Chapter 5

National Identity and the Sense of (Non-) Belonging: Iranians in the United States and the Netherlands

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In this chapter I will explore some contextual differences between the Netherlands and the United States and the impact of these differences on the lives of Iranians in both countries. Between 1995 and 2000 I listened to the narratives of Iranian women in exile in the two countries. Subsequently, I continued conducting research in both countries. I did research on the discourses of identity in relation to both individual migrants and to Iranian organizations in the US In the US, I focused on migrants and organizations in California, particularly in Los Angeles. The most striking outcome of this research was that the Iranians, with their relatively common pasts, position themselves completely differently in these two countries. Iranian participants located in the Netherlands felt excluded and started to develop a complex relationship to the past. They felt strongly nostalgic about Iran and positioned themselves exclusively as Iranian. Iranian participants located in Los Angeles, however, felt a sense of belonging to the new society and positioned themselves in a hybrid way by calling themselves Iranian-Americans. This piece primarily focuses on contextual factors shaping the positioning of migrants in the Netherlands and the United States. These factors include migration history, the construction of identity, and the presence of culturalist discourse. The purpose of this piece is not to present empirical data (for this, see Ghorashi 2003a, 2004, 2005), but to show how certain contextual differences, in terms of dominant discourses, are crucial to the way that identities are constructed and experienced. This work shows how exclusionary rhetoric provides for exclusionary identities. Before describing the specific contextual differences of both countries, I provide brief overview of the background concerning Iranian migration to the West.

The Country of Choice

Compared with diasporic groups such as the Jewish diaspora, the existence of an Iranian diaspora is quite recent. The number of Iranians residing outside Iran – either in exile or as migrants – before the revolution of 1979 was somewhere in

the tens of thousands. After the revolution that number reached into the millions. There is no exact number for number of people representing the Iranian diaspora but speculations range from 1 to 4 million.[1] The largest population is located in the United States, especially concentrated within the state of California. Southern California, and in particular Los Angeles, have been deemed by many a second Iran or 'Irangeles' (Kelly and Friedlander 1993). Estimates for the number of Iranians in LA vary. The number is estimated to be around 200,000, somewhere between the official numbers of 100,000 (by the census of 1990, Bozorgmehr et al. 1996: 376, note 15) and the numbers released by the media (between 200,000 to 300,000 in mid 1980s, Bozorgmehr et al. 1993: 73). Within Europe, Germany probably hosts the largest group of Iranians. In Sweden, Iranians are the largest non-western immigrant group. Currently, there are approximately 30,000 Iranians living in the Netherlands, the majority of whom immigrated in the 1980s and the early 1990s.

The largest wave of emigration from Iran coincided with the years of suppression beginning in 1981. Seeking a safe place to stay, most Iranians looked to European countries and the United States. Initially, France was a favored country because of its historical bond with Iranian political exiles (Nassehy-Behnam 1991, 102). England and Germany were also popular because of these countries' histories of student and cultural exchange. The image of the United States as a land of opportunity also played a role in people's choices. But the single most important factor in this decision was language. For the past several decades English has been taught as the second language in Iranian schools, therefore, English-speaking countries such as England, the United States and parts of Canada were preferred destinations. But because those preferred countries were also the most difficult to reach, financial resources and contacts were crucial. The date of departure also became an essential factor. People who left Iran at the beginning of 1980s had more chance of reaching the favored European countries or the United States, whereas by the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s policies in those countries became more restrictive toward refugees. Accordingly, smugglers increased their prices to help people reach these countries. Many refugees chose nearby countries, particularly Turkey, as a country of transition.[2] Once in a transition country many were obliged to choose the best available country – as determined by offers made by the UN or by smugglers – instead of the country they hoped for. The Netherlands would certainly not have been considered as a favorite destination for Iranians, due to lack of historical contact with the country and the language barrier. However, many Iranians came to the Netherlands based on the offers available.

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1 Spellman (2004, 1) writes about an estimated one million people who live outside Iran. Other media outlets (including Iranian) report a higher number for Iranian diaspora, somewhere between 4 to 6 million: see for example: http://impressions-ba.com/features.php?id_feature=10259.

