Disengaging culturalism: Artistic strategies of young Muslims in the Netherlands
Termeer, B.M.H.

Citation for published version (APA):
Termeer, B. M. H. (2016). Disengaging culturalism: Artistic strategies of young Muslims in the Netherlands

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Introduction
Start of Fieldwork: Reconsidering the Research Question

How are feelings of belonging of Muslim migrants in the Netherlands affected by the rise of nationalist sentiments and culturalist discourse? Do Muslim migrants feel at home in the Netherlands? These are the two main research questions that I took with me into the field at the start of my research. One of my first interviews takes place at an insurance office in my neighbourhood. Achmed, a middle-aged man who was born in Morocco, invites me into the office's small kitchen to talk and drink coffee. I explain to him that I am a researcher interested in the topics of belonging and feeling at home among migrants in Rotterdam. Achmed responds by asking whether my research is about integration and if I want to talk about that.

After I make clear my critical stance regarding the very notion of integration and the political debates around it and striving to convince him that I am not primarily interested in the traditional concept of integration as such, one of Achmed's colleagues joins us. Abir, who is in his early thirties and of Turkish decent, has overheard our conversation. A bit agitated, he asks rhetorically what integration means, going on to propose some possible answers himself: ‘Does it mean that I have to send my children to school? Then yes, I want to integrate. Does it mean I have to drink alcohol? Then no, I don't want to integrate.’ The rest of our conversation is spent talking about topics that dominate the integration debate in Dutch politics and media.

When I started my fieldwork, I had been living for eight years in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood in the city of Rotterdam which was often in the news for various problems associated with impoverished inner-city districts with large migrant populations. I had become interested in how the rise of culturalist rhetoric in mainstream media and politics influenced feelings of belonging among migrants and their offspring. As part of a larger research project that was designed to study the culturalisation of citizenship in the Netherlands and beyond, I embarked upon a sub-project that was initially centred around questions of belonging and feeling at home among both migrants and native Dutch citizens as they are experienced on an individual level. However, at the start of my fieldwork, I discovered that the very question ‘do you feel at home?’ was not politically innocent when posed by an ethnic Dutch researcher to a first- or so-called second-generation migrant with a Muslim family background.1

About a week later, something similar to my first conversation happens when I meet up with Yousuf, a young man who was born in the Netherlands to Pakistani parents. Together with a friend who introduced me to Yousuf, I meet him at his office where he and his brother run a small company that sells phone cards to what the Dutch call phone houses.

---

1 The use of the term ‘second-generation migrant’ for people who are born in the Netherlands but whose parents have migrated to this country is part of the dominant way of speaking about migrants and their offspring in the Netherlands. I return to this point later in the chapter.
After being shown around his office, we talk a while about the trials and tribulations of the phone house business. We have talked up to this point in a relaxed atmosphere, but that changes when I try to steer the conversation in the direction of the topic of feeling at home in the Netherlands. I ask Yousuf whether he refers to himself as Dutch or Pakistani, to which he answers that were someone to ask him, ‘Are you Dutch or Pakistani?’, he would choose the latter.

At this point his older brother, who has overheard us talking, joins the conversation. In a slightly irritated and defensive way, he talks about ethnic Dutch people who have migrated to Saudi Arabia and who refuse to celebrate Eid. He says that sometimes in their memories, migrants create a dream version of the country they have left behind. When I try to ask more about this idea of a dream world of memories and how it relates to feeling at home, the older brother says, ‘everyone does that, it is only human to do so’. He does not answer any more of my questions about feeling at home and I get the impression that he feels ‘Othered’ by my questions, something he obviously experiences as unpleasant.

After the older brother leaves, I try to continue my conversation with Yousuf. Somewhat taken aback by the intervention of his brother, I ask Yousuf whether the topic of feeling at home scares people off, to which he replies that ‘the average person’ would indeed be alarmed by it. Yousuf tells me that the first thing that comes into his mind when people talk about feeling at home are images of Moroccan youth who are misbehaving and being asked, ‘why do you behave like this?’ and ‘do you feel at home here?’ If at the start of my research I was somewhat naïve about the implications of studying what in the Dutch context is such a highly politicised notion as belonging, this naivety is dispelled once and for all when Yousuf explains to me that it also makes a difference who asks the question ‘do you feel at home?’ and adds, ‘you speak from your house (jij praat vanuit jouw huis)’. Referring to my friend, whose parents also have migrated from Pakistan to the Netherlands, Yousuf says, ‘if he were to ask me, it would be different because then we are both foreigners (buitenlanders)’.

The dominant integration discourse with its exclusionary logic of ‘them’ (in the form of Muslim migrants) being different from ‘us’ (an imagined homogeneous Dutch majority population), and of ‘them’ not really belonging to the Dutch nation, has clearly had an impact on both Yousuf and his brother and on Achmed and his colleague. All of them are deeply aware of the fact that questions surrounding notions of ‘belonging’ and ‘feeling at home’ are part of the dominant Dutch discourse about integration and minorities. Being confronted with these topics by an ethnic Dutch researcher mobilizes the polarizing dynamics of the debate and leaves little room to address areas of concern that are not part of that debate.

These first experiences in the field made me wonder whether starting my research from a category that is so intimately intertwined with the culturalist logic of Dutch integration discourse, such as the notion of belonging, would result in my reproducing that discourse.
instead of critically investigating how it is experienced on an individual level in everyday life. Furthermore, I wondered what valuable data might remain obscured from view if I were to focus solely on Muslim migrants as they are imagined in the dominant discourse, and insert them from the start into the logic of the integration debate. These considerations led me to reformulate my original research questions and to focus my research on a particular domain of investigation, namely artistic production, the reasons for which I outline below.

During the early phase of fieldwork, in which I explored different cases that might be valuable for this research, I came into contact with an organization that helped develop the professional skills of young artists in Rotterdam. The organization, which I have named 'New Talents' for the purposes of this study, was created with the aid of government subsidies and was part of a larger scheme to improve conditions in impoverished inner-city neighbourhoods. A number of the artists working with New Talents, as well as some of the artistic mediators among its staff, had family migration histories and were Muslim. Talking to the artists and following their work, it struck me how many of them did not directly or indirectly relate their work to the themes that are so prominent in Dutch discourse about integration and migration. Ethnic background, religious affiliation, and feelings of being torn between country of origin and country of residence were all usually conspicuously absent from their work. To be sure, the artists that I spoke with did not form some kind of exclusive elite. Many of them lived in impoverished neighbourhoods, some were still pursuing secondary education, and only two had graduated from art school. No specific characteristics were present that set these people apart from other second-generation migrants. The fact that they chose to express themselves through art did not make them in some way more privileged than others, something I wish to emphasize here to make clear that the absence of themes in their work that are recognizable within dominant integration discourse was not due to these people being special cases or otherwise exceptional vis-à-vis other Muslim migrants.

I was intrigued by the overall absence of these themes in the work of the artists I met and wondered how this related to their everyday experience of culturalisation. What did it mean that most of the artists that I spoke with tried, most of the time, to stay out of the dominant integration discourse, both in their work and in the conversations I had with them? Further, what positions did the artistic mediators who often supervised the young artists take in relation to the dominant discourse? Did they also attempt to opt out of this discourse? If so, to what extent did they succeed in that effort?

Meeting the artists and artistic mediators at New Talents made me realize that the field of artistic production was particularly valuable for the study on which I was embarking. First, it allowed me to work with themes that stayed close to the everyday life experiences of my interlocutors. As Bruner has noted in relation to the anthropology of expression, ‘the
advantage of beginning the study of culture through expressions is that the basic units of analysis are established by the people we study rather than by the anthropologist as alien observer’ (1986, p. 9). Looking at artistic expressions of young Muslims in the Netherlands allowed me to analyse not only to what extent and how topics related to dominant integration discourse would come up in their work but also to observe which other themes might be more significant to them. In this way I could investigate the importance of dominant integration discourse and culturalist rhetoric in the everyday lives of my respondents and their multiple positionings in relation to this discourse without my presupposing any particular position at the beginning.

A second advantage of choosing to focus on the field of artistic production relates to the contradictory relationship it lays bare between (emergent) subjectivity and ascribed identity. On the one hand, the domain of artistic production is particularly appropriate for studying how subjectivities are developed. In the process of making, the artist can experiment with multiple subjectivities that are less weighed down by the structural constraints of everyday life. Art creates the possibility of extending the range of subjectivities that are available to the subject, of, as it were, sketching one’s self (or selves) into being. A focus on the processes of making thus helps develop insights into how subjectivities are created and takes the investigator away from a representational paradigm in which subjects are the bearers of identities that are pre-existent.

The field of artistic production itself is, however, embedded within larger socio-political forces, which means that it is often confronted with the reality those forces create. In the Dutch case, the meeting of these two domains becomes especially salient when the artists in question are Muslim and have a family migration history. As politically marginalized subjects, these artists are frequently confronted with ascribed identities based on ethnicity, culture or minority status, identities which are often at odds with the subjectivities that they seek to develop in artistic production. The tensions produced in the interaction between these processes of subjectivation and identification provide valuable insights into how Muslims in the Netherlands experience and negotiate the dominant integration discourse and culturalist logic in everyday life.

