazza's debut *Abdulah's Feet* (1996) is a case in point.[13] Almost all of the stories of this collection depict North African village life. The stories have a fairytale-like quality: feet can think and talk, trees turn into humans and vice versa. Yet, the village is far from idyllic: sexual aberrations rule, spiritual leaders are corrupt and degenerate, stealing and cheating are the order of the day. This setting resonates with many Western ideas about the Arab world: cruel, perverted, horrifying, but also romantic, sexually titillating, and perverted. At first sight, Bouazza appears to confirm what his European readers expect from a village in Morocco. However, shrouded in mellifluous language and a playful tone, Bouazza serves his readers oppression of women, fake religious piety, superstitious silliness, and *Jihad* hysteria. The reader is beginning to feel increasingly uncomfortable when they realize that what appeared to be making fun of the exotic Other turns into a confrontation with one's own (often thoughtlessly racist) attitudes.

Bouazza's demand for full creative room for maneuver and his rejection of labels and characterizations run as a continuous thread through all his public performances and above all through his work. From his debut to his final enigmatic novella *Meriswin* (2014), Bouazza proved *hors categorie*, beyond categorization. His language was described as baroque, kitsch, and enchanting and his style flew against all expectations of "newcomers" by shunning brevity and reveling in the metaphorical. He seamlessly blends made-up words with forgotten Dutch words. His writing is both rooted in Dutch literary tradition and reaching far beyond it. In embracing the practice of self-making, he forged his own path and challenged existing and exclusionary expectations put on his art.

Vignette 1. Literary Prizes: From Canon to Diversity

Mi have een droom (2010)

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[12] *Beer in Bontjas*, 66.

[13] Hafid Bouazza, *De voeten van Abdulah* (Amsterdam: Arena, 1996). Available in English as *Abdullah's Feet*, trans. Ina Rilke (London: Review, 2000).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the mood in the country was shifting. In times of societal unrest and discontent, art and literature were called upon to drop their aesthetic disinterestedness and embrace an active role in shaping social and political debates. Ramsey Nasr, author, actor, director, translator, and political activist, son of a Dutch mother and a Palestinian father, unashamedly voiced this artistic responsibility. Upon his appointment as Dutch poet laureate (*Dichter des Vaderlands*), he argued that his poetry should serve the benefit of "a nation in search of itself." The Netherlands was "in need of a poet" to address urgent questions: "Who are we? What are they, the Netherlands?" And he added, "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."[14] Nasr's verbalization of the Netherlands as a country adrift, his drive for poetic meaning outside the strictly aesthetic, his experience as a performer and, not unimportantly, his bicultural background granted him a "natural" authority to speak to and for the nation. He did so with gusto; his best-known poem as poet laureate, *Mi have een droom*, is a particularly effective example.[15]

Although this poem, like much of Nasr's work, is driven by the urgency of content, its impact is determined by the powerful form—of which Nasr's performance is an integral part. Projected into the future of 2059, *Mi have een droom* is the lament of an elderly white male speaker who feels that his beloved city Roffadam (a thinly disguised Rotterdam) has changed beyond recognition. In an emotional monologue, he blames immigrants, newcomers, for acting as if they own the place and for a lack of respect and good manners. He combines nostalgic longing and regret over his loss of youth with feelings of resentment and discontent. The poem culminates in a vision, his dream (*droom*): to put the clock back to the times of his youth, when, at least in his memory, the city was still a well-organized space where the lines between Black and White were clear and where he could play the role of the alpha male, the "bigtime poenami-master."

The aggrieved tone of the speaker, his pervasive sense of lost ownership, the drawing on clichés from the immigration debate, even the inclusion of snippets from local soccer anthems—all contribute to the mood of anger and frustration. The speaker feels that his

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[14] Ramsey Nasr, "Bij verkiezing van Dichter des Vaderlands speelt poëzie geen rol," *de Volkskrant*, 19 January 2009.

