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'Who wants to feel white?' Race, Dutch culture and contested identities

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Abstract

Is the concept of 'whiteness' applicable to the Netherlands (and – mainland Europe)? This article explores cultural expressions of white normativity and possible interpretations of the notion of whiteness as identity. For that purpose we combine two data sets: first white and/or Dutch normativity in political and public life and in the media are discussed, and, second, everyday experiences of racial and/or national identity among whites. The former includes MA theses on newspaper coverage of the Dutch multicultural society. The latter draws from student essays about the meaning of whiteness in their life histories. Dutch students avoid references to 'skin colour' and to 'whiteness' because of the 'racial' connotations. Inequalities are not denied but recognized and verbalized more readily in terms of ethnicity, citizenship, national identity or western superiority and civilization.

'Race/Ethnicity: please mark appropriate box' is a standard item on official forms in the US. No big deal for the majority to tick the box 'Caucasian' or 'White'. But what about the situation where the very notion of 'race' is a sensitive, if not a taboo word, to be referred to indirectly (as in: 'she is dark') but not in terms of political, social or even statistical belonging (as in: 'white voters'). In the Netherlands it is considered morally wrong to register according to 'race'. Even 'ethnic' identification according to a Dutch law introduced in the 1998 (Wet SAMEN) requiring the registration of employees according to their ethnicity, had a short life. In 2004 when this law got discontinued, 30 per cent of the organizations still had not been willing to comply. Registering 'ethnicity', in the Dutch case meaning registering whether citizens themselves or at least one of their (grand)parents are

immigrants, felt too close to registering something like 'race'. There were also anxieties among ethnic groups about being stigmatized institutionally.

When asked to write a paper about whiteness in the Netherlands (and in Europe) we wondered, which whiteness in the Netherlands: cultural, political, psychological or maybe historical? Were we to look at 'our' race critical theory appraisal of the dominant culture as 'white' and impose the notion of whiteness, otherwise virtually absent as a Dutch paradigm? But what would 'white' mean? Did we mean with 'white' culture in fact the 'Dutch-ness' of the culture, the dominant representatives of whom are (racially) white? As international scholars in a global academic world where 'racial studies' are dominated by Anglo-Euro-American publications, we were familiar with the US proliferation of whiteness studies; with critical standpoints of white scholars who want to offer different strategies for addressing racial inequality (Roediger 2002; Perry 2002; Frankenberg 2004; McKinney 2005). What could whiteness mean, if applied to the Netherlands? We thought of examples close to home: for instance, the whiteness of Dutch academia, meaning the virtual absence of professors of colour, combined with the normativity of (masculine) western European cultures of knowledge (re)production (Bosch, Hoving and Wekker 1999; Botman *et al.* 2001; Wekker 2002; Essed 2004). There is the whiteness of the Dutch Art sector, where art with a capital A stands for white, Dutch, European (Trienekens 2004). But, we immediately also questioned whether and, if so, how the notion of 'whiteness' would add anything substantial to our understanding of the taken for granted normativity of the dominant (Dutch) culture as instruments of, for instance, 'academic racism' (Essed and Nimako 2006). Would it change our understanding of racist discourse in everyday situations (Verkuyten 1999), or the experience of everyday racism (Essed 1991)?

Scrutinizing whiteness, it has been demonstrated in the US, involves shifting the critical gaze from the racialized 'Other' to whites, the ones who remain 'racially invisible, unnamed' (McKinney 2005, p 3). Invisible to whom? Not to people of colour. This introduces an interesting dimension of the critical study of whiteness in the US. The focus shifted not only onto whites, but on white versions of whiteness, including white guilt, how they confess shame, or, the other way round, deny racism, absolve themselves from responsibility for existing racial injustices, or express discomfort at the idea of white identity (Frankenberg 2004). For some whites, the focus on white identity also created opportunity to talk about race without having to talk to/with blacks.[1] The 'internal' white, the exposure of layers of posture and awareness, which goes at least back to DuBois' brilliant notion of double consciousness, is only partly a topic of this paper. We address two different areas of concern: a) cultural expressions of white

normativity, 'normativity' as a notion selected in order to make conceivable a possible linkage with 'whiteness', but without pre-defining 'that' white normativity is only or foremost an indication of whiteness; and b) interpretations of the notion of whiteness as identity. For this purpose we draw illustrative examples from two fairly recent projects we conducted independently, but which complement each other. The projects were not conducted for the purpose of this paper, but we found them useful in our deliberations about the applicability of 'whiteness' as a concept in the Netherlands. The first project is an analysis of how white and/or Dutch normativity play out in political and public life and in the media. The crucial question here is: if we would identify white and/or Dutch normativity as cultural expressions of everyday racism, what then make these manifestations also forms of 'whiteness?' The data include MA theses on newspaper coverage of the Dutch multicultural society (Erasmus University Rotterdam 2004–6).[2] Second, to explore everyday experiences of racial and/or national identity among whites we analyse a small number of student essays about the meaning of whiteness in their life histories. They are Dutch and other European students who took a class in race critical studies at the University of Amsterdam (2002–4).

