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# Tracing anxious politics in Amsterdam

**ANOUK DE KONING**

**ABSTRACT** In recent decades the Netherlands has seen the rise of anxieties regarding the present and future of the nation. De Koning explores the way such anxieties circulate and are taken up in various settings and by differently positioned people, using the ‘notorious’ Amsterdam Diamantbuurt neighbourhood as her vantage point. She focuses on engagements with the iconic figure of the troublesome ‘Moroccan youth’ in order to trace how such anxious discourses move from the national stage, to the neighbourhood and into the narratives of Moroccan-Dutch residents. While younger women contest discourses that frame their male peers as inherently disposed to crime, and instead single out overzealous policing, older residents grapple with explanations. They articulate an anxious belonging that differs markedly from the contentious narratives of the younger generation. These engagements give us a sense of how such publicly articulated anxieties interpellate differently positioned people, and feed into generationally specific senses of belonging.

**KEYWORDS** Amsterdam, anxious politics, belonging, Diamantbuurt, integration, racialization, stigmatization

**A**s in other European countries, public debates in the Netherlands have been dominated by the articulation of anxiety about the social and political present and future of Dutch society. Such anxieties often focus on the problems that people of migrant backgrounds are said to pose to the nation. In the Netherlands, Moroccan-Dutch young men are singled out as especially troublesome. Starting in the Diamantbuurt, a neighbourhood that in 2004 gained national notoriety as the home of troublesome ‘Moroccan youth’, I explore

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how such discourses about the nation and its problems take shape, circulate and are experienced by differently positioned people. I do so by examining narratives about problems with 'Moroccan youth', who have become iconic figures in these anxious discourses about the nation.<sup>1</sup>

This article starts out by examining discourses surrounding problematic 'Moroccan youth' on the national stage. It then moves to an exploration of how these same discourses inform interactions in the neighbourhood. In the second half of the paper, I examine how Moroccan-Dutch residents comprehend local young men who fit the description. Younger women contest discourses that dehumanize their male peers and frame them as inherently disposed to crime, instead singling out overzealous policing. Older residents grapple with explanations for the apparent failure to prevent some young men from taking the wrong path. They articulate an anxious belonging quite different from the contentious narratives of the younger generation. The narratives of these various residents give us a sense of how such publicly articulated anxieties interpellate differently positioned people, and feed into distinctive senses of belonging.

### **Anxious discourses and iconic figures**

Anxieties about the present and the future of the Netherlands have dominated Dutch politics for at least two decades. These anxieties often revolve around concerns about the presence of *allochthons*, people with a migrant background. The term *allochthons* officially designates anyone who is born abroad or has at least one parent born abroad.<sup>2</sup> However, in vernacular usage, the term is most often employed to refer to those who are considered most troublesome and are most strongly raced as Other: Dutch citizens with Turkish, Antillean and, particularly, Moroccan backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> Key among the alleged problems related to the presence of *allochthons* is

- 1 'Moroccan', 'Turk', 'Surinamese' etc. are ethnic labels commonly used in the Dutch context, alongside the umbrella terms *allochtoon* (official classification for anyone with one parent born abroad, often understood to denote a degree of foreignness) and *autochtoon* (both parents born in the Netherlands, often understood to refer to white Dutch). In their vernacular use, they are understood to refer to locals, often Dutch citizens, with particular ethnic backgrounds. When using 'Moroccan' or 'ordinary Dutch' I use inverted commas to highlight that these are vernacular terms. In my own analysis I rely on the terms 'white Dutch' and 'Moroccan-Dutch' (or Dutch with Moroccan backgrounds) to indicate how people are ethnically identified.
- 2 The term is used almost exclusively for the subcategory of 'non-western' *allochthons*, categorized as such on account of their socioeconomic and cultural distance from Dutch society, and not for 'western' *allochthons* (those with a European, US or colonial Indonesian background). See Dvora Yanow and Marleen van der Haar, 'People out of place: allochthony and autochthony in the Netherlands' identity discourse—metaphors and categories in action', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2013, 227–61.
- 3 Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2009), 150–1.

the lack of integration, expressed primarily in a failure to adopt values that are presumed to epitomize Dutch culture, like freedom, equality and tolerance.<sup>4</sup>

Taking Willem Schinkel's discussion of the virtualization of citizenship as a starting point, I argue that discourses that focus on the integration of *allochthons*, or the absence thereof, construe society as homogeneously white Dutch, and imagine *allochthonous* Others as existing outside society and in need of integration. Social problems are primarily projected on to those Others and thus distanced from society, which comes to be imagined as largely trouble-free.<sup>5</sup> These Others are grouped together as *allochthons* or under the label 'black'. The latter term is mostly used in reference to schools with a population made up primarily of children from 'non-western' backgrounds but it may also be used when referring to neighbourhoods that have significant numbers of residents with migrant backgrounds. In all these cases, the label 'black' is understood to connote 'problems'. *Allochthons* are thus understood to constitute potential problems for those who properly belong to the nation: 'ordinary' white Dutch. This suggests the racialization of society into a white Dutch body politic, on the one hand, and an outside consisting of non-white Dutch Others who are figured as a burden or threat to that body politic, on the other. The latter are framed as forever in need of integration, while their ethno-racial and cultural difference keeps them tenaciously lodged outside of the national community.<sup>6</sup>

At the centre of the circulating anxiety about the present and future of the Dutch nation has been the iconic figure of the 'Moroccan youth'. This iconic figure is routinely linked to nuisance in public space and criminal activities, and portrayed as the ultimate 'big city pest'. When, in 2002, the Dutch Social Democratic politician Rob Oudkerk inadvertently introduced the term 'kut-Marokkaan', 'Moroccan cunts', in a session of the Amsterdam city council, he articulated, in rather crass terms, what had become a common perception of 'the trouble with Moroccans'. The incident signalled the growing legitimacy of stigmatizing, racialized language in the public arena in the Netherlands. Public debates in national politics and the media have routinely featured explicit discussions of the problematic nature of the 'Moroccan' contingent in Dutch society. 'Moroccans' have been portrayed as both typical and the worst examples of *allochthons*.