[15] In 2015 the poem was painted on an 800-meter pedestrian air bridge at Annabel Schietraat 20 in Rotterdam. Ramsey Nasr, *Mi have een droom*. Available online https://straatpoezie.nl/gedicht/mi-have-een-droom/

"natural rights" are being undermined. He claims this stake with the repeated multilingual phrase "Mi have een droom," which immediately activates the subtext of Martin Luther King's famous speech "I have a dream." But whereas King envisioned a future of racial equality and tolerance, in the poem by Nasr the speaker's dream is an expression of the opposite: his dream is of a city frozen in time (*een stilte die stilstaat*).

Nasr gives voice to the victimized speaker who feels that his world, his city, the place he loves and claims as his own, is being taken over by "others." At the time Nasr wrote the poem, the narrative of loss was a familiar complaint, but that is not the most striking feature of the poem. What makes *Mi have een droom* such a monument of its time is Nasr's language. The poem is written in a made-up urban language, a multilingual slang consisting of Dutch, English, German, Surinamese, Arabic, and various other languages, combined with neologisms and invented words. Thus, the speaker expresses his longing for the good old times through a highly hybrid language, his own language, his diasporic mother tongue. It is Nasr's language that makes his nostalgia for a monocultural past suspect, not because his longing itself is unreal, but because the cultural purity he longs for never existed. An ironic gap stretches between what is said and how it is said, exposing his dream for what it actually is: not vision, but exclusion. It is language that resists and opposes the speaker's sense of entitlement and belonging. This is poetry designed to quash persistent myths of purity and continuity.

Black: Afro-European literature from the Low Countries (2018)

In 2021, the Rijksmuseum organized a high-profile exhibition under the title "Slavery." For the first time a national museum devoted an entire exhibition to the Dutch colonial involvement with slavery and, significantly, presented this as an integral part of the story of the Netherlands. Not as a separate, closed off historical period, but as a system that still impacts on Dutch society today. The silence around colonial history has been broken. Cities like Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht are investigating their involvement with slavery and offering official apologies. In 2021, Prime Minister Mark Rutte officially acknowledged that there is institutional racism in the Netherlands,[16] and on 19 December 2022 he offered an

[16] That racism is back on the political agenda underlined in the 2021 coalition agreement: "There is no place for institutional racism in our society." The term racism appears six times in the 2021 coalition agreement

official apology on behalf of the Dutch government for "past actions of the State."[17] King Willem-Alexander followed suit on 1 July 2023 during Keti Koti, the national ceremony to commemorate the abolition of slavery in Suriname and the former Netherlands Antilles. He recognized: "The horrific legacy of slavery remains with us today. Its effects can still be felt in racism in our society."[18] Active antiracist movements continue to push for the recognition of the lasting legacy of colonialism in contemporary Western societies.[19] The once cherished self-image of the Netherlands as a color-blind and antiracist nation is no longer tenable.[20]

This shift did not bypass the Dutch literary world. Also in 2021, Rasit Elibol put together a collection of essays called *The New Colonial Reading List* (*De nieuwe koloniale leeslijst*). With a growing commitment to reckon with the colonial past, Elibol argues it is time to redress the balance in literary terms too: "It is urgent to review the traditional canon so that everybody can recognize themselves in those stories."[21] Elibol's use of "everybody" is telling: it takes the multiracial and multicultural diversity of Dutch society as given. The past and present narratives of the Netherlands should cover the (hi)stories and realities of all Dutch and not be the site of a white elite.

This call for a recalibration of Dutch literature is one aspect of a wider emancipatory push in Dutch letters that could be labeled an "Afro-European turn." New authors of color step into the limelight with a clear affirmation: they come from two continents, Europe and Africa. They also have a clear mission, like the artist and poet Lisette Ma Neza, who announced her performance *L'Europe Noir: Some girls want to go to Europe* as follows: "It is my mission for now. I am seeking the stories of Black Europe, of Afropeans, l'Europe Noir. To understand what it means to be Afropean […]. Even I, I belong to two continents. To both of

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compared with zero mentions in the equivalent document of 2017. *Omzien naar elkaar, vooruitkijken naar de toekomst*, *Coalitieakkoord* 2021-2025, 15 December 2021, 29.