The decision to embed my research in the field of artistic production led me to formulate research questions that bring together the domains of minority positioning in relation to hegemonic discourses, creativity and material culture: How do young Muslims in the Netherlands position themselves vis-à-vis dominant culturalist discourses by means of artistic production? Which different strategies of positioning does artistic production make possible? What is the role of artistic mediators in emancipatory struggles? What forces impact upon the creative process? What role do materiality and the process of making play in the development of (alternative) subjectivities? In what follows, I develop a theoretical framework that allows me to study the intersection of these domains.
Culturalism: Identifying a Dominant Discourse

'*Ever since my Turkish blood transfusion, I like the singing of imams*

Imca Marina

The expression above comes from Imca Marina, a popular Dutch female singer. In an article that appeared in the Dutch daily *Het Algemeen Dagblad*, Marina speaks about the surgery she underwent after she had suffered a heart attack while she was in Turkey to give a series of concerts. She explains that during surgery a blood transfusion was necessary: ‘The medical team eventually had to give me at least four litres of Turkish blood’. Since then, she says she has experienced some striking changes in her appreciation of the sensory stimuli emanating from the oriental other: ‘Before I had surgery I found the singing of imams coming from the mosque minarets quite annoying. But since I woke up from my narcosis I on the contrary think it is beautiful. There is something very reassuring about it.’ Another change that the singer attributes to her ‘Turkish blood transfusion’ is her sudden fondness for the smell of ‘roasted kebab’. Although she does not understand how such shifts have come about, there is no denying them, according to Marina.

Marina’s notion of ‘Turkish blood’ exemplifies a view of culture as if somehow resided in the blood. The article appeared in a section of the newspaper that relates the secrets of Dutch celebrities, which puts Marina’s observations within a particular context as a somewhat strange perspective. Although this might suggest that her ideas about the intimate relationship of nature (blood) to culture are not mainstream, these views are by no means limited to a few eccentric individuals. As I outline in this section, understanding culture as a biological force is a key characteristic that underlies the culturalist logic behind the dominant way of speaking about people designated as ethnic minorities in Western Europe today.

In 1996, Gerd Baumann analysed the culturalist logic informing the dominant ways of speaking about ethnic minorities in British politics and media (1996). In his study of the London suburb of Southall, he identifies a dominant discourse that is characterized by its employment of a reified idea of culture as a static and bounded whole which is seen to define particular ‘communities’ that are formed around ethnic groups (Baumann, 1996, p. 16). In this logic, ‘community can function as the bridge that connects culture with ethnos’ (ibid.). Since dominant imaginations about ethnicity construct it as a natural, biological...
category rather than seeing it as the outcome of processes of boundary construction between
groups (Barth, 1969), biological reductionism can readily enter the dominant discourse and
provides for a circular argument in the form of: ‘Culture = community = ethnic identity =
nature = culture’ (Baumann, 1996, 17).

Baumann shows how the hegemonic status of this discourse is solidified by a coming
together of five characteristics: ‘It is conceptually simple, enjoys a communicative monopoly,
offers enormous flexibility of application, encompasses great ideological plasticity,
and is serviceable for established institutional purposes’ (1996, p. 30). The first feature
becomes apparent from the circular reasoning, outlined above, for which the dominant
discourse allows (Baumann, 1996, p. 22). This ‘hermetically closed’ discourse can achieve
a communicative hegemony as its foremost protagonists—certain politicians and segments
of the popular media—can be in a position to influence the main communicative channels
(ibid.).

Its flexible application is evidenced by the various ways in which a reified notion of
culture can be used to designate individual people as units of communities on the basis
of race, national origin or language (Baumann, 1996, p. 23). However, religion can also
form the foundation for the construction of communities that are alleged to share a reified
culture and that ‘[cut] across ethnic, national, and linguistic criteria alike’ (ibid.), as in
the case of the construct of a ‘Muslim culture’ (ibid.). The multiple ways in which culture
and community, the key terms of dominant discourse, can be applied ‘lends it pragmatic
flexibility, and renders it applicable in virtually any contestation over collective rights’
(ibid.).

The fourth characteristic becomes apparent from the fact that the dominant discourse
is not the hallmark of one political colour but is found across the political spectrum, from
the right wing to liberals to the left wing (Baumann, 1996, pp. 23–24), which makes it ‘as
serviceable to minority bashers as to minority advocates’ (ibid., p. 25). Finally, the dominant
discourse is very effective in the institutional domain of municipal politics (ibid.). This last
point is actually one of the explanations for why people designated as ethnic minorities
in some contexts themselves use the dominant discourse, while they disengage from its
logic in other contexts (Baumann, 1996, p. 192). The dominant discourse ‘represents the
currency within which they must deal with the political and media establishments on both
the national and the local level’ (ibid.). In the particular context of Baumann’s study, it
‘represents the hegemonic language within which Southallians must explain themselves
and legitimate their claims’ (ibid.).

Taken together, these five features of dominant discourse consolidate a way of speaking
about subjects that are identified as ethnic minorities and ignores the situated nature
of identity. People have cross-cutting ties (Baumann, 1996); at some moments they can
identify themselves along their occupational status, while at other times gender may be
more relevant; other situations foreground national, religious or ethnic identity. This logic is exemplified by what Baumann calls the demotic discourse that those in Southall who have been designated as ethnic minorities use alongside the dominant one (1996, p. 34). Culture and community are not equated in this discourse; rather, culture is seen as dynamic and processual and community is understood as resulting from ‘conscious creation’ (1996, p. 34).

The five features of dominant discourse that secure its hegemonic status in the United Kingdom are also found in relation to the dominant way of speaking about ethnic minorities, or migrants as they are often called, in the Dutch context. In the Netherlands, the dominant discourse over the last 20 years has become more and more focused on the (forced) cultural integration or assimilation of people identified first and foremost as migrants. Analyses of the Dutch case often identify a shift through different phases in which Dutch policy deals with the presence of people with non-Dutch histories on Dutch soil. This shift moves from an absence of a concern about the integration of migrants to the formulation of integration policies that leave room for the cultural needs of minorities and focuses on their empowerment and emancipation, towards a stronger focus on integration as a process of assimilation to Dutch culture with its values and norms (Duyvendak, Pels, & Rijkschroeff 2009; Geschiere, 2009; Schinkel 2007).

In the first decades after the Second World War, the Netherlands saw an influx of so-called guest workers, arriving mainly from countries such as Turkey and Morocco. Nevertheless, until roughly the mid-1970s, the Netherlands still perceived itself as a country of emigration rather than immigration (Geschiere, 2009, pp. 138–139). The guest workers were expected to return to their home country, which meant that they were encouraged to retain their own culture. However, once the myth of return was dispelled after the 1980s, integration became an increasing concern. Whereas until roughly the mid-1990s, the integration of people designated as migrants primarily focused on structural factors that contributed to socio-economic marginalization, such as employment opportunities, education and racism, this focus shifted by the end of the 1990s to a culturalist mode of thinking about the problems associated with migrants that remains in place today (Schinkel, 2007, p. 145). This development has been called the culturalisation of citizenship (Duyvendak, Hurenkamp, & Tonkens, 2010). Although in this most recent phase the policy of multiculturalism came under attack, one of its defining foundations was actually retained; the idea that migrants have and maintain their ‘own culture’ (Schinkel, 2007, p. 146).

---

5 The defining break from a more tolerant approach toward migrants to a more restricting one is often said to have taken place as a result of two key events at the beginning of the 2000s that shook the Dutch nation: the rise of the right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn and his murder by an animal rights activist and the murder of Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist (cf. Geschiere, 2009).
As in the British case, the dominant discourse in the Netherlands employs a reified and static concept of culture that is allegedly shared by people who on the basis of their ethnic identity form specific communities. The article ‘Here, a Turk is a Turk amongst the Turks’ (‘Een Turk is hier Turk onder de Turken’), which appeared in the respected Dutch daily *NRC Handelsblad* and relates the alleged stagnation of processes of integration into Dutch society of young people with a Turkish family migration history, is just one of many examples of the way that mainstream media in the Netherlands engage the dominant discourse.\(^6\) The use of the category of ethnic identity in the Dutch case is not only problematic because it is connected to a reified idea of culture and biological ‘facts’, but also because it is used almost exclusively to designate the migrant Other. Dutch people are perceived as having no ethnicity; they are ethnically neutral and are constructed as the norm (Schinkel, 2007, 172–174).

