Growing up in Immigrant Australia
As a child of Italian immigrants in Australia, I grew up in the late 1950s and the
1960s during the assimilation era when teachers entreated us to speak English at
home and to become as Australian as possible. Italians in those days were called
wogs and dagos, and were often confronted in the streets and told to go back to
where they had come from. Even as teenagers, my sister and I insisted that my
mother should speak English to us when walking down the street, not only to avoid
any possible abuse, but so that we could appear as Australian as possible. I grew up
in an immigrant community in Sydney, where many of the women worked as unskilled
labourers in order to help their children become upwardly mobile. The Italians,
Greeks, Poles, Serbs and Croatians and Anglo-Australians lived side by side in work-
ing-class areas. In the early post-war decades, they gradually began the long journey
from a dominant mono-cultural society to the multi-ethnic and multicultural society
that Australia is today.

After 1972, with the election of a progressive Labor party that introduced a non-
discriminatory immigration policy and initiated multiculturalism, I became involved,
along with many other first and second generation immigrants, in the process of
opening up Australia to the world. I was involved both at the grass-roots level, work-
ing among community organisations and immigrant women’s groups, and later as an
academic. Australia, along with Canada, started a global trend towards multicultur-
alism in the 1970s and 1980s. In both these countries, multiculturalism had a two-fold
meaning. First it was based on the recognition that immigrants would maintain their
languages, cultures and religions and cluster together—at least initially. Second, it
required the state to take active measures to combat racism and to ensure equal opportunities for all residents, whatever their backgrounds. But whereas Canada enshrined multiculturalism in its constitution, Australia has been more ambivalent, with constant redefinitions of multiculturalism by various governments, and periodic waves of public scepticism by more conservative groups. It is important to note that many of the European debates on multiculturalism have been reductionist: they have focused on the cultural recognition aspect, while ignoring the need to combat racism and ensure equality.

In 2001, I moved to Europe. As a visiting professor in Sweden for a few months, I discovered that while Sweden appears to have good integration policies, it has one of the highest rates of immigrant segregation in Europe, particularly in housing and the labour market. I visited one of the housing estates, where newcomers have become concentrated, and asked one man what he thought of the recent media coverage about the non-integration of immigrants in Sweden. He replied: “What do you mean we are not integrated? That I mix little with Swedes has nothing to do with integration. Of course we are integrated. I mix with people from many countries here. I work. Of course I’m integrated.” That was one of my first lessons in Europe—that these terms are very complex—and it influenced some of my later research work.

Our understanding of immigrant integration is intimately linked to how immigrants are perceived and how the so-called “native” ethnic groups, in countries of immigration, perceive themselves. The Swedish experience and my time in the UK influenced my interest in the Netherlands, a country that, in a similar way to my own home country Australia, perceives itself as an egalitarian society. Many of the national myths are based on an idea of fairness and “tolerance” of difference. In all these countries, these myths lend themselves to a denial of injustice, of prejudice and of racism. However, the denial of Dutch racism is striking.

Let me begin with a brief overview of the British approach to immigrants and diversity, before placing the Netherlands in perspective.

**Race Relations and Multiculturalism in the UK**

When I moved to the UK at the beginning of 2001, I learnt about its unique mix of race relations policies and multiculturalism. In the earlier post-war decades, Britain had gained the reputation of being one of the most openly racist countries in Europe. In the 1950s and 1960s, Afro-Caribbeans, Africans and Asians, newly arrived from the former colonies, experienced blatant discrimination in housing, employment and public spaces. Accommodation adverts stated openly: “no blacks need apply.” The first Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968 were based on the idea that special agencies should be set up to help black immigrants with settlement problems but also to educate white communities about immigrants. The Acts were premised on the idea that the state should combat racism and promote equality of opportunity.