The term 'Moroccan' commonly refers to young men, born and/or raised in the Netherlands in households whose male heads migrated from various parts of Morocco in the course of the 1960s and 1970s to work in Dutch industries. The iconic figure of the 'Moroccan youth' invokes second- or

4 Rogier van Reekum and Jan Willem Duyvendak, 'Running from our shadows: the performative impact of policy diagnoses in Dutch debates on immigrant integration', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 46, no. 5, 2012, 445–66.

5 Willem Schinkel, 'The virtualization of citizenship', *Critical Sociology*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2010, 265–83.

6 Yanow and van der Haar, 'People out of place'. See also Mayanthi L. Fernando, 'Exceptional citizens: secular Muslim women and the politics of difference in France', *Social Anthropology*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2009, 379–92.

third-generation Moroccan-Dutch young men hanging around in disadvantaged big city neighbourhoods. 'Moroccan youth' are presented as ultimate proof of the failure of the multicultural Netherlands, and the trouble that people from (non-western) migrant backgrounds pose for 'the Dutch'. They provide the foil through and against which the nation has come to define itself. This iconic figure is most often imagined in the plural, as part of an anonymous band that inhabits urban street corners, terrorizes passers-by, hackles women and behaves aggressively towards gays and Jews.<sup>7</sup> This plural existence is an important aspect of the figure's iconicity. It gives it a less than fully human nature and presents it as a collective threat to good Dutch citizens.

Like other such iconic figures, such as the oppressed Muslim girl or the ordinary white Dutch couple, this iconic figure is construed out of intersecting sets of characteristics (class, gender, age, religion, location and ethnicity). It is, however, primarily read in racialized terms.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while the iconic 'Moroccan youth' forms in the imagination as male, young, of working-class background, a big city resident, Muslim and second-generation Moroccan-Dutch, it is mainly the latter characteristic that is stressed. As a result, the marginalized position attached to this iconic figure seemingly becomes a logical outcome of his imagined ethnic habitus.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, crime has increasingly been framed in a racialized manner, projected on to ethnic minorities, Moroccan-Dutch young men in particular.<sup>10</sup> Such framings are legitimized by referring to the significant over-representation of this particular group in crime statistics.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, the criminal activities of Moroccan-Dutch young men have come to be seen as a 'normal', if highly problematic part of their ethno-cultural habitus.

These various forms of racialization help frame these young men—most of whom were born in the Netherlands and have Dutch nationality—as outsiders, foreigners, facilitating calls to 'send them' and, in their wake, an entire ethnic community 'back home'. Such calls illustrate the pertinence of what

7 Paul Mepschen, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Evelien H. Tonkens, 'Sexual politics, Orientalism and multicultural citizenship in the Netherlands', *Sociology*, vol. 44, no. 5, 2010, 962–79.

8 Michael Keith, *After the Cosmopolitan? Multicultural Cities and the Future of Racism* (London and New York: Routledge 2005).

9 I use 'racializing' here to stress that this projection of identity, most often read as ethnic in the Dutch context, is a highly generalizing, involuntary and negative imposition; see Alana Lentin, 'Europe and the silence about race', *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2008, 487–503. It is, moreover, one that is read off the body, and is often interpreted as unchanging and deeply ingrained.

10 Francis Pakes, 'Global forces and local effects in youth justice: the case of Moroccan youngsters in Netherlands', *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2010, 109–19; Saskia Binken and Talja Blokland, 'Why repressive policies towards urban youths do not make streets safe: four hypotheses', *Sociological Review*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2012, 292–311.

11 Schinkel, 'The virtualization of citizenship', 273.

Abdelmalek Sayad argued is a double punishment meted out to immigrants whose crimes are seen as a second offense, on top of the initial offense of their 'foreign presence'.<sup>12</sup> It also indicates that people with migrant backgrounds have a conditional citizenship: a citizenship that is contingent on good behaviour, even if mostly in discursive, and not in juridical, terms.

The incessant invocation of 'Moroccan' deviance has only recently been challenged. One important source for such critiques are recent studies that have documented the widespread presence of racial stereotypes regarding Moroccan-Dutch young men among police officers and the routine nature of ethnic profiling and discriminatory policing practices.<sup>13</sup>

Anxious discourses that feature the trouble with 'Moroccans' are elaborated through references to specific incidents, for instance the alleged harassment of bus drivers by 'Moroccan youths' in Gouda in 2010. Such discourses elevate the specific locales where these incidents have taken place to arenas in which battles over the nation unfold. The Amsterdam Diamantbuurt neighbourhood is one such locale that has functioned to exemplify problems with *allochthons*.<sup>14</sup> Not only in media, but also in policy circles, the neighbourhood became notorious on account of a group of 'Moroccan' young men who used to hang out in and around the neighbourhood, some of whom engaged in criminal activities that ranged from petty theft to more serious crimes like robberies or organized drug dealing.

### The 'notorious' Diamantbuurt

The Diamantbuurt is a small neighbourhood of some 3,000 people located just south of Amsterdam's city centre. It was built in the 1920s by housing associations wanting to provide decent housing for the city's working class. At the time of research, two housing corporations owned most of the housing stock in the neighbourhood, let at affordable rates under the Dutch social housing programme. *Autochthonous* residents (self and both parents born in the Netherlands) made up 45 per cent of the neighbourhood. Representing 13 per cent, those categorized as 'Moroccan' (at least one parent born in Morocco) constituted the second largest group. The neighbourhood often scored rather badly in terms of 'youth nuisance' and 'youth criminality' on safety and liveability

12 Abdelmalek Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, trans. from the French by David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press 2004), 282ff.