Another characteristic feature of the dominant Dutch discourse is the important role of the labels *allochtoon* and *autochtoon*.\(^7\) Policy language in the Netherlands firmly keeps in place a border between real Dutch people, or *autochtonen*, and migrants or *allochtonen*, as they are called.\(^8\) The label of *allochtoon* still sticks to people who are so-called second- and third-generation migrants, although these are people who were born on Dutch soil. Even when a person has one grandparent that has migrated from another country to the Netherlands, the label of *allochtoon* still applies. Willem Schinkel has called this the ‘genealogicalisation (genealogisering) of integration’ (2007, p. 157), in which children of migrants are labelled as migrants (ibid.).\(^9\) This distinctively Dutch model of discrimination is furthermore defined by the invention of two categories of *allochtonen*, Western and non-Western. Non-Western does not refer to countries such as Japan or China, but particularly to countries that sent guest workers in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Morocco and Turkey.

The concepts of allochtoon and autochtoon institutionalize an essential form of alterity that is very difficult to breach, as Geschiere states: ‘If even people who have been born on Dutch soil are still to be called allochthons, this throws some doubt upon their being “really” Dutch citizens: indeed, can an *allochtoon* ever become an *autochtoon*?’ (2009, p. 152). While the label of allochtoon constructs people who are born in the Netherlands as

---

\(^6\) Article by Sheila Kamerman in *NRC Handelsblad* (23.03.2013).

\(^7\) See Ceuppens (2006) for an analysis of the rise of the authochtony discourse in Belgium and the role of the prosperous welfare state. In Belgium, the terms *allochtoon* and *autochtoon* also serve to delineate outsiders from people who really belong to the nation, but with a different dynamic and outcome than in the Dutch case, which is related to the fact that Belgium is a deeply federalized state, divided primarily between Dutch-speaking Flanders and Francophone Wallonia (Ceuppens, 2006).

\(^8\) See Geschiere (2009) for an analysis of how these two terms became established in the dominant discourse in the Netherlands and the striking similarities between the way they are featured in the Netherlands and in Cameroon.

\(^9\) Constructing the grandchildren of people who have migrated to the Netherlands as migrants or *allochtonen* has profound implications for official statistics; see Geschiere (2009, p. 150).
others, the label of autochtoon is used in attempts to construct a homogenous Dutch culture. Although defining what constitutes Dutch cultural identity has proven to be a far less than straightforward task,10 there are nevertheless a number of qualities that are typically ascribed to it in the dominant discourse. Dutch culture is often imagined as thoroughly secular, as open and tolerant to other ways of life and as emancipated and sexually liberated (Verkaaik, 2009). Taken together, it is not hard to see how these features can be mobilized in political debates to exclude Muslims, who are perceived as the pre-modern Others of enlightened Dutch culture (Mepschen, Duyvendak, & Tonkens, 2010; Verkaaik & Spronk, 2011).

As in the British case that Baumann analysed, dominant Dutch discourse on migrants finds itself in a position of communicative monopoly (Baumann, 1996, p. 30), as its logic and language is used by influential politicians and dominant media alike. Likewise, its flexibility of application (ibid.) is evidenced by the ease with which culture and religion are conflated in public and political debates about Islamic culture, and by the practice of fusing the categories of migrant, allochtoon and Muslim. Furthermore, the dominant discourse shows a similar ideological plasticity (ibid.). Since the rise of the populist politician Pim Fortuyn at the beginning of the 2000s, the dominant discourse has proven to be very successful in gaining the support of voters, and today it is used by both the political left and right (Van Reekum, 2012). Finally, it is also the dominant language of a wide range of Dutch institutions.

In the Dutch case, the dominant discourse has also found its way into the sphere of the social sciences. The border between the language of social scientists and policy makers has become increasingly vague (Schinkel, 2007, p. 178). This has led to a situation in which research and politics have become intertwined, which is also reflected in the politics of funding. Willem Schinkel argues that media, politics and science are part of a circular process in which research data on perceived problems of integration (itself a notion that Schinkel profoundly problematizes) of migrants into Dutch society are reported in the media, which helps to produce a political agenda (2007, p. 181). The political agenda on integration, which for Schinkel is ‘overcoded with power’ (ibid.), then becomes ‘input for scientific research, and legitimizes and finances research’ (ibid.).

A study by the sociologist Han Entzinger (2009) about the current state of integration of young Turks and Moroccans in Rotterdam is a clear example of the employment of dominant discourse in the social sciences.11 Entzinger states that the cultural distance between autochthons and allochthons has increased, mainly in the perception of autochthons (2009). Rather than being a result of ‘real value orientations’, this becomes apparent from

---

10 See for instance Verkaaik (2010) for an analysis of the attempts to give form and meaning to Dutch naturalization ceremonies by local bureaucrats and Geschiere (2009) for the difficulties entailed in the production of a Dutch canon.

11 In the conclusion of his article, however, Entzinger does attempt to move away from certain aspects of the dominant discourse in his plea to prevent the ‘emerging elite of allochthons’ (2009, p. 22) from becoming frustrated by a lack of opportunities and by discrimination. He argues that it is at this point that ‘the key to a societal problem can be found that mistakenly and often too explicitly is cast in religious terms’ (ibid.).
a deterioration in the way the two groups perceive each other (2009, p. 8), leading to a situation in which young Turks and Moroccans ‘continue on the path toward integration, but are at the same time becoming more out of favour’ (ibid.). Entzinger continues:

In this process of polarization [Turkish and Moroccan youth] are starting to put more emphasis on certain aspects of their ‘own’ identity. In the Netherlands it is, especially among younger Moroccans, Islam that is being used as such a marker of identity, as an instrument to distinguish oneself from others. This appears to confirm the hypothesis that the changing social and political climate has led to a deterioration of the relations between allochthons and autochthons: because of increased integration demands, allochthons turn away from autochthons and a hardening of the mutual boundaries takes place. (2009, p. 8, my translation)

Not only does Entzinger uncritically employ the notions of allochtoon and autochtoon, he also ignores the fact that most of the young ‘Turks and Moroccans’ were in fact born and raised in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the study signals the emergence of an identity politics among young Turks and Moroccans that is related to ‘their “own” identity’ (2009, p. 8), which throughout his study is understood as coming from their own or their parents’ migration history. In line with the dominant discourse, ‘the younger Moroccans’ (ibid.) are problematized above all others and singled out as subjects who turn towards ‘Islam’ (apparently there exists such a thing as one monolithic Islam) to set themselves apart from mainstream society. Finally, the study concludes that allochthons turn away from autochthons, instead of the other way around, thereby locating the problem on the side of those who ostensibly are insufficiently Dutch.

The culturalist language and logic of the dominant discourse is not only present in research that literally engages with the issue of integration but also can be observed whenever studies determine the identity of their subjects on the basis of their perceived ethnic, cultural or religious alterity, and use these markers as explanatory devices for different problems associated with people labelled as migrants.

Notwithstanding the near-hegemonic status of the culturalist discourse identified above, this discourse should not be understood as a static or homogenous structure that oppresses from above those people who are identified as ethnic minorities. First, the discourse harbours many layers, including anti-migrant sentiments, Islamophobia, the new nationalism, Orientalism and culturalisation, all of which have to be analysed in the specific contexts in which they appear. Second and even more importantly, the dominant discourse is neither always wholly taken up nor wholly rejected by actors. As the ethnographic data discussed below make clear, in some situations it is actually contested and reproduced at

---

12 In the dominant Dutch discourse on migrants, young people whose parents were born in Morocco are one of the most stigmatized groups.
the same time. As a structure of power, the dominant discourse not only limits the actors of this study but also provides them with the conditions for their agency. Furthermore, the dominant discourse interacts with various other discourses that the respondents in this study have to negotiate in their daily lives, such as gender. Therefore, this study also looks at instances of positioning in relation to intersecting discourses that press upon the subjectivity of the respondents.

This study then looks at how the macro level of dominant public and political discourse in the Netherlands impacts upon the micro practices of individual young Muslims in Rotterdam. By way of ethnographic research it aims to ‘access an empirical working out of these macro debates’ (Woodward, 2007, p. 29) in the domain of artistic production.

**Resistance, Accommodation and Exit**

In order to be able to study the ways in which young Muslims in the Netherlands position themselves in relation to the dominant discourse, I draw upon an analytical framework that is comprised of the three different strategies of resistance, accommodation and exit. The strategy of resistance consists of an explicit positioning against the dominant discourse, while the strategy of accommodation is characterized by an attempt to adjust oneself, to whatever degree, to this discourse. Both of these strategies relate directly to the dominant discourse and thus depend upon it, whether as direct critique or as a more subtle form of adjustment to it. The strategy of exit, however, seeks a position entirely removed from the dominant discourse and in this sense only relates to it indirectly, by trying to circumvent it.

In developing this analytical framework I have been inspired by several authors (Baumann, 1996; Bröer, 2008; De Certeau, 1984; Hirschman, 1970). This means that the strategies of resistance, accommodation and exit are drawn from the scholarly literature and should be regarded as ideal types that were rarely encountered during my fieldwork in perfectly discrete forms. As I delineate below, these strategies are often shaped into various amalgamations in the practice of everyday life. Nevertheless, when looking at the ethnographic data, the framework derived from the literature does roughly correspond with and provide a guide into making the data comprehensible. In that sense, my use of the analytical framework can be compared to the way Gerd Baumann understands his structural model of selfing and othering, which exists in different grammars of identity/alterity (2004). In setting out his model, Baumann stresses that the grammars ‘do not, of course, describe how social systems work.... Rather, they are used as guides as to how different discourses order the relationships between self and other’ (2004, p. 19).

