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Depoliticising literature, politicising diversity: ethno-racial boundaries in Dutch literary professionals' aesthetic repertoires

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ABSTRACT

Although still a neglected area, over the years a growing body of sociological research on the position of ethno-racial minorities in Western artistic fields has emerged. With this article we aim to contribute to this research area by focusing on ethno-racial diversity in the Dutch literary field. Through in-depth interviews, we analyse how gatekeepers mobilise specific cultural repertoires and by doing so draw ethno-racial boundaries when discussing acquisition, assessing quality and positioning themselves in the literary field. We argue that literary publishers and other professionals (selectively) employ an 'old school' modernist repertoire that especially values the formal aspects of literary products, by which non-white writers and publishers concerned with diversity are often positioned in an identity politics framework. Their work is said to take in a less prestigious 'political'/'subjective' position rather than a 'literary'/'universal' one. As such, this paper informs on how gatekeepers' practices shape the position of non-white authors in the Dutch literary field.

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1. Introduction

In 1999, a publication of the Dutch Foundation for Literature (Letterenfonds), the main subsidiary body for literature in The Netherlands, described the Dutch literary world as 'inward-looking'. Over the years, various attempts to increase diversity[1] have proven to be relatively unsuccessful. On the rare occasions that the ethno-racial homogeneity of the Dutch literary scene has been debated, the field is described as 'white' (e.g. Amatmoekrim, 2015). The continuing inwardness and whiteness of the literary field formed the point of departure for the research presented in this article. More specifically, in order to understand the enduring status quo this research explores the classification systems, cultural ideals and

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imagined realities of a relatively tight-knit cultural class of gatekeepers in the Dutch literary field.

The Dutch literary field[2] provides an interesting case to study the dynamics of in- or exclusion of ethno-racial minorities in the arts. On the one hand, writing requires relatively limited economic capital (as opposed to film, for example). On the other, the literary space is strongly controlled by gatekeepers whose work is guided by firmly established aesthetic principles and genre-oriented norms. Past studies have shown considerable differences in the way ethno-racial minorities' artistic practices have been accepted by established institutions, not only between countries but also regarding form and genre (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008; Sievers 2008; Delhaye and van de Ven 2014). This study takes a similar institutional approach: despite a growing number of studies, there still exists, as DiMaggio and Fernández-Kelly (2015: 1237) put it, 'a notable gap in research [concerning] the ways in which the arts are organised – both at the level of the host society and within immigrant communities'.

Indeed, although there has been a growing body of literature in The Netherlands that focuses on gatekeepers and literary institutions since the 1980s (De Glas 1998; Laan 2010; Franssen 2015; among others) little research has been conducted on cultural diversity and the position of ethno-racial minorities in the literary field (notable exceptions are Berkers 2009; Kuitert 1999). Admittedly, there has been an increasing number of studies by literary scholars on literature by writers with a migrant background. Yet as these analyses focus mainly on specific writers and their work, an overall sketch of the impact of these writers on the dynamics in the literary field remained almost out of scope.[3]

The objective of our research is to begin to fill this gap. We aim to understand the various ways in which gatekeepers define, classify and categorise both literature and publishing practices through Michèle Lamont's concept of boundary work. Lamont defines symbolic boundaries as 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people, practices, and even time and space' (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168). Boundary work is embedded in discursive classification repertoires that are often, historical, culture and nation specific (ibid.).

Although most studies on literary gatekeepers focus on commercial and genre boundaries (e.g. Weber 2000), Berkers (2009) focuses on ethno-racial boundaries. In relation to literary policy, criticism and history, he investigates how intermediaries construct and reproduce differences between 'us' and 'them'. In Pierre Bourdieu's study of the publishing field, exclusionary mechanisms are mainly explained in terms of class, as he believes racial discrimination is roughly reducible to class discrimination (1996, 227). Berkers (2009) work, quite on the contrary, shows the significance of studying ethnicity and race as independent categories. He finds that in American,

Dutch and German national literary histories and newspaper criticism minority authors' ethnic difference is often emphasised. In addition, Berkers found that in The Netherlands ethno-racial minority panellists were absent in literary policy.