13 For research on discriminatory police practices in Amsterdam, see Sinan Çankaya, *De Controle van Marsmannetjes En Ander Schorriemorrie: Het Beslissingsproces Tijdens Proactief Politiewerk* (Amsterdam: Boom Lemma 2012); Francois Bonnet and Clotilde Caillault, 'The invader, the enemy within and they-who-must-not-be-named: how police talk about minorities in Italy, the Netherlands and France', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 38, no. 7, 2015, 1185–201.

14 Anouk de Koning, 'Creating an exceptional problem neighbourhood: media, policy, and Amsterdam's "notorious" Diamantbuurt', *Etnofoor*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2013, 13–30.

surveys but, in other respects, for instance with regard to violence or general safety, it fared rather well.<sup>15</sup>

The Diamantbuurt's notoriety began in 2004, when a journalist at the mainstream newspaper *De Volkskrant* decided to focus on a conflict between a white Dutch couple and a group of mainly local young men—most with Moroccan backgrounds—who hung out in front of the former bathhouse in the centre of the neighbourhood. The story was reported, as a piece of activist journalism, as exemplary of the plight of white Dutch people in big city neighbourhoods. The article and subsequent reporting only provided the perspective of the couple, who were given the quintessentially Dutch pseudonyms 'Bert' and 'Marja'.

As the conflict heated up, in part fuelled by regular follow-ups in *De Volkskrant*, the Diamantbuurt story was also picked up by other national media. The narrative came to signify the sense of 'no longer being at home in your own country',<sup>16</sup> an allegedly common sentiment among white Dutch. The Diamantbuurt story was framed as a clash in public space between an anonymous group of 'Moroccan youths' and the 'ordinary', that is, white, Dutch couple Bert and Marja. The Diamantbuurt young men would become exemplary of an iconic figure of 'Moroccan youth', which was, in turn, shaped by the story. This association gave the narrative its wider appeal and influence. In turn, the story helped affirm, bolster and elaborate discourses on the trouble with 'Moroccans'. Take, for instance, the September 2011 cover of *HP/de Tijd*, a mainstream weekly magazine, that read: 'Lessons from the Diamantbuurt. Or: how we should deal with Moroccan punks and other street scum'.

While the media spotlight on the neighbourhood came and went, its reputation lasted, and local incidents easily made the news. As a journalist at the Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool* told me in an interview in 2012:

The Diamantbuurt has never been out of sight. . . . Everyone knows what the Diamantbuurt stands for, and it's not the beautiful houses. It's Bert and Marja, annoying Moroccan boys who terrorize the neighbourhood, it is *the* terror neighbourhood of the Netherlands and that has not gone away. Even if you don't encounter it as often as before, if something happens, you merely have to mention Diamantbuurt and everyone knows what you're talking about.<sup>17</sup>

Between 2011 and 2012, I conducted ethnographic research in the Diamantbuurt, along with Hakima Aouragh, who acted as my research assistant. The research involved an analysis of media reporting and policy documents related to the neighbourhood, participant observation, for example, of

15 Anouk de Koning, "'This neighbourhood deserves an espresso bar too': neoliberalism, racialization, and urban policy', *Antipode*, vol. 47, no. 5, 2015, 1203–23.

16 Jan Willem Duyvendak, *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011).

17 Translations from the Dutch, unless otherwise stated, are by the author.

activities at the local youth centre, and of neighbourhood and policy meetings, and more formal interviews with a wide range of actors involved in the neighbourhood, from journalists to street-level professionals and young and old residents of varying backgrounds. Among these formal interviews were those with 10 first-generation Moroccan-Dutch migrant parents and 17 Moroccan-Dutch young men and women, which provided an important source for the present argument.

At the time of our research, the neighbourhood had once again become the focus of much media attention. The renewed interest followed a front-page news report in *Het Parool* on the criminal cases against Abdelmagid elJ. and his brother Mustafa.<sup>18</sup> 'From hanging-around youth to violent criminal', was the headline of the 7 May 2011 piece that set off a series of articles in various national newspapers and two current affairs programmes on national television. The article provided the horrific details of the case against Abdelmagid, which included the extortion and torture—'American History X style'—of his neighbour and former partner in crime. It presented the case primarily as an illustration of the government's failure to act on early signs of trouble:

'The government's lack of effective intervention has allowed two brothers from the Diamantbuurt to go from hang-around youths to violent criminals,' says chief of police in the Amsterdam South district, Leen Schaap. . . Even though. . . the brothers Abdelmagid and Mustafa el J. had been causing nothing but trouble for years, they were able to escape prosecution or only received short sentences. . . The duo knows how to twist social workers around their finger, even now that both brothers are in jail for very violent extortion practices and shooting at a rival, respectively.<sup>19</sup>

This excerpt demonstrates a rather typical narrative about 'Moroccan problem youths'. Such narratives often turn on the state's lack of effective intervention, which is often blamed on an exceedingly naive attitude and a misplaced sense of 'political correctness'.<sup>20</sup> Leftist elites and 'soft' elements of the state in particular, such as social workers, are blamed in this respect, even by other state or political actors who place themselves on the tough, 'realist' side of the argument. While the article was written in ethnically neutral language, the names of the two brothers situated the two young men within the discourse on 'Moroccan crime' and clearly evoked to the politics of anxiety.<sup>21</sup> The piece confirmed and bolstered images of neighbourhood pathology and 'Moroccan' deviance.

18 Out of concern for people's privacy, the press generally identifies suspects and convicted criminals by their first name and the initials of their surname only.

19 Paul Vugts, 'Van hangjongere tot gewelddadige crimineel', *Het Parool*, 7 May 2011.

20 Baukje Prins, 'The nerve to break taboos: new realism in the Dutch discourse on multiculturalism', *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, vol. 3, no. 3–4, 2002, 363–79.

