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Irreligiosity and Belonging

Reflections on an Iranian Dutch Dance Performance

Roodsaz, A.

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Religious Matters

in an Entangled World

ABOUT	BUILDINGS, IMAGES AND OBJECTS			FOOD	BODY	TEXTS
NEWS	TEAM	PUBLICATIONS	GALLERIES	VIDEOS	BLOGS	M



Blog: Irreligiosity a

22 March 2018

[NEWS](#) [BLOGS](#) [CONFERENCE](#) [CULTURAL POLITICS](#) [IRAN](#)
[MIGRATION](#) [MUSIC](#) [PLURALISM](#) [RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES](#)

From 11 to 13 October 2017, the international research conference *Religious Minorities', Claims of Difference and Sameness in the Politics of Belonging* was hosted by the Department of Religious Studies at Utrecht University. The aim of this conference was to explore how perceptions of specific religious minorities feed into the ways in which these minorities and/or their religion. In a series of blog posts, different conference participants write about this blog about an Iranian Dutch dance performance, Dr. Rahil Roodsaz explores the connection between 'whiteness' and 'irreligiosity' in the Netherlands.

Irreligiosity and Belonging: Reflections on an Iranian Dutch Dance Performance

Author: Rahil Roodsaz, Postdoctoral Researcher in Cultural Anthropology at Radboud U

In July 2011, the famous Iranian-American pop-singer, Faramarz Asef, was invited to the city of Nijmegen for an annual summer festivity. Before the concert started, he expressed the kind of gathering and celebration that, of course, we would rather have in Iran. He said, "I maybe someday, after we have gotten rid of this religious dictatorship, we will have exactly that." Capturing exilic sentiments among especially the first generation Iranian Dutch immigrants, his statements were received by cheers and applause from the audience. In the previous years, a crowd of approximately 500 people of Iranian descent from various cities attended the event. During this two hours' festive program, men and women of different categories would dance, sing and drink together. Dolled up women, wearing sleek dresses and high heels joined men with well-tailored suits or shirts tightly fitting their body and fashionable hairstyles. Combined with the loud westernized pop music produced in Los Angeles, this performance would catch the attention of many bystanders. In my role as an observer, which I was doing as part of my PhD research, I had to answer bystanders' questions about this group's background. To quote a curious middle-aged man: "Where do these people come from? Iran? Really? I thought they might be Italian or something that..."

'Where do you come from?' appears to be a typical question for non-white people (Ahmed 2001). According to Sara Ahmed (2017, 117), such questions often work as 'assertions' that are stopped, a right to stop you is asserted. In being assertive, such speech acts become questionable, as someone who can be questioned, as someone who should be with a question mark. A body can become a question mark." In case of the Iranian Dutch dance performance, the bystander stops to pose this question, which suggests curiosity and a sense of otherness associated with what he observes. Although the Iranian Dutch dance performance was surrounded by other 'ethnic' performances, as put by the organizer, such as a workshop on Arabic belly dancing and different kinds of 'exotic' food trucks, the Iranian westernized dance and the entire dance performance, rather than 'ethnic' or 'exotic', conveyed a complex message.

whiteness as also hinted at by the bystander's association of what he saw with the very question of whether they are Italian as posed by the bystander shows the question of their position as either white or non-white. As Sara Ahmed poses in her analysis of 'the stranger' (Ahmed 2017, 117), the Iranian Dutch with a partially white and partially non-white appearance is inconsistent with the expectation of the bystander of what or who they are. In the dance scene, the Iranian Dutch are neither entirely the ethnic or exotic 'other', nor the white 'us'. Their performance looks too white to be seen as part of the former and too 'other' by the bystander as 'Italian' convey, yet being located in the 'ethnic' corner of the stage. Their not entirely white appearance does not allow for their self-evident categorization.

The Iranian American sociologist Neda Maghbooleh (2017, 170) argues, "In an era of Global Terror, a racialized master category governs and links Arab, Middle-Eastern, Muslim, and Asian Americans, despite [...] internal diversity." In the context of Western European societies, a racialized master category seems to operate as suggested by the interchangeability of 'Muslim', 'Middle-Eastern', 'immigrant' and 'refugee' in articulating anxieties about 'integration' in western societies. Underlying the questionability of the whiteness of the Iranian Dutch appearance during their dance performance is a tension between non-white Middle-Eastern bodies and Islam in the Dutch context. In the 'integration' discourse, these bodies are connected to each other as part of a larger category associated with ethnic, religious and cultural difference as opposed to the secular category of Dutchness. Nevertheless, in the case of the Iranian Dutch the question of whether they are Italian simultaneously points at the fluidity of and possibilities between the categories of 'white' and 'non-white'.

