

The Covenant of the Allochthons: How Nativist Racism Affects Youth Culture in Amsterdam

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This reflection is based on growing up in Amsterdam myself, as the child of an Iranian refugee, on conversations with today's teenagers, and on comparative experiences related to this topic while living abroad for two years, in New York City. First, I give an impression of teenagers' handling of Dutch society's tricky politics of belonging as "allochthons." They have come up with a self-proclaimed "Covenant of the Allochthons." This, I will argue, is deeply interdependent with nativist, often also described as culturalist, forms of racism. In the second section, I briefly discuss how living in the United States has made me question disproportionate alliances between Dutch allochthons. The cosmopolitanism of so-called allochthons is tied to an "allochthon covenant" and must therefore be criticized and seen in the light of nativist racism.

Going to School in Amsterdam

Granted, I did not graduate from high school that long ago, and could write about myself. But to me, more interesting and revealing of Dutch racial tensions is the life of fifteen-year-old Michael Tan, my neighbor's son. I have tutored Michael ever since he first entered primary school. He has seen more of the world than I had at that age. His parents, hardworking people originally from China and Malaysia, have taken Michael on many (family) trips; to Asian countries, North America, and other European countries. I have been fortunate to visit Michael's maternal grandmother and extended family in a village in a tropical forest area close to Kuala Lumpur. They make a living by harvesting rubber and durian trees. It was there that it truly dawned on me how many rapid changes each successive generation of his family must have

experienced. In Holland, Michael's parents run a modest but successful snack bar in the Baarsjes district of Amsterdam-West, selling mostly Flemish fries. Michael has spent much of his youth in the back of the store's kitchen, reading, playing videogames with friends, and practicing the guitar in his tiny space surrounded by soda cans and boxes of paper dish ware. For years, he would come upstairs to study with me in my house above the snack bar. The store is located on a busy shopping street, which is a border area between the white, "autochthonous," city center and the "allochthonous," or non-native, districts surrounding the center. On a map produced by the Central Bureau of Statistics, the population of the area is shown to be highly mixed.¹ Next to the snack bar are, for example, a Surinamese Indian restaurant, a Dutch butcher, and a Turkish baker, right on the corner of the busy intersection. Michael's parents bought a house in Badhoevendorp, a suburban town connecting to Amsterdam, where he attended a Catholic primary school. Most of his friends at school were blue eyed, white, and usually much taller. He was one of the few "allochthons." When he performed in a school play in his final year before secondary or Dutch high school, it was hard not to notice that he was one of only a handful of (second and third generation) migrant children. I vividly recall his parents' somewhat uneasy relationship with the other, mostly Dutch, parents gathered at the event. There were friendly conversations, for sure, but Michael's parents' Dutch language and social performance could not match that of the other parents, who mingled with much greater ease.

Michael thrived in school. Despite the initial skepticism of his white primary school teachers—after all he was this small kid, who barely spoke Dutch when he came to their school—he had done very well and was selected to go to the Barlaeus Gymnasium, one of the most prestigious schools in the country, where he would study Greek and Latin along with the regular subjects. The school is located at Leidse Square, right in the heart of the Dutch capital, a more mixed high school, very different from his school in the suburbs. Many of its students are from an educated upper class, and live in the well-to-do parts of the city.

A year later, for his thirteenth birthday, Michael's father and I took him and his friends to play laser games. He had invited new friends from his former school as well as the Barlaeus. His companions were of various backgrounds and education levels. At one point, one of the children started talking about being "really" Dutch, contrasting himself to Michael, to a Surinamese boy, and me. Bas, the blond child, said that he was "oerhollander." The literal translation would be "primordial Dutchman," which has a slightly stronger nativist overtone than the adjective "oerhollands," which is more commonly used. Michael's much smarter friends from the Barlaeus immediately reprimanded the boy for using exclusivist language that reminded them of the populist and Islamophobic leader of the so-called Freedom Party, namely Geert Wilders. Their quick dismissal of nativist discourse, I conjectured at the time, had to