21 See Pakes, 'Global forces and local effects in youth justice'.



## Questioning collective responsibility

Calls for members of the Moroccan community to take collective responsibility for a variety of incidents involving Moroccan-Dutch youths have been a recurrent feature of public debates in the Netherlands for over two decades. In November 2014 a group of Moroccan-Dutch organizations in Amsterdam raised the alarm about Moroccan-Dutch Amsterdammers who, in a climate of growing intolerance and discrimination, were said to feel increasingly insecure, discontent and anxious. Their ‘memorandum on the position of Moroccan Amsterdammers’ states:

Many Moroccan-Dutch indicate that they suffer from the stigma ‘Moroccan’. The many Moroccan-Dutch who want to make a positive contribution to society feel they constantly have to take responsibility for the criminal deeds of a group of Moroccan-Dutch and radical Muslims in the Netherlands or abroad. In this context, it becomes increasingly common to understand discrimination [against Moroccan-Dutch] as their own fault.<sup>22</sup>

Such admonitions to take collective responsibility suggest reified understandings of ethnicity that assume the existence of ethnic communities and consider ethnic background a decisive factor in the social lives of their members. In this reasoning, the over-representation of ethnic crime can only be attributed to that specific community and/or ethnic culture, which again justifies calls to take collective responsibility.<sup>23</sup> Not taking collective responsibility is seen as a form of complicity. Over the last decade, public figures from the ‘Moroccan’ community, particularly aspiring politicians, have repeatedly corroborated this logic by claiming ‘it is high time to own up to our failure’.

Attributions of collective responsibility are examples of what Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley have called ‘the metonymical magic of inflation and homogenization, when all members of a perceived group are associated with—or asked to loudly dissociate themselves from—the practices of some’.<sup>24</sup> White Dutch are exempt from such groupist reasoning. They remain the unspoken, invisible norm. As Mayanthi Fernando points out, white Europeans carry no representational burden.<sup>25</sup> Lentin and Titley see such inflation and

22 “‘Mocro in Mokum”: notitie over de positie van Marokkaanse Amsterdammers’, June 2014, 6, available on the *Encemo* website at [www.emcemo.nl/images/Pdf/Mocro\\_in\\_Mokum'2.pdf](http://www.emcemo.nl/images/Pdf/Mocro_in_Mokum'2.pdf) (viewed 29 January 2016).

23 See also Marguerite van den Berg and Willem Schinkel, “‘Women from the catacombs of the city”: gender notions in Dutch culturist discourse’, *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2009, 393–410.

24 Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age* (London: Zed Books 2011), 63.

25 Mayanthi L. Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press 2014).

homogenization as a crucial component of race thinking in a putatively post-race Europe. We can indeed understand such attributions of collective responsibility as part of the racialization of society and its social problems discussed above.

Another strand of collective explanations turns to the family and the social environment (often defined in ethnic terms). This is manifested in assumptions regarding parents' direct or indirect complicity in their sons' illegal behaviour, and the fear that younger siblings will follow in the footsteps of their older brothers. Such notions have also been taken up in policy analyses of problems with ('Moroccan') young men in the Diamantbuurt and Amsterdam more generally.<sup>26</sup> Take, for instance, the following excerpt from a 2010 policy document on anti-social behaviour and crime by youth in the Diamantbuurt:

The Diamantbuurt has experienced anti-social behaviour by youth for years and, especially in the last few years, growing (youth) criminality caused by the Van Woustraat group [a criminal youth group identified as such by the police]. There are close relationships between predominantly Moroccan Dutch families in this small neighbourhood. . . . There is a strong solidarity, a strong aversion to the authorities (especially the police) and to other cultures, including the Dutch one. Members were involved in anti-Jewish and anti-gay incidents. . . . Most parents are unable (and sometimes also unwilling) to do anything about this.<sup>27</sup>

Besides reflecting notions of (deviant/deficient) ethnic community, these collective explanations also fit the trope of bearing responsibility that has become a cornerstone of governmental policies. The call for bearing responsibility draws attention away from the structural causes of inequality and marginalization, and instead focuses on individual explanations and solutions. It frames social problems as first and foremost the responsibility of individual citizens or families, and as a problem of character.<sup>28</sup> This initiates what Willem Schinkel and Friso Van Houdt have called repressive responsabilization, which involves concerted efforts at forcibly educating those sectors of society—particularly those with migrant backgrounds—

26 For a more extensive discussion, see Anouk de Koning, 'Citizenship agendas for the abject: the production of distrust in Amsterdam's youth and security domain', *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2015, 155–68.

27 Memo, 'Jeugdoverlast en-criminaliteit in de Diamantbuurt', 6 December 2010, 3, available on the *Municipality of Amsterdam South District* website at [http://zuid.notudoc.nl/cgi-bin/showdoc.cgi/action=view/id=119131/type=pdf/1O002\\_Memo\\_Jeugdoverlast\\_en\\_criminaliteit\\_in\\_de\\_Diamantbuurt\\_Memo\\_Jeugdoverlast\\_en\\_criminaliteit\\_in\\_de\\_Diamantbuurt.doc\\_090835588005ea4b.pdf#search=%22memo%20jeugdoverlast%20criminaliteit%22](http://zuid.notudoc.nl/cgi-bin/showdoc.cgi/action=view/id=119131/type=pdf/1O002_Memo_Jeugdoverlast_en_criminaliteit_in_de_Diamantbuurt_Memo_Jeugdoverlast_en_criminaliteit_in_de_Diamantbuurt.doc_090835588005ea4b.pdf#search=%22memo%20jeugdoverlast%20criminaliteit%22) (viewed 1 March 2016).

