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### Contested representation of Dutch Americans in Washington Irving's *A History of New York*

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**ABSTRACT:** This study aims at analyzing the representation of Dutch Americans in New York in Washington Irving's (1809) historical text entitled *A History of New York*. It argues that Irving's text engages in the spatial and cultural dispute between the Dutch and English colonies in America in the 17th and 19th centuries. The study shows how the historical depiction of the early Dutch colony in the 17th-century America in Irving's text serves as a political critique of the 19th-century America. It also shows the reassertion of Irving's text about the contribution of Dutch culture to American history, which was not acknowledged in any of the historical writings of his time. Furthermore, this study shows that Irving's multilayered strategy of using Dutch colonists both for portraying a more inclusive and pluralist America and for a political parody complicates his representation of the Dutch ethnic community and thus results in their stereotypical caricatures. The study uses the concept of representation and the New Historicism method to reveal the connection between the depiction of the 17th century and the context in the 19th century and to unmask the underlying ideological biases in the text.

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

The American society experienced what was known as *Holland Mania* in the late 19th century and the early 20th century (Goodfriend, 2008: 17). The term *Holland Mania* is labeled by Annette Stott in her book as the time when a craze about Dutch things colored New York life. Literary works, paintings, and advertisements reflected the popularity of the Dutch and their antique cultural characteristics (Stott, 2005: 14–15; Bradley, 2009: 41–46). This craze was attributed to the publication of *A History of New York* (AHONY) in 1809 by Washington Irving. Ironically, the same book ignited anger of the Dutch community in New York because of its negative stereotypical descriptions of the Dutch (Bowden, 1975: 159).

In the opening paragraph of chapter III, Irving, through his narrator named Knickerbocker, criticized the *forever* in the New York Historical Society (NYHS) who only highlighted warfare while failing to notice the role of the Dutch community in writing the history of New York (AHONY, 475). Through AHONY, Irving reminded the English people in his contemporary works in the 19th century that New York was once a Dutch colony in the past. In the 21st century, the United States has transformed into a large and established country dominated by white people. The arrival of the European immigrants to the land around 400 years ago recast the Indians as Native Americans through a struggle for space. In practice, the spatial struggle took place not only between the European immigrants and the Indian tribes, but also among the European immigrants. However, the history of territorial dispute among the Europeans is rarely discussed in American history. The history of the United States begins invariably from a territorial dispute among white people in the New England colonies despite the fact that there were other European colonies that existed before the New England colonies. The problem that arises in this study is that AHONY attempts to reconstruct that very critical part of colonial history—the spatial competition between the Dutch and the English—that has been forgotten. However, Irving used a parody to deliver the historical reconstruction in AHONY. In many cases, the use of parody is associated with sheer wisecracking; thus, it obfuscates

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

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The problem that arises in this study is that AHONY attempts to reconstruct that very critical part of colonial history—the spatial competition between the Dutch and the English—that has been forgotten. However, Irving used a parody to deliver the historical reconstruction in AHONY. In many cases, the use of parody is associated with sheer wisecracking; thus, it obfuscates

the purpose of reconstructing the history of the Dutch in AHONY. Therefore, on the one hand, Irving offered “advocacy” for the Dutch society, being one of the forgotten communities in the American colonies in the writing of history after the nation’s declaration of independence; on the other hand, he staged the problem in a wisecracking manner by making the Dutch ethnic group in New York as the object of ridicule. Irving’s wisecracking refers to stereotypes of the Dutch ethnic group that are shared in the mind of the dominant Anglo-American society. At the same time, he used caricature and jokes about the Dutch society in his characters to criticize the New American government in the 19th century, particularly the presidency of Thomas Jefferson. This study seeks to address the ambivalence of AHONY by pointing out how the comical depiction of the Dutch historical figures from the 17th century was used as a means to criticize the 19th-century America in a complex and multilayered narrative strategy.

Stuart Hall’s concept of representation (1997) is used as a basis in this study to see how Irving brought back the past of New York throughout the 17th-century Dutch society, to generate a certain image representation of this ethnic group. The method used in this research is New Historicism, whereby the AHONY is read against the historical background of the 19th century, to see how Irving’s contemporary context feeds into his writings. In the framework of New Historicism, authors constructed reality through their works as a means to respond to issues of their time (Gallagher and Greenblatt, 2000).

## 2 THE STRUGGLE FOR SPACE

AHONY tells the story of the territorial dispute between the English and the Dutch. In AHONY (498–499), the English, who came from the New England colonies and were nicknamed the “Yankees”, performed systematic expansion toward the Dutch colonies (New Netherland). They cut down trees to open up new areas and settled there for a while before moving westward by selling their land. This arrangement was continuously repeated. From another historical source (Michael Kammen, 1975: 43–44; Van Rensselaer, 1909: 128–129), we obtain a detailed description about how the Yankees gradually infiltrated the New Netherland colonies. They took over the unoccupied areas near Fort Goede Hoop, which belonged to the Dutch but were not turned into settlement areas. Fort Goede Hoop, which was both a fort and a trade post, was located on the banks of the Connecticut River (*Fresh River*) and bordered by the New England colonies. Today, the area is named Hartford.