The obsession with cultural difference

Before turning to the case studies, we first address one fundamental difference between the US and the Netherlands in relation to the meaning of 'race' and the discourse of racism. The notion of whiteness easily invokes essentialist notions of race even when critical studies of whiteness are more about cultural normativities, political appropria-tions and social-economic practices, privileging whites compared to other populations (Ware and Back 2002, Puwar 2004). Whiteness, even when defined as an ideology, culture, process, and a sense of privileged location, presupposes at least some adherence to race purity as a relevant phenomenon. Crucial to the historical construction of white identities in the US was the sense of non-contamination, not even by 'one drop' of non-white blood. Similar radical race distinctions and demarcations are not prevalent in the Netherlands. Moreover, miscegenation between people of different skin colour is common, a matter of private choice, and now is increasingly considered acceptable in particular among white Dutch and (Christian) immigrants from the former colonies of the East Indies (Indonesia) and the Caribbean, notably Suriname and Dutch Antilles (Hondius 1999). This is not to say that racial associations (such as the frequent use of the word 'negro' to refer to dark people of African descent) are absent. Dienke Hondius' historical analysis of native Dutch representations of the 'Other' reveals that Dutch travellers and colonizers never missed

the opportunity to comment on the skin colour of the Other over 'there'. Miscegenation in the West and East Indies colonies was accepted, as long as the couples stayed in the colonies so that the Netherlands would not have to deal with any offspring of mixed heritage (Hondius 2006). Whereas race was a common category in early twentieth-century school textbooks and scientific work, it disappeared from the discursive scene after the Second World War. It became a word deemed 'not important' and rather not to be mentioned. The reluctance in the Netherlands and in various other European countries to acknowledge 'race' or even 'ethnicity' as a formal category (Amiraux and Simon 2006; Essed and Nimako 2006; Hondius 2006; Mielants 2006) makes the question of Dutch 'white-ness' as identity complex and convoluted. It will not do to use the United States as a normative frame of reference for understanding 'whiteness'. Instead, we intend to make sense of the possible usefulness of the idea of Dutch 'whiteness' in its own right, that is, interpreted within the Dutch (and European) context. Here cultural racism has a larger presence than biological racism,[3] racial-ethnic groups are 'not-yet-Europeans'(Winant 2001a) and Eurocentrism became Europism (Essed 1996). Europism means Europe's turn to a defensive and inward looking stance, caught in unresolved tensions between secularism and the legacies of the Christian religion, ridden by conflicts over the financial burden of aging societies when the national borders are closed for immigrants, the emancipation of (native European) women unfinished and the perceived threat of super sexist men from 'other cultures' taken as an invasion. Europism charac-terizes too the fight over national and regional identities in the process of so-called European unification; the boldness of the extreme right emerging from the fading memories of the Holocaust, as well as a host of other issues around assimilation and anti-immigrant sentiments.

Various scholars have pointed out that the Dutch often use the argument that 'race' is a non-scientific concept as proof that there is no racism in the Netherlands (Verkuyten 1995; Botman 2001). Race is explicitly prevalent in historical representations of the Netherlands, picturing Dutch members of 'het blanke ras', the white race (Mok 1999). Today race is a legal category in European and Dutch law (antidiscrimination legislation) but it is not a formal policy category in Dutch political discourse. Public discourse is mostly about 'ethnicity', about 'national identity', or about (post)modern cultures in conflict with 'traditional' immigrant cultures, most notably concerning the religious difference of the Muslim faith. In this discourse, references to race are more implicit and often intertwined with notions of culture and ethnicity. In order to acknowledge the relatedness of 'racial' and 'ethnic' criteria of common sense categorization, Essed (1996) suggested the notion 'racial-ethnic' to account for the convergence

of systems of racialization and ethnicization, based in different historical developments: migration into the Netherlands in the context of decolonization (1950s–1970s), labour migration (1960s–1970s), and refugee programmes (1970s onwards).[4]

Hardly a day goes by without Dutch politicians or other spokes-persons problematizing immigrant ethnic groups. They are seen as a strain on society's resources; as unwilling or culturally and socially incapable of integrating into Dutch society. The focus of negative attention shifted from Moluccans and Surinamese in the 1970s–1980s (van Dijk 1983, 1993) to Turks and Moroccans from the end of the 1980s onwards, and now also includes refugees from Eastern Europe and countries in the South (van der Valk 2002). References to race or race-like characteristics are shunned. The dominant discourse on racial-ethnic groups is almost exclusively about 'cultural' problems (Wodak and van Dijk 2000), and in the new millennium more specifically about Islam as anti-democratic.[5]

The obsession with culture was also tangible in the contest over the citizenship status of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former Dutch politician of Somali background who lied about her age and name when she first arrived in the Netherlands. The obsession is manifest in incessant debates on school segregation – the controversy over so-called black and white schools, meaning schools with majority ethnic students versus native Dutch students, and also over residential boroughs. There are heated debates on television, over the internet, in the written media, in parliament, over whether 'Islam' has or should have the status of 'belonging' to Dutch and European culture. No such questions are posed about Judaism or about any Christian sects. The rights to have Islamic schools and to wear an Islamic headscarf are under attack. The panic over 'alien' cultures infiltrating the Nether-lands has roots in Orientalism and cultural racism (Pieterse 2002). But this can also be seen as a form of 'glocal panic' (De Cauter 2003): narrow-minded local reactions to the consequences of globalization and mass migration. The obsession with difference finds fertile ground in the European unification of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which has placed the concepts of national and European culture, citizenship and belonging squarely on the political agenda (Wiener 1998).