28 Nikolas Rose, 'Community, citizenship, and the Third Way', *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 43, no. 9, 2000, 1395–411.

that are considered to be lacking in the necessary qualities for responsible citizenship.<sup>29</sup>

Such collective attributions of blame also reverberate at the neighbourhood level. Our research was conducted around the time of this renewed wave of media attention on the neighbourhood. By that time, the Diamantbuurt had already been the focus of media, policy and police attention for seven years. Many residents had a troubled history with the media, authorities and researchers. They had grown weary and no longer wanted to discuss the neighbourhood troubles. Hakima and I had a hard time winning the trust of potential interviewees, particularly Moroccan-Dutch residents. Several social workers intimated that Moroccan-Dutch residents were reluctant to be interviewed because they were afraid of being taken to task for the misdeeds of 'their group'. These residents were often framed as complicit in the problems of the neighbourhood. In contrast, the dominant media reporting about the neighbourhood interpellated white Dutch residents as victims who had been increasingly marginalized and left to fend for themselves in hostile environments.

A neighbourhood meeting in early 2011 about the renovation of the Smaragdplein, the neighbourhood square, illustrates how such collectivist understandings resurfaced and were contested locally. The meeting was held to discuss a new layout of the square that would create more space for playing and social interaction. A few white Dutch residents were critical of the plan and had come to voice their concerns. Social workers and community police officers described these particular residents as 'known complainers'. They did not seem to represent the views of most white Dutch residents in the neighbourhood. However, as residents of the square, they were the ones most directly confronted with possible adverse consequences of the new design and they were very vocal in their opposition to the plans. They were afraid the changes would increase the nuisance they experienced from playing children and *hangjongeren*, 'hang-around youths'.<sup>30</sup>

The atmosphere turned sour when they confronted a number of Moroccan-Dutch girls who had helped with the design. A social worker told me she felt horrified when the white Dutch residents turned around to blame the girls for the trouble their male peers had caused. Naoual, one of the girls, remembered how angry these accusations had made her.<sup>31</sup> 'Didn't they, the girls, also suffer from the trouble in the neighbourhood', she

29 Willem Schinkel and Friso Van Houdt, 'The double helix of cultural assimilationism and neo-liberalism: citizenship in contemporary governmentality', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2010, 696–715.

30 For an insightful discussion of the Dutch preoccupation with *hangjongeren*, see Erin Martineau, "'Too Much Tolerance': Hang-around Youth, Public Space, and the Problem of Freedom in the Netherlands', Ph.D. thesis, City University of New York, 2006.

31 I have used pseudonyms for all our interviewees, but not for the public figures discussed here or for persons mentioned in media reports.

asked, 'and had they not participated in the design to improve the situation?' One of the white Dutch residents remembered it differently: 'A few Moroccan girls were there, quite outspoken ladies that started to curse everyone, like: "We always get blamed." At one point the meeting had to be ended because people were almost fighting. I was called a whore and I had no children so I should keep my mouth shut.' The complaining residents eventually won out. Nothing ever came of the planned renovation of the square. The project was quietly shelved and, finally, the entire plan was cancelled and the funds repurposed.<sup>32</sup>

### Challenging iconic readings

Such ideas of collective responsibility were also contested at a more individual level, *inter alia*, in the way residents with Moroccan backgrounds reflected on the criminal activities of some of the local young men. How did those most closely identified with the Diamantbuurt's young men make sense of troubling figures like Abdelmagid and Mustafa elJ?

Naoual, in her late teens, was born in the Diamantbuurt and had grown up with many of the young men who were the focus of media and policy discourses. When I asked her about Abdelmagid, she became quite emotional. 'The news about Halima's brother really shocked me. . . . How can you be so heartless to do something like that to someone?' Naoual had to stop for a moment to allow her feelings of distress to pass. She continued:

If someone can do that, you know that something is not right with that person. Simply as a human being. . . I think you can do much for money, but to go this far. . . I read about the extortion, what he did with that iron. . . That is heartless, isn't it? . . . I thought: that Magid [nickname for Abdelmagid], who used to hang out [at the square] and tell his sisters to go home because it was getting late. Who would ask us, 'Hey little ones, do you want some candy?'

Naoual was clearly shocked by the cruelty of the acts that 'Magid' was reported to have committed. Rather than making Magid a worst example of Moroccan-ness, Naoual asked how any human being could do such heartless things. He must not be right in his head, she concluded. By arguing that he must be crazy, Naoual paradoxically reclaimed a sense of humanity for Magid and countered implications of ethnic pathology.

Hajar, in her early twenties, had lived her entire life in the Diamantbuurt. 'I used to like Mustafa', she said. 'We used to go to the same school. Now he and

32 See the memorandum to the Executive Committee of South District, Amsterdam, 28 June 2011, and the minutes of the South District Council meeting, 27 September 2011, both available on the *Municipality of Amsterdam South District* website at [http://zuid.notudoc.nl/cgi-bin/showdoc.cgi?action=view/id=132557/type=pdf#search="smaragdplein"](http://zuid.notudoc.nl/cgi-bin/showdoc.cgi?action=view/id=132557/type=pdf#search=) and [http://zuid.notudoc.nl/cgi-bin/showdoc.cgi?action=view/id=134376/type=pdf#search="smaragdplein"](http://zuid.notudoc.nl/cgi-bin/showdoc.cgi?action=view/id=134376/type=pdf#search=), respectively (viewed 29 January 2016).

my brother [who grew up alongside Mustafa] have chosen the wrong path. But I also think, give them a break now that they are still young. So that when they come out [of jail], they can say, I have seen that game, and I am done with that now. I am going back to school.'

Farah, in her late twenties, talked nostalgically about growing up in a familiar and safe neighbourhood that provided her and the other kids with a safe playground. She said she asks herself how some of the young men she grew up with could have gone wrong, while others have been able to make a good career. One has become a lawyer, she said. 'And you think, "Hey, that's also a friend of that guy who's been in jail." So I don't think something went wrong there. I also don't think it has anything to do with home. It's not the entire family that's in jail. Things did work out for other family members.'