13 I use the notion of strategy in a sense that does not limit it to intentional agency, but also allows room for more subconsciously motivated action; see also footnote 18. I differ in my use of the notion of strategy from De Certeau, who distinguishes between strategies and tactics and sees the former as linked to those in power and the latter as belonging to the domain of the oppressed or ‘the other’ (1984, p. xix).
The framework that I draw upon thus serves both to gain insights into the ways in which Muslims in the Netherlands position themselves vis-à-vis the dominant discourse that constructs them as other and to provide a guide along which to order the ethnographic data. When I applied the framework to the data, two key points became clear. First, artistic mediators often draw upon various mergers of the three forms of resistance, accommodation and exit, highlighting the interdependency of the three strategies. Second, among the artists themselves, the exit strategy is dominant. Before I proceed to explain this in more detail, I first set out more clearly the characteristics of the strategy of exit as encountered in the field. The three strategies of positioning that I have identified are to a certain extent inspired by the model that Albert Hirschman developed to analyse different ‘mechanisms of recuperation’ (1970, p. 3) for firms, organizations and states in decline. These mechanisms are exit, voice and loyalty, which correspond roughly to what I have called exit, resistance and accommodation. However, there are some important differences in the way that exit is understood by Hirschman as compared to the present study that need to be highlighted here to clarify the way in which I use this concept.

Exit for Hirschman implies a total departure from a firm, organization or state, while in the cases I analyse exit is both less absolute and less physical, in that it does not pertain to an act such as emigration to another country but to an exit from a dominant discourse. The strategy of exit as I use it is defined by the attempt of Muslims with a family migration history to leave the dominant themes and images of public and political discourse on migrants and Muslims in the Netherlands and instead put forward alternative images and stories by way of artistic production. This, however, does not imply that exit is ‘an autonomous opposite, or an independent alternative’ to the dominant discourse (Baumann, 1996, p. 195). As Baumann makes clear in relation to the demotic discourse that he identified in Southall, this discourse ‘does not make the dominant discourse lose its salience: it would hardly be dominant, after all, if Southallians could “switch it off” altogether’ (ibid.).

Young Muslim artists with a family migration history living in the Netherlands who do not engage the dominant discourse in their artistic work, but instead develop work that is inspired by other aspects of their lives practice what I call a strategy of exit. These artists do not voice a protest against the dominant discourse but direct their gaze in different directions, often simply because other things inspire them more. The strategy of exit is therefore different from a strategy of appropriation in which images and themes from the dominant discourse are intentionally used in such a way as to give them a different meaning and thus question them. I label that strategic approach a form of resistance rather than exit.

---

14 See also Bröer (2008), who has developed a discourse resonance model to analyse how policy discourses affect the perception of aircraft noise (2008). Bröer distinguishes between three positions or relationships: consonance, dissonance and autonomy. When people reproduce the dominant policy discourse, Bröer terms this consonance, whereas when people struggle with the dominant discourse and reject parts of it while embracing others, this is termed dissonance, and when people do not entertain any relationship to dominant discourse, their position is called autonomy (2008, p. 99).
The way in which the strategy of exit is developed in artistic productions evinces many differences, but there are two main variants that can be distinguished: one form of exit that can still be brought into relation with the dominant discourse by viewers of the work, such as curators, commissioners and managers at funding bodies, and another form which remains illegible in relation to the dominant discourse. What these forms have in common is that they both aim to engage with different themes than those arising out of the dominant debate on Muslims and migrants in the Netherlands. Each results from the attempt of these young artists to opt out of the dominant discourse and not to relate to the subject position of Other to which it assigns them. Artistic work that calls upon the strategy of exit is therefore not concerned with the kind of identity politics that is often brought into the discussion of young Muslims and migrants in Western Europe.

Although both types of exit developed in artistic work thus attempt to leave the dominant discourse, the first type to a certain degree can still be read by specific beholders as relating to issues from the dominant debate about Muslims or migrants. Although the artist herself might not intend to engage the dominant debate in her artistic work, she cannot control how her work will be received or interpreted. The presence in the artwork of symbols that in the dominant discourse have become overdetermined markers of difference can produce a form of legibility in the artwork that, in the eye of the beholder, reproduces or ties in with the dominant discourse, irrespective of the fact that the artist is attempting to exit that discourse. As this study shows, this makes the artwork vulnerable to being incorporated by the dominant discourse, but at the same time offers the potential to destabilize it.

The second type of exit performed by artistic work made by young artists who are Muslim and have a family migration history is more radical, in the sense that on its own this kind of work cannot be read as pertaining to issues of the dominant debate. I do not wish to imply here that an artwork can have only one singular meaning divorced from the context in which it is viewed, but to highlight a distinction between art that shows particular symbols or themes recognisable from the dominant discourse (irrespective of the meaning that the artist has assigned to them), and art that is much more difficult to relate to the dominant discourse because of the absence of these kind of symbols and themes.

Before I refine the descriptions of these two forms of exit further, it is important to note that exit in this study is thus in the first instance identified from the perspective of the artist rather than the beholder. The attempt by the individual artist to leave the dominant discourse is the condition on which I attribute the label of exit to a particular artwork, whether specific viewers relate that art to the dominant discourse or not. Having established that a piece of art aims to perform the strategy of exit, it becomes clear that there exist two different types of exit. As noted above, there is one type that still can be pulled into the logic of the dominant discourse by different audiences and one type that makes this

15 See also ‘The Emancipated Spectator’ by Jacques Rancière (2009).
effort exceedingly difficult or even absurd. I have called these two types of exit volatile and stable, respectively.\textsuperscript{16} The degree to which exit can still be read as tying in with the dominant discourse depends on two main factors. The first is the presence of elements or themes in the artwork that are recognisable in relation to the dominant discourse; often these elements or themes have become overdetermined markers of difference. The second is the gaze of particular beholders, which ultimately determines the extent of legibility.\textsuperscript{17}

Why is it important to address the issue of whether the art made by young Muslims in the Netherlands is legible in relation to the dominant discourse? There are two main, related answers to this question: first, the issue of legibility has an immediate effect on how the artist and her work are received by institutional gatekeepers such as curators, commissioners and funding bodies, and thus her chances of having her work funded or exhibited. In the arts arena, the dominant discourse provides interpretative frameworks that make the work of artists that are identified as culturally (or religiously or ethnically) other legible in relation to their perceived otherness. When these artists make work that is too far removed from these markers of difference, their art often fails to receive attention, be selected for exhibitions or become eligible to receive funding. Second, the issue of legibility is related to the potential for political emancipation that the artwork can provide. As this study makes clear, a minimum degree of legibility in relation to the dominant discourse is often a necessary requirement for a given piece of art to be able to resonate with this discourse in order subsequently to question the assumptions that underlie it.

The fact that exit in its more radical incarnations, i.e. exit that is relatively stable, cannot resonate with the dominant discourse precisely because its distance from it often necessitates a form of translation or mediation between exit and the dominant discourse in order to make that exit legible as relevant. This is how artistic mediators who attempt to translate art made by artists identified as Muslim migrants that does not engage with the images and themes from the dominant discourse serve as gatekeepers at relevant artistic institutions.

The artistic mediators who are featured in this study themselves also have a family migration history or are Muslim or both. They often try to introduce exit to artistic institutions with the aim of destabilizing the hegemonic position of the dominant discourse and to problematize its culturalist logic. Mediation can transform exit into resistance, which more often than not requires a degree of accommodation to the dominant discourse by the mediator. In the practice of mediation, the mediator thus does not simply try to opt out of the dominant discourse, but strives to undo its logic from within that discourse by having recourse to a combination of strategies.

\textsuperscript{16} As is outlined below in this chapter and the study as a whole, exit is rarely stable in an absolutist sense. I have chosen to call the two types of exit volatile and stable in order to highlight their different susceptibility to being drawn back into the logic of the dominant discourse.

\textsuperscript{17} However, this does not mean that the success or impact of exit can only be judged in relation to how other people view the artwork.
Art that performs the strategy of exit has an inherent potential for political emancipation by virtue of its capacity to cut through the logic of the dominant discourse on migrants and Muslims and by providing alternative images and stories. However, this potential can often only be unlocked by mediators who make the artwork legible within artistic institutions. In mediation the strategy of exit is thus confronted by the dominant discourse, which means that mediation always involves the risk of the exit that is being attempted becoming incorporated into that very discourse. Furthermore, mediation is not always successful. The more stable the form of exit—the less easily the artwork can be pulled into the dominant discourse—the more likely it is that mediators will fail in their attempts to show the relevance of the artwork to the institutions in question.

The strategies of resistance, accommodation and exit are by no means clear-cut categories, but have to be understood as dynamically related and interdependent. What can be a strategy of exit at the level of the maker can become a means to resist the dominant discourse at the level of the mediator, who can place a particular work in the larger context of an exhibition. Different actors in the field—mediators, curators, artists, commissioners and publics—give different meanings to a particular artistic project. A single artwork or project can therefore perform a combination of the different layers of resistance, accommodation and exit.