2 The UNHCR unofficially estimates that there were 300,000 to 1.5 million Iranians in Turkey by the end of the 1980s (Bauer 1991, 96, n. 5).

For some the Netherlands in turn served as a transitional country to reach other preferred countries such as the United States or Canada.

As mentioned above, the United States was a preferred country of destination while the Netherlands was more of an accidental choice. According to Bauer (1991, 80), the class background of Iranian exiles in Turkey and Germany is more varied than in the United States. It is often emphasized that Iranians in the United States are from a higher class than Iranians in Europe (Mahdi 1997, 38). Yet, the background of Iranians in the United States is much more heterogeneous than any other countries outside Iran. What, however, contributes to this image of high-class migrants in the US is rather the relatively high social mobility of migrants within this country. What is often ignored is that this high mobility in the US makes it possible for Iranians to become successful in the country regardless of their original class background. In case of Iranians, it is important to add that many rich people left Iran for the United States before the revolution and settled in some of the most expensive areas of the country such as Beverly Hills, a factor that also strengthened the image of rich Iranians in the United States. However, US Iranians, particularly in Los Angeles, are strongly heterogeneous in terms of class, religion, ethnicity, and occupation.

The main aspect shared by the majority of the Iranian diaspora is that their history of migration is quite recent and has mostly been caused by the Islamic revolution. In spite of this commonality of history the positioning of Iranians within their new countries has been quite diverse. Diversity is, of course, present within any cultural, ethnic or national group. But what is interesting here is that there are striking patterns when it comes to the positioning of Iranians in different countries.

The results of my research in the US show that highly educated, successful first generation Iranians in California position themselves as both Iranian and American. They feel a sense of belonging to American society, yet feel very much Iranian in a cultural sense, calling themselves Iranian-Americans. Iranians in the Netherlands with the same background and position in society identify themselves exclusively as Iranian and do not consider themselves Dutch at all. They feel uprooted within Dutch society and feel no sense of belonging to their new country (Ghorashi 2003a, 2003b).

When I first came across this difference I wondered how it was possible that a so-called tolerant society such as the Netherlands could contribute to the construction of essentialist and mono-cultural identities such as that of someone who was considered exclusively Iranian. This while American society – which many of Iranians called the *Great Satan* in their revolutionary years – had enabled the formation of hybrid identities such as that of an Iranian-American. How could this 'old enemy' become home to these Iranians? To answer these questions I have explored various factors. I will start with the United States.

The u nited States: Distance from the 'm elting Pot'

The history of immigration in the United States has been closely linked to assimilation theory, which has a hierarchical base of departure. The assumption is that a dominant culture (of the host society) exists in contradiction to a subordinate culture (of migrants). Assimilation theory takes as a strong central standpoint that immigrants must change when they enter the host society, and adopt the dominant culture. It follows that migrants, with their assumed subordinated culture, are expected to start at the bottom of society and gradually move up.

By the end of the twentieth century, the diversity among new migrants had influenced a change in this kind of approach to migration in the United States (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996, 17). Many new migrants entering the United States had higher educations and specialized skills. They were prepared to claim a higher place on the ladder of the host society rather than starting out on the bottom rung.

Although this change of approach has offered more room for recognition of the qualities of immigrants and has allowed the possibility of negotiation between them and the host society, it still does not imply that migrants are considered equal to the members of the host society. Migrants still have to work harder to get to the place that non-migrants of similar skill levels achieve. 'The same proficiencies and skills yield better rewards for whites than for immigrants … Yes, the high-skilled immigrants are doing well, the argument goes, but having run into a glass ceiling, they do not do as well as they *should*' (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996, 20). Nevertheless, the diversity of new migrants to the United States has brought a more differentiated view on migration to the foreground, and has pushed the assimilation standpoint somewhat to the side. Thus, this differentiated form of migration has forced an image of difference within the United States in which diverse migrant communities have been considered part and parcel of American society.[3]

However, this is just one side of the story. A second important factor that contributes to this differentiated notion on immigration is tied to the ways in which discourses on American national identity are constructed. These discourses are partially related to what Behdad calls 'an ambivalent concept of the 'nation-state' in which [d]isplacement is the precondition for the formation of national consciousness in the United States. […] In short, exile and displacement are not the opposite of nationalism, but the necessary prerequisite to imagining a national community in America' (1997, 156 and 158). Following Behdad's argument, the concepts of displacement and immigration are an essential part of national discourse in the United States.