I also asked Nadia, a mother in her thirties, whether she was shocked to find out about the arrest of the elJ. brothers who lived close by. 'Yes, I was. Because to be honest, they have real good parents, really a sweet mother and father. . . . As I just said, parents can no longer control a boy of 18, 19. Mothers don't know everything that happens in the streets, what kind of stuff the children get up to.' Nadia countered the idea of responsibility on the part of the family to suggest other structures that led to the boys getting into trouble.

These interviewees hardly defended crime or violence. They, however, also did not see the elJ. brothers as extreme yet otherwise typical examples of troublesome 'Moroccan' young men, but wondered out loud how they had gotten to this point. They stressed that some young men may choose the wrong path, go crazy or try to make some fast cash, but there are many others who do not. Their narratives contested the naturalization of criminality with respect to these young men, as well as the notion that those who had committed crimes were written off, portrayed as irredeemably lost to decent society. They did not really know how to explain such wrong turns; some pointed to difficult family situations, while others disputed this. Many younger women pointed to the role of the police in exacerbating these young men's predicament.

### **Contested policing**

Miriyam, in her early twenties, blamed overzealous policing for young men's criminal activities, with police constantly fining young men who hung around in the neighbourhood: 'I don't blame these guys if they start breaking and entering in protest. . . . If they want to broadcast their protest in this way, I am not against them.' When Hakima noted that some locals had been arrested on serious criminal charges she fell silent for a moment. 'Yes, those were often. . . [silence]. . . but I don't know whether that really has anything to do with the neighbourhood. Those guys simply go for the big money and they happen to live here and then this neighbourhood gets this stigma.'

Other members of the younger generation provided more nuanced perspectives. 'These guys know very well . . . that it is not right what they do', Hajar told me. 'I think it is an addiction. Even though you don't need it, you still have to do it. . . Like someone has to smoke, that person has to steal.' Naoual argued: 'They don't think too much. I swipe something, take a TomTom, that gets me 200 euros or so. Just finding the easiest thing.'

However, they also frequently came back to the role of the police, which had become very prominent after the commotion that followed the 'Bert' and 'Marja' affair in 2004. Elsewhere I analyse the emergence of an elaborate youth-and-security policy alliance made up of municipality, police, judicial, social work and myriad other welfare institutions, partly in response to the mediagenic problems with Moroccan-Dutch young men in the Diamantbuurt. This alliance was meant to allow for concerted action to control and reform these deviant youths.<sup>33</sup>

Sayyid, a middle-aged professional who had worked in the neighbourhood for many years, gave a rather critical account of the changed attitude of the police in the neighbourhood. The local young men and the police no longer trusted each other, he said. When I asked him how that had happened, he blamed a lack of discussion and a more repressive approach.

I see police officers who are new here, who are not experienced. Some boys are playing football in the square, and they pass by, gawk at them like they would at monkeys in a cage. The boys make some gesture, and it clashes. Before, the police would stop, 'Hey guys, how are things?' They might kick around a ball for a bit, and that way it is easier to open up a conversation with these guys. But if you pass by and give them a look that says 'Hey, those criminals are playing football', you'll get a reaction from these guys.

Lindsay, a youth worker who worked in a number of Amsterdam neighbourhoods, told me that young Diamantbuurt residents held exceptionally negative views of the police. The younger interviewees related generationally specific stories about the police, informed by the fraught relations between the two groups.<sup>34</sup> These were in part inspired by oft-repeated accounts of incidents of massive police action in response to minor incidents, with a show of force that was prompted by the neighbourhood's notoriety.

Naoual was in her early teens at the time of the 'Bert' and 'Marja' affair. She explained the troubled relations with the police that they, as local kids, had seen develop.

33 See De Koning, 'Citizenship agendas for the abject'.

34 For a similar account of fraught relations between police and urban youths from racialized minorities in the Netherlands, see Binken and Blokland, 'Why repressive policies towards urban youths do not make streets safe'.

As a kid, you hear them [older youths] say, 'The police, they're nothing, they're bad.' At one point you start thinking that way too. And when the police would come, we would think, what's their business here? . . . It is simply unpleasant when they are around all the time. As if you are under surveillance.

She said that younger kids and girls are largely left alone, but that things are very different for the older guys.

They are more easily asked for their ID. When they are with a group, they are watched. This invites them to act tough, in turn. Staring or yelling something, or simply showing attitude. Then the police think, 'Who do you think you are, you brat,' and they in turn . . . That happens a lot around here. . . . I also think that guys hear from the older ones that you should not talk [to the police], or that police are fags.

Miriyam, who, in the excerpt quoted earlier, blamed police actions for pushing some of the guys on the wrong path, later explained:

In the period when there was supposedly more police in the streets, they would just drive around in one of those arrest vans. That's not 'more blue in the streets' [a stronger public police presence]; by 'more blue in the streets', I mean community police officers who walk or move by bike and who intervene when they see something that is off. But not standing at the ready with an arrest van.

Not all younger interviewees blamed the police to the same degree, but all questioned the more repressive and constant manner in which the police, the primary representatives of the authorities in the neighbourhood, bore down on their male peers. Many parents we interviewed seemed more ambivalent *vis-à-vis* the police than the younger generation. While most thought that policing was in principle a necessary and potentially good thing, those with personal experiences of the police were critical of their increasingly harsh approach.

These narratives thus evidence a generationally specific, contentious belonging. Our younger interviewees did not question their own rightful presence in the Netherlands. Neither did they consider themselves failed or bad citizens.<sup>35</sup> Their narratives convey a critical and, in some cases, antagonistic relationship with the authorities. This critical, contentious sense of belonging contrasted markedly with the anxious belonging articulated by their parents' generation.