Who belongs and who does not? At the heart of dominant notions of being Dutch and European are the perceived necessity of modernity, progress, and the superiority of western civilization (Said 1978; Patterson 1997). Cultural hierarchies are claimed with European cultures assuming the historical maturity and the moral right to force the rest of the world into western modes of modernity (Goldberg 1993, 2002). The unification of Europe builds (implicitly) on old racist theories of cultural hierarchies: barbarian Moor then, Muslim terrorist

today; from black African cannibals at the height of colonialism to current media representations dominated by famine, corruption and warlords. In the meantime the mantra of progress, the subordination of nature and human emotion through reason, technology and weapons goes largely uncontested. There is tension between being European and being a Muslim, or having Asian or African fore-parents. This does not imply that 'European' is a homogenous category. One political translation is the distinction between 'real' Europeans – members of the European Union – and 'aspiring to be' Europeans, or, on local levels, 'real' Dutch and 'not quite' Dutch. As the next section illustrates, this distinction is also firmly rooted in Dutch language.

The unique contribution of Dutch to the conceptual language of race and ethnic relations

There are two Dutch words in the international language of racial and ethnic distinctions: Apartheid and allochtoon. The end of Apartheid in South Africa happened to coincide, in the Netherlands, with the birth of a new racial-ethnic label, allochtoon. Allochtoon, which did not exist in the Dutch dictionary before, could translate as 'allochto-nous', an equally non-existing word in English, to indicate the opposite of autochtonous (indigenous, native, authentic). The mu-tually exclusive categories of autochtoon and allochtoon set apart 'US' from 'THEM'; the real Dutch (autochtoon) from the not-quite-Dutch (allochtoon). The distinction was formalized by policy-makers as part of the legislation for increasing the labour participation of non-western immigrants (Wet bevordering arbeidsparticipatie allochtonen, May 1994). With a succeeding law, the Wet SAMEN (1998–2004), ethnic registration of employees became a legal requirement for middle and large labour organizations. The formal definition of allochtoon as used by the Dutch government includes residents born elsewhere, as well as their children, even when born in the Netherlands and even when one parent was born in the Netherlands as well. Note that 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. In practice, allochtoon captures the mix of racial thinking and cultural hierarchies.

Further formal distinctions are made between western and non-western allochtonen, the former implicitly representing closeness to western civilization, to economic, technological and social progress. In policy practice allochtoon refers foremost to non-western ethnic groups considered disadvantaged or less integrated into 'modern' societies such as the Netherlands: persons (and children of persons) born in Turkey, Morocco, Suriname, the Dutch Antilles, Aruba,

former Central Yugoslavia, or countries in South and Central America, Africa and Asia.[6] Ramifications are that allochtonen are informally considered and treated as second-class citizens, never quite Dutch, never quite the norm, always considered as aspiring, as a problem, lagging behind. The racial connotations are strong, but not absolute and sometimes rather unexpected. Immigrants from the former colony of the Dutch Indies (white colonists and their children, many of whom are from mixed white-Asian heritage) count as western allochtonen. Generations of miscegenation have gradually bleached if not erased the markers of non-whiteness. The title of western allochtoon applies also to the Japanese, who, under Apartheid in South Africa qualified as honorary whites. This is not to suggest that Japanese immigrants are not exposed to Dutch racism. The notion of 'model minority', measured in terms of their successful integration into US capitalism and culture, does not apply in the same way for Asian immigrants in the Netherlands – their success would probably be a function of cultural adaptation, geographical dispersion and physical assimilation through miscegenation – just like the Indonesian immigrants after the 1950s.

Despite the strong emphasis on cultural determinism, and the myth of Dutch and European superiority, skin colour as a racist marker of belonging should not be underestimated either, as the following two quotes illustrate. One is taken from interviews with spouses in so-called interracial marriages in the Netherlands, and the other from a white Canadian immigrant:

> The dominant norm prescribes that ... 'it does not matter' what skin colour one has. At the same time, skin tone stratification is still a fact, and colour is one of the most persistent, unchanging and obvious differences. In a situation where privileges of white skin are never mentioned, and darker skin tones only mentioned as not relevant, tensions around visibility, a crucial factor, are inevitable. (Hondius 1999, p. 410)