In this paper, we want to elaborate on Berkers' framework in two ways. First of all, in order to understand the ways in which literary professionals draw ethno-racial boundaries, we zoom in on the spatial differences within a national publishing scene instead of looking at differences in boundary work between nations and analyse how spatial boundaries – intertwined as they are with socio-demographic features – form symbolic boundaries (and vice versa) (Weber 2000).

Second, in his analysis Berkers uses 'artistic classification' in a fairly unproblematic manner: he explains which ethno-racial minority authors have become part of the mainstream, yet he does not question the classificatory systems themselves. As many have argued, by unreflexively using modernist conceptions of artistic value, gatekeepers impose one specific classification system on a wide variety of cultural expressions, which thereby devalues 'non-white' artistic tradition (Morrison 1988), for example, when it is seen as 'unoriginal' (Saraber 2001) or 'amateurish' (Delhaye 2008). By leaving classification systems unquestioned, one risks then to reinforce a discourse where politics and aesthetics are perceived to be at odds (Elliot 2002). Classification systems may be taken for granted, presented, seen and felt as 'natural' and 'apolitical'; they are inherently class-, time- and place-specific constructions that have exclusionary effects (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992).

2. Methodology

In order to be able to analyse the way gatekeepers in the Dutch literary field categorise and classify literature and publishing practices and by doing so perform boundary work, we conducted in-depth interviews with literary publishers and editors. More specifically, in trying to reconstruct their repertoires, we mainly focused on how these gatekeepers discussed acquisition, assessed quality and reflected on their marketing strategies.

In 2016, literary fiction accounted for 39% of the total Dutch Publisher's turnover rate of 521 million euro.[4] A large part is translated fiction: of the 3307 fiction books published in 2009, 35% is published in Dutch. This trend has been quite stable after the turn of the century (Franssen 2015). In The Netherlands, literary publishers are organised in the Literary Publisher's Circle (Literaire Uitgeversgroep), founded in 1996, which is part of the Dutch Publishers Union (Nederlandse Uitgeversbond).[5] The Literary Publisher's Circle, which in 2014 had 28 members, is a highly esteemed agent able to influence the dynamics within the literary field.

Due to entry requirements, some smaller one-man and regional publishers are not part of the Literary Publisher's Circle.[6] While some publishers may be missing in our research, what was important to us is that the Literary Publisher's Circle itself defines which Dutch publishers are considered as 'literary', a selection we were happy to adopt as it liberated us from a complex operationalisation exercise. The group includes all fiction publishers who have been defined as the most prestigious ones and is responsible for the vast majority of Dutch literary fiction (Franssen 2015).

As mentioned, we used the membership list of the Literary Publisher's Circle as a point of departure. We sent interview requests to all the members that publish Dutch contemporary literary fiction. In the initial request, we asked the publishers to participate in a research project on cultural diversity in the literary field. In response, eight accepted to do a semi-structured in-depth interview; one only wanted to fill in a questionnaire; five did not respond and eight declined our interview request. Publishing houses that immediately turned our request down told us this topic was 'not relevant for them', they 'lacked experience' on this issue or they thought that 'our authors don't fit your request'. This leads us to assume that publishers we interviewed have a more favourable attitude towards diversity because they are at least willing to talk about it, even though almost no one sees increasing diversity as a goal in itself.[7] Some publishers we interviewed had previously worked for houses we were not able to connect with. They provided us information on the remarkable similarities of gatekeeping practices among houses.

Publishers are not the only gatekeepers in the acquisition and distribution process of Dutch literary fiction. To contextualise the repertoires of the publishers, we also interviewed a literary agent; a former employee of the Dutch Foundation for Literature who was responsible for its intercultural policy and an employee of the Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse Boek (CPNB) (a foundation, set up by publishers, bookstores and libraries to promote trade of books). All interviewed gatekeepers were white. The youngest respondent was 30, the oldest 66. Most were in their 40s or 50s. Out of 12 respondents, only 2 were female. This gender bias is opposite to Franssen's 2015 study, who specifically interviewed acquisition editors (a beginners/less prestigious job) that were generally younger and mostly female. Older respondents (50–60) had either a university or university of applied sciences degree. Those in their 40s and younger all had a university degree.

