



**SPECIAL ISSUE:**  
**AUTHENTICITY IN NARRATIVE CONTEXTS**

**The Picaresque Public Intellectual: Dialogue with Sjoerd-  
Jeroen Moenandar<sup>1</sup>**

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“Let this book be fiction,” Rodaan Al Galidi wrote at the beginning of his novel *Hoe ik talent voor het leven kreeg* (2016) [*Two Blankets, Three sheets* (2020)], “so that the world in which I stayed for years, transforms from fiction into non-fiction”.<sup>2</sup> In the ambiguity of these words lies a comparison as well as a difference with the first modern novel: M. de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605-12). Don Quixote travels through the Spanish countryside and intentionally decides to believe in a fantasy, to *suspend the disbelief* to say it with a 19<sup>th</sup> century axiom. Pretending that he is a famous knight, Quixote keenly transforms sheep into soldiers and windmills into dragons. Semmier Kariem, the protagonist in Al Galidi’s text, mixes reality and illusion as well, but not because he decides to play and suspend the disbelief, rather because he does not know where the boundaries of imagination and reality are. Coming from the desert in Iraq and having dwelled for years through the Middle-East, the protagonist lacks a fundamental knowledge and understanding of the Dutch well organised society and institutions. During the nine years of his asylum procedure, everything is strange and incomprehensible. Holland is the land

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1 Moenander, S. (2025). Public intellectual on the fringes: The affordances of being authentic and inauthentic in Rodaan Al Galidi’s newspaper columns. *Narrative Works*, 13(2): 153-173.

2 “Dit boek is fictie voor iemand die het niet kan geloven, maar non-fictie voor iemand die ervoor open staat. Of nee, laat dit boek non-fictie zijn, zodat de wereld waarin ik jarenlang heb moeten verblijven, verandert van fictie in non-fictie” (8). Translation O. Heynders.

of structure and control, of arrival and registration, handing over and taking in. Every asylum seeker receives “two blankets, three sheets, one towel, one pillow and a pillowcase” which must be returned once the applicant leaves for another location. Every single piece is checked over again and again.

The public intellectual role that Al Galidi performs in writing a literary novel and newspaper columns can indeed be considered the role of a cultural transmitter, who moves between speaking the truth and making things up, between being mild and critical about Dutch society. I am convinced by Moenandar’s observation that Al Galidi implements the picaresque narrative modus to organize the relationality between various specific public intellectual roles, ideas and audiences. I underline the argument that ‘the picaresque style fits the life of an irregular migrant, having to work “illegally”’, which immediately resonates the work of Iraqi-Finnish Hassan Blasim who writes and combines facts and fiction (novel and blog writing) in a similar provocative and humorous manner.

Because of picaresque style of writing of Al Galidi, I have some doubts about another statement regarding “the expectations among European readers and critics that migrant authors function as spokespersons of their community.” I wonder who the European readers are, and who the community is that is represented by the migrant author. Put differently: who is the migrant writer as public speaker and who is the public? Isn’t the point of the boundary experiences and boundary narratives that representation is at stake, that aesthetics and ethics are interrelated while they are pervasive? Isn’t the picaresque style the public intellectual can afford a signal of *not being* migrant anymore?

Johan Schimanski et al. choose the term “border aesthetics” as a way of understanding the aesthetic dimension of borders, bordering and borderscapes. As they explain, aesthetical works may give access to imaginaries about borders. Aesthetics is understood as the language that articulates the subject’s sensory perception of a given world. Borders become meaningful through sensory perception, through sensuous cognition.<sup>3</sup> The scholars consider migrants as “border-crossers with displaced citizenship who often are seen as passive border beings,” but who can get “access to plurivocal agencies inherent in specific aesthetic and artistic forms”.<sup>4</sup> I consider the public intellectual migrant as someone who negotiates between fact and fiction, representation and imagination, history and the critical perception of the present. Al Galidi is an important author in constantly mixing up satire and truth speaking, while criticising the modernist,

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3 Schimanski, Johan & Stephen F. Wolfe (eds) (2019). *Border Aesthetics, Concepts and Intersections*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn.

4 Schimanski, *Border Aesthetics*, 153.

consensus dominated, idea of the rational public sphere. I would not characterise him as the representant of a specific community (of illegal asylum seekers, migrants on the move, or people from Iraqi descent.)

Dutch critics did not pay much attention to Al Galidi's novel, until the author appeared in March 2016 in a television interview hosted by prominent writer Adriaan van Dis<sup>5</sup>. In the interview Al Galidi perfectly performed the role of the stranger not yet adapted to Dutch rules, entering the studio with a sloppy plastic bag full of papers and forms, to proof that his asylum procedure had led to enormous paperwork and time-consuming reading. The critics at first had not grasped the novel in its ironic style and voice, and only when watching the embodied author interviewed by a famous host, people developed an interest in the novel and its writer. The liquified difference between facts and fiction, between author and protagonist, was concretised when Al Galidi on television made a masquerade of his asylum identity.

**Odile Heynders** is full *Professor of Comparative Literature* at the Department of Culture Studies in the School of Humanities & Digital Sciences of Tilburg University. She published several books and many articles on European literature, authorship and strategies of reading, as well as on how literary fiction intervenes in democratic public spheres. Her book *Writers as Public Intellectuals, Literature, Celebrity, Democracy* (2016) appeared at Palgrave Macmillan. Her current book project is on *Experiences of Migration* - focussing on how literary fiction can offer sensitive knowledge within the interdisciplinary context of migration studies. Heynders has been member of the NWO [Dutch Research Council] Board, and fellow at the NIAS institute (Advanced Studies in the Humanities & Social Sciences). Next to that she performs many teaching and management tasks. Her current research project is on the "Truth of Fiction."

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<sup>5</sup> 10 March 2016: Hier is ... Adriaan van Dis – Rodaan Al Al Galidi:  
<https://www.bnnvara.nl/dewerelddraaitdoor/videos/275387>