Notwithstanding the interdependent nature of the three strategies, this study makes clear that the strategies of resistance and accommodation are nearly non-existent among the artists themselves. The young artists in this study pointed out to me at various moments that they wanted to be seen as ‘just normal’, and were reluctant to discuss the political climate in the Netherlands and the media’s portrayal of Muslims or allochtonen, because they feared that by entering into discussion they would be seen only as Other. Furthermore, they often did not think that voicing a protest would do anything to alter the situation. However, another important and related reason for deliberately not entering the public and political debate by means of their art, and thus refraining from the strategies of resistance and accommodation, is the fact that almost all of the young artists that I spoke with are thoroughly fed up with the dominant debate and would rather invest their time and energy in other things, such as developing their artistic skills. There simply are more important things that inspire them than engaging with their ascribed subject position of Other. The strategy of exit from the dominant discourse by means of artistic production is thus not always a deliberate action on the part of the artists in this study, but often results from an artist following her passions, although that does not make the actual phenomenon of exit any less important.18

---

18 Cf. Miller and Woodward (2012). In their study on the practice of wearing blue jeans, Miller and Woodward explain that for migrants in the United Kingdom wearing blue jeans can be a mode of becoming ordinary. They argue that the fact that wearing blue jeans might not be a conscious practice does not reduce its importance (p. 120).
Culturally Open Images and Stories

Instead of focusing my inquiry on the reasons why the artists I spoke with did not engage in a strategy of resistance in the form of so-called activist art, I have focused on what forms the strategy of exit takes in their work and what that strategy affords them. It is characterized by images and stories that exhibit a degree of cultural openness. As Victor Turner (1967) has shown in one of his seminal works, symbols often have more than one meaning. When used in the dominant discourse, however, the range of meanings of particular symbols can become flattened and symbols can become overdetermined. The veil is one example of a symbol that has become an overdetermined marker of difference in Western discourses on Islam (Dwyer 1999). In Dutch public and political debate, the veil has come to be equated with the oppression of Muslim women and the backwardness of Muslims in general, while the many different meanings that the veil can have for the women who wear it are shunted aside.19 The dominant discourse thus reduces the complexity of particular symbols in such a way that they can serve a particular political project.20

The dominant discourse effects a form of closure that culturally open images attempt to undo. Culturally open images and stories have the potential to intervene in the dominant discourse in various ways. First, they can restore the polysemous status of symbols that have become overdetermined markers of difference. In Chapter Two for instance a case is discussed that shows how culturally open images can depoliticize the symbol of the veil and have the power to release it from the connotations it has gained in the dominant discourse. Second, culturally open images can give rise to a form of miscommunication that can be used strategically by artistic mediators. In Chapter Three, a case is analysed that makes clear how two different parties agree upon the suitability of an artwork for a particular exhibition, even if they hold very different interpretations of it. This allows the artwork to be commissioned even while it simultaneously questions many of the assumptions that are part of the culturalist framework that underscores the exhibition.

Finally, culturally open images that do not refer to any of the overdetermined symbols or themes of the dominant discourse offer a radically different view into the lives of young Muslims in Western Europe. Art that belongs to this category points towards emergent subjectivities of young Muslims in Western Europe that seek to transcend the available dichotomies of Muslim and non-Muslim, allochtoon and autochtoon, Western and non-Western, etc. In the cases that I discuss, this type of art is encountered for instance in the

---

19 See for instance Annelies Moors for an analysis of how in Western Europe Islamic head coverings are taken to be ‘a sign, symbol or instrument of women’s oppression (at the hands of the men in their families or the wider ethnic-religious community)’ (2011a, p. 147), and how the public debate on the headscarf turns Muslim women into ‘a marked category that ‘can never escape the burden of representation’ (2009, p. 195).

20 Cf. Ohnuki-Tierney (2002), who analyses the role of the Japanese state in changing the range of meanings of the symbol of the cherry blossom as part of nationalist propaganda that culminated at the end of the Second World War.
genres of abstract and landscape photography and Japanese manga (see Chapters Two and Five, respectively), but it can also appear in the form of a particular colour that exemplifies an alternative way of imagining subjectivity (see Chapter Six).

Culturally open images and stories should be understood neither as neutral nor as empty. They create spaces within the dominant discourse for a different view on the relationship between ethnicity, culture, religion and identity, especially in reference to Muslims and migrants. Furthermore, on an individual level, they allow the artist who is identified as Muslim or migrant to imagine herself outside of the polarising dynamic of the dominant discourse. Cultural openness in this study is thus understood as a relative quality and evaluated in relation to the cultural closure of the dominant discourse and the culturalist logic that informs it. To be sure, culturally open images do not necessarily entail a rejection of the themes of ethnicity, culture or religion as such, but a rejection of the way in which these themes are imagined in the dominant discourse. This means that art that is inspired by the artist’s ethnic or religious affiliation can also be viewed as culturally open when it presents an image of that characteristic that differs from those constructed by the dominant discourse.

One of the dilemmas of the strategy of exit and the culturally open images and stories to which it gives rise is the fact that they are often not legible within the dominant interpretative framework and depend on mediators who are able to manoeuvre between exit and the dominant discourse to gain access to institutions; this requirement might endanger or compromise the ‘exit-quality’ of the artwork. This precariousness of exit stands in stark contrast to the direct power that exit has in Hirschman’s study (1970). When viewed as having the potential to achieve an actual escape from an oppressive or unsatisfactory state of affairs within a firm, organization or state, exit can have the effect of being a threat that helps to strengthen the power of the marginalized voice (Hirschman 1970, p. 82). Exit in the cases that Hirschman analyses is seen as a ‘mechanism of recuperation’ (1970, p. 3) and can lead to ‘restoring quality performance of government’ (1970, p. 117).

In the present study, exit has a much more subtle efficacy that can be analysed on three different levels: the micro level of the lives of individual artists, the meso level of the artistic domain that shows the dynamic interplay between artistic mediators and institutional gatekeepers such as curators and commissioners and the macro level of the national public and political discourse about people designated as migrants and Muslims. The efficacy of exit on the first level involves processes of self-definition and self-realization away from the dominant discourse that are afforded by artistic production. In this study, I deal with these practices as forms of authorship. On the second level, the strategy of exit has the potential to affect the dominant understandings of cultural diversity as regards the arts. On the third level, the efficacy of exit is at its most subdued; the dominant discourse is in a position of communicative monopoly in the public and political domain. When marginalized subjects
choose not to engage with the dominant representations constructed of them in mainstream media, politics and parts of academia but put forward alternative images and stories, they often fail to be taken up on the level of the national public and political discourse. This makes the task of understanding and making visible the possibilities and limits of the strategy of exit all the more important. This study aims to contribute to this important goal by offering analyses of ethnographic cases that relate to the first and second levels and by showing how these cases problematize the dominant discourse on the national level.

In order to gain a clearer vision of the relationship between the levels of analysis that this study differentiates and the different forms of exit, I have summarized these relations in Figures 1 and 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Art’s Legibility Relative to the Dominant Discourse</th>
<th>Legible</th>
<th>Illegible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form of Exit</td>
<td>Volatile</td>
<td>Stable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1 | Relationship between legibility and forms of exit.**

**Level of Analysis**

**Individual Artist**  
Self-definition and self-realization of an individual artist identified as a Muslim migrant by means of art that attempts to opt out of the dominant discourse.

**Artistic Mediator**  
Mediation between art made by an artist identified as a Muslim migrant that attempts to exit the culturalist logic of the dominant discourse and artistic institutions where the dominant discourse provides the main interpretative framework. The goal is to make exit productive. The more an artwork moves in the direction of illegibility in relation to the dominant discourse, the more mediation is required in order to sell it. This produces the risk of the artwork being drawn back into the dominant discourse, but the less an artwork is legible in relation to the dominant discourse, the more mediation is prone to failure.

**National Public and Political Discourse**  
The political and discursive power of the dominant discourse has a communicative monopoly, meaning that attempts at exit often remain unnoticed or are confronted and imperilled by attempts at re-incorporation into the dominant discourse.

**Figure 2 | Levels of analysis.**

---

21 This figure concerns art that is made by artists who are identified as Muslim migrants who seek to exit the dominant discourse.
The strategies of positioning in relation to the dominant discourse that I examine in this study are developed in artistic production and artistic mediation, so I embed them in a perspective that keeps an eye on the creative and material dimensions of these strategies without losing sight of the role of significant others and relations of power.