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3   It is important to keep in mind that certain regional differences impact the way the differences are accepted. California is one of the states of the United States where the differences are most visible and where acceptance is much higher.

That said, the approach toward immigration is ambivalent. On one hand, displacement is part of a national discourse, as America has often been called the dreamland for migrants, a place in which they are offered equal opportunities in life. On the other there exists a strong sense of a need to protect the national boundary against 'certain kinds of' immigrants.

> Despite the fact that the United States is an 'immigrant country,' there is a strong sense of the nation and of national boundaries which have to be protected against diseases (such as communism and AIDS) brought in by immigrants, a sense best expressed by the huge, impenetrable bureaucracy, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (van der Veer 1995, 2).

Thus, it is not so much the immigration policies in the United States that make America an 'immigrant country' but rather this ambivalent concept of a national identity that creates space for difference, as this allows those displaced and exiled to be part of 'imagining a national community in America.' In other words, the ambivalent notion of national discourse in the United States has made it possible for the displaced to claim their part of the pie within the national discourse about Americanness.

The third factor in the construction of American identity is what Stratton and Ang (1999) call 'a design through ideological means' instead of 'cultural means'. Being a good American is about respecting universal, abstract idealist terms and values such as democracy and freedom.

> In the first place, being American is not primarily defined in terms of specific cultural practices and symbols (such as love for baseball or hotdogs), but in more abstract, idealist terms. As Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed in 1943: 'Americanism is a matter of the mind and the heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race and ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to this country and to our creed of liberty and democracy' (Stratton and Ang 1998, 144).

It is interesting that Roosevelt's citation consists of contradictions. America, for example, has always been about race but it has not been about culture. Ironically, the same year Roosevelt expressed these sentiments (1943) Japanese Americans were inhumanely rounded up and placed in interment camps. Yet, by refusing to define American identity in a culturally specific way, a space is created for a culturally heterogeneous American identity that is based on common universal values. This emphasis on common ideals instead of common culture has been essential for the formation of hyphenated American identities. This non-culturalist discourse of national identity in the United States provides an inclusive space, in discursive terms, for cultural diversity in the country.

The claim of hyphenated identities by the migrants themselves is the last factor that has contributed to the construction of American identity through difference.

In migrant struggles to claim their cultural space in the US the history of the civil rights movement has been essential. In particular, the extensive and long-lasting struggle of African Americans within the United States has made an important contribution toward the heterogeneity of national identity, because it has not only emphasized and safeguarded African Americans' difference in the search for their 'roots,' but it also exerted a strong claim for their Americanness. Through this history of identity politics in the US the road has been paved for many new migrants to claim their own cultural space within American society.

Based on the influence of these four factors on the construction of national identity in the United States, I adopt Rawls' (1971, 1980) concepts of thin universality and thick particularity as they relate to discussions concerning pluralism; I do this in order to define the place of difference in national discourses. New types of migrants, the ambivalent notion of national discourse, the non-culturalist claim of the American identity and the civil right movements in the United States have resulted in a heterogeneous – read thin – notion of national identity in which there is room for thick particularities. Said another way, American national discourse allows thick cultural differences within its thin notion of national identity. It is possible to be considered American – both by oneself as well as by others – within the country's diversity of physical appearances, languages, and cultural backgrounds. Thus, the notion of American identity is like an umbrella that includes different particularities. The mere fact that American identity is not defined in cultural terms makes it possible for a unified identity to embrace a diversity of cultures. This is also a key reason for the strong cultural and ethnic flavor of identity politics in the country. In the United States culture and ethnicity have been the most important tools in the process of negotiation of becoming American. Next to the heterogeneous – read thin – notion of national identity that exists within the US, another essential part of the construction of national of identity in America is the image of success. '[N]ational identity in the United States has been defined more positively in commonsensical terms as deeply connected to the mythic march of progress and prosperity at home…' (Giroux 1998, 181). America is considered 'a land of opportunity' and migrants feel pressure to show that they have 'made it' in America. Thus, being a good American is not gauged by one's assimilation into a common American culture. To be sure, one may be different as long as one respects American values and contribute to the progress of the country by being successful. Being American is about being the same and yet culturally different.