[17] For a full transcript of PM Mark Rutte's apology speech: https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2022/12/19/government-apologises-for-the-netherlands-role-in-the-history-of-slavery

[18] For a full transcripts of King Willem-Alexander's speech: https://www.royal-house.nl/documents/speeches/2023/07/01/speech-by-king-willem-alexander-at-the-commemoration-of-the-role-of-the-netherlands-in-the-history-of-slavery

[19] Important voices are Black Archives Amsterdam, NiNsee (National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy), and Mappingslavery.nl. Many initiatives to discover historical ties with slavery and colonialism are taking place on a local level, in towns, provinces and museums.

[20] Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 30-49.

[21] "Het is hoog tijd om de canon te herzien, zodat iedereen zich kan herkennen in die verhalen," Rasit Elibol, *De nieuwe koloniale leeslijst* (Amsterdam: Das Mag, 2021), 23.

them at the same time, all at once."[22] Her mission aligns with that of writers Vamba Sheriff and Ebissé Rouw, who in 2018 compiled the volume *Zwart: Afro-Europese literatuur uit de Lage Landen* (*Black: Afro-European Literature from the Low Countries*).[23] In the collection's introduction they state that they want to expose and remedy the absence of Black stories and Black experience within Dutch literature and the broader Low Countries context, because the stories "that are specific to the geographical context of Black people in the Low Countries are being ignored."[24] They see this as part of a systemic absence—or denial—of the Black experience in the Netherlands and Belgium: Blackness is suppressed within the Dutch-language literary tradition, while American Black authors—who describe events and situations that took and are taking place at a safe distance—are widely read and celebrated.[25]

In addition to representation, Sheriff and Bouw add a second dimension to the role and position of Black authors. Their stories not only *reflect* the diversity of the Netherlands, they also play an active role in *shaping* today's social and political debate. They do not just grapple with a "complex heritage" that gives rise to questions of identity that negotiate two worlds. Their role exceeds the personal as they are also actively engaged in the shaping of "the discourse around big social and political themes that concern the world today: injustice, inequality, chauvinism, sexism, racism in all its manifestations."[26] These writers do not see their roles confined to "words on a page"; they are at the center of critical global movements and thus it is their role to redress, reshape, and represent the world today. This is an unapologetic, self-assured verbalization of the specific transnational position of the Black and diasporic author in the Dutch literary landscape and, significantly, beyond.

Breaking out of a national frame is a third aspect of the position described by Bouw and Sheriff. The evocation of new, transnational alliances, the Afro-European—or Afropean—creates a reality and space in which a Black author, or any author of color, can connect with a creative heritage beyond the white Dutch/European frame. The escape from

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[22] The quotation is a transcription of a video for the *Europalia Arts Festival*, Lisette Ma Neza_Europe Noir available on Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/647778492. She credits Johny Pitts, *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 2020) as her source of inspiration.

[23] Vamba Sherif and Ebissé Rouw, eds., *Zwart: Afro-Europese literatuur uit de Lage Landen* [Black: Afro-European Literature from the Low Countries] (Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2018).

[24] Sherif and Rouw, 8.

[25] Gloria Wekker attributes this lack of interest in and representation of Blackness to a collective Dutch dislike "to be identified with migrants," because that would undermine "the dominant representation […] of Dutchness as whiteness and being Christian." *White Innocence*, 6 and 7.

[26] Sherif and Rouw, 10.

a reductive national context, in which white means to be universal, opens a discursive space for the creation of new stories and the discovery of old ones. It also allows for a new sense of belonging to a collective Black community in Europe. Instead of something to repress or deny, race offers an escape from existing hierarchies that are based on the outdated assumption that being Dutch means being monocultural and monoethnic.