do with their different positions on the social map. Bas lived in a small town and was tracked into the most average high school level, whereas the other kids were going to an elite school that allowed posters on its doors that mocked Wilders, as he often claimed to defend the “ordinary man.” On the one hand, it was reassuring to me, Michael’s tutor, that he had befriended people from a great variety of social and ethnic backgrounds, and that among them were critical teenagers. On the other hand, I also sensed that the Barlaeus Gymnasium, despite good intentions, could still be an intimidating place for my young friend. The white children, different in terms of class, race, and culture, could decide not to befriend him.

He told me that sometimes he had trouble adjusting to the other children and finding his way, especially in his first year at the high school. In the next three years at the elite Gymnasium, Michael made new friends, increasingly with other allochthons. My conjecture on the importance of the social map had not turned out to be totally wrong, but highly questionable if overemphasized. Though he had already interacted a little with Moroccans, he met his first Moroccan friend, Mohammad, at the Barlaeus. Even though his parents’ snack bar is located in a district in Amsterdam that houses many Moroccans and Turks, Michael mainly knew people of Muslim background through me. His parents often expressed skeptical sentiments toward young Moroccan boys in the neighborhood, because they had misbehaved in their snack bar. There was also a conflict with the Egyptian neighbor, who had once taken trash out in front of the store. In general, they preferred to keep their distance from the Dutch Muslim population, and in particular the Moroccans, who in the recent decade have been constantly scrutinized in public spheres, but Michael did not share their skepticism to the same extent.

Michael’s new friendship signaled a typical second generation phenomenon, namely allying with other allochthons in the presence of a dominant autochthonous group, a reaction that his parents can understand, but not feel with the same intensity. He joked that he had made many allochthonous friends and that they had even come up with a name for themselves: the Covenant of the Allochthons, *de Allochtonenverbond*. They comically used the wrong article “de” instead of the correct “het,” appropriating the stereotype of allochthons who cannot get their grammar right. The covenant currently consists of about ten members. Michael and the others joke that next year they want to run in high school elections for student councils as the Covenant of the Allochthons. They have also created a private Facebook page. As its background image, they use a black and white picture of Saddam Hussein accompanied by other “allochthons,” who according to Michael “look surprisingly much like us.”

Although my own high school experience at the Spinoza Lyceum in Amsterdam was similar, my friends and I had never so explicitly self-identified as allochthons at that age. I was even more alarmed when Michael used the Surinamese, that is,

Sranan Tongo word “ptata,” short for patata which means potato, for the one white child that belonged to their group. Michael (and I) did not know that ptata, which to ears not used to Sranan Tongo, may sound like “tata,” referred to the potato-eating stereotype of white Dutch, but the word has a certain pejorative quality that the word “autochthon,” a term he does not use often, does not. Michael used “tata” in a way that distanced and sharply distinguished him from the “Hollanders.” He would suddenly talk about “tata’s” in general as well. He and his friends had learned the word in the neighborhood of the snack bar from other Moroccan children, who did not differentiate between “tata” and “ptata.”²

I say that I was alarmed because I realized that there had been little progress in reconciling “autochthon” and “allochthon” groups in comparison to a decade ago. Michael’s self-definition as allochthon, something he did not do in the past, reminded me of my own visceral experiences of not being accepted, sometimes even rejected, based on racial formations in school. In general, however, conflicts were few and racism existed only in very subtle, though persistent, ways. Language was and remains one of the dividing markers. A 2002 quantitative study of interethnic language use in secondary schools showed that allochthonous groups used “street language” significantly more often than autochthonous children. Language is used to build solidarities between ethnic groups, who can show respect for each other by taking over slang, while demarcating territorial boundaries vis-à-vis white children. Making fun of each other’s background is another way of creating a reassurance that would be much harder to realize with children marked as autochthonous (Vermeij). Pejorative language is not only used to transgress racial barriers, but also to identify and distinguish class.