It is within this context that Iranians have been able to reconstruct their cultural identity in an American way and even to link their cultural identity to a national American identity. Many of the Iranians I spoke with in Los Angeles described a sense of community. For example, many registered and non-registered organizations are active in celebrating Iranian cultural festivities. The Iranian culture that has been reconstructed in the US is in many ways a re-creation of the years before the revolution. For many Iranians who were brought up during the time of the Shah 'Irangeles' feels more like Iran than the post-revolution Islamic

Iran. A passage from my field notes in L.A. shows this re-creation of the homeland, which is replacing the 'real homeland' in many ways:

> This morning I was listening to California-based Iranian radio. During the program an old woman called and she said that she had paid the subscription for six months and that she is going to Iran for a while and that she would miss the radio terribly while staying in Iran. One of the things that would make her happy to come back to the US would be then the existence of the radio. What was interesting for me was that an old Iranian lady would miss the Iranian radio program abroad while going back to Iran. This shows how to feel at home as a concept is separated from its original place when a concept has lost its original place and has its new form in a new re-created home. Iranians who have been brought up in the time of the Shah would hear the music of the years of their childhood. The old lifestyle is much closer in L.A. than in Iran after the revolution. Iran consistently has other elements that would attract Iranians, especially emotionally. But the fact that Los Angeles can in many ways replace Iran as a homeland creates for Iranians a known environment to deal with their new life in a new context in a less conflicting way (Field notes of 23 July 1997).

Los Angeles had the same impact on me as a person who had left Iran approximately 11 years before (at the time of my research within L.A.) and who was in search of her homeland while living in the Netherlands. I soon felt at home in Los Angeles in many ways. I could relive many similar images from my childhood, including ones that I had already lost when I was still in Iran. The whole setting of Iran outside of Iran, or 'Irangeles', serves for many a familiar environment, similar to the place where they grew up. This can stimulate their sense of belonging. The existence of the past in the present in Los Angeles has partly contributed to the fact that most Iranians I talked to saw themselves as part of American society. They feel American in an Iranian way.[4]

Continuous Strangers: iranians in the Netherlands

Compared with what I found in the US, the Iranian participants with whom I spoke in the Netherlands were more individually oriented and did not describe a sense of community. The few gatherings that are organized within the Netherlands are primarily related to Iranian national festivities or political events. The only festivity that is celebrated every year in almost every large city is the celebration of *Norooz* (the Iranian New Year on the 21st of March). The lack of a strong community does

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4   This sense of belonging is, however, constantly being negotiated and re-evaluated (for more, see Ghorashi 2004, 2005).

not mean that Iranians are invisible in the Netherlands. In fact, the opposite is true. Iranians have been quite visible in fields such as politics, literature and science.

The individualist orientation of Iranians in the Netherlands has to do with a combination of factors. Applying for political asylum has been virtually the only way that Iranians could stay in the Netherlands. The reason for the group of Iranian immigrants who entered the Netherlands in the 1980s was very political. Indeed, the stay of Iranians in the country depended on their political story. In addition, the existence of an Iranian Embassy in The Hague meant that the 'enemy' was close. This made the lives of many Iranians insecure, especially given the fact that some prominent members of the Iranian opposition were assassinated in Europe in the 1980s. These events created an atmosphere of fear resulting in limited interaction among Iranians. Starting in the mid-1990s, Iranians showed increasing interests in various cultural, social, and democratic activities and this led to the formation of new organizations. However, after more than ten years, it seems that these activities have still not resulted in the formation of a cohesive Iranian community in the Netherlands. The reason behind this can be explained through the impact of the political past in combination with the specific history of the Netherlands.