**Artistic Production and Authorship**

In order to gain an understanding of the creative and material processes by which the strategy of exit is developed into material form, it is useful to work with the notion of authorship. I build my notion of authorship on the idea that ‘people are the authors of themselves’, which is indebted to the work of Barbara Myerhoff (1986, p. 263). In her study of elderly Eastern European Jewish immigrants living in California and struggling against being invisible to mainstream society, Myerhoff analyses the transformative power of expressing and performing actual and desired self-images. She argues that:

One of the most persistent but elusive ways that people make sense of themselves is to show themselves to themselves, through multiple forms: by telling themselves stories; by dramatizing claims in rituals and other collective enactments; by rendering visible actual and desired truths about themselves and the significance of their existence in imaginative and performative productions…. Self-definition is made possible by means of such showings, for their content may state not only what people think they are but what they should have been or may yet be. (1986, pp. 261–262)

Myerhoff shows how these older Jewish immigrants are able to counter their politically marginal position and their invisibility to a certain extent by performing and displaying desired images of themselves to themselves and others through a parade and a mural. She explains:

They displayed and performed their interpretations of themselves and in some critical respects became what they claimed to be. By denying their invisibility, isolation, and impotence, they made themselves be seen, and in being seen they came into being in their own terms, as authors of themselves. (1986, p. 263)

What attracts me in Myerhoff’s view of authorship is the idea that marginalized people have a degree of agency in authoring their own images and stories that can help them to cope with their precarious position and that may even move beyond that to impact upon the perceptions that other people have of them. However, there is an important difference in how Myerhoff and I use authorship, namely the degree to which the self-authored images of marginalized people are taken up by dominant institutions that can validate them. The cases that Myerhoff analyses were very successful in convincing not only the marginalized
individuals themselves about the validity of their created self-images, but also other important actors, such as the media, who helped bring public attention to and support for the elders, as Myerhoff explains: ‘By pressing into service others who believed, to restate their versions of themselves, they amplified their claims’ (1986, p. 262). In the cases that I investigate, the self-images and stories created by young Muslims have not been taken up as readily by dominant institutions that can introduce them into the realm of public and political discourse; at least in the short term, this limits their potential for social change.

Authorship in my study, although referring to a process that is marked by a degree of agency in relation to self-definition by means of artistic production, is thus faced with more obstacles than Myerhoff’s examples.

Nevertheless, the relevance of authorship practices in this study cannot be understood as being determined solely by others’ validation of those practices. While such validation can be valuable, it is crucial to give due attention to self-authored images and stories, even if they do not gain much public support or do not receive commissions from established institutions. The images and stories that people create of and about themselves can have an important efficacy for their authors, irrespective of whether they are able to capture the attention of others, let alone cause them to rethink their views. As Myerhoff also states in her study: ‘If others were watching, so much the better…. If no one else noticed, [the elderly Jewish immigrants] watched each other and themselves, bearing witness to their own story’ (1986, p. 269).

I approach authorship as a creative process of self-definition and self-realization away from the parameters of the dominant discourse. This process involves the artists’ mind and emotions, of course, but at the same time is strongly material. I have therefore found it useful to incorporate theories developed in material culture studies into my conceptualization of authorship. I am particularly inspired by the theory of objectification developed by Daniel Miller (1987). Miller explains how in Hegel objectification consists of a series of processes in which the subject ‘first extends itself through creation, and then becomes aware of that created “something”, which appears as outside itself’, (1987, p. 21). This leads to a sense of dissatisfaction at this state of separation, which in turn leads to the reincorporation into the subject of what was externalized, transforming the subject in this process (ibid.). Drawing upon Hegel, Miller defines objectification as ‘a dual process by means of which a subject externalizes itself in a creative act of differentiation, and in turn reappropriates this externalization through an act which Hegel terms sublation (aufhebung)’ (1987, p. 28). After sublation the subject and its creation are no longer separated; ‘the creation is used to enrich and develop the subject, which then transcends its earlier state’ (Miller 1987, p. 28). In discussing the concept of objectification as Miller develops it, Sophie Woodward points out that ‘Miller makes Hegel’s theory material by pointing to ways in which this moment of the externalization of the self may happen through objects’ (2007, p. 14).
Although Miller uses his idea of objectification primarily to analyse consumption practices, it also provides valuable insights into the relationship between artistic production and processes of self-definition and self-realization. The idea of objectification helps to understand artistic production as a process in which the artist and her work come into being precisely by interacting with each other. When the artist externalizes herself in material form by means of creating a piece of art, she is then able to look at herself from a distance and to recognize herself in the object she has made. This in turn can lead to the object being reintegrated within the subject, the artist herself. In this process the artist has gained knowledge and has developed herself. However, there is also the possibility that this process will not succeed. The reincorporation of the object within the subject may fail, instead leaving the subject with a feeling of alienation, as when the artist does not recognize herself in the work that she has made, or when the work fails to match the expectations that the artist has of herself and her work. I develop this point in more detail in Chapter Six.

Looking at artistic production as a form of objectification offers a vantage point on the relationship between subject and object in which neither is prior to the other (Miller 1987, p. 32). In this study, I approach artistic production as a process of developing thoughts, feelings, and modes of being in the world (i.e. various subjectivities), in interaction with the creation of material form. This entails a process that does not involve the representation of something that is already there, but rather is constitutive (Miller 1987, p. 33). The subject does not merely express some already existing subjectivity but is constituted in the process of objectification, where subject and object exist in interaction with each other. This reminds us of the model of and model for distinction developed by Clifford Geertz (1993). Artworks are not just models of subjectivities in the sense that they are representations of certain subjectivities, but are also models for the development of those subjectivities. Writing about the Balinese cockfight, Geertz states that ‘attending cockfights and participating in them is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education’ (as cited in Ortner, 2006, p. 118, my emphasis). It allows the participants to become more aware of their own subjectivity, but this subjectivity does not exist prior to the cockfight itself, as Geertz explains:

Yet, because … that subjectivity does not properly exist until it is thus organized, art forms generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display. Quartets, still lives, and cockfights are not merely reflections of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility. (Geertz as cited in Ortner, 2006, p. 118)

I have further developed the idea that the artist and her artwork come into being through interaction with each other by engaging with the work of Tim Ingold (2000, 2013), who is more inspired by a phenomenological approach. Ingold holds that in the process of making, form is generated through the interaction of the artist and her material environment.
Instead of the artist imposing a mental image on material form, the artist and her work come into being in a process in which both respond to each other (Ingold, 2013). I elaborate on these ideas in Chapter Four.

Understanding people as the authors of themselves might carry a connotation of unrestrained agency; however, this does not reflect how I employ the concept of authorship in this study. Authorship should be seen as a process that takes place between creation and constraints. Looking at how this process develops among artists who belong to a socio-politically marginalized minority, as this study does, makes clear the various limitations with which these artists are faced when engaging with artistic institutions that rely on the dominant discourse. Moreover, on the level of the process of making itself, there also exist various forces that compete with the degree of agency that the artist experiences. For instance, the rules of the existing genres with which the artist engages have a structuring influence on the process of authorship, as do technical and skill limitations. Finally, the dependence on government subsidies that many artists face creates both possibilities for and limitations on the process of authorship.

Although I analyse the affordances of authorship on the level of the individual artist, this study shows that it is a process in which many more actors are involved, all positioned in particular relations of power, such as mediators, supervisors and curators. Far from being an autonomous and unconstrained activity, authorship in this study is understood as a process that is embedded in larger social, political and economic structures. However, one of this study’s contentions is that artistic production does afford subjects particular opportunities for fulfilling a sense of agency, especially when this is felt to be lacking in other domains of life. The strategy of exit when realized in artistic production not only involves an escape from the dominant discourse but also the development of alternative subjectivities.

It is here that the relationship between the strategy of exit and the process of authorship can be discerned; whereas from the perspective of the strategy of exit the desire to opt out of the dominant discourse is emphasized, from the perspective of authorship the realization of this desire in the form of the creation of alternative subjectivities is foregrounded. Authorship thus centralizes the generative dimensions of the strategy of exit; in this sense it embodies the other side of exit. The process of authorship and the engagement with materiality that it involves provide for specific possibilities of exiting the dominant discourse, not towards an alternative discourse, but in the first instance towards the development of culturally open images and stories and emergent subjectivities that transcend the dichotomies of the dominant discourse. It allows the artist to enter the public domain on her own terms, as author of her own subjectivity (cf. Myerhoff, 1986, p. 263).

22 I follow Cherland and Edelsky (2004) in looking at the domain of fiction as offering the possibility of fulfilling a desire for agency.

23 Alternative to the ascribed subject positions made available within the dominant discourse.
It is important to note that understanding authorship as a domain of self-definition and self-realization does not necessarily entail the Romantic assumption of an authentic self that can be accessed or known by means of artistic production. Wilf understands self-expression through artistic production as belonging to a Sentimentalist-Romantic ideal postulating that by engaging in creative expression the subject is able to find its authentic self (2011, p. 172). Wilf argues that within this ideal the interiority of the subject ‘is revealed only as it is articulated because it is a potentiality’ (2011, p. 471–472). This revelation takes place through the ability of the subject to imagine ‘fictive scenarios’ that ‘may or may not align with the subject’s interiority’, and the subsequent reaction of the subject ‘to the objectified products of his or her imagination in the form of “feeling” and “pleasure” that alerts the subject to his or her true nature and interiority’ (ibid.). Following Taylor, Wilf goes on to argue that ‘at stake here is authenticity, rather than sincerity, that is, the demand that I remain “true to myself” in the sense that I follow what the voice of my nature calls me to do’ (ibid.).