Vignette 2. *Confrontations*: Rewriting the Rules

Many poets

In the early 2020s, there is a growing recognition that the past is not simply behind us, but equally around us and part of us. As a result of the increased interest in Dutch colonial history, the silence around the lasting legacy of Dutch imperialism has been broken. Politically, the Netherlands is slowly moving away from a debate in which the integration is cast in terms of cultural essentialism and calls for assimilation. There is a budding consciousness of collective diversity in which "national culture" is constantly defined and redefined. Many authors search for their personal history and reflect on how it affects their position in the world today. Writers like Johan Fretz, Karin Amatmoekrim, and Raoul de Jong trace their Surinamese ancestry to open up a space for their mixed heritage within Dutch literature. However, there is still work to be done. The jurors of the 2022 Libris Literary Award noted that the diversity characteristic of today's Dutch society is still not reflected in contemporary literary production: "it is imperative that publishers keep investing in a diverse portfolio."[27]

That present-day diversity also demands a review of canonical literary texts is recognized as a moral imperative.[28] The renewed interest in *We Slaves of Suriname*, the seminal work of Surinamese author Anton de Kom, is a case in point. Originally published in

[27] Libris Prize jury report: https://librisprijs.nl/juryrapport-nominaties-libris-literatuur-prijs-2022

[28] In addition to Elibol, there is the extensive *De postkoloniale Spiegel: De Nederlands-Indische letteren herlezen*, eds. Rick Honings, Coen van 't Veer, and Jacqueline Bel [The Postcolonial Mirror: Dutch East-Indian literature reread] (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2021).

1934, De Kom records the history of Suriname and the cruelties of the Dutch colonial occupation from the point of view of the Surinamese, the oppressed. For years, De Kom and his writing were celebrated—and debated—in Suriname, but marginalized in the Netherlands. Recently, the recognition of the importance of De Kom and his work has become symbolic of the way the Dutch silence around the colonial past is being broken. In a significant gesture to recognize and redress, De Kom was included in the official Canon of the Netherlands in 2020.[29]

Nearly three decades of diasporic writing also reveal that labels and categories are strategically created, or resisted, to challenge existing structures and hierarchies. The emergence of a transnational Afro-European perspective allows literary authors to forge a new way of being in the world, away from the often still monoculturally and racially connotated Dutchness. A quarter of a century earlier, authors rejected the label "migration writing" in order to expose the expectations of the Dutch reading public and to challenge concepts of group identity for some and the right to individuality for others. Adapted for their specific cultural time and space, both the editors of *The Country in Me* (1996) and of *Black* (2018) are questioning existing understandings of "real" literature, or of "Dutchness."

Today's diverse Dutch literature is a place to explore questions of race, identity, and belonging, challenging existing and exclusionary singularity and offering inspiration and empowerment. Over a decade after Ramsey Nasr's observation that the Netherlands needed a poet, his observation sounds like stating the obvious. Of course, the Netherlands need poets, and fortunately, there are many.

[29] The Canon of the Netherlands is predominantly an information and teaching tool, but it offers an insight into how the Netherlands wants to present itself as a nation: https://www.canonvannederland.nl/

Further reading

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Vignette 1. Literary Prizes: From Canon to Diversity

Literary prizes are an important part of the Dutch literary landscape. The Dutch language area enjoys over eighty literary prizes or awards. Apart from boosting the income and reputation of individual authors and their publishers, literary prizes are also significant cultural players in their own right. Their engagement exceeds literary-aesthetic qualities; they also reflect—and direct—ideological and societal concerns. Increasingly, juries of literary prizes are aware that literary prizes should not reproduce existing inequalities. Diversity is on the agenda.

Not all prizes are the same. There are state, sponsored, genre, and special interest group prizes. The jewel in the crown is the three-yearly *Prijs der Nederlandse Letteren* (Dutch Literature Prize) to honor a lifetime contribution to literature in Dutch. Introduced in 1956 as a joint Belgian and Dutch state prize, it involves a royal presentation in either Brussels or Amsterdam. Winning the prize is little short of a consecration, a sure way to cement one's place in the literary canon. In 2021, this honor was bestowed on Astrid Roemer as the first author of color and the first Surinamese writer to be recognized. The symbolic moment, however, sustained a scratch: when Roemer openly showed support for the former dictator and president of Suriname Desi Bouterse, who was convicted of murder and drug trafficking, the festive ceremony in Brussels was called off.