The construction of pillars – 'own worlds' – along lines of religious denomination and political ideology was long the dominant framework for thinking about differences in the Netherlands, before de-pillarization (*ontzuiling*) gained dominance in the 1960s. Pennings calls pillars 'separated institutional complexes of religiously or ideologically motivated institutions and members, which are marked along the same boundaries in different social sectors' (1991, 21). He describes pillarization as 'the process in which after 1880 Catholics, orthodox Protestants, and social democrats have gradually institutionalized their mutual differences' (Ibid). Regardless of whether the pillars have been shaped by the elites in the service of national pacification (Lijphart 1968) or else have been developed within an (already) existing pluralistic political culture (Daalder 1981),[5] pillarization has had a channeling effect on cultural differences, with the result that 'its supporters remained separated while the pillar-elites maintained contact with each other' (Pennings 1991, 17). The process of secularization of Dutch society and the increasing role of the state in social affairs made the existence of pillars unnecessary and unwanted.

It is very likely that the habitus of pillarization continued when new migrants[6] came to the Netherlands, due to a culture that was supposed to be entirely different from the Dutch one. Koopmans holds that the relationship between Dutch society and its migrants is strongly rooted in the pillarized tradition. This system, which in the early twentieth century was a successful pacifying element in the

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5   For both references to Lijphart and Daalder see Pennings (1991, 8–9).

6   In the late 1950s, postwar economic growth and the need for unskilled labor forced the Dutch government to look beyond its borders, fostering labor contracts first with Italy and Spain and later with Turkey and Morocco (Wilterdink 1998, 58). By the term new migrants I refer to these Turkish and Moroccan 'guest workers'.

conflicts between local religious and political groups, has been reintroduced as an instrument of integration (Koopmans 2003, 166 and 167). The influence of this pillarized history on migrants is most clearly witnessed in the case of migrants from Islamic countries who entered the country as 'guest workers' in the 1960s and the 1970s. Even in the 1980s when the realization came that this initial idea of temporary migration was not realistic anymore, most policy makers and academics still considered this group to be a new kind of pillar. Based on a thorough study of the research on pillarization, Blom concludes that it is best – despite the amount of criticism concerning the term – to 'again let pillarization become a metaphor' for the new social developments (2000, 236). Here, we encounter contrary processes: after the welfare state had made pillars redundant a new discourse started to grow about the creation of a new pillar in a relatively de-pillarized Netherlands. Logically it seems quite misplaced to think of a new pillar in a country that struggles to prove that it is a de-pillarized society, and in which the emphasis is on individual autonomy against group pressure. Another contradiction has been the increase of anti-religious sentiments in the Netherlands as the result of de-pillarization on the one hand, and on the other hand the implicit continuation of religiously based structures in different fields within the country next to the growing presence of Islam. Yet the above-sketched field of tension shows the confusing situation that the new migrants from Islamic countries faced. The habitus of pillarization translated into minority thinking, left – and even created – space for these migrants to preserve their own culture, especially when it was still generally assumed that they would return to their home countries, but this was even continued when they were believed to stay in the Netherlands. At the same time this space for group formation on cultural or religious basis formed a foundation of uneasiness and discomfort for the Dutch majority population. In a time that majority believed to be freed from the limitations and the pressure of the group and religion, there is a new group in the society which claims its group's rights; a group believed to be both religious and traditional in many ways.

It is this history of recent migration together with the present de-pillarized Dutch society that makes group formation among migrants undesirable. Importantly, it is the combination of this context with the particular pattern concerning Iranians, with its emphasis on political past that has contributed to the sense of individuality and lack of community among Iranians in the Netherlands. The political past of Iranians has been key to the construction of the self-image of Iranians as part of the intellectual elite of Iran. As mostly refugees from an Islamic country and in general non-religious, Iranians sensed this dislike towards migrant group formation and acted upon it by also resenting group formation within their new society. By doing this they tried to distance themselves from negative images – such as low education, traditionalism and religiosity – that had been attributed to migrants from other Islamic countries. This strategy points to why Iranians have not been able to form a community and practice their culture in the Netherlands. It needs to be noted that as opposed to Iranians in the United States Iranian immigrants within the Netherlands did not need the protection and support of their group, because of

the possibilities of the existing welfare state in the Netherlands. But the question remains: why do these immigrants position themselves exclusively as Iranian and why do they not relate to the Dutch identity in spite of their successes and after living in the country for almost two decades?