It should therefore not come as a surprise that allochthons in general, not just the youth, interact more with each other than autochthons do with other allochthonous groups. A 2012 quantitative study corroborates this hypothesis for Amsterdam. The study also indicates that segregation in the capital has increased slightly in the past 15 years, as well as that segregation in schools, following general spatial segregation, remains prevalent (Scheffer and Entzinger).

Furthermore, Jan Willem Duyvendak has discussed Dutch nativism as being reinforced by the homogenization of shared values, particularly among autochthonous Dutch citizens. In that sense, it is a misunderstanding to believe that “the Netherlands has developed into a pluralist, highly diverse society.” In fact, writes Duyvendak, “since the 1970s, the majority population has rapidly become more culturally homogeneous. Whereas in many countries, including the US, majority opinion is divided on issues of gender, family and sexuality, almost the entire political spectrum of the Dutch majority population supports progressive values on these matters” (88). Being progressive, according to Duyvendak’s analysis of nativism, has not resulted in smooth acceptance of diversity, however.

The allochthon's resistance to what the majority perceives as integration, e.g., by refusing to speak Dutch at home, is a refusal to homogenize. The net result is that, even though ethnic diversity has increased dramatically overall, contemporary Dutch nativism is characterized by being less able to navigate around diverging ethical norms, most notably those of conservative Muslims, but also of other groups.

Allochstan on the North-Sea

A covenant of allochthons is not merely a joke of a group of teenagers, but an exacerbated symptom of a social reality in which subtle forms of segregation, even in mixed schools, continue to persist. A covenant, as Thomas Hobbes theorized, is an “artificial bond” (ch. 21) between people who, by agreeing on a “construction” of power (ch. 47), seek to regulate life for the sake of “safety” (ch. 15). The paradox of a covenant as social contract is that it is agreed upon by a people, but is simultaneously that which defines a people as a people. It is a covenant only in the first sense of being artificial, which in no way relativizes its impact on Dutch youth cultures, and does not exist in exactly the same form in other western countries, for example, those with a stronger tradition of civil religion, such as the United States and France. It is not a true covenant because the territory of its people, described by Lammert de Jong as “Allochstan on the North Sea,” is not created in a process of self-determination, but mainly in response and thanks to the dynamics of the country in which it exists: “Allochstan on the North Sea is a catchphrase to identify the subordination of non-western immigrants and their descendants in the Netherlands . . .” (89). An allochthon covenant is a symptom of that subordination.

Michael's self-proclamation of their Covenant of the Allochthons should be thus seen in the broader context of the creation of Allochstan on the North Sea, which was neither his doing, nor that of his friends. The discrepancy of the Covenant of the Allochthons lies precisely in the imposed self-identification of Michael and his friends as allochthons *before* the act of contracting, which when following the Hobbesian logic, should be that which defines them as allochthons *a posteriori*. On the one hand, they must integrate, but their status as citizens of the Republic Allochthonia, *Republiek Allochtonië*, the name of a well-read blog on matters relating to Dutch allochthons,³ simultaneously limits the extent to which this demand can be met.

The marking of such boundaries happens through language, but one's physical appearance matters as well. These are not unidirectional black and white borders, as allochthons may discriminate against each other, depending on context, and since white individuals can be admitted to allochthon covenants as well. A white, blue-eyed, teenager of Hungarian-French descent can be one of their friends, but he can be perceived as different from a relatively similar looking “ptata” or native Dutch. The ptata, the native Dutchman who is described in the national anthem as “of German blood,” *van Duytschen bloet*, is a caricature, a mock-identity that is more comfortable to refer

to for the children labeled as allochthons. The cross-allochton adoption of the ptata releases entrenched feelings of resentment, and while mocking language is employed, boundaries between friends are torn down, but also redrawn. Especially when there are no ptata's present, the use of the word functions as a way to create a sense of them and us.