> When I run into someone here [in the Netherlands] who starts raving against the influx of immigrants, I speak up. I point out that I, too, am an immigrant, and does the speaker think that I, too, do not belong here? The answer, invariably – invariably! – is no. It's okay for me to be here. And that (unspoken but always present; invisible but of paramount importance) is because I am white. (Denise Osted 1998)[7]

Moreover, there is the (white-but-not-quite-so-white) experience of the daughter of parents who would be categorized as non-western allochtonen from Turkey. Ebru Umar, publicist and fierce advocate of Dutch language, culture and identity, fulminates against the

(former) Dutch minister of Immigration and Integration, Rita Verdonk, who insisted upon using the word allochtoon, in spite of protests among target groups and against the advice of the Dutch parliament to drop that notion for its stigmatizing effects:

> Anyone who has the nerves to call me an allochtoon will be summoned for discrimination. And if the judge would conclude that I am an allochtoon, I will tear up my Dutch passport and throw it into an open fire. I am not an allochtoon, you see. (...) Born in Den Haag, raised in Rotterdam, resident of Amsterdam, I have but one mother tongue: the Dutch language. That this happens to be the second language of my parents does not matter one bit. (...) The minister has decided to separate one group among the Dutch from another (...): allochtonen are second rate citizens, otherwise we would have called them Dutch, wouldn't we? (Ebru Umar 2005)[8]

The above examples illustrate that the Netherlands pretends colour-blindness (Goldberg 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2004), or practice, what Mica Pollock (2004) would call colour muteness: people can rather easily suppress statements about race, about being white, about whiteness, about racism, exactly because there is ample space to be vocal about (perceived) cultural vices of allochtonen. Fear for the accusation of racism is dwindling because allochtonen are not considered to be a race.

Although the word allochtoon is predominantly used with negative connotations, there are instances in which the object of classification can be exempted, as in 'I know you were born in Suriname, but to me you are not an allochtoon', or, 'but to me you are Dutch', meant to uplift the addressee from the low allochtone status. Here one would not say though: 'but to me you are an autochtoon, a native Dutch'. The over-emphasis on to be or not to be an allochtoon obscures the underlying presupposition that autochtoon represents a higher valued category to which one can only belong when the heritage is rooted in Dutch genealogy. Autochtoon means being from Holland, whereby Dutchness is a given through genealogy. Allochtoon means being in Holland, but (with fore parents) from somewhere else. But the allochtoon can acquire (a degree of) Dutchness. Thus it seems helpful to make a distinction between *genealogical* belonging and *acquired* belonging.

This distinction has concrete policy, status, and funding implications as Trienekens' study of diversity in the arts sector demonstrated (Trienekens 2004). Policy documents and art committees, when dealing with allochtone artists or arts organizations, operate under headings such as Participatory Arts (community arts), Interdisciplinary, Inter-cultural or Multicultural Arts. These labels distinguish allochtone art

organizations from those under generic headings such as 'theatre', 'dance' or 'music'. Usually, the former do not qualify for proper budgets and long-term funding and are not considered to represent innovative, high-quality productions. Moreover, public funding for allochtone artists and arts organizations tends to favour hybrid art, a mix of western and non-western cultural traditions. In other words, a certain degree of cultural acquiredness counts as a plus.

The distinction between genealogical claims to represent national culture and acquired claims is not unique to the Netherlands. Anna Rastas, who did research in Finland among young people, found that due to interracial marriages, transnational adoptions and a growth in the number of descendants of immigrant parents, there are more and more children and young people who identify themselves as Finns but whose identity as 'true' Finns is questioned because of their phenotype (Rastas 2005, p. 148). They remain what Schuster called 'symbolic aliens': members in juridical terms but not real members of the nation (Schuster 1999, p. 221). Moreover, Denmark already has a two-tier approach to their welfare system and similar suggestions are being made in the Netherlands. These clear distinctions between the 'real' Europeans and those from outside can become a way in which race distinctions become linked to citizenship, because this distinction enables suggestions 'to restrict citizenship rights along racial lines' (Winant 2001b, p. 97).

The distinction marking the racial-ethnic – the allochtoon with acquired Dutchness – from the 'real' Dutch is thus clearly everyday practice. But is this about whiteness or rather about cultural acquiredness and perceived level of civilization? Recent global events related to the (US) war against terrorism, the increasing acceptability of symbolic Muslim bashing and the assassination of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh have given a new dimension to this distinction. This will be demonstrated in the following section, focusing on the everyday discourse among politicians and in Dutch (quality) newspapers.

You will never belong: about the allochtoon and the 'real' allochtoon

'Allochtone youngsters discuss their problems with their mother, not with their father' reads a recent newspaper headline.[9] Now we know. Forget about any qualifications and distinctions, the allochtoon covers all: from Surinamese-Hindustan-Dutch girls to young male Sudanese refugees. Gross generalizations like the above are routine and standard in the Dutch news. This was obvious to us as critical news readers/consumers, but it is confirmed in our first case study, addressing seven reports on changes in the Dutch media representations of allochtonen over the past decade. The study, conducted in the academic years of 2004–6, involved seven students in the Master programme in Media

and Journalism at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Except for one Dutch-Indonesian student all were white Dutch.