### **Anxious parents**

Blame is a central trope in the narratives about the neighbourhood troubles. In the 'Bert' and 'Marja' story and the *Parool* piece on the eIJ brothers, it was the

35 Schinkel, 'The virtualization of citizenship'.

government that was held responsible for having failed to intervene effectively. Social workers in particular were said to have been naive and to have failed to acknowledge and act against the derailing of local Moroccan-Dutch youths. As I noted earlier, statements about the authorities failing to intervene in problems caused by *allochthons* are a crucial part of the anxious discourses that provide the central backdrop to my argument. Moroccan-Dutch parents were also held responsible. Living in small apartments, they were said to send their sons out into the streets where they were a nuisance and got involved in illegal pursuits.

Questions regarding their parenting haunted many of our older interviewees. Did the deviant behaviour of so many Moroccan-Dutch youngsters indicate that they, and their generation more generally, had failed as parents? Fatima's narrative brings across the complexity of anxieties and explanations parents have regarding these young men. This well-educated middle-aged mother rehearsed a narrative that was common among first-generation Moroccan parents when she suggested that the Netherlands used to be too soft and even restricted the disciplining options of Moroccan migrant parents:

When a parent threatens to call the police, the son says, so what, the police can't touch me. He even curses the police officer and hits him, while the officer stands by and does nothing because he's not allowed to. So, yes, the amount of freedom has led young people to do what they want.

'Of course, things have changed', she said when Hakima asked if that still held true.

Nowadays, the police really spy on these young people. If they even run a red light or break a branch off a tree, they are arrested. Why? Why do they take a boy to the police station when that just scares them? Before he would be taken by the hand and brought to his mother, and he'd even get a bag of sweets, and now this. . . . They traded one extreme for the other.

All first-generation migrant parents we interviewed struggled with questions as to what had gone wrong with young men in their environment or even with their own sons. Have we not been strict enough with our kids, they asked themselves. Have we been too strict? Are the Dutch to blame for the failures of our children since they prevented us from raising our children in a strict manner? Or is our way of raising kids in the Netherlands not the right way and should we adopt other ways? Do children simply have too much freedom in the Netherlands? Will it work to go back to Morocco or is that no longer a safe environment to grow up in either?

Everyone seemed to agree that a 'Moroccan upbringing' was stricter than 'Dutch' ways of parenting, and might include the physical disciplining of



children. However, first-generation parents differed in their evaluation of such ways of raising children and in how they positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* a Moroccan parenting style. Take Mr Bensalah's explanation when Hakima asked him why his children all stayed out of trouble:

Allah protected them, and I also did not let them interact with other kids in the street too much.

[Hakima:] 'Were you very strict with them?'

'No, too strict is not good either. You have to improve [them]. . . . We don't know how to educate children. Our blood is warm, we are easily angered. You have to deal with children in a more gentle way, correct them, and not only with anger. That's why, to be honest, we can't educate them in the right way. We can't educate them like the Dutch do. The Dutch do not hit their children, we do, and that's where things go wrong. . . . But Alhamdulillah [Thank God], I never. . . [hit them].

These first-generation migrant parents worried intensely about the future of their children and the best ways to ensure their success and stop them from taking the wrong path. We heard several stories of parents giving their sons money or goods, even if household resources were scarce, hoping their sons would be able to resist the temptation to make some fast cash. Others said they closely monitored their children, did not let them play in the streets or even discouraged them from mingling with other 'Moroccan' kids.

Hajar's account of her father's attempts to keep his sons out of trouble is illustrative. According to Hajar, her father was always quite vigilant:

He would make rounds through the neighbourhood with his bike. . . . He would check out all those places where they would chill. . . . He would really embarrass them. . . . 'Yes, you there, go home now!', when they were playing the tough guy. When they came home, they would say: 'Don't embarrass me in front of all those guys. No one has their father come and get them, but you insist on getting us.'

This vigilance didn't stop her brothers from going astray. Now that that strategy had failed, her father tries a new one on his younger sons, Hajar explained:

My father does not want to deprive my younger brothers of anything because he is afraid they will take the wrong path. Even if my father can't afford it, he'll give them some money. Because he's afraid that otherwise, they'll start doing bad things. Because they want to have some money. . . . But it is not the lack of money that made them [the older ones] take the wrong path.

Some parents felt they had failed as parents and felt ashamed and unsure *vis-à-vis* other parents in the Moroccan-Dutch community. They did not dare

confide too much in other Moroccan-Dutch parents in their neighbourhood given the sense of shame and failure that accompanies having a child who finds himself in trouble. Quite a number also no longer trust the good intentions of the Dutch authorities. One woman confided in Hakima that she felt lonely and anxious, contemplating: 'What have I done wrong for my child to choose the wrong path? And what on earth can I do to prevent the younger ones from following in these same footsteps?'

While the anxiety that surrounded questions of parenting and parental failure was intense, parents also pointed to other factors that explained the predicament of many Moroccan-Dutch young men. Interviewees mentioned the lack of opportunities in terms of traineeships and work, in part due to discrimination in the labour market. Mr El Amrani, for example, a well-respected figure among first-generation Moroccan migrants, discussed the negative stereotypes that impede Moroccan-Dutch young men in the labour market. He summarized it well by reflecting on his life story: 'We Moroccans used to be angels.' Our employers would ask: "'Don't you have a friend at home? Bring him to work!'" Nowadays there's much [negative] talk about Moroccans. Nobody wants to have a Moroccan in his company.' His comments cogently capture the sea-change in majority attitudes *vis-à-vis* 'Moroccans'. First-generation migrants like him were welcomed as a cheap, temporary labour force, while their sons and grandsons have been framed as an unwanted presence and have become proof of the wrongheadedness of multiculturalism and the trouble with *allochthons*.