These borders are visceral, intuitive, and fundamentally permeated by racism. Ash Amin's analysis of Islamophobic biopolitics relates subtle, implicit, "territorial" demarcations in everyday school settings as well. Muslims are not the only targets of everyday biopolitics: in general, the allochthon's not being native or his different cultural background are easily read off the body, skin color, dress codes, gestures, and so forth. In short, an instinctive relation to practices that Amin and others, have called "cultural racism." Cultural racism is intimately tied to nativism and racism, not in the least because "race," a concept that is taboo in the Netherlands, is often identified through bodily traits. Culture too is read off the body, so the issue should not be whether a new "cultural" type of discrimination has emerged that makes race critical discourse sound obsolete, but to point out the family resemblances or hybrid entanglements between nativism, culturalism, and racism.

What unites the allochthon children in a covenant are not their cultural differences, but especially their shared status as "non-natives." By creating their own "street language," they create a counterculture that becomes recognizable to them alone, freed from the more exclusivist ways of their parents, and woven together with a variety of possible racial formations. Such countercultures result from what Essed calls everyday racism, and Amin describes as everyday doings that give shape to a "phenotypical" racism:

Accordingly, racial practice becomes an everyday "doing," well before thought, effortlessly weaving together historically honed folk summaries of others that people carry in their heads and a phenomenology of bodily response that also recurs with uncanny consistency . . . we might describe such everyday doings of race as "phenotypical" racism, working with handed down folk summaries of "racial" grouping based on essentialized biological and cultural markings . . . and reliant on the sensory-affective sorting of surface phenomena through these summaries. (7)

The extent to which the curious grouping of allochthons can be pervasive becomes painfully clear when stepping outside the Dutch context. I spent two years as a graduate student in New York City, at the New School for Social Research, whose student population can be characterized as hyperdiverse.

On one occasion, a Dutch-Turkish friend and I were strolling in the city and accidentally met Regillio Tuur, a Dutch-Surinamese boxer who is famous in the Netherlands. Tuur was very happy to meet Dutch speaking individuals. He repeatedly said how he missed speaking Dutch, and we obviously reacted positively to his

professed nostalgia. The same happened, for example, when an old Indonesian woman started speaking Dutch to me after seeing my ID, wishing me the best of luck. There were also “native” fellow students from the Netherlands, and we met on several occasions as well. But I did not develop the same need to befriend them as they appeared to feel toward each other. Instead, my Iranian identity became emphasized with much greater ease in the American context, though it was also clear that I was at times somewhat different from students who had recently arrived from Tehran.

As the two years passed, I became increasingly aware of how much easier it was to feel accepted as belonging to the city in New York than it was in Amsterdam, despite always being delayed or questioned at JFK airport when entering the country, usually based on my Middle-Eastern appearance. True, racism is a blatant malady in New York and in the United States in general: the social injustices that exist, e.g., among the Hispanic and Afro-American populations clearly made Amsterdam look paradisaical. And yet, New York City would bombard me with signs that evoked a powerful sense of cultural recognition that does not exist in the Netherlands to the same extent, from the available languages on ATM machines and statues celebrating immigrants to everyday interactions with people.

Susan Fainstein’s comparison between New York and Amsterdam, from a critical urbanist perspective, presents in detail why, in general, it can be judged that both New York and Amsterdam are relatively successful in managing cultural diversity. The United States succeeds in absorbing and producing hyphenated identities without the Dutch *allochthon* category, but Amsterdam is much more successful in realizing socio-economic justice, providing goods that are scarce in the United States, such as excellent health care for all, good public schools, and social housing. From a global perspective, Amsterdam is still an emblem of democracy, social justice, and diversity. However, since the rise of explicit xenophobic discourses, previously suppressed racial or ethnic—the “neutral” alternative to race in the Netherlands—tensions have become more obvious.