For most of the students the topic choice, multiculturalism, was harder to digest than they had reckoned with. The main motivation to look at multiculturalism was their concern about possible backlash due to the assassination of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh (2 November 2004, by a Muslim fundamentalist).[10] But they did not foresee that their research would require an analysis of their own assumptions and behaviour as well. For the first time, and without using these words, they were confronted with their whiteness or their Dutchness, or their being a member of the majority group. Awkwardness crept in right from the start when they had to think about terminology issues. How to identify the people addressed in the newspaper coverage of the multicultural society: as allochtonen, first or second generation migrants, foreigners (buitenlanders), ethnic-minorities, Turks or rather Dutch-Turks or Turkish-Dutch versus autochtonen, Dutch or white-Dutch?

They could choose any label as long as they clearly motivated their choice. Most of them did not take any chances. They adopted the publicly endorsed terminology of allochtonen and autochtonen in the introductory and theoretical part of their theses, where they discussed mechanisms of representation, media-framing and stereotyping. They were right in arguing that any terminology would be flawed because it would re-instate distinctions between Dutch citizens. They were, however, naively optimistic and unaware of their own contradictory thinking when adopting the term which is currently most commonly used in the hope to avoid further confusion.

In effect, their choice meant that they would analyse newspaper coverage of only non-western allochtonen, who in the empirical part of the theses were referred to either by their ethnicity (e.g. Surinamese, Turk, Moroccan), religion (Muslim) or status (asylum seeker). These qualifications were obviously largely directed by the language used in the newspapers and the students subsequently reflected on the function of the term 'allochtoon' as a container definition encompassing so many differences. Nonetheless, noticeable 'slips of the pen' occurred in the various drafts of their theses. In spite of the initial choice for the distinction 'allochtoon-autochtoon', some lapsed occasionally to other terminology such as 'foreigners' or 'ethnic-minorities' (the predecessors of the term allochtoon). One student remained inconsistent until the very end as a reaction to the uncertainty the question of labelling had evoked in the student. This student relentlessly used different terms or adopted the terminology of the consulted literature – switching from allochtonen to minority groups, immigrants or newcomers and locating them squarely outside of the Netherlands by distinguishing between e.g. Surinamese and

Dutch. These errors were far from innocent. It can be seen as an indication of avoidance, of a lack of awareness about what it entails to be a member of the majority racial-ethnic group. It indicates ignorance about everyday racism expressed in the very language they use.

Not only the students' emotional struggle but also the actual news coverage of multicultural society in the period 1995 to 2005 turned out to be revealing. In 1995 the main concerns were political (legislation etc.) and discrimination; in 1999 the attention turned to criminality and the issue of asylum seekers. In 2002 the main topics were criminality and cultural differences/integration. In 2005 cultural differences and integration remained the main theme, but was complemented with articles on Muslim extremism.[11] In addition, the students found an interesting shift in the language used to describe the racial-ethnic target 'groups' – the objects of problematization: until 1999, around 40 per cent of the articles focused on asylum seekers, other groups were referred to by their country of origin. This focus slowly shifted to 'allochtonen' as a generic category. This shift is significant, because it implied that journalists no longer thought it apt to distinguish between, say, a newly arrived Somali or a second generation Turk. The news coverage of allochtonen peaked in 2002 (37 per cent of all articles on the multicultural society analysed for that year) and then dropped to around 8 per cent in 2005, due to a developing obsession with Muslims. Muslims have been exposed to a quite dramatic attention boom: from 2 per cent in 1995 to 54 per cent in 2005 of all articles on the multicultural society in the respective years. The construction of the 'real allochtoon' of contemporary Dutch society seems to have walked straight out of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism; the Muslim (regardless of skin colour), the religious imposter, the blood thirsty barbarian, has returned. This may seem an exaggeration. At the same time, global surveys identify the Netherlands (and Germany) as the leading representatives of the world muslimphobia list. The Pew Research Center reported in July 2005:

> (...) majorities in Great Britain, France, Canada, the U.S., and Russia, as well as pluralities in Spain and Poland, say they have somewhat or very favorable views of Muslims. Only in the Netherlands and Germany does opinion tilt toward an unfavorable view (51%–45% unfavorable in the Netherlands; 47%–40% unfavorable in Germany).[12]

The muslimifaction of racism is related to actual events and current affairs, but it underscores what others have noticed too: religion as a marker of difference seems to have surpassed ethnicity in dominant discourse (Ahmad 2004, p. 31). Moreover, the shift towards the problematization of cultural differences and the obsession with