A prominent Amsterdam hotel and live television broadcasts are associated with the high-profile Libris Literature Award, sponsored by a national chain of bookstores. Modeled on the British Booker Prize, Libris offers fifty thousand euros and the benefit of a significant boost in book sales. The Libris jury has considerably more room to respond to societal movements than the Dutch Literature Prize: the award is presented yearly for a recent novel in Dutch. To date, the prize has been awarded three times to an author with a migration background, i.e. about 11 percent, of which twice in the past six years. In 2022, the Libris jury explicitly recognized diversity issues and its social responsibility: "Not by a long stretch is the diversity that characterizes contemporary society reflected in the authorship of Dutch literature. Publishing houses will have to continue to invest in a culturally diverse offer."

A successful early recognizer of the impact of literary awards is the El Hizjra Foundation. This Amsterdam-based foundation, advocating the Arab cultural and literary heritage, aims to "contribute to an inclusive society in which there is room for all citizens and

where participation is more than a matter of course." The El Hizjra Literary Prize, launched in 1992, takes the form of a writing competition to encourage and promote literary production by the Arabic and Berber diaspora in the broadest sense. The main incentive to participate is perhaps not the modest 350 euros in prize money, but rather the successful publicity campaign, the publication of the winning contribution, and the creative coaching the winners receive. Several winners of larger literary prizes, e.g. Abdelkader Benali and Mustafa Stitou, were thus first spotted and encouraged.

Vignette 2. *Confrontations*: Rewriting the Rules

The highly acclaimed 2020 debut novel by Simone Atangana Bekono, *Confrontations* (*Confrontaties*), depicts the impact of everyday racist bullying on the self-image of the teenager Salomé, who, like Atangana Bekono, has a Dutch mother and a father from Cameroon. Salomé struggles with an inward split, a "double-consciousness," described by W.E.B. Du Bois as "the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others."[30] Salomé Atabong senses that there are two versions of her: one that is having fun and engages in the things normal (white) teenagers do, e.g. traveling abroad or spending too much money. The second Salomé is the I-narrator of the novel, who carries a scar on her chin as a reminder of why she is serving six months in a youth detention center. She has inflicted serious bodily harm on two of her former classmates. The two subjected her to repeated racial aggression and bullying from her first day at secondary school.

Writing about racial inequality and discrimination is in itself not new. Arguably the internationally best-known Dutch novel, *Max Havelaar* (1860) by Multatuli, challenges the double exploitation of the Javanese laborers in the colonial Dutch East Indies (today's Indonesia). What is new is the way in which contemporary writers sound a self-aware demand to be heard, to make space not out of pity or benevolence, but because it is high time to redress Dutchness, to adjust the self-image of the nation in line with the multicultural and multiethnic reality of the Netherlands of the twenty-first century.

In 2016, the Surinamese-Dutch scholar Gloria Wekker put the discussion around Dutch self-representation firmly on the map. In *White Innocence* she argues that the way the Netherlands thinks of itself as a small, egalitarian, "colorblind" nation not only belies Dutch imperial history, but also serves to cover up existing structural inequalities. Monoethnicism and monoculturalism still prevail as the unspoken ideal, according to Wekker. In the early 2020s, it is clear that fewer and fewer people are sticking to the script. Many Dutch authors of color express their lived reality through their stories and their characters. Racism, coming of age in a predominantly white environment, identity, and mixed race in the Netherlands—these themes are no longer unsaid.

[30] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

Salomé's family encourage her to be compliant, to work hard, and sit out her sentence, but the years of humiliation prevent her from playing along. She wants to regain control not by apologizing but by rewriting the rulebook. *Confrontations* ends with a powerful politico-artistic statement. The power structures as we know them can no longer keep Salomé in the place assigned to her, at the sidelines. She confronts one of her classmates and demands that she be called by her full name: Salomé Henriette Constance Atabong. It is a healing gesture as well as a call to engage with systemic inequalities and to be truly inclusive: "I am not on the fringes; I am right in the center."[31]

[31] "Ik ben niet aan de rand, ik ben er middenin," Simone Atangana Bekono, *Confrontaties* (Amsterdam, Lebowski, 2021), 22.

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Prometheus, 2020). Recently, his fiction debut was released under the title *Rendez-vous in Praag* (Prometheus, 2023).

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