

[Amsterdam Public Library. Image by Gkamiya via Wikimedia Commons]

Breaking House Rules: Hoodies, Hijabs, and Belonging in the Netherlands

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Post

The Incident

With panoramic views of both the city and its harbor, the Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (OBA), proved to be an ideal place for me to take a break from working at either my home or office at Leiden University. I visited the OBA regularly since moving to the Netherlands in 2011, when I accepted a position as an assistant professor of Modern Middle East History. Its gigantic floor to ceiling windows drowned you in the sunshine, and led you to feel as if you were amongst the clouds when it was overcast. While it had cameras throughout the building and security men “patrolling” its floors, they never seemed to do more than scold people who drank from non-spill proof containers.

Perhaps due to its expansive building design, the OBA was always a bit chilly. On this particular day in November 2013, given that zipping up my sweatshirt and tying my scarf around my neck failed to

provide adequate warmth, I eventually pulled up my hood to cover my hair, fondly remembering family members who warned against escaping body heat. I did this all instinctively, and eagerly entered my writing zone.

I inelegantly left it a couple of hours later. Seemingly out of the blue, an OBA guard approached me and said something in Dutch. It took me a moment to realize he was addressing me, as I had not done anything to attract attention. He then repeated what increasingly sounded like a reprimand. When I apologized and explained that I did not speak Dutch, he pointed to his own head and instructed me to remove my hood. “You have to take that off,” he said as he pointed at me. I reflexively obeyed and removed my hood. I felt cold, hesitated a split moment, and then pulled the hood back up. The guard paused and looked at me inquiringly, and I responded that I was cold, and did not see why I had to remove the hood. Surprised by my refusal, he repeated what I had just said, seemingly to himself, as if to no one in particular. I glanced at the cameras around me and then looked back down to my computer screen in an attempt to resume my work. The guard walked away.

I tried to share a communal smirk with the strangers who had, over the course of the day, joined me to work on the table. When solidarity failed to materialize, I began reexamining what had just transpired: I had sat quietly for hours in the same seat working, presumably being recorded, and the guard disturbed me and demanded I remove my hood without justification. I attempted to return to writing, but instead found myself composing responses to the guard in my head, my anger rising as I fixated on the interruption and the absurd demand that I remove my hood. Slightly obsessively, I remember even wishing for the guard to return so that I could give voice to my inner monologue.

About an hour later, he did return, and with two additional guards. Still “hoodied,” I stated that I was not taking it off. This time he said that it was “the rule,” and that if I did not like “the rules of the house,” I had to leave. I asked to see the rules, inquiring, “Where are the rules written?” Feeling quite smug, I added, “If there are rules, you need to display them and have them accessible.” In employing the “we,” I designated myself the representative of library-goers, even though no one seated around me had offered any sense of solidarity. I repeated my demand to see the rules, and waited for them to back down.

They did not. Additional guards appeared, perhaps thanks to the CCTV or from the ensuing commotion. I continued to argue with them, demanding to see the “house rules” they maintained I was breaking. I did not get up or lower my hood, though our exchanges did force those sharing the table to pause from their own work and stare. Nothing, however, garnered as much anger or reaction from the guards as when I demanded to speak to their manager. One broke away from the others and banged his fist furiously on the table shouting that he didn’t have a manager and that they didn’t need one. “We are all colleagues here!” he shouted.

This particular altercation revealed additional power dynamics between us, and also between the guards and the library administration. I disrupted others in the library, placing my needs and what I identified as my "rights" above others. I did not consider how I constructed value and meaning when I differentiated between the guards and their supervisor. While the classification of employees is an actuality everywhere, I ensured and reinforced the power dynamic between them by my demands. Although hierarchy is slightly more oblique in the Netherlands, it is still always in play. A chain of command exists, though it is unclear how it is formed and structured, or how one accesses its apex. I was intrigued by the guard's need to articulate the myth that they were "all" colleagues.

The guards' anger sharply escalated, and became more physical, in the form of one guard banging on the table, and more aggressive, as a few of them moved forward and surrounded me. This change in stance and momentum reminded me that I was alone in the library, and not just in the sense that I was unaccompanied. Language was also an issue, as I could not understand the guards or the other library-goers when they spoke to each other in Dutch. My inability to communicate in Dutch forced the guards to use English. While their English was fluent, it lacked nuance. On the other hand, perhaps they did not feel the need to employ the distinction between "Get out!" (which they did shout), and "You'll have to leave" (which they did not).

In claiming that I was breaking the rules, the guards used the concept of house, and employed its implications of rules and hierarchy. They repeated over and over that if I failed to obey the "house rules," I had to leave the house. Covering my hair with a hood apparently was against these approved "rules." I appropriated this binary of *either* obeying a given rule or leaving the "house," and applied it to my own personal struggles of acclimating and belonging in the Netherlands.