In order to improve our understanding of the repertoires of gatekeepers, four writers were interviewed as well. We decided so because symbolic boundaries, and the mechanisms of exclusion that accompany them, come to be perceived differently by those excluded (Lamont 1992). The authors we interviewed all had a migrant background and had published one or

more books for a house in our sample (their age varied between 30 and 40). Of this sample, three were higher educated and one just had a high school degree. In contrast to the gatekeepers, none of their parents were higher educated. Interviews (including with publishers) lasted between 45 min and one and a half hour.[8] All respondents' names are anonymised; although due to their specific characteristics it was impossible to anonymise CPNB and the Dutch Foundation for Literature as institutions.

3. A short history of cultural diversity in the Dutch literary field (1999–2014)

Government policies on diversity in the arts, and literature specifically, take place against the background of an ongoing political debate on national identity and citizenship. Within the Dutch public and political realm, heavy criticism on supposedly multicultural and laissez-faire integration policies has fostered a renewed interest in a debate over Dutch national identity (Uitermark 2010). From the 1990s onwards Dutch citizenship has been defined in increasingly moral and cultural terms, whereby 'non-western allochtones' are set apart from 'white natives' in policy and statistics, thus becoming the 'objects of problematisation' (Schinkel 2013). In general, policies concerning 'allochtones' have shifted from an emphasis on rights (late 1990s) to duties (early 2000s) (Groenendijk 2007).

Within the cultural sector, the first and most prominent example of a policy focusing on rights was the policy document *Culture as Confrontation* by Secretary of State Rick van der Ploeg in 1999. It aimed to enhance cultural diversity in the arts, by which a broader conception of artistic quality was pleaded for (Delhaye 2008 1306). As a result, the Dutch Foundation for Literature implemented an intercultural sub-policy, after which the percentage of ethno-racial minority panellists (granters) increased from 0% (1995) to 5.1% (2000), and the share of grantees with a migrant background rose slowly and temporarily (Berkers 2009). Yet, the specific implementation of this intercultural policy worked in an ambiguous way: by relegating diversity into a separated funding circuit, it left the established structure of the field untouched (Delhaye 2008), maintaining the whiteness of the Dutch literary world itself (Ahmed 2012). As the anti-Islam Freedom Party (PVV) in 2010 supported a right-wing minority government, diversity schemes were deleted from government programmes. (Delhaye and van de Ven 2014).

Irrespective of any policy, there have been a couple of publishers who actively sought to increase the visibility of ethno-racial minorities in Dutch literature (Kuitert 1999). Apart from that, some migrant communities installed literary prizes for unpublished authors themselves. One of them is El-Hizjra that served as a stepping stone for Dutch Arab aspiring writers.

Most prominently, some of the El-Hizjra laureates eventually won large mainstream literary prizes (Nijborg and Laroui 2013).

In 2001, the CPNB organised its annual National Book Week, themed 'writing in-between cultures' (in Dutch: '*Schrijven tussen twee culturen*'). This theme provoked controversy as ethno-racial minority writers were put in the spotlight supposedly not because of their work but rather because of their background (Breure and Brouwer 2004). The promotion of cultural diversity was perceived (especially by critics) as a non-literary category that threatened literature's autonomy. Opponents argued that ethno-racial background should play no role whatsoever; literary quality should be the only legitimate criterion for judging literature (Bouazza 2001).

Apparently inclusive, this kind of language worked in a paradoxical way: by presenting criteria as 'universalist' and 'autonomous'; a cultural division was being made between those who legitimately entered the Dutch literary scene and those who supposedly did not' (Breure and Brouwer 2004). Albeit less prominently, within this debate, exclusionary features of the Dutch literary field were also criticised. Three smaller publishers pointed, for example, at the lack of "multicultural" writers in bigger publishers' lists (NRC Handelsblad 2000). The sudden rise of interest in 'migrant literature' at the end of the 1990s is often described as a hype that waned after the 2001 National Book Week (Minnaard 2008).

The lack of substantial attention to intercultural diversity in the literary field is also evident in literary recognition. In the last 15 years, 6% of the debuting authors is non-white (Franssen and Stoffelsen 2015). In 2013 only 4% of the 170 books in the bulk list of the Libris Literature Prize – one of the most prestigious around – was written by authors with a migrant background (Van der Deijl et al. 2016). If we consider the three literary prizes with the highest amount of prize money (the Libris Prize, the AKO/ECI Prize and the Gouden Uil/Fintro Prize), all of which were installed in the 1980s or 1990s, roughly 4% of the prize winners has a migrant background. The most prestigious oeuvre prize, the PC Hooft Prize, has in its 70-year history only once been won by a non-white author (Astrid Roemer in 2016).