AHONY described how the vast New Netherland populated by a small number of Dutch inhabitants was brought to bay by the more populous English who came from the East, who were constantly moving toward the Dutch colonies (see the left map in [Figure 1](#)). The Dutch colonies at that time owned several unoccupied areas in North America. The three governors who presided over New Netherland were described to be helpless in preventing the flow of immigrants from New England into their territory. For the English, the area of New Netherland was considered to belong to England. Territorial dispute began when Governor Wouter van Twiller was in office and continued until the administration of Governor Willem Kieft. During the administration of the second governor, Fort Goede Hoop fell into the hands of New England and the area became known as Hartford. The Dutch lost many more of their territories during the administration of the last governor, Governor Peter Stuyvesant. Fort Goede Hoop was not the only landmark that was captured by the English. Other territories that were rich in *wampum* (traditional shell beads that were the currency used by the Indian tribes) in Oyster Bay, Long Island, were captured by the English (see the right map in [Figure 1](#)).

In historical records about New Netherland, the treaty signed by Governor Stuyvesant with the New England confederation addressed the East border that had been a problem since the administration of Governor Wouter van Twiller, or known as the Hartford or Fort Goede Hoop matter. Governor Stuyvesant wanted to resolve the border dispute; thus, the Hartford Treaty was signed in 1650 (see the map for comparison). This treaty made New Netherland lose a large part of its territory in the east (Van der Zee, 1978: 219–221). From the English’s side, the entire east coast of America belonged to the English. The presence of the Dutch

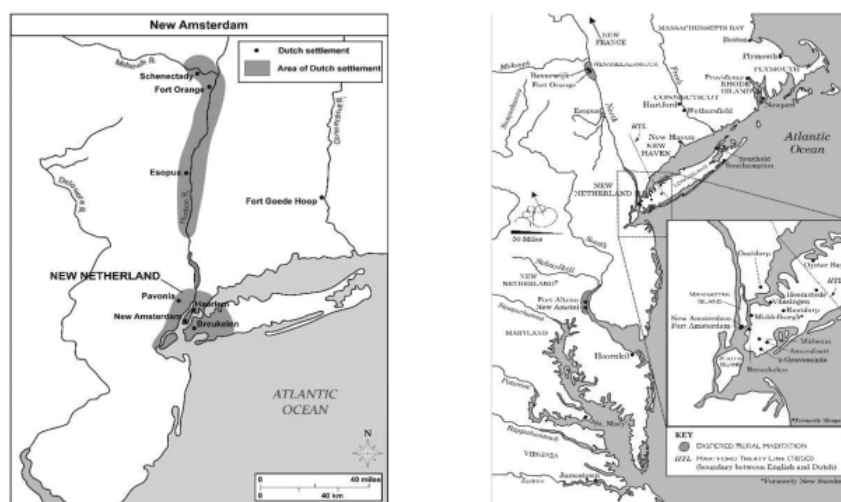


Figure 1. **Left map:** The New Netherland map. As seen on the map, the Hudson River stretches out from the north to the south and flows into New Amsterdam, the capital city of New Netherland. In the north, we can see Fort Orange, and in the east, we can see Fort Goede Hoop that is located near the Fresh River or the Connecticut River (source: Tim McNeese. *New Amsterdam*, 2007), 2. **Right map:** The New Netherland map after the Treaty of Hartford in 1650. As seen on the map, the borders are established based on the Treaty of Hartford (Hartford Treaty Line) and the former territory of New Sweden (source: Evan Haefeli 2012, 97).

there was disregarded and as a territory it was not acknowledged by the English. In AHONY, Knickerbocker mentioned the treaty, although he did not refer directly to its name.

In the 17th century, the dispute between the Dutch and the English could be traced beyond territorial issues. From the claiming of Fort Goede Hoop, one can infer that there were economic motives behind the struggle for space. The English took over the Dutch's trade route, because Fort Goede Hoop was the Dutch's trade post in the east of mainland North America. Economically, a large population requires a strong economy as well. New England colonies were required to expand their territories because of the population growth, as well as to increase their economic capacities. At the same time, their neighbor owned unoccupied areas with a small population.

In AHONY, Irving showed that the dispute which was originally about territories in the 17th century became a struggle for space for cultural representation when territories were no longer the issue because the ethnic groups became one new nation, the American nation. However, the competition did not end there. The struggle for space for cultural representation in the 19th century of New America is illustrated in AHONY, but the complicated structure of the text made the spatial struggle for representation not easily picked up by the readers.