Moreover, I wondered how often this absolute (i.e., either follow our rules or get out), was applied against the very guards who were now directing the threat to me. Domestic Dutch politics is rife with politicians who employ the same discourse against members of their own population, especially ethnic Turks and North Africans whose presence in the Netherlands has migrant roots. Every single one of the guards was of color. It would be hard to imagine that they had never been subject to similar intimidations.

The Dutch press often profiles new outreach programs directed towards ethnic and religious minorities, which are designed to assess and teach what the political elite mark as "Dutch" values. These include, but are not limited to, a DVD distributed by the government (which also mirrors the national citizenship test), which includes such problematic questions as "what would you do if you saw two men kissing in public?" and "would this disturb you?" These questions suggest that the imagined viewer will be distressed, and thereby separates him/her from the majority, who, it is assumed, is untroubled. This particular language of teaching "inclusion" affirms distinction: it creates and reinforces a minority group with opposing values and juxtaposes it against an imagined tolerant

and distinctly “Dutch” majority. The effect of these campaigns, along with inflammatory speeches made by political party leaders such as Geert Wilders, extends beyond a particular issue.

The constant concern within the Dutch press and its political sphere regarding their own religious and ethnic minorities (I say their own, because most members of these communities hold Dutch nationality) also encourages competition amongst members of these minority groups. Which members or which groups--the Turkish, the Moroccan, or the Iranian--best exemplify Dutch tolerance, becoming “members of the house?” Intra-and inter-community contests for who best exemplifies these new members follow, as does the reverse, when members or groups compete over who can effectively withstand Dutch homogenization. In regards to the latter, by parading their isolation from the very society that pushes them to assimilate, these members or groups display their own power vis-à-vis other groups and the Dutch state. This has at times culminated in violent confrontations with state security apparatuses.

Given the polarizing processes present in Dutch society, perhaps I should not have been surprised that this standardization extended to include me. If these guards were subject to similar processes, they, too, were identified as different. Or, in implementing what they decided was a “house rule,” did they place themselves within the whole, and accordingly act to exclude me? Were they claiming and exercising power by berating me? There seemed to be a dual purpose to their actions: demonstrating power while asserting their belonging to a larger totality.

Of course admitting my defeat at the library was not that simple for me. It did not matter that I was not breaking a rule, simply because there was not one to break. I began to pick up my things, but continued to complain in full volume. I somehow wanted my reaction on record for the guards present and for the cameras. A young woman sitting next to me, probably in her twenties, was the only person who engaged with me. Obviously uncomfortable, she suggested that I wear my scarf tighter around my neck to combat feeling cold. That was beside the point, I responded, as I should be able to wear what I wanted. She then incomprehensibly invoked 11 September 2001, and reminded me that since that date, everyone has to be more careful. I regarded her insertion of the attacks with a combination of animosity and astonishment. I explained that I did not think any of the hijackers wore hoodies and in a moment of wanting to invoke my own belonging while separating her from my presumed “community,” I informed her I was in New York on 11 September 2001. She then used my claim to New York to affirm her argument: “Well then, you understand why you cannot wear a hoodie,” she replied. Dumbfounded, yet even more so surprised and saddened by the lack of solidarity, and disturbed by the ten guards surrounding my table, I gathered my belongings. Down the open escalators we loudly went, with guards telling me to “shut-up and leave the house.”

At the bottom of the library’s atrium, amidst the hollering, I pleaded to know how I could remain and in effect be in the “house.” One of the guards who joined our group once we reached downstairs attempted to make it simple: “Just take off the hoodie. If you want to stay, just take it off.” But I really

could not do that. “I do not want to,” I responded. “Why can’t I stay and wear what I choose?” I earnestly did not understand why they decided to invent such a rule. Without anyone to ask, I decided to physically demonstrate the shortcoming of the demand. I slipped off the hood for a moment, and haphazardly wrapped my scarf around my head like a hijab, or head covering. I then asked them if I could stay in the library that way. When the guards said yes, I protested. I could not comprehend the difference between the two – both were, in effect, covering my hair and head. One of the guards approached me. “Look,” he said, “I do not know what the difference is either, but I do not get paid enough to sit and argue with you. Just come back tomorrow during the day and you can speak to a supervisor.” I turned around to look at the others and hopelessly repeated that there was no difference.

I then noticed the guard’s name on his badge. Addressing him directly, I repeated, “Can I wear this?” When I said his name, I saw a type of recognition in his face. It lasted only an instant, but something registered. Perhaps it was how I said his name, in an Arabic accent. Or, perhaps he was affronted that I used his name directly. At the time, I know I did not consciously make the connection between his name and my momentary gesture of wearing a hijab. In retrospect, having had time to reflect upon the incident, I can now see that I engaged in some profiling of my own. I attempted to relate with the guard. I assumed my “veiling” would register familiarity with him, and he would connect one head covering with another. In invoking his name in the way I did, I also attempted to connect with him, perhaps hoping that he would see I did not belong to the majority, but to a minority like him. In that instance, I made my own assumptions of who belonged and who did not.