4. A cultural geography of the acquisition process

Actually, the process of literary recognition starts at the publishing house with the acquisition of writers who fit into the signature of the house. This acquisition practice is perhaps the key activity of publishers. In the way this activity is organised, place and location play a key role.

Given the close proximity of publishers, the Dutch literary field can largely be characterised as a tight-knit cultural network or community (Deinema 2011). Of the publishers in our sample (the *Literaire Uitgeversgroep*), a vast majority, including the most reputable ones, is

located in either Amsterdam's prestigious canal district or South district. So too are all other literary institutions we interviewed (Dutch Foundation for Literature, CPNB, a literary agency) as well as many venues that host literary events. The charisma of these areas is well illustrated by a literary agent, explaining the choice of location for his companies' office: 'It all happens here, all literary stuff is here, lectures are here, parties are here, you know, that's all in Amsterdam. So you're selling yourself short when you're not in Amsterdam.'

In our interviews, the canal district ('grachtengordel') is often used as a metaphor to denote a closed-off network of white, culturally privileged, higher educated people. The literary field is generally imagined to be composed of members of that network. For example, an acquiring editor described migrant authors as 'writers who don't fit the typical canal district picture'. And the employee of the CPNB was well aware that when organising the children's edition of the National Book Week, one should not only have 'white, canal-district kids' on one's posters. In that way, the metaphor canal district is employed to both describe and criticise the homogeneous white highly educated population of the Dutch literary world. This specific use of the metaphor constructs ethno-racial diversity as situated outside of this space as the canal districts' and thus the literary community's 'Other'. Interestingly, the only large publisher that self-identifies as culturally diverse was at the time we conducted fieldwork the only one located outside of Amsterdam.

Literary gatekeepers who actively focus or focused on diversity think along similar lines: in their perception, there is always a sense of distance between ethno-racial minority writers and the literary field. In their maps of perception, 'diverse' authors are situated at the periphery. A small publisher who, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, 'specifically looked' for non-white writers that grew up in The Netherlands, following the realisation that 'a part of the Dutch population is not getting published' told us the following:

> So, I went to scout there, and they came [names a couple of writers and the prizes they won], they came from everywhere, because, there as well, it was not situated in the center, and there we go again, but in the periphery. You've got the mainstream, that's the center, and you've got the periphery, which is where I look. So most people look in the center, whereas I think: where does it happen? In the underground or at the fringe. And our task is to bring it to the center.

In this quote, the literary mainstream and the centre are seen as synonymous, whereby non-white writers are positioned in the periphery, and need to be brought to the centre. These authors reside somewhere under the radar; you will not find them if 'you don't actively look for it'. The use of this spatial vocabulary makes clear how geographical boundaries have

become social boundaries (spaces divided by various social markers such as education, income, background, etc.), which in their turn have become symbolic boundaries. That means that concepts such as 'centre' and 'periphery' are used by social actors to divide and categorise space, writers and literature. These are tools by which people create (consciously or unconsciously), reproduce or contest definitions of the literary reality (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168).

Similarly, as ethno-racial minority writers discuss how they entered the literary scene, they often describe their arrival in terms of overcoming distance, as reaching something they used to believe was out of reach. This becomes evident in the way they discuss prizes for writers with a specific cultural background. These prizes, they say, had given them the confidence that a career in writing was also something they could aspire. They feel it provides an imperative for publishers to look for writers in places they are not familiar with – thereby explicitly mentioning two of Amsterdam's suburbs (Zuidoost and Nieuw-west) where a majority of the residents has a migrant background. Similarly to other literary professionals, they imagine the literary world as a demarcated geographical space representing an ethno-racially homogenous white, higher educated, cultural class – and an ethno-racially diverse population positioned on the periphery or even outside this area.