Muslims is a further denial of the multilayered identity of individuals (Essed 2001) as well as an ongoing blurring of meaning: 'Muslim' is no less a container definition than 'allochtoon'. Has the time arrived to extend the notion of 'racial-ethnic' to 'racial-ethnic-religious' – no longer only indicating the historical movements of migration, but above all the superlatives of belonging, of acquired Dutchness: from most-acquired to least-acquired in the eyes of the dominant majority? In short, it is an increasingly complex constellation of markers that constitute the 'Other' in contemporary Netherlands and Europe in which nationality, ethnicity, race, corporeality and religion at times converge and then again diverge on the basis of 'acquiredness' to distinguish one 'Other' in the eyes of the beholder from yet a much more 'Other' one. It needs to be said that the complexity of racial-ethnic-religious processes of Othering and dehumanization are not unique to Europe, after all we are all interconnected in global constellations of racial and cultural hierarchies, which are regionally and locally shaped. Here, David Theo Goldberg would speak of the Europeanization of race and racism (Goldberg 2006). Whereas in the US ethnicity and religion are cross-cutting yet embedded in the old racial distinction between black and white, African American and Caucasian, in the Netherlands 'race' is not mentioned, but inherently subsumed, repressed under the coverage of cultural and religious references.

Whiteness: what about it? European students comment

It seems so obvious: has modern Europe ever seen itself other than 'white'? Yet, as we have seen above, the notion of whiteness does not seem completely adequate to account for the struggle over 'belonging' in political, common sense and media discourses in and among European member states (or those who aspire to be a member). In order to get a better sense of the (emotional) value of the idea of whiteness, or of the level of culture as everyday practice, our second case study analyses a number of student essays, written for the course Research and Dynamics of a Multi-Cultural Society: Race, Migration and Refugees at the University of Amsterdam. Different versions of this course got offered in the spring quarters of 2002-2004. In one year the course dealt more explicitly with theories and experiences of whiteness. In order to protect the anonymity of the students the exact year is not being identified here and we use pseudonyms when quoting from their essays. The large majority of the participants were women, and most of the students were white (European): ten Dutch nationals; five other European students (from Germany and Scandinavia); six students from other countries, predominantly the US (including white, Jewish, Latina students).[13]

For their mid-term assignment the students were asked to write a referenced essay of 1,000 words about the following theme: 'Is the notion of 'whiteness' directly or indirectly relevant to understanding your (life) experiences and identity? Please explain. Do you feel in that respect different from relevant peers or family members? Why or why not?' The assignment instructions mentioned that the students were not expected to give any 'right' answers, because there are none.[14] The purpose of the assignment was for students to demonstrate that they could contextualize their lives in a racial-ethnic, historical and political context, with the help, of course, of other relevant literature. The accounts were amazingly informative and so rich that, at the end of the course, the students were asked whether their essays could be used (anonymously) for educational purposes. Below we discuss the main themes of the essays, focusing on the Dutch and other European contributions.

Absence of critical knowledge of race and racism in education

How familiar were the students with the notion of whiteness? Most white European students indicated that they had never really thought about the idea of whiteness until they signed in for the particular course:

'I looked around and noticed something I probably never consciously noticed before. The overwhelming majority of the group of people I was standing with was white. (...). So why did I this time notice the whiteness? Because I have to write an essay about the notion of "whiteness" and what impact this notion has had on my life experiences and identity.' (Doro R, white, female, Netherlands)

Some students struggled with the notion or rejected it as relevant for explaining their experiences:

'I do not feel connected to a specific white culture. Somehow it shocked me to read that this exactly is a component of whiteness, according to Twine.'[15] (Micky K, white, female, Netherlands)

That whiteness was not part of their vocabulary was to be expected due to the absence of the term in everyday Dutch language. That they were also unfamiliar with its meaning or manifestations may be explained by the lack of critical race education as part of mainstream education in (mainland) Europe (Essed 1991). Moreover, critical scholars of Dutch society agree that racism is often seen as a US problem or a problem of ignorant people (van Dijk 1993; van der Valk 2002). This can also be inferred from the essays:

'Unlike what we often read in literature on racism, mainly from authors from the US, I personally don't have very exciting stories to tell about racism. The Netherlands doesn't have a history with racism problems like the United States do. I have never really had a notion of "whiteness".' (Tineke W, female, white, Netherlands)[16]

Finally, most European students provided as a reason for not having thought about whiteness that they came from small, relatively homogenous (white) communities:

'Like Kenny's[17] home community middle-class whiteness was considered the norm in my hometown and therefore it was never made an issue. Looking back now I can say that I grew up racially unconscious because I was raised in a culture of avoidance.' (Sara C, female, white, Germany)

Contrast

For most of the students their first direct experiences with 'Others' came when travelling abroad (notably Asia or Africa), when they had a Moroccan student in class or when they moved to larger, multicultural cities for their studies. Although this made most white European students aware of differences, and sometimes of discrimination, it did not evoke a deeper understanding of whiteness, because these differences were merely used to define or reinforce their sense, for example, of Dutchness. Taking the 'Other' to define one's 'Self' is more the continued practice of Orientalism than the critical scrutiny of one's own identity and how whiteness has affected daily lives. Note also, in the quote below, the rephrasing of 'whiteness' into 'Dutchness':