The approximately 35.000 Iranian Dutch form a minority group with an Islamic majority of whom have come to the Netherlands as political refugees in the past decades. Due to their past and sometimes current political activities against the Iranian government, their relationship with religion can be described as strained. Some of them have a leftist background and many associate religion, Islam in particular, with an oppositional stance (Roodsaz 2015). Within the community, being openly religious might be seen as an alliance with the Iranian authorities and provoke suspicion (Roodsaz 2015; Ghobadi 2015).

Moreover, previous studies have pointed at the relative absence of organized religion (CBS 2006) and a marginalized religious identity (Ghorashi 2001) within this group. In addition to their high participation in the job market, a high level of education and a tendency to live in the Netherlands, Iranian Dutch have been reported among this group as signs of their relatively successful integration into Dutch society (CBS 2016). Furthermore, expressing a critical view on Islam in public spaces, such as in Dutch media by some of the well-known Iranian Dutch, such as the law professor, adds to this group's reputation as secular.

Although these qualifications bring them closer to being included into the white category of Dutchness, in other contexts the Iranian Dutch are confronted with different treatments. Particularly, political anxieties around a nuclear Islamic Iran have, in addition to the informed a **ban in 2007** on receiving university education in the fields related to 'sensitive nuclear technology' for Iranians in the Netherlands. This decision was a result of international sanctions against Iran, and was met with protests in the Iranian Dutch community. This shows the lack of steadiness of the Iranian Dutch 'safe' position as part of the category of Dutchness and secular Dutchness based on socio-economic achievements and anti-religious attitudes.

Liberal ideas about sexuality and gender are perceived as an important vehicle in the construction of modern identity and belonging to Dutch society among the Iranian Dutch, as I discuss in my PhD-thesis. One of the most important characteristics of this liberal attitude is the rejection of religious authority over issues of sexuality and gender. This rejection, for instance, opens up the opportunities in a diasporic context to gain sexual and romantic experience. Iranian-Dutch parents imagine their children growing up in the Netherlands to be able to cohabit with a potential partner before committing to a married life, which they see as a step towards their own experiences regarding the choice of marriage partner while living in the Netherlands. The values that would be gained by a move from religion and towards modernity are possible through embracing masculinities beyond the value of honour and femininities that involve sexual satisfaction. Issues of sexuality and gender, in particular homosexuality, are seen as a matter of personal freedom that are protected and respected in the Netherlands as a secular society, and are perceived as the problematic treatment of mainly women, gays and lesbians under Islamic laws and culture. Embracing a liberal attitude towards sexuality and gender is seen as a step towards modernity.