The 19th-century background in AHONY illustrates the situation in the United States that was about to hold an election marked by full-blown competition from two parties (Republican and Federalist), as narrated through the stories told by Knickerbocker. This character is the one who later tells the story of New Netherland in the 17th century. However, in the story, this character disappeared and was reported to have died. Stories about New Netherland were only found in his notes. Thus, there is a skip in the story of AHONY, which initially attempted to tell the story of the early 19th-century America in the narrative frame to the story of New Netherland in the 17th century.

In AHONY, Knickerbocker is described as a member of the American congress and served as the Dutch New York representation after the declaration of independence. His opinions were never considered and he always lost debates in the US congress. By mentioning this, AHONY shows how marginalized the Dutch were in American politics. Not recognized



by the congress, Knickerbocker was determined to rewrite the history of the Dutch power in North America in the 17th century so that their history would not be forgotten. Knickerbocker sought to enter the space of representation that was controlled by the dominant society to demonstrate that a small community within the American nation once had a role in the formation of the United States. *AHONY* aims to remind its readers that the presence of the Dutch minority community was prior to any other communities in mainland America, and they also played a part in the American revolutionary war. Because of their role in the formation of the nation-state, they should be given space in American history.

Knickerbocker's writing about Dutch Americans—according to *AHONY*—was found by the character Seth Handaside, the owner of the hotel where Knickerbocker stayed in, after Knickerbocker disappeared and was reported to have died. In telling this imagined character and his mysterious death, Irving symbolizes the end of an era. The death of Knickerbocker is a symbol of the end of the Dutch ethnic group's role in the life of the New America.

The publication of *AHONY* in 1809 is a form of resistance toward the forsaking of Dutch history by bringing a different representation about the Dutch in New York. Judith Richardson (2008) in her article "The Ghosting of the Hudson Valley Dutch" proposed that the ghost stories are always related to Hudson Valley where the Dutch community lived. According to Richardson, the ghost stories circulated in the Dutch community in the United States were probably originally from the mother country. Richardson interpreted that on a different level it was the Dutch society themselves (which according to Richardson were set aside as "the second native people" after the Indians") who haunted the Anglo-Americans.

Richardson's interpretation shows that the competition and dispute between the English and the Dutch were no longer about territorial matters. Even after becoming part of the American nation, the Dutch are still considered a threat by the dominant Anglo-American society. In reality, the territory that belongs to the Dutch in the United States does not exist any longer, and it has already been integrated into the territory of the United States, but the assumption that the Dutch are a threat remains.

### 3 IRVING'S AMBIVALENCE

The use of parody by Irving in writing *AHONY* is a strategy in the writing of a literary work. Irving had intentions behind his choice of strategy. Irving found the moment to use his strategy when a book that was published by NYHS did not include a detailed history of the Dutch who once occupied New York. Thus, he chose to parody this book.

According to Bradley (2009, 24; 2008, xviii), Irving parodied the book by Dr. Samuel Latham Mitchill because the book "removed fifty years off the Dutch's power over New York (New Netherland)". Mitchill only mentioned the warfare that led to the English's victory over New Amsterdam (the capital city of New Netherland), which was under the administration of the Dutch Governor Stuyvesant. After a transition of power, New Netherland was captured by the English who was represented by Richard Nicholls in 1664. The period when New Netherland became a Dutch colony was not described at all, particularly the part related to governance, society, and culture. For this reason, Irving published *AHONY* in December 1809.

Bradley (2008, xvii) also argued that *AHONY* was a direct attack toward NYHS. The organization was founded in 1804 to gather every bit of information related to the history of America. However, information about the settlements in New Amsterdam was not brought up. Irving sought to reveal New York's past that has been forgotten. The publication of *AHONY* is one of Irving's reactions toward NYHS for what the organization did. NYHS, whether they realize it or not, indirectly approved the action of one of their members who annulled the history of New Netherland from the collection of notes. This is the same as covering up America's history and annulling the foundation behind the rise of America as a new nation.

The contested representation that Irving sought to show could be considered quite successful. He presented a piece of work that contradicted from the dominant perspective in a history that remained very much influenced by the concept of WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), or in other words the history of the Anglo-Saxons and their descendants. However, at the same time,

Irving had another purpose, that is, to criticize the arena of the 19th-century American politics. To achieve this, he used characters from the history of the Dutch colonies in the 17th century as a vehicle to quip the leaders and criticize the American government's policy in the 19th century. Characterization of the Dutch in a caricature manner in Irving's work reaffirms negative stereotypes about the Dutch that circulated in that period. The three New Netherland governors and the important figures surrounding the governors are portrayed with physical stereotypes and dressed in funny attire. They are also depicted to lack intelligence as leaders, because the decisions that they made always end in mistakes and failures. These New Netherland characters are a mockery of the New America government, particularly the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, who Irving considered, like the New Netherland government, incompetent and a failure.