'To me, thinking about whiteness first of all was about wondering what answer you could get from asking a black person what blackness means to him. (. . .) I have come to realize that my identity is even more related to being Dutch than I thought it was. (. . .) To me Dutchness is something I think about more frequently. This is because it is challenged more often, simply because of the presence and confrontation with people from non-western, especially Muslim, societies.' (Hanna R, female, white, Netherlands)

But contrast is not necessarily an extension of 'Othering'. Some students became aware of racial injustice and preference treatment of being white when they observed how the system worked for whites and against people of colour. One white student identified with a black student because she felt stigmatized too on another ground:

'Eileen was treated as an outcast in my school, but I was attracted by her different story, her different looks and simultaneously we were sisters in being stigmatized: she by being black and I by being fat.' (Zija L, female, white, Netherlands)

The only black European student pointed at a sharp difference between race in the US and the Netherlands. Interracial marriages are much more accepted in the Netherlands than in the US (Hondius 1999) and the notion of zwart (black) is not always part of everyday discourse among people of colour.

'Growing up in a small village of approximately 3000 inhabitants, of whom the vast majority was white, the three black women did not really go unnoticed. All three of them had a white husband. One of these women was my mother. (. . .) I never saw myself or my brother or mother as 'black'. (. . .) I still remember the moment I discovered that I was black. I was eight years old and before I went to bed that evening I took a glance at the mirror. Just like always. But this time was different because I suddenly saw that I looked just like the children I had seen on the television, the (hungry) children from Africa. This was one of those experiences I will never forget! (. . .).' (Hester S, black, female, Netherlands)

Being claimed as a real national

The crucial mark of belonging is whether or not you are being claimed as a member of the national community, one of the students explains:

'I was born in Denmark. Whether or not I belong there I am not so sure. It is not because I do not have the choice to belong there. In fact, unlike many other people who are born in Denmark and live there all their life, I have a choice. I have a choice maybe because my name is R[mentions typical Scandinavian name] and not Ahmed, maybe because my parents are Danish and not Somali, maybe because I am a protestant and not a Hindu, maybe because my mother tongue is Danish and not Hebrew, or maybe because I am white and not colored! The criteria for belonging in Denmark are not whether you feel that you belong there or not, as Hans Christian Andersen beautifully writes, but whether the dominant ethno-cultural group thinks that you belong.' (Mirre R, female, white, Denmark)

Indeed an interesting aspect in the essays of the white European students is that, without necessarily denying the impact of colour, they tend to understand their identity foremost as national identity and

regularly mention differences between European countries to describe this identity.

> 'Being Norwegian was identified by a number of aspects: language, history, food and sports for example. We felt we were different from the Swedes and the Danes, and the other Europeans.' (Petra M, female, white, Norway)

At the same time, national identity remains an abstract, theoretical 'thing' not something lived, not something to be proud of – national identity and pride are for some countries still too close to the memory of the (racist) nationalism that underpinned the holocaust.

Colour is just one of many factors

Even though the students often mentioned the differences between the European countries as markers of their own national identity, in the essays the similarity between the white Dutch, German, Danish and Norwegian students is striking: they experience the same struggle with coming to grips with the fact that their being white would in any way signify privilege. Instead, many of them raised the question whether privilege is a matter of racial differences and whiteness or a matter of socio-economic factors. Many white European students believed indeed that it is due to socio-economic differences – failing to grasp the relation between race and socio-economic standing.

Moreover, there is a double notion of being a 'human being', an 'individual', that the white European students put forward as an argument to illustrate that whiteness has not affected their life experiences and identity, but in doing so they reinforced the very concept of whiteness:

> 'My identity is based on aspects like place, social position, education, religion, political opinion and gender. (...) The notion of whiteness is not present in this reasoning, but maybe now I am also playing the colour-blind, racially invisible individual and do I fit perfectly in the culture of whiteness.' (Micky K, female, white, Netherlands)

One white Dutch student summed up his identity as:

> 'a white Dutch protestant man. As a result of this, I have always belonged to the dominant group. My ancestors have for long been living in the territory of the Netherlands. Therefore, I have always felt as being "all Dutch", since I had no far relatives from abroad. (Kasper A, male, white, Netherlands)

He continued to identify himself by the city in which he was born and by his middle-class background. Most white European students discussed similar markers of identity, sometimes supplemented by being 'able-bodied' and 'heterosexual'. In short, according to these students, the main markers of European white identities are: race, nationality, religion, gender, place, class, physical ability and sexual preference. Although they mentioned race ('white') as a marker of identity, it appears to be a reference to difference in skin colour or ethnicity rather than a deeper understanding of racial hierarchies. Because not only are the white European students struggling with the concept of whiteness, about the meaning of which they had not really thought before entering the course, one also clearly discerns a resistance among the white European students to the idea that their skin colour would in any way privilege them. Kenny (2000) talks in this respect about the 'culture of avoidance', to which one white Dutch student responded: 'How can you avoid something if you aren't even aware that it exists?' (Jarke M, female, white, Netherlands). Would it be more accurate to speak of a 'culture of ignorance' in the white European case?