Our older interviewees also pointed to the general difficulty of living in a society that is openly hostile to people of Moroccan descent. These first-generation migrants reflected on the hardening of social attitudes and increasing discrimination. We were entrusted with a number of heart-wrenching stories of everyday aggression that interviewees had experienced on account of being 'Moroccan'. The comments of Fatima, the well-educated Moroccan-Dutch mother cited earlier, reflect those of a number of first-generation women who felt Dutch society no longer accepted them, and had turned against them. Young couples in the neighbourhood contemplate moving back to Morocco, Fatima said. 'They see their children only getting worse by staying here, choosing the wrong path. They won't progress here, because they cannot expect anything from the government, or the police, or the schooling system that does not provide them with equal chances either.'

Whereas many of the younger generation focused on the role of the police and the punitive course charted by the authorities, their parents' generation was less sure. They wrestled with explanations for the trouble in which some Moroccan-Dutch youths found themselves. While they asked themselves what type of upbringing could prevent such wrongheaded choices, they also pointed to the changed social climate, in which 'Moroccans' had become favourite scapegoats, and even the Dutch authorities seemed increasingly less understanding and more hostile. The contentious belonging

articulated in the narratives of the younger generation thus found its counterpart in the anxious belonging of their parents, who wondered why so many of them had failed to produce successful sons and law-abiding citizens.

## **Human tragedy**

The Diamantbuurt story provides an effective dramatization of claims regarding multicultural failure that are articulated in media and politics. These discourses constitute white Dutch people as subjects and/or victims, forced to put up with the nuisance or criminal behaviour of Moroccan-Dutch youths. The cover of *HP/De Tijd* magazine referred to above ('Lessons from the Diamantbuurt. Or: how we should deal with Moroccan punks and other street scum') effectively captured the essence of these discourses by asking how 'we'—the readers, ordinary Dutch, Dutch society?—should deal with 'them', 'Moroccan punks', the exemplary big city pests that make urban life annoying and dangerous.

In this article I have used discussions regarding the neighbourhood's notorious young men to explore the way anxious politics circulate and are taken up in Amsterdam. Our Moroccan-Dutch interviewees had to navigate a discourse that implicated them alongside these iconic 'bad guys' and obliged them to negotiate notions of ethnic deviancy and collective responsibility. They struggled with that framing, questioning the portrayal of Moroccan-Dutch young men as universally troublesome and habitually deviant. Their narratives thus contested an implicit but pervasive feature of the dominant discourse: the naturalization of 'Moroccan' deviancy that, according to its logic, makes Moroccan-Dutch young men into unredeemable criminals whose criminal pursuits need little further explanation. These interviewees thereby disputed the intense dehumanization that this naturalization implies.

Many insisted on seeing stories like those of the eIJ. brothers as personal dramas that involved many victims, and not only the likes of white Dutch 'Bert' and 'Marja'. Rather than implying a need to take communal responsibility, or seeing such narratives as indications of the dysfunction of an ethnic community or culture, their engagements drew attention to the intense human tragedy in those stories, especially for those most closely related, including the young men themselves. Many interviewees pointed to the authorities who failed to understand the predicament of Moroccan-Dutch youths and had increasingly turned a cold shoulder. The younger women in particular had little faith in the even-handedness or goodwill of the police, in view of the heavy-handed treatment of their male peers.

These alternative engagements with the iconic figure of the 'Moroccan youth' point to the complex ways in which anxious politics circulate and are taken up in the ethnically diverse and contested spaces of the city. They evidence generationally specific understandings and senses of belonging,

echoing the differences that Abdelmalek Sayad observed between first-generation immigrants and their French-born children. Sayad noted that first-generation immigrants are 'always anxious not to disturb them [others] because a foreign presence is . . . always a cause for concern'.<sup>36</sup> Their 'polite presence', in fact, gives little cause for concern as they try either to be invisible or to accommodate and adapt, attenuating the signs that make them stand out. In contrast, their offspring, according to Sayad, are by definition impolite, offending against images of the nation and blurring the national order. They are hybrids: neither foreign nor truly local.<sup>37</sup>

Mayanthi Fernando explores how young Muslim French negotiate and shape the 'impolite' position outlined by Sayad, carving out a space in which one can be publicly Muslim and French.<sup>38</sup> The narratives of the younger women discussed here demonstrate a similar assertive negotiation of presence. Some produced alternative narratives that inverted allocations of blame and distributions of affect. Their accounts focused on the punitive course of the authorities, expressed in the way the police approached the neighbourhood and its young men. Their contentious narratives did not question the legitimacy of their own presence, or the belonging of their male peers but, rather, assertively disputed the stigmatization and marginalization of these young men.

Most of the parents were less sure. They wondered anxiously what had gone wrong and who was to blame. The anxieties that were produced and expressed in and through narratives regarding 'Moroccan youth' had become part of their lives, bodies and minds. This was apparent in the anxiety of a mother who could not sleep at night, and in the ill-fated attempts of a father who made the rounds to find his sons, and still saw them slip away. These anxieties even permeated the narratives of parents whose children managed to stay on the right track, finish their education and build a career, but who wondered whether the Netherlands would welcome their children as it, in their somewhat nostalgic reminiscences, once welcomed them. Theirs is an anxious belonging that, not unlike the anxious belonging discussed by Townsend Middleton, 'lives . . . in the body and in the body politics of a people long related to the literal and figurative margins of the nation'.<sup>39</sup>

## By way of conclusion

For more than two decades, political discourses in the Netherlands have articulated anxieties about the nation that focus on the presence of

36 Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, 289.

37 *Ibid.*, 290–1.

38 Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled*.

39 Townsend Middleton, 'Anxious belongings: anxiety and the politics of belonging in subnationalist Darjeeling', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 115, no. 4, 2013, 608–21.

racialized Others. These discourses have deeply problematized particular segments of society—*allochthons*, ‘Moroccans’—and placed them outside the nation. This article provides some insights into the traces of these discourses among the people who are insistently rendered as problematic. Using various engagements with the iconic figure of ‘Moroccan youth’, I have shown how such anxious discourses circulate in Amsterdam, resurfacing in contestations over assertions of collective responsibility and informing generationally specific senses of contentious and anxious belonging.

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