He answered me though. “Yes,” he sardonically smiled. He then continued, “But you can’t.” Puzzled, I asked why. “Because you smell like pork,” he replied with disgust. By labeling me as smelling of pork, he had assessed I was not a Muslim, and therefore most certainly not like him.

I had misheard. I *must* have misheard. When I asked him to repeat himself, he stepped back, without offering more. Maybe he felt he had said too much, or maybe he felt that he had said enough. Either way, I left the building, stating to no one in particular that I would return the following day to speak to a supervisor. When the guards responded, “we will remember you,” I attempted to deflect the threat by calling back that I would remember them too.

The Incident Spirals: The Media and the Manager

Walking back to the train station, I decided that instead of mentally collecting the responses I should have said to the guards and to the library, I would take to Twitter and “tweet.” In addressing the library and the source of my grievance directly, I also expressed my anger and frustration publically. This soon spiraled out of control. Some of my thoughts were re-tweeted by both friends and strangers, and others solicited unfriendly responses. Some wrote to me berating me for not following the rules,

others told me to “shut up” and stop complaining. The library even responded, and stated “For security reasons we ask our visitors to have their faces visible. We hope you understand.”

I did not understand. I responded that my face was visible, but my hair was not. And I tweeted multiple versions for emphasis. As I stressed the matter, so did those who engaged with my tweets. From being reminded that being a professor did not mean I was the president, I was suddenly told to “leave and stop bitching” and “go back to Afghanistan and wear my burka.” Disturbingly, I was told that if I was in my “Muslim country” I would be chained to the kitchen of my eighty-eight-year-old husband who would have married me at the age of nine. Many tweets insinuated that being in the Netherlands had saved me from my inevitably abusive predicament.

Except that I was now frightened in the Netherlands. I shiftily looked around the train on my way home with the ludicrous presumption that someone would recognize me. At the same time, I reminded myself of the ridiculousness of such a concern. Plus, I could not leave, because I was home. I had moved indefinitely to the Netherlands two years prior. I was not from Afghanistan, I was not Muslim, and I do not cover my hair. But in persuading myself that I was not who they claimed, was I revealing *why I was uncomfortable* with their allegations? Did this discomfort construct the labels of Muslim, Afghan, or one who wears a hijab *as accusations*? I also used the covering of one’s hair for religious reasons--a symbol that had been made to connote various identifications within the Netherlands and Europe--to press for my own choices to pull up my hood. And I did all of this from within my position as a professor in the Middle Eastern Studies Department at Leiden University.

By that evening, I began to get a series of text messages from friends and colleagues from the university asking if I was all right, along with a link to an article from the right-wing, largely anti-immigrant Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*.[1] I clicked on it, and watched a photograph of myself appear, accompanied with my work email and a short article about how I had apparently refused to obey the rules of the library and therefore was forced to leave. My friends also asked me not to pay attention to the comments below the article as they were particularly dismissive, sexist, and cruel. While I could not understand most of them, I began to understand the ramifications of what became “this incident.”

The following day I contacted members of my faculty and university administration, especially since my name, photo, and email, along with the name of my employer was in the press. I am grateful my institute director was supportive, as were many of my colleagues. Most of them did not comment on my actions, but did discredit *De Telegraaf* as a fringe paper, with populist tendencies. While I could understand wanting to discount the newspaper, I simply could not. *De Telegraaf* was hardly marginal--it is the most popularly read national newspaper in the Netherlands. I can assume their comments were well-intentioned, but their dismissal of the paper deprived me of support, as if threats made by the extreme or unsophisticated are fictitious.

I also had colleagues who justified the intent of the OBA guards. One claimed, “Oh, they did that [demand you take off your hood] because they thought you were a Moroccan.” For them, the guards mistook me as an otherwise valid target. My colleagues’ agreement with the “spirit” of the guards’ intervention prevented me from articulating and engaging with the multiple layers of power displayed through the incident and its media coverage. I had assumed that my gesture of comparing my hood with a headscarf would register positively with him, and he would feel solidarity. Instead, it did the reverse, and led to a vocal and nasty rejection of my efforts of camaraderie. My colleagues, who defended the guards’ activities, neglected to see me as a recipient of their contempt. They thus similarly engaged in an identification process–I was like them–and in so doing, ironically I was finally offered solidarity I sought in the library. Just not for the reasons I sought. They classified me as like them. Perhaps it was because of our shared education level, that we weren’t Muslim, that we were university professors. In doing so they simultaneously reinforced the bifurcated categorizations in Dutch society.