One of the critical challenges to my Dutch cosmopolitanism came from friends in New York. They pointed out that, of the nine individuals that visited me in two years, only one could be classified as unambiguously “true Dutch,” supposedly “of German blood,” and he was a former teacher of mine, not a young individual. The other visitors had Chinese, Surinamese, Turkish, and other backgrounds. My friends and I in New York also had contacts with people from a great variety of backgrounds, which they identified positively as cosmopolitanism (unless they took issue with the concept for academic reasons). My Dutch cosmopolitanism, however, was frowned upon: why were so many of my Dutch contacts “allochthons”? With their skepticism in mind, I returned to the Netherlands and found Michael’s statement about his friends’ Covenant of *Allochthons* amusing at first, but increasingly disturbing. I would think back upon past experiences in a less apologetic fashion, admitting to myself that

nativist racism, which is not a one-dimensional or unidirectional phenomenon, is perhaps more persistent than many in the Netherlands would like to believe. And all of this is despite positive experiences of cohabitation and strong ties to the autochthonous population. Allowing such thoughts released feelings of resentment and resulted in a more conflictual manner of addressing Dutch racism. For example, the matter of Black Pete, our annual blackface tradition, led me into heated arguments with both allochthons and autochthons, who preferred a live and let live attitude and did not understand why I had to make such a big deal out of something they considered so insignificant.

The idea that racism is an everyday doing is especially critical in the Netherlands, because of an often resolute public denial of any hints of racism. An extreme example is a Dutch public prosecutor's claim that the death of Aziz Kara, a 64-year-old Turkish man who was recently fatally injured by his white neighbor, was merely the result of a fight between neighbors. Despite the accounts of the victim's son and mother, the prosecutor has tried to politically isolate the case by explicitly denying racist motives, reassuring the Dutch public that they do not need to worry about being infected by racism themselves.⁴ Such public, but also academic, denials or the downplaying of everyday racism have dragged individuals such as myself, whose academic work is not primarily concerned with racism, into the debate (Tamimi Arab).

These experiences have led me to believe that my Dutch cosmopolitanism, manifested especially in daily interactions with the many different groups that live in the Netherlands, is an "allochthon cosmopolitanism" that is deeply tied to nativist racism. Being excluded as non-native, particularly when the appearance of the body becomes experienced as a marker of discrimination, mixed with cultural forms of racism, can heighten cosmopolitan sensitivities. Such an allochthon cosmopolitanism is infected by resentment, categorization, and responses to "benign" forms of racism. All of these words describe the more general phenomena of subordination and oppression.

Cosmopolitanism in the philosophical sense of the word, as defended today by thinkers such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, is however far removed from the need to create an allochthon covenant, to claim specific racial boundaries, and to use the language of us and them. For the philosopher, cosmopolitanism today means cultivating appreciation for human diversity as well as holding on to universalist notions of the good, not as a reactive but as an actively affirmed value. Allochthon cosmopolitanism cannot be exhaustively reduced to being merely a response to nativist racism: it can affirm the value of having multiple identities, and help people transcend the Dutch polders. But allochthon cosmopolitanism cannot be a satisfactory solution to exclusion either, especially when it reproduces the categorical thinking that it must escape. Even in a prosperous country such as the Netherlands, dealing critically with diversity and racism will remain a challenge.

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Notes

1. www.nrc.nl. Statistiek saai? CBS-cijfers komen tot leven op de kaart. February 14, 2012.
2. The “p” in ptata is so subtle that you have to know it belongs there to hear it, and, alternatively, it is easy for Sranan Tongo speakers to hear its absence because tata has a different meaning, namely father (figure) or ancestor. Also see: <http://www.sil.org/americas/suriname/sranan/national/sranannldictindex.html>
3. www.republiekallochtonie.nl
4. www.nos.nl. OM: twee jaar cel voor burenruzie. December 12, 2012.

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