Belonging to the Dutch Society?

The idea of the migrant as a guest has long lost its currency in the Netherlands, but the idea that migrants' most 'natural' link is the one they have with their country of origin is persistently dominant. This assumption can also be traced within many other European countries. The often-cited joke by Ulrich Beck is an example of this. A black man in Germany is asked: 'Where are you from?' He answers: 'From Munich.' Q: 'And your parents?' A: 'Also from Munich.' Q: 'And where were they born?' A: 'My mother in Munich.' Q: 'And your father?' A: 'In Ghana … ' Q: 'Ah, so you're from Ghana.' Not so much a punch line as a stereotype, the joke reinforces the idea that the real, unbreakable tie a migrant has is to his or her 'country of origin', (which points to the event of the migration in the person's family), even if the person was born in his home country. The history of migration in the Netherlands, with the earlier presence of 'guest workers' and a subsequent focus on refugees as the main types of migrants in more recent history, has created a certain kind of understanding of migration. Specifically, there is a undertone of temporariness that is linked to the idea of migration, which is also connected to a rooted notion of identity. Migrants belong to the place they came from and will, assumedly, eventually return to. This construction of otherness is embedded within an ideology of certain images and practices concerning 'who belongs' and 'who does not belong', and within a construction of certain images concerning the nation that excludes migrants. The migrant as 'other' is 'constructed as not belonging to the nation and yet living inside it' (Räthzel 1995, 165). In this way, this discourse of temporary migration has a close link to the discourses surrounding national identity.

　　The general assumption about the Dutch is that they are not nationally oriented. As Prins puts it, '[t]he essential trait of Dutch identity is assumed to be its non-identity, its fluidity, its openness to 'others'' (Prins 1997, 120). She continues:

> However, this modest mode of speech has a reverse. For by assuming that Dutchness is an unmarked category, a subject position that does not strike the eye because it does not differ from modern culture in general, it turns out to coincide with what is considered the norm or normal. Hence, everything not-Dutch gets marked as 'other', as different from that norm (Prins 1997, 126).

Until recently the Dutch were quite famous for not stressing their national identity. This may have to do with their resistance to Germany related to their unpleasant past during the Second World War, when a strong national identity served as a

basis for exclusion and terrible violence. But this claim of non-identity and manifest dislike of national identity does not mean that the notion of Dutchness is not present in daily life. The opposite is the case: questions of proper and improper behaviors in public life are very much linked to a notion of Dutchness that regulates the society in a latent manner. The 'real' Dutch have a normalized religion and body. According to Wekker the image of Dutchness is at the very least that of being white and Christian (Wekker 1995, 78). Since the growing culturalist discourse in the Netherlands, with concerns regarding Islam and the position of migrants from Islamic countries at its core, this image of Dutchness may seem somewhat differentiated. One example is reference to 'Judeo-Christian tradition' within present discourse instead of solely to Christian tradition as opposed to Islamic tradition. The present focus on Islam in the Netherlands may also have somewhat marginalized the exclusionary rhetoric towards other migrants groups such as Surinamese or Chinese. Although the present focus on Islam may seem new, it is actually based on the long term, albeit shifting, presence of exclusionary rhetoric applied towards migrants with different backgrounds.

My research has shown that in contradiction to the United States, the Dutch notion of national identity has been quite exclusive and thick. This thick notion of national identity leads to a process of exclusion and sets up a dichotomous relationship between us – 'the Dutch' – and them – 'the others'. The consequence is that people from different backgrounds who are born in the Netherlands or who have lived most of their lives there and have Dutch nationality are not included as 'one of us'. Since 11 September, the cultural and religious content of this thick notion of Dutchness has become even more obvious. Beneath a new rightist discourse in the Netherlands is a close link between national and cultural identity. The focus of the dominant discourse in the Netherlands since 2000 has increasingly been on the incompatibility of 'other' cultures and on the need to protect Dutch culture and identity from external cultural invasion in order to promote Dutch cultural norms and values. This newly formed exclusionary rhetoric is based on a homogeneous, static, coherent, and rooted notion of culture which Stolcke calls 'cultural fundamentalism' (1995, 4). In this 'new culturalist struggle', migrants are blamed not only for their culture, but also for not distancing themselves from it. The recent dominant assumption has been that the social and economic problems of immigrants will be solved once they distance themselves from their culture and assimilate into Dutch society. This explanation for these immigrants' problems has deepened the 'us and them' dichotomies within the society.