The vision of self-expression as constituted by a ‘normative ideal of modern creative agency’ (2011, p. 479) that Wilf proposes differs from my understanding of authorship in several important ways. First, I decentre the subject’s agency to include the many other forces that impact upon the process of making, such as material environmental factors and unequal power relations. Second, authorship in this study is not analysed as a process that allows the subject to get in touch with the true self but rather as a process that allows for the formation of multiple situated selves away from the parameters of the dominant discourse. Exiting the dominant discourse does not have to take the shape of a single authentic self; it can take the form of various experimental subjectivities. Authorship thus looks at the generation of multiple selves or subjectivities that can harbour many ambiguities instead of looking at the development of the self as a single or true core.

**Muslims and the Research Imagination**

There exists a tendency in social science research on Muslims and Islam to focus on extremes, such as Muslim converts and apostate Muslims. Although these studies might well shed light on important questions like the relationship between religious practices and identity formation, this focus nevertheless can lead to a one-dimensional portrayal of Muslims. Similarly, studies that analyse the way in which pious Muslims experience their religion and investigate how agency can be understood as being part of the process of submitting oneself to Islam (e.g. Mahmood, 2001), although very valuable in problematizing the portrayal of Muslims (especially women) as passive victims, have not contributed to the image of Muslims as ordinary people, living ordinary lives of which Islam is but one element, albeit an important one. In all these studies, Islam is the most important or even the sole frame of
analysis to understand the actions and ideas of Muslims; however, as Samuli Schielke (2010) points out, even pious people are not pious all of the time. In other words, when the actions and thoughts of Muslims are analysed solely from the vantage point of their religion, we reduce the complexity and ambiguity of everyday life as it is lived by all of us, including Muslims, where existential concerns meet pragmatic choices (Schielke, 2010, p. 9).

I have taken on board all these considerations throughout this study, which demands that I do not perceive my respondents as only Muslim; they are also artists, students, fashion lovers, etc. Furthermore, I have approached the respondents in this study in a way that aims to stay close to their own concerns and everyday lives. This means that the question of how artistic production relates to the individual's religious subjectivity was in many cases not the most important one to ask. Unlike much contemporary scholarship, this research does not take Islam as the starting point for analysing the lives of the respondents, but examines the role of religion only when the specific context demands it. Religion is understood as one of the many spheres that guide a subject in her daily actions. The respondents in this study are therefore not perceived as subjects who in their thoughts and actions are determined by their religious affiliation.

This study contributes to a critique of portraying Muslims unidimensionally in social scientific research. Furthermore, it develops a critique of research that understands Muslims with a family migration history solely by way of the themes that are put forward by the dominant discourse, such as integration and its supposed failure, feelings of homesickness for the country of actual or familial origin, being torn between two cultures, double or divided national loyalties, an emphasis on identity politics, etc. These themes are all too often presupposed to play the most important role in the lives of Muslims in Western Europe, so that Muslims often end up defined by them in political discourse, the dominant media, and even in social science. By making visible what artistic strategies young Muslims in the Netherlands practice in an attempt to opt out of the dominant discourse, this study emphasizes the other stories and images that speak about their everyday lives.

Furthermore, instead of focusing only on how Muslims with a family migration history position themselves vis-à-vis the dominant discourse, this study looks further and includes themes that are scarcely present in research on Muslims or migrants in Western Europe, such as the role of creativity and artistic production in processes of self-definition. In this way, the focus shifts from the relationship between artistic work made by Muslims and the dominant discourse to a focus on the relationship between creativity, material culture and the creation of emerging subjectivities. Shifting from a focus on strategies of positioning to a focus on authorship therefore entails a movement away from the dominant discourse as the only or most important interpretative frame to look at the lives of artists who are Muslim and classed as migrants. The perspective of authorship instead foregrounds the process of making, its affordances and its limitations. What drives the artist? How does she arrive at the art that she makes? What kind of obstacles does she face? What subjectivities
does she develop by means of her art? What roles do materiality and the process of making play in the generation of subjectivities? Finally, how do relations of power impact upon the creative process?

However, the movement between a focus on exit and a focus on authorship in this study does not progress in any linear way, involving instead going back and forth between the two perspectives. The fact that authorship in this study is conceptualized as a practice that is embedded in larger social, political and economic structures means that it is always confronted by the dominant discourse. This is one of the reasons why the respondents in this study are labelled both as artists and as Muslims with a family migration history, instead of only as artists. As this study shows, even when the religious or ethnic subject position of these artists may not be relevant in their work, it is frequently made relevant in the context of the reception of that work by actors who operate within a culturalist framework. The reason that this study cannot simply leave out the label of ‘Muslim’ when talking about the artists in question and cannot ignore any family migration history is thus related to the particular dialectic that I want to lay bare: an artist with a family migration history self-identifies as Muslim, but she does not identify with the ascribed subject position of Muslim migrant as it is made available within the dominant discourse and does not want to address that subject position in her work; still, she is often forced to relate to this subject position when her work is evaluated in the gaze of the beholder.

As an anthropologist conducting research into the ways in which Muslims in the Netherlands position themselves in relation to the political and discursive power of the culturalist paradigm, I naturally become involved in the dominant discourse. My research asks young artists who are Muslim and have a family migration history to relate themselves and their work to the dominant discourse. This means that this study is one of the forces that makes the work that these artists produce legible in relation to the dominant discourse. At the same time, however, this study aims to contribute to the destabilization of this discourse by paying attention to the ways in which young Muslims create artworks that venture beyond the confines of that culturalist logic and by showing how artistic production allows these artists to author their own self-images. By providing a social scientific platform for their work and their struggles, this study contributes to their visibility in the social sciences and to the emancipative potential that their work may have beyond them as individuals.

Notes on Methodology

This research involves in-depth ethnography carried out over 24 months at various locations in the city of Rotterdam. Rotterdam is one of the large cities in the Netherlands; in November

24 This is why I describe authorship as the other side of exit.

25 I distinguish in this study between subjectivity and subject position. In the second section of Chapter Five, I elaborate on this important difference.
2015, the municipality counted 628,334 inhabitants at the centre of a metro area of some two million.26 My research methodology includes semi-structured interviews, participant observation and analyses of the different artwork produced, such as a short story, different forms of photography, and graphic design/illustration art, always in relation to the data that I gathered by means of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. My interview techniques include data elicitation while the artists and I discussed both works in progress and finished works at shows in museums. Furthermore, I conducted so-called walking interviews,27 which took me from the secular space of the city streets to the sacred sphere of a religious procession and to the world of highly exclusive and expensive fashion stores in the centre of a city.28

For this research, I interviewed twelve artists, four artistic mediators and four supervisors or teachers. The number of people with whom I have talked, however, is far larger because I also spoke to those I met during participant observation, such as the curators of artistic projects, attendees at the openings of various exhibitions, participants at a workshop given by one of the artists, and artists’ family members. In addition to meeting artists at their homes, I invited many of them into my own home to talk while enjoying a meal together. In this way, I tried to get to know the artists better and to understand what mattered in their everyday lives. I visited one artist in her studio, but the majority of them did not have access to their own dedicated workspace. Many of the young artists still lived with their parents and preferred to meet in the public library, which was also a convenient space for them to meet the artistic supervisors and mediators who oversaw the development of their work. Those mediators and supervisors I met primarily at their offices or at the public library during their discussions with the artists they supervised.

My research has involved many instances of Geertz’s ‘deep hanging out’ (1998) with individual respondents. The relatively small number of respondents and the long timespan of the research enabled me to establish a certain level of intimacy with most of them and a personal bond that helped me to gain their trust and in certain cases to dissolve or at least erode some of the boundaries between researcher and respondent. However, I do not wish to ignore the extent to which my presence and my questions were an integral part of the data collected. The information I gathered during this study has taken shape in intersubjective encounters between researcher and respondent.

Whereas at the start of my research I strongly experienced that my subject position of ethnic-Dutch researcher impacted upon my relationship with the respondents, this tended

27 For the advantages associated with the practice of walking together with respondents as an ethnographic research tool, see Margarethe Kusenbach (2003).
28 On three occasions an interview took me outside of Rotterdam: to fashion shops in Brussels, to an office of a national artistic fund in a large city, and to a religious procession in another large city in the Netherlands that for privacy reasons remain undisclosed.
to play a far more limited role when I talked with the respondents about their artistic production. In these situations my own professional background in the arts provided me with a natural common ground and helped me to establish a closer bond with the respondents. My interviews gradually took on the shape of more informal conversations with people that I had already met several times. I was particularly interested to learn if and to what extent the themes from the dominant discourse would surface when I did not ask directly about them.