The layered encounters inside and outside the OBA, together with the virtual and actual communication exchanges, blurred the targets of my anger. For example, if I had revealed the guard’s accusation that I smelled of pork, I would have become the darling of *De Telegraaf*’s readership--the very same people who were engaged in vilifying me as an ungrateful provocateur. I would have confirmed what many of its readership believe: Muslims are intolerant of those who do not conform to their beliefs, and a threat to Dutch society. The layers likewise complicated my sense of injustice and exposed that some of its countenances stemmed from my own privilege and assumptions. Who was at fault here? While there in fact was no rule against what I was wearing (as was later confirmed for me), and I do not think anyone has authority over my body, I pause at the ease with which I rebuked the guards and demanded to speak with a supervisor as indicative of my sense of entitlement. I equated my refusal to cower to “authority” to personal empowerment. There certainly was a gendered aspect to the entire experience. I was the only woman surrounded by a group of ten men–guards-who marked my body and how I chose to cover it as a device to measure conformity and belonging. In addition, there were the sexist and deeply misogynistic messages and threats I received via Twitter and email. Still, in maintaining my “right” to wear what I wanted, I also objectified women. I questioned whether I could cover my head with a headscarf in an attempt to draw a parallel to myself, in effect using women who do so for my own purposes. While I still consider the association apt, I wonder about the implications that I simultaneously constructed. Yes, I maintained my “rights,” but I had *also* manipulated the racist alarm at the presence of Muslim populations in the Netherlands. I used the common image of a woman wearing a headscarf, which racist diatribes use to render the Muslim woman’s body as dual site of victimhood and intrigue, to concurrently fashion my own idealized category of a woman.

Over the next few days, I continued to receive reprimanding emails and tweets along with media requests. While the library administration initially defended the actions of their security guards, it contacted me to schedule a meeting with the library director. On the phone, he initially chided me for

taking to twitter, though he also agreed that I had done nothing wrong and had not broken any rules. He asked me to return to the library, and offered to meet me personally to discuss the matter further. It took me a few weeks to take him up on the offer. I hesitated because of how the experience generated uncertainty for my decision to live and work in the Netherlands. It exposed my own sense of “foreignness” and my inability to claim belonging. The attacks in the media reinforced that I was neither “of” the Netherlands, nor part of its “othered” groups. At the same time, I also found the opportunity to meet with the director slightly dubious. Was I afforded this audience because I had subsequently been categorized as a “white” professor employed at Leiden University? Did everyone enjoy such treatment?

When I entered the library, some of the same guards who had surrounded me a few weeks prior, escorted me to the elevators. When the elevator door opened to take us to the office of the director, a man was already in the elevator ascending from a lower floor. For a moment I thought it was arranged, because he was wearing a sweatshirt with its hood pulled up and covering his head. I smiled, though without looking at or speaking to the accompanying guard. Once in the director’s office, we spoke casually on a variety of topics, including my decision to move to the Netherlands, the director’s Feyenood mug and his allegiance to Rotterdam’s football club, and the library’s architect and design. We eventually addressed the incident. The director apologized for the initial disruption and admitted there was no rule of dress, and when I specifically asked if I could cover my hair with a hood, he answered, “of course,” as if it was the silliest question he had heard. Perhaps it was, though it was not without consequence. In invoking the “house rules,” the guards simultaneously challenged and appropriated the categorizations of both the library and its larger reflection, Dutch society, and attempted to integrate themselves higher within its structure. In this seemingly innocuous exchange, it would seem that the director also amended this scheme, and decided in that moment to place me within its accepted center, and rendered his employees to the periphery.

Afterward

It took me a very long time to speak about the details of the incident, especially the guard’s accusation that I smelled like pork, and my colleague’s justification that the guards mistook me for “a Moroccan.” Even now I struggle to process the layers of the experience and most importantly, understand the meaning and assumptions behind my actions, attempting to arrange them within the context of living and working in a foreign country that I attempt to make my home. It would have been far more simple if the guards at the OBA were not of color, or if they were merely extending their view of Muslim women’s lack of belonging in the Netherlands to isolate me. Then I might have been able to use the experience to challenge the “Dutch” characteristic of tolerance. Yet it was not an example of a security apparatus appropriating anti-Muslim scorn. Or, at least, it was more than that. I have been reassessing my actions that day, without accusing myself of wrongdoing in refusing to take off the hood. I wanted to examine my decisions, and the assumptions I made therein. This incident exposed the tension of living in a country that is not quite sure about how to engage with foreigners of all

kinds, its own Muslim citizens, and its need to invite and retain members of its population that do not historically connect to the country. In addition, what became “the event” revealed the dynamics at work in Dutch society, while also making me aware of my own role in laying claim to redrawing the boundaries of the very categorizations I claim to condemn.

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[1] In its initial posting, *De Telegraaf* had included my work email, which was eventually removed.