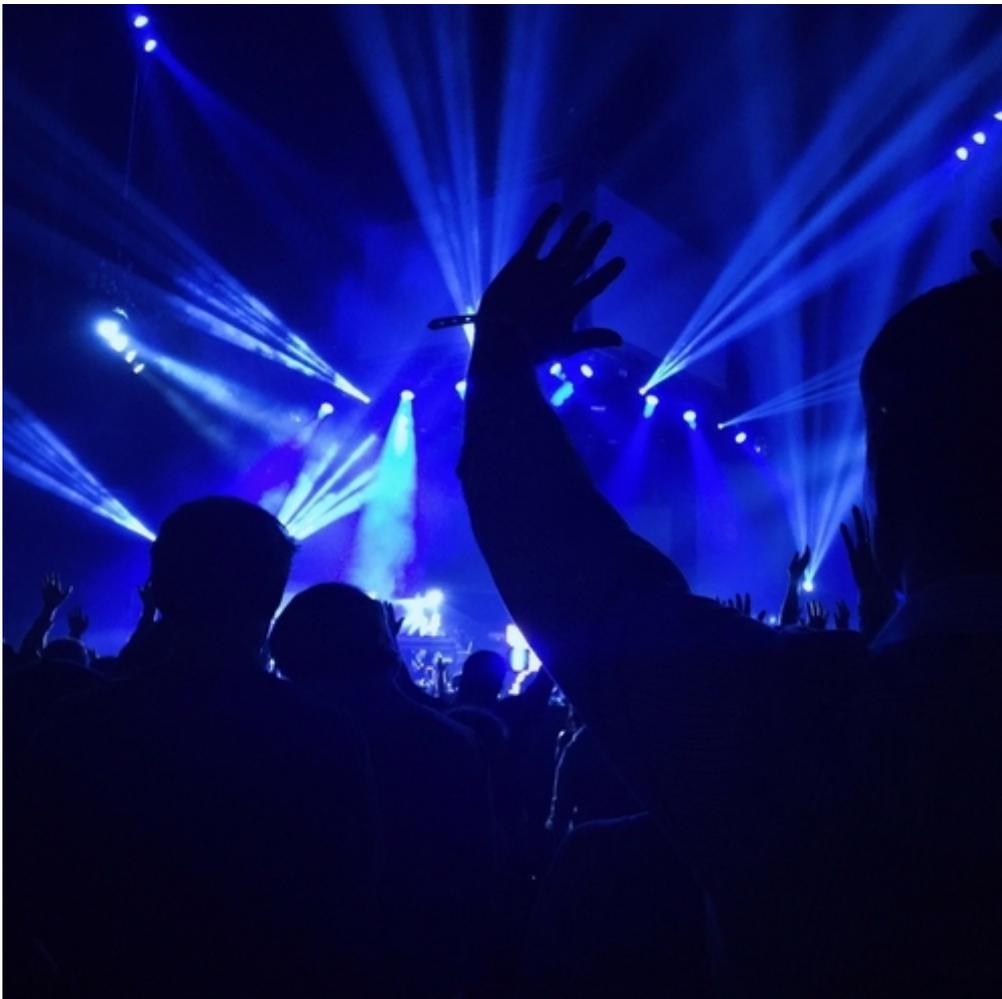
rhetorical move to position the self outside a religious past and within a secular rejection of religion 'irreligiosity', as part of an attempt to claim a modern self of sexuality and gender.

Such constructions of belonging need to be seen as embedded within a larger Dutch integration of (Islamic) minority groups in the Netherlands. As scrutinized by van (Dudink 2017; Bracke 2012; Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens 2010), within the progressive Dutch nation as opposed to backward immigrant others is imagined often based on notions of gender and sexuality. According to its popular rhetoric which immigrants manage to appropriate a liberal attitude towards sexuality an instance with regard to issues of sexual diversity and gender equality, would reveal 'integration' into Dutch society. The Dutch nation is here assumed and reproduced as secular and progressive and sexuality and gender are employed as the means to integration. Within this discursive field, minority groups with an Islamic background Iranian Dutch, engage in constructions of belonging through negotiating, appropriating and sometimes rejecting expected ethnic and religious identities and positionalities.

Given the framing of the dance event as an illustration of how one would prefer to party in an Iran liberated from Islamic dictatorship, as the Iranian American artist and the audience seems to underline, together with the previously outlined popular sentiments among the Iranian Dutch expressed in relation to issues of sexuality and gender, we propose to consider their dancing bodies as constitutive of a move from religion to a diasporic setting. They reject Islam as one of the expected categories of otherness in accordance with another expected category of difference, namely being 'exotic'

The Iranians' dancing performance can be seen as an effort to embrace irreligiosity which they overstep the white/non-white racial boundary in the Dutch context. Middle-Eastern, Muslim and non-white are seen as interchangeable. However, they 'pass through' as either entirely white or non-white, given the curious and surprised looks of the bystanders about their background in a space where only 'exotic' irreligiosity is expected. If being unmarked, normalized and naturalized can be taken as a sign

requirement for certain bodies to explain one's claim to irreligiosity discloses a inclusion in whiteness. This allows us to see the racial boundaries of the secular flexibility and fragility of those boundaries, allowing identities and bodies to be out of whiteness (Maghbouleh 2017). Nevertheless, this incomplete inclusion is that it serves as the very condition for the Iranian Dutch to act 'unexpectedly' a enabling them to craft an identity as a racial insider through irreligiosity, however incomplete. The Iranian Dutch' dance performance offers an opportunity to become visible by not conforming to an expected appearance, a visibility that indicates a between whiteness and non-whiteness and thus carries possibilities of transgre



Further reading

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