Conclusion: Europe is about real Europeans

We have analysed how cultural and national belonging (citizenship, national identity) predominate in Dutch and European dominant ideologies. The reproduction of a sense of superior civilization continues to be an instrument of racism. The notion of race remains largely unnamed – though not invisible – in the Netherlands and (mainland) north-western Europe. The systemic nature of racism, everyday racism, is being denied, and with that the acknowledgement that white skin colour is one of the criteria of inclusion in the community of 'real' European nationals. But in the lived perception and in the most commonly used model of explanation for (racial) inequality in Europe, however, one does not primarily refer to skin colour, but to deeper connotations of citizenship, national identity, western superiority and civilization. This makes whiteness a difficult concept to be introduced in the European context.

The taboo to mention 'race' in combination with the strong emphasis, in common sense and political discourses, on national, cultural and European belonging, seems to leave little if any explicit space for ideologies and identities of whiteness to get a stronghold in the Netherlands – even when, from an academic point of view, it is possible to identify a number of ingredients that also have been identified as instruments of whiteness in the US, including whiteness as structural racial advantage, as boundary marker, a relational category

and as a site of privilege (Frankenberg 2004). In other words, whiteness remains a floating concept when European discourse and politics are largely about identifying the cultural and historical criteria of national representation and European-ness. European-ness probably means 'white' (whichever way white gets to be defined), 'plus' something else. This plus refers to a continuum between popular (everyday practice) and high culture. The closer to the high end, in terms of social, intellectual or artistic status, the more comfortable members feel to claim the right to represent and define national or European culture as universal civilizations. Thus you can be white (racial categorization) but lacking social status, or the correct (read: Christianity-based) values, which taint the ability to claim real European-ness. By the same token, you can enjoy social status, and fully identify with Protestant values and European culture, but be too Asian or African or otherwise tainted, to qualify as 'real' national or European. A question we only hypothetically answer is: does whiteness equal real Europeanness (or real Dutchness, Frenchness and so on)? We believe that the answer is no.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. This interesting observation comes from David Theo Goldberg, informal conversation August 2006
2. In order to protect the identity of the students we do not qualify the specific year, but the period of study. The same strategy is applied to the University of Amsterdam project – see below.
3. We do not mean to mitigate the cultural expressions of racism in the US as discussed among others in Lamont (1999) and Goldberg (1993). In both the US and in the Netherlands cultural and biological expressions of racism are present, but the prevailing emphasis is different (Essed 1991).
4. The Dutch population, 16 million, includes over 10 per cent first, second and third generation immigrants from the (former) colonies (Dutch Indies, Suriname and the Dutch Antilles) and from the countries of labour recruitment (predominantly Morocco and Turkey). There are refugees who came in the 1980s and 1990s (from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Bosnia, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Rwanda) as well as other communities: Ghanaians, Pakistani, Cape Viridians, to mention just a few.
5. This phenomenon is not unique to the Netherlands (Hesse 2000). This is not the place to discuss the issue at length, but we have reason to believe that the Netherlands is obsessed with culture and religious difference, epitomized in the theme of the 'backwardness' of Muslims. This opinion has become *salonfähig* since the rise of politician Pim Fortuyn (in the early years of the new millennium). For similar statements political representatives of the

extreme right were sentenced to jail in the 1980s, indicating the recent shift to licensing extreme racial-ethnic views.

6.   http://www.e-quality.nl/e-quality/pagina.asp?pagkey=42568.

7.   http://commposite.uqam.ca/videaz/wg3/0027.html, 25 May 1998.

8.   *de Volkskrant*, 27 August 2005, Forum, p. 15, translated from Dutch (PhE/ST).

9.   *Algemeen [0]Dagblad*, 31 August 2006, translated from Dutch (PhE/ST).

10.   Although all seven theses were instructive, the information used here draws predominantly from one thesis which analysed the news coverage of non-western *allochtonen* in the newspapers *Algemeen Dagblad* and *de Volkskrant* (during the month January of the years 1995, 1999, 2002 and 2005). A total of around 350 newspaper articles were analysed.

11.   These themes covered between 25 and 30 per cent of all articles on the multicultural society analysed for the respective months.

12.   http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?PageID=811.

13.   The American students' essays will not be considered in this paper. Suffice it to say that these students, whether they are white or not, expressed a more in-depth understanding of whiteness and linked it more clearly, and rightly, to the privileged position it entails than the European students.

14.   However, the mere fact of being graded makes it difficult to assess whether the views expressed in the essays were self-presentations in order to 'please' the instructor of a critical course, or genuinely critical self-reflections.

15.   Twine's (2000) introductory chapter to *Racing Research, Researching Racism*, one of the required readings.

16.   The tendency to identify racism rather over 'there' than over 'here' is not unique to the Netherlands, but applies as well to South African Afrikaners receiving the blame for Apartheid, or the South of the US seen as the truly racists rather than citizens of the North (McKinney 2004).

17.   Kenny (2000) was part of the required literature.

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