The perception of migration as a temporary phenomenon, a thick notion of Dutchness, and the new culturalist struggle in the Netherlands all have one thing in common – a 'rooted' and homogenous notion of culture. The impact of this dominant perception in the Netherlands is that even successful immigrants in the society feel uprooted and not a part of society. The thick construction of Dutchness also makes virtually impossible the existence of hyphenated identities that are linked to multiple positions of cultural difference. Therefore, identification within the Dutch context is limited to strict notions of Dutch and non-Dutch, which do not

leave space to maneuver among cultural diversity or for hybrid positioning. Even when migrants became a part of society through their contacts with the Dutch and their achievements in study and work, they still did not see themselves included as Dutch citizens.

This is also true in the case of Iranians, who, in spite of their achievements in the Netherlands, and their attempts to belong by differentiating themselves from other Islamic migrants, feel that they can never break through the thick wall of Dutchness so that they can feel any sense of belonging to the society. They then distance themselves from any kind of identification with Dutchness and position themselves exclusively as Iranian. As a result, what prevails is that there is a disrupted sense of time and place that excludes multiple identifications with the past culture (Iran) and the present setting (the Netherlands) (Ghorashi 2003b). This sense of uprootedenss also fuels nostalgic feelings towards the past and creation of an 'imaginary home'. This imaginary home is a selection of memories of the past; an Iran of their minds. This imaginary Iran is a 'home' created outside the place where one lives at present, a 'misplaced home' that makes the possibilities of settlement and a sense of belonging in a new context very difficult, if not impossible.

Conclusion

Societal context is essential to how migrants position themselves in the new society. The historical and discursive processes in the United States have resulted in a situation in which the physical space of an 'old enemy' has turned out to be home for many Iranians. I argue that different factors such as civil rights movements, the diversity of new immigrants, a non-culturalist construction of national identity, and the ambivalence of the U.S. national discourse in relation to displacement and exile have brought to the foreground a rather heterogeneous approach to national identity. Within this new approach it becomes possible to create multiple positions of cultural difference. This heterogeneous definition of national identity creates a thin notion of Americanness in which there is space for thick particularities (in this case, people with varied backgrounds and cultures). When the construction of national identity is not informed with an assumed cultural thickness and the subsequent sense of exclusion is not present, there seems to be no sense of uneasiness for Iranians to connect with the new identity, in this case, an American identity.

In the Netherlands, however, national identity is seen as homogeneous, and is related to a thick notion of Dutchness that includes white Dutch and excludes those who are deemed culturally different (migrants). This homogeneous definition of Dutchness does not represent the diversity of the Netherlands and excludes the migrants' share of Dutchness. When a national identity seems culturally exclusive and thick, as is Dutchness, it does not leave space for migrants to connect to this identity and claim it in their positioning. The notion of temporary migration

together with an increasingly negative fixation on cultural and religious difference in the Netherlands make the Iranians participants in this study – who are also active participants in the Dutch society – feel like strangers or unwelcome guests. The fixation against cultural and religious otherness within the Netherlands, however, contributes to a sense of exclusion and thus a feeling of uneasiness towards the migrants. This prevents any sense of belonging by migrants to Dutch society and any identification with the Dutch identity. The result has been that migrants and the Dutch are moving farther away from each other day by day and a sense of insecurity is emerging in the society. It is not only the migrants who cannot feel a sense of belonging in the Netherlands, in this omnipresence of culturalist exclusionary discourse in the Netherlands, it is also many 'native' Dutch who are also losing their sense of belonging in the country they considered theirs.

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