Furthermore, I aimed to adopt an open attitude towards the stories and images that the respondents brought forward, wanting to follow the themes that were important to the artists themselves. As this study shows, that approach yielded very different information about the lives of these young people than a narrow focus on their ascribed subject positions alone could have established. However, when I did ask them about how they perceived the political climate in the Netherlands, they often expressed a strong feeling of being seen as Other. Frustration at the media’s portrayal of Muslims was another frequently expressed emotion, as was the desire to not engage too much in talk about politics.

In conducting my study, I chose to spend a lot of time with a small number of respondents. This study therefore does not aim to create a representative picture of all young Muslims in the Netherlands, but rather offers an in-depth examination of the complex and multi-layered process of authorship as it is embedded in larger socio-political relations of power. In addition to my desire to establish a deep level of analysis, my decision to concentrate on individual lives has been informed by my reluctance to portray the respondents as representatives of ‘their’ culture or ethnicity. As Lila Abu-Lughod explains, conducting ‘ethnographies of the particular’ is one powerful mode of ‘writing against culture’ (1991, p. 149): ‘By focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness’ (Abu-Lughod 1991, p. 154).

I selected my respondents first through the people that I met at New Talents, an organization established to develop the artistic talents of young people in Rotterdam. Then, I contacted a larger network of artists and artistic mediators through snowball sampling. This network did not form an ethnically homogenous group of people, but included those with diverse family migration histories, including Moroccan, Palestinian, Turkish, Pakistani, Afghan, Iranian and Dutch-Egyptian. As such, this network was reasonably reflective of the highly diverse population of Rotterdam. The ethnic diversity among the group of artists that I met accorded well with my intentions not to select artists on the basis of their ethnicity. Instead of assuming from the start that the category of ethnicity would be an important variable in processes of self-definition by means of art, I wanted to leave that open as an empirical question. Likewise, I did not select respondents on the basis of gender, but accounted for the role that issues related to gender played when they came
up in particular cases and contexts. In his study on the relationships people in London have with the material things that surround them, Daniel Miller conducted fieldwork in a random London street to avoid starting from categories such as ethnicity and gender, but ‘to acknowledge generalizations and categories when they emerge’ (2008, p. 4). This establishes a sense of openness to appreciating categories that the researcher has not foreseen, as Miller states: ‘it just may be that the generalizations emerge best, not from place of origin or gender, but around an orientation to science or celebrity, gardening or church’ (ibid.).

In my case, the selection of the respondents in Rotterdam was of course not as random as in Miller’s study. My interest in the ways in which Muslims with a family migration history positioned themselves vis-à-vis the dominant discourse obviously led me to select respondents that shared the basic subject positions of Muslim migrant. Beyond this ascribed subject position, the artists that I met all self-identified as Muslim. However, even though I did select participants by religious criteria, I have aimed throughout not to let that be the prism through which to understand every aspect of the respondents’ lives.

The artists that I met also shared a number of other important features. First, while the ages of all the artists to whom I spoke ranged from 14 to 42 years old, those whose stories are featured in this dissertation were between 14 and 20 years old when I first came into contact with them. These artists thus more or less belong to the category of adolescents. Second, the majority of the artists that I met with lived in socio-economically marginalized urban neighbourhoods, sometimes together with their parents and siblings. As described in the introduction to this chapter, the respondents clearly did not belong to some kind of elite social group that would account for their participation in the domain of the arts or set them apart as extreme cases who are fundamentally different than supposedly more average Muslim migrants.

Finally, most of the artists that I met shared a connection with New Talents. The artists presented in the chapters that follow all at some point or another worked with the artistic mediator who was in charge of visual arts and literature at New Talents. This mediator, whom I have called Hasan, took on the role of supervisor and mentor to the artists who participated in projects developed by New Talents, and mediated between them and cultural institutions such as museums. Having said that, these artists did not work together with each other in artistic collectives. They generally worked individually with a supervisor; in addition to Hasan, these included people who were not part of New Talents but had been recruited by Hasan to participate in a project.

29 My approach to the variables of ethnicity, gender and class can be called intersectional; see Yuval-Davis (2006).

30 I reiterate this point here to highlight the fact that a study about creativity or artistic production does not automatically entail a study into exceptional or privileged human beings whose lives bear no resemblance to those of people who do not wish to express themselves through art. Imagination and the process of making can be a resource for people across the divides of class, education, age, etc. I return to this point in the conclusion of this dissertation.
In terms of education, half of the artists I encountered had received or were embarking upon some type of formal educational training in the arts or design. The majority of the artists featured in the dissertation, however, were students at secondary schools, one of which was an Islamic secondary school. For some of them artistic production was a nice hobby, while others aspired to become professional artists or designers. In this study I do not distinguish between so-called high art and low art or between professional or amateur artistic production. From the perspective of the process of making, these categories bear little relevance to the respondents. Furthermore, during my research I found that they also tended to recede into the background during practices of evaluation. The factors of cultural and ethnic background and the practice of mediation often proved to be at least as important in establishing whether or not an artist’s work was suitable for an exhibition.

I must address a dilemma that concerns the anonymity of the respondents. In order to safeguard the privacy of the respondents in this study, I have changed personal and institutional names to fictional alternatives. This means that when a piece of art is shown, I do not provide the reader with the real name of its creator. This has the clear disadvantage of not giving the artists the recognition that they deserve on an individual level. The choice of letting anonymity outweigh acknowledging the real names of the artists has been difficult, as one of the goals of this study is to contribute to the visibility of these artists in the public domain. However, I trust that despite this requirement for anonymity, this study can nevertheless contribute to a more nuanced and thus accurate account of Dutch artists who are Muslim and have a family migration history beyond the level of the individual artists themselves.

Structure of the Dissertation

The argument of the dissertation unfolds over five main ethnographic cases presented in five different chapters. The concepts of exit and authorship underlie all the chapters, though I place a different emphasis on them in each chapter. In Chapter Two, I start by questioning the idea of art as an autonomous domain left unspoiled by the world of politics; I argue instead that ethnographic research shows that the influence of culturalist logic presents itself not only in the public and political debate, but also in the arts. Then I proceed by analysing the notion of cultural diversity and the way in which it is applied as a policy objective in the arts. I look at how the idea of cultural diversity is akin to that of cultural assimilation in its stress on a reified conception of culture, and how it harbours the dangers of stigmatisation and the exclusion of people that are designated as ethnic minorities. I show how individual gatekeepers in the artistic domain manoeuvre the dominant understanding

---

31 In Chapter Two, I have used the real names of artists who are not, or not substantially, interviewed but whose work for the project Rotterdam Diaries is shown and discussed, in order to counter some of the disadvantages of not sharing the real names of particular artists when their work is presented.
of cultural diversity in an attempt to open up the cultural closure of the Dutch artistic canon. By analysing an ethnographic case about the creation of a literary photobook, I make clear how young Muslims gain ownership over their stereotypical representations in mainstream media and politics by creating alternative images and stories about their everyday lives. The photos in the book are analysed as exemplifying the two different forms of exit that were introduced in Chapter One, volatile and stable.

In Chapter Three, I examine the ethnographic case of a prestigious photo exhibition that centres on the themes of anger, youth and radicalization, which takes place in a national museum for visual arts. I investigate how a culturalist interpretative framework implicitly informs the choices of the curators when selecting artists to participate in the exhibition, and show how an artistic mediator draws upon a combination of the strategies of exit, accommodation and resistance to question this framework. The chapter analyses the role that the ethnic and cultural identity of two different artists plays out in how their work is perceived and evaluated by the curators.

Chapter Four revisits the case that was analysed in Chapter Three, but turns its attention to the creative process of making an artwork. In this chapter I investigate how authorship is an embedded practice that takes shape in a field of forces that interact with each other, including material factors, significant others, and the larger socio-political arena in which both the artist and her work are situated. I examine what role the dominant discourse plays in the process of making and show how artworks can destabilize the logic of dichotomies such as Western and non-Western, autonomous and political and religious and secular.

In Chapter Five, I return to the issue of belonging with which I open Chapter One. By analysing an ethnographic case that deals with creative writing and the consumption of East Asian popular culture, I examine the idea of a ‘fictive belonging’, which I understand as a form of belonging that takes place in and through the production and consumption of fiction. I ask to what extent fiction can allow the subject to exit ascribed subject positions that press upon her sense of self, and show how the notion of belonging is not necessarily connected to ethnic origins but can be directed to imagined places that the subject herself has never visited.

In Chapter Six, I investigate how subjectivities are created in artistic production in processes of selfing and othering. I examine three different self-portraits of the artist to develop an understanding of liminoid subjectivity. I argue that while in some instances the liminoid can be a sphere that allows for a sense of wholeness and symbolic closure, it can also harbour contradictions and fragmentation. This leads me to suggest that authorship is a practice that allows the subject to create meaningful narratives about the self and the social world in which she is situated without having to negate the incompleteness and imperfection of everyday life.
Finally, in Chapter Seven, I offer a conclusion and elaborate further on three themes that underlie the dissertation, namely power and its relationship to the socio-political context, the relation between agency and the imagination and the correspondences between the artistic strategies that I have investigated and the anthropological strategies of the study itself.