One cannot deny that the parody used by Irving implicates the representation of the Dutch ethnic community in his work. Instead of showing appreciation to the Dutch colonies as the pioneers of American history, he resonated stereotypes of the Dutch ethnic community within the American society and turned them into a joke. The Dutch New York representation in *AHONY* has become ambiguous because, on the one hand, their existence and role in the formation of the New America are acknowledged, but, on the other hand, they are mocked and ridiculed.

In "The Author's Apology" written by Irving in 1848 at the same time when the revised edition of *AHONY* was published by the publishing house G.P. Putnam and Sons around 40 years after the first edition in 1809 (Bowden, 1975: 160; Bradley, 2008: xxii), Irving told why he chose the Dutch as the subject of his book. It turns out that Irving himself lived in a neighborhood inhabited by descendants of the Dutch. Irving also had a brother-in-law who was of Dutch descent. Thus, he had been in contact with Dutch culture since a very young age.

The struggle for spatial representation had been apparent since the publication of *AHONY* when Irving tried to attract attention through advertisements in newspapers. Irving used the clever strategy to draw the attention of not only the group of American historians that are the subject of his criticism but also the American people. Irving succeeded in doing so as *AHONY* became popular in the 19th century, and the Dutch community began to receive some attention.

The announcement of the missing person, who was Knickerbocker the character and the narrator in *AHONY*, was in fact a hoax. The purpose was to promote the publication of *AHONY*. Not only did Irving promote fabricated news about a missing person in *Evening Post*, but he also wrote a fictional response about the missing person in *Traveller*. He also calculated the time of publication of these advertisements that was a month after the commemoration date of the discovery of Manhattan by Henry Hudson, which was marked by the annual NYHS meeting on 4 September 1809. In addition, he also chose 6 December 1809 as the publication date of *AHONY*. This date is also the anniversary of the NYHS meeting (Bowden, 1975: 161).

The American public's attention toward this minority group rose through the writing of *AHONY*. This was acknowledged by Irving in "The Author's Apology" on how since the publication of his book the attention of the American people toward the Dutch ethnic group increased. Therefore, *AHONY* shows the struggle for not only territorial space in the history of America but also representation space. This struggle is in fact apparent in the *AHONY* text, which reflects the ethnic bias of the writer. On the one hand, Irving believed that it was necessary to fight for acknowledgment of the Dutch ethnic group's presence in New York within American history; on the other hand, he was entrapped in the negative stereotypes constructed by the dominant American society toward the Dutch so that his noble purpose to attain equality between the Dutch and the dominant American society at that period of time became buried by his own ethnic bias.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

History has always been written from the perspective of the conqueror. Apparently the 19th-century American history was always written from the perspective of Anglo-Americans. As a young American in the 19th century, Irving appeared to be anti-mainstream. He strived to remind others that the American country and nation were created by various ethnics and cultural communities. As a creative youth, Irving used unconventional methods to deliver his point.

In the 19th century, books or reading materials were the fastest way of influencing people; therefore, Irving adopted a different way to reintroduce the contribution of the Dutch community to American history. He used literary works to provide information about what took place in the past and placed it side-by-side with the contemporary situation of his time.

Narrations about the early history of America always began from Puritan England. However, Irving shattered this paradigm by demonstrating that there were other European nations in addition to the Native Americans. Irving wanted to show that the Americans were not the only English-speaking people. He asserted that before the declaration of America's independence, the society in America was already multiethnic. Irving showed in *AHONY* that the Dutch community in New Netherland did not move anywhere since the area was taken over and turned into an English colony. They remained in the former area of New Netherland and changed the name into New York, even though the nation remained a defeated one.

The contested representation demonstrated by Irving can be considered "successful" because the Dutch ethnic community in New York, which had almost been forgotten, became the center of attention after the publication of *AHONY*. Ironically, at the same time, Irving also "succeeded" in othering the Dutch ethnic community through his parodical style and caricatured characterization. Although the Dutch ethnic community was brought into memory, it was remembered as failed and incompetent.

The contribution of the Dutch ethnic community to American history is one of the aspects revealed by Irving about minority communities. However, there are also other ethnic communities in addition to the Europeans that came and became part of the American nation, including Chinese, Korean, Indian, and Egyptian ethnic communities, that settled in the United States earlier than predicted. The Islamic culture that is today propagandized as a foreign entity in the United States could have existed in the land hundreds of years ago. Their history could serve as the very site for the struggle for representation. This study contributes to the existing scholarship of American and Dutch immigration history by highlighting the complexity of a historical narrative. Similar studies can be carried out to reveal the strategies for representing other minorities in the US literature and history books.

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