Most gatekeepers do not relate these geographical conceptualisations to the acquisition process. But, even though publishers and editors deny that non-literary factors influence this process, they do describe – just like gallerists (Velthuis 2013) – acquisition as a practice embedded in specific social and geographical environments. What is important to note first is that editors and agents face abundance: they receive many more manuscripts than they can actually read in its entirety, let alone publish. Therefore, the difficulty is not to find authors, but to find the right author for their house. Arguably the most democratic way of dealing with acquisition is the selection of unsolicited manuscripts. Editors and agents estimate that they receive between 400 and 800 manuscripts per year, which they refer to as the 'slush pile'. They say that out of this slush pile, usually one or two writers are good enough to publish, thereby frequently remarking that 'it is not a lot, really'. It appears to be an unfavourable acquisition method, as it is usually anonymous: many editors say it is a disadvantage when an aspiring writer has not met the editor in person or when editors do not know your face.

Generally, the image of an editor in his office reading the mail and selecting the manuscripts only partly reflects what editors say they do. Apart from scrutinising unsolicited manuscripts, literary professionals employ a variety of acquisition practices. They look for young authors at talent nights, rely on their network, surf the internet, read magazines and literary journals, receive offers from agents and contact winners of writing

contests. Out of this list, two things become evident. Firstly, editors do a lot of their acquisition outdoors. Given their time-consuming job and the fact that most talent nights they refer to are located in Amsterdam, their outdoor activities mostly occur within reachable distance of their publishing house. Secondly, the selection of writers does not simply reflect the editors' personal taste or the publisher's signature, but is mediated by other gatekeepers – from the programmers of talent nights to the juries of writing contests. This is likely to limit the spaces where they look for talented writers.

These processes also shape the idea of what a writer should be. He or she needs to be able to write *and* to know at which places to promote oneself. Therefore, for an outsider to get published, one needs to get access to these networks by obtaining and utilising, in Bourdieu's (1996) terms, cultural and social capital, and have a 'feel for the game'. Revealingly, the following quote illustrates how an editor of a large publisher sees it: 'People who know how the cultural milieu works (…) approach someone in person, or – actually, it is not so difficult to get to know some people and find some sort of entrance.' So, literary professionals generally describe their acquisition work rather paradoxically. On the one hand social factors are said to play a role: aspiring writers who have the right social capital do have more chances being published. On the other hand: social factors are being downplayed in specific instances – especially when discussing diversity.

Most of the time, literary professionals say they select titles according to quality, a capacity assessed by criteria perceived as neutral and universal which exists outside of time and space. It has abundantly been argued that such a conceptualisation of quality standards obscures their inherent social and ideological character and thus the ensued social disparities, or in the words of Bourdieu, misrecognises power dynamics (Bourdieu 2008; Elliot and Wallace 1994; Elliot 2002; Wolff 2006). With respect to Dutch literature, this explains why the degree of diversity in this field is so often described as a 'coincidence'. For example, in the following quote:

> The funny thing is, I have the largest portion of the, well, allochtones under my wing. (…) But that's a coincidence – it's not like I'm building a migrant list or something. (editor from a large publisher)

In the same vein gatekeepers often construct 'diversity' as incompatible with selecting on 'literary quality'. Given the desired autonomy of the literary field, quality should be the ultimate standard leading publishing practices. Diversity, for that matter, is never described as intentional: it is not seen as guiding a practice that is part of the acquisition process, but as an outcome that is only visible in hindsight. That is why gatekeepers so often talk about diversity by referencing to their catalogue. Like an editor of a small, independent house said: 'We acquire on quality. And then, afterwards, you may be confronted with the fact that there is no man or woman in your

catalogue.' The perception of literary quality as a neutral category thus permits the view that the literary field is an egalitarian one, and as such it serves as an explanation for under-representation as well as over-representation. By talking about disparities as coincidences, social and political explanations for misrepresentation become nearly impossible.

5. On aesthetics, politics and ethno-racial diversity

In order to deepen our understanding of why selecting on diversity is seen as incompatible with selecting on quality, it is necessary to take a closer look at the way in which literary professionals frame and classify literature.

At the end of the twentieth century a remarkable comeback of aesthetic modernism has been witnessed within the arts at large and in literary fiction more specifically. This modernist resurgence in the cultural field has spurred a revival and renewal of modernist scholarship which materialised into the founding in 1999 of the Modernist Studies Association, annual conferences, the launch of new journals and many publications (Mao and Walkowitz 2008). Starting from new methodological principles, academics in the field of literary studies have become to explore the contemporaneity, purported persistence or continuity and even the 'future' of literary modernism (Huyssen 2006; Walkowitz 2006; James 2012a; James 2012b; D'Arcy and Nilges 2016). These scholarly analyses are consistent in their view that modernism's regeneration is not a simple repetition of early-twentieth-century modernist principles and practices. A mere continuation would go against modernism's basic premise of going beyond established literary conventions. Contemporary modernism has also been shaped by postmodernist critique as well as by changed conditions in the literary production (James 2012a; Brouilette 2016).

While early modernist literacy practices and its surrounding discourses may have not been a homogenous undivided whole, it is nonetheless possible to discern some key postulates that have been widely agreed upon by various practitioners and critics from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Among those are the search for an aesthetic purity devoid of sociopolitical and moral functions, a 'worship of form' (Seshagiri in James 2012a, 2) that is incompatible with matter, and the creation of universal value by transcending spatial and social differences. With the conception of disinterested 'pure art' went the idea of an artist as a genius who positions himself in a detached yet an individualistic way (Elliot and Wallace 1994). Ever since its construction, the discourse of modernism has been functioning as a powerful cultural repertoire by which divisions have been made between true authentic literature and modernism's 'Other': mass culture, commercial culture, amusement, sentimental culture. It has consistently been shown by feminist and postcolonial scholars how this modernist

practice and discourse has induced exclusionary mechanisms that were gender, class and racially biased (Elliot and Wallace 1994; Huyssen 1986; Pollock 1988).

According to David James in his book M*odernist Futures*, contemporary modernist literary practices have become much less reductionist in that they combine literary experimentalism with ethical and political commentaries; the formal is used at the service of the thematic (2012a, 13). These literary practices no longer seem to be grounded in modernist notions such as the individual genius, artistic dignity or supposed detachment (2012a, 11–13). Also in The Netherlands, some contemporary writers have left the 'splendid isolation' of literary experiment in order to relate more to the political and social reality (Vaessens 2009, 207).

Yet, notwithstanding the fact that literary practices evolved over time and that national and transnational literacy fields have become much more commercialised as a result of global competition (Franssen and Kuipers 2013; Tomek 2015), Dutch editors, publishers and other gatekeepers still frequently mobilise an old-school modernist discourse that grounds literary quality in (overlapping) values such as individuality, originality, style, autonomy, neutrality and universality. Their assessment of literature is, however, by no means limited to solely modernist criteria. These cultural professionals use a wide array of repertoires to value genres such as romance or crime fiction (Franssen and Kuipers 2013), yet when it comes to judging novels they seem to resort to a reductive modernist discourse. Interestingly, in the interviews, early-twentieth-century modernist values are particularly used to demarcate between 'pure literature' and 'migrant literature'; it is often posited that the last named focuses too much on (politically loaded) content. These outcomes are very much in line with Vaessens (2009) analysis of Dutch literary criticism that gatekeepers distinguish between 'pure' literary themes (defined similarly to the aforementioned modernist criteria) and a novel's 'political' content, whereby the latter signifies a decrease in quality. In the first interview we had with a large, independent publisher that self-identifies as diverse, the respondent stated:

> Politics is something that only sparsely finds its place in Dutch literature. That type of commitment, hey, we [in the Netherlands] generally tend to prefer pure literary themes.

Although this quote relates to a novel that is praised for its political commitment, it is interesting to see how a discordancy is created between 'pure' literary theme and 'political' content. A political theme seems to be incompatible with 'pure' literature and is thus positioned at the fringes of literature.

In general, publishers and editors are convinced that literature's potential is to be 'relevant' or to 'ask other questions', but usually in ways that show the primacy of form over content, stating that fiction should not become

'too political'. For example, an editor of a small, independent publisher argues that when a writer's message is too clear, it can be 'fatal' for a novel's storyline. The Dutch Foundation for Literature assesses literature on similar values. The interviewed employee, for example, elaborated on how writers in his programme used political themes in their narratives. He concluded his thoughts with the following sentence: 'In the end, it is of course literary quality that is most important.' Both mentioned examples show how the interviewed gatekeepers judge contemporary literature in a rather reductive way: quality is referring to composition and form, whereas content matter is seen as a threat to literary value.

Valuing literature through the lens of a reductive modernist aesthetic repertoire means, as has been argued, that thematic content is seen as a threat to form and style and that some subject matters are even defined as less worthy than others. Yet, it seems that for some literary intermediaries the background of who is tackling the subject matter is made relevant in assessing its literary value, even though it is frequently posited that ethno-racial background does not matter in literature. One of the interviewed writers told us that her novel that describes various generations of one family was perceived as a 'typical migrant' story. By defining the novel that way, a history of migrants becomes 'migrant literature'. This term comes to function as an ethno-racial genre label that is often made related to a writer's background – while white migrant writers such as Nabokov, Kundera and Grass, even when migrated, are seldom said to write 'migrant literature' (Sievers 2008). When discussing these novels, one publisher remarked, pointing at 'migrant literature' published in the early 2000s, that 'their value lay mainly in raising awareness'.

In these examples, one can see how boundary work is done by the use of vocabulary such as 'migrant literature' and 'awareness' that categorises 'non-white' narratives not so much as complex aesthetic interventions in pressing social debates (Minnaard 2008), but as representing group identities and/or written out of political motives. Such a view reproduces a reductive understanding of literature by not taking the potential of literature to function as a counter-discourse seriously (Hoving 2010). This framework profoundly shapes the way gatekeepers differentiate literature, especially for literary professionals that do not self-identify as diverse. For example, when the literary agent we interviewed described the way he sold books to publishers, he used a white female writer and a Turkish-Dutch male writer as examples of his strategies. The first novel was offered to prestigious, highbrow literary houses. The second novel could also be offered to somewhat less prestigious companies since it was, the agent said, 'a family history'.

Yet, many published Dutch writings and books that have been praised also explore family histories.[9] Now, these themes are defined as 'minor' or not authentically literary when explored by minority groups. Dutch

gatekeepers often relate the relative absence of non-white writers to their lack of ability to meet quality criteria. They often argue that authors need to transcend their background because literary fiction is 'especially the voice of the individual'. The systematic resort by literary gatekeepers to a reductive old school modernist repertoire prevents them from adopting a more diversified and open-minded way of judging contemporary literary fiction. That explains why novels by ethno-racial minority writers are often accompanied with the suspicion that their work is published or awarded because of its (political) content or out of emancipatory (and therefore 'non-literary') motives, rather than its aesthetic quality. So, through the selective use of modernist criteria, ethno-racial minority writers and their publishers are often said to adopt a 'political'/'subjective' position rather than a 'literary'/'neutral' or objective one. Their work is seen as an articulation of identity politics, not an outcome of literary practice.

6. Diversity as a marker of a publisher's literary prestige

The reductive modernist aesthetic repertoire that informs the way publishers classify and value literature is also reflected in publishers' self-images and the way they position themselves and others in the literary field. Here too, a clear opposition is produced between the 'literary' publishing house endowed with much cultural capital and the less renowned houses driven by diversity politics. Publishers often self-describe as politically neutral, even though some say their identities are rooted in a political or socially committed past. Two publishers that used to have a strong focus on 'multicultural' or 'new Dutch' literature explained their houses were often seen as less prestigious and described occasions of stigmatisation. Over the years, both publishers explained they started concentrating less on diversity in favour of a more 'general' list. The same goes for a social, political focus in general. When an editor of large, independent publisher heard we also interviewed a house with a culturally diverse list, she said: 'It's funny you talked to that publisher. They really look for something socially relevant, whereas I think: I just find this a good story'. These are telling examples that show how the idea that the literary domain should be autonomous in an apolitical way or that composition or literary form is incompatible with sociopolitical commitment is part of a still deeply ingrained repertoire with the help of which cultural gatekeepers classify literature. These ideas lead literary publishers to draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and houses that have a stronger political focus. Time and again, a 'literature for literature's sake-position' is perceived as more prestigious.

The way a house positions itself often influences a writer's decision to sign a contract. For example, one writer explains how she chose the

publishing house strategically in order to influence the reception of her literary work:

> At that time, I thought: if they [a publisher with a culturally diverse list] publish me, everyone will know the score, and even though I would write a totally different book, there will be a group who doesn't pick it up and think: oh, it's migrant literature, you know. So, this publisher was somewhat more neutral (…) I thought that if I would publish a book there, it would be approached more neutrally.

This anecdote confirms the stigma culturally diverse publishers and their writers face in the literary world. Since 'white' is used as a synonym for 'neutral', a boundary is drawn between migrant literature – that has the suspicion to be published out of 'non-literary' motives – and 'neutral' literature, of which the aesthetic features are viewed as unproblematic and where sociopolitical factors are considered absent. It shows how the persistent modernist elements in the conception of literature not only influences the position of publishers but also compels non-write writers to strategically conform to such criteria in order to gain recognition.

7. Conclusion

In this paper we analysed how gatekeepers in the Dutch literary field draw ethno-racial boundaries by mobilising a specific cultural repertoire in order to define, classify and imagine both literature and publishing practices. In describing the acquisition process, literary professionals often draw a symbolic boundary between a white literary field and non-white Dutch citizens. Still, because literature is viewed as an egalitarian system where social and spatial factors are of little importance, and literary quality is said to be a 'neutral' criterion, diversity is usually defined as a coincidental outcome rather than the result of an intentional practice. When assessing literary quality, gatekeepers draw a symbolic boundary between a 'pure', 'neutral' literary-aesthetic ideal of literature and a literature that is conceived as 'subjective', 'diverse' and an articulation of identity politics. That is why, when diversity is discussed in relation to literary quality, the former is perceived as a political intervention that threatens the artistic autonomy of the literary field. As a result, a publisher that has a culturally diverse list is associated with a less prestigious position in the field. In short, literary values and gatekeepers' practices are depoliticised, while diversity as a practice and policy is politicised, and thereby discredited.

These findings do not stand on their own. With regard to Dutch journalism for example, Müller and Frissen (2014) find that journalists frequently conceive their professional ideology as incompatible with diversity. They experience their valuation of neutrality, objectivity and newsworthiness in combination with a desire not to be too 'politically correct' as difficult to combine with a

careful handling of issues surrounding ethnicity and race. Such a comparison shows that, although this is an analysis specific to the Dutch situation, further research – that is sensitive to circumstance and context – might illuminate similar structures in other artistic disciplines and genres.

As a research on diversity in literary fields, this study could have benefitted from ethnographic observations, following decision-making processes up close and possibly locating more subtle mechanisms of exclusion. Our interviews gave many (mostly anecdotal) insights in disparities concerning class and gender. But while it is necessary to study the intersections between race, gender and class, it is beyond the scope of this paper. It shows that research angles like these may provide more room for comparisons between different artistic genres and local scenes. Further research will, hopefully, make the presence of immigrants and ethno-racial minorities in the arts a less neglected area.

Notes

1. We use diversity mainly as a shortcut to ethno-racial diversity. When we refer to gender, age or genre diversity, for example, this is explicitly stated.
2. We focus mainly on literature written originally in the Dutch language published in The Netherlands. The literary field of Flanders (Belgium) and other Dutch speaking territories is out of the scope of this paper.
3. For an excellent overview of the history of literary research on writers with a migrant background in The Netherlands, see: Minnaard (2017).
4. From market research, see http://kvbboekwerk.nl/marktcijfers/jaarcijfers/. Visited 19 June 2017.
5. See www.gau.nuv.nl for the full list. Visited 1 September 2014.
6. including 'multicultural publishers' such as In de Knipscheer and Uitgeverij Jurgen Maas.
7. Of the publishers we interviewed, two can be characterised as larger, independent publishers. Their output is towards a hundred books a year (fiction and non-fiction, translated and Dutch); they have over 20 employees and publish commercially attractive titles to remain financially healthy. Another large publisher who has been interviewed was part of a chain. Usually, a house that belongs to a chain can make decisions less autonomously, as there is more pressure on revenue. Furthermore three small, independent publishers (around six employees) have been interviewed that publish around 25 books a year. They all claim their publishing decisions were not informed by economic considerations. Subsequently, we interviewed two small, independent publishers that both define themselves as interested in diversity and sometimes publish commercially attractive titles alongside personal favourites. Finally, we interviewed a small publisher that is part of a publishing group and self-describes as market oriented. Its executive used to run a publishing company that invested in diversity in the late 1990s and early 2000s.
8. All interviews were conducted in Dutch; all quotes are our own translation.

9. Such as Adriaan van Dis – *Ik Kom Terug*; Harry Mulisch – de *Ontdekking* van de Hemel; Thomas Rosenboom – *Publieke Werken*; Jan Siebelink – *Knielen Op een Bed Violen*; Dimitri Verhulst – de *Helaasheid der Dingen*.

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