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Chapter 19
Racialization and Counter-Actions in COVID-19 Times: Experiences Among Asians in the Netherlands

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1 Introduction

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) made its way across the globe, stigmatization, prejudice, and discrimination escalated in many parts of the world. Racialized physical or verbal assaults on people of Chinese or East/Southeast Asian appearance, and also on people of other presumed ethnic appearances such as Africans in China, were widely documented. Anti-Asian incidents were especially common in Europe during the early phase of the outbreak, often in big cities that take pride in their diversities. Some spoke of the "corona racism pandemic" (Goßner, 2020; Zeng, 2020) that was feared to have more long-lasting impact than the viral pandemic itself. In the Netherlands, large multicultural cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht—which pride themselves as being free, open, tolerant, and inclusive—have witnessed more of these types of discrimination incidents than other urban and rural areas (Discriminatie.nl n.d.). Racialized aggression has taken place not only in physical but also digital spaces. Stigmatized communities and their supporters have stood up to draw attention to and counter-racism, both in urban public spaces and through active online campaigns. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a stage for racialized discourses and aggressions, and for activism countering these.

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This chapter draws on a qualitative research project we conducted in 2020/21. We carried out news and social media content analyses, (participant) observation and 20 interviews (in Chinese or English, as they preferred) with people of Chinese or East/Southeast Asian appearance in Dutch cities, to document their experiences connected to corona racism. We paid special attention to their daily experiences of racialization and engagement in counter-actions in urban public spaces and online spaces. In particular, our research participants pointed to places—such as supermarkets, streets, and parks—where their experiences are entangled with the discourse and contestations in digital spaces. Boundary-marking and in/exclusion processes in the physical and digital spaces conflate and constitute each other mutually and in a continuous manner (Bork-Hüffer & Yeoh, 2017).

2 Racialization and the Public Physical and Digital Spaces of Multicultural Cities

Public spaces in multicultural cities are commonly seen as places where people from different backgrounds can come together, build relationships, and create communities. It would, however, be too naïve to believe that urban public spaces are always conducive to convivial relations (Pettas, 2019; Sandberg, 2020). Many multicultural cities across Europe also became the locus of discrimination and racist practices as anti-Chinese/Asian sentiment flared up with the advent of COVID-19 (Cluskey, 2020; Damiani, 2021). In our interviews and some of our own experiences,[1] public spaces such as streets, parks, shops, and public transportation were often reported and seen as places where racist acts occur. Gaby (a 21-year-old female student in Utrecht) recalled:

> When I went to buy groceries with a face mask on in those days [i.e., during the first wave of the pandemic in March–April 2020), many children and teenagers ran away once they saw me. There were also times when I was walking on the street, people yelled "Corona!" and "China!" at me. This is quite normal, and I really got used to it.

During the height of the pandemic, experiences similar to Gaby's were reported widely in the news and on social media platforms by people of East or Southeast Asian appearance. For example, Rajagopalan (2020) reported a verbal and physical assault in The Hague, while Moca-Grama (2020) described a similar experience of a Dutch–Chinese woman in Tilburg. Such stories were also often heard in our interviews. Racialization experienced by our respondents took various forms; they could be "subtle"—such as distancing, unfriendly stares, or unconsented photo-taking (when our respondents had their masks on, which was still uncommon)—or overt, namely, verbally and physically aggressive, such as yelling offensive words, spitting, or even hitting.

[1] Two of the authors are of Chinese appearance.

Fig. 19.1 Da Li's interview (*Source* Stop Asian Hate Amsterdam Instagram account [source: @stopasianhateamsterdam], used with permission)

There has long been discrimination against Asians in the Netherlands (Ruiter, 2021; Wong, 2021) but it has been considered by many as "hidden and underhand" (Marotta, 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak has provided a context for it to be unleashed and played out more blatantly in the public space. The common usage of the words "China" and "Chinese" as swear words aimed at people of East/Southeast Asian appearance signals the racialized nature of these micro-aggressions.

While there had been efforts to collect discrimination testimonies before COVID-19, online posts were much more common during the pandemic. New websites such as "Amsterdam racism map"[2] were set up to collate COVID-related incidents. The Instagram account "@stopasianhateamsterdam" posted an interview with Da Li, a Chinese migrant in Amsterdam (Fig. 19.1), where he wrote: "I hardly go to public places anymore because I no longer feel safe after several verbal and physical abuses in the subway and on the street" (Stop Asian Hate Amsterdam 2021).

Echoing the strategy of many other victims, Da Li avoided the places out of fear. The fear created by racist experiences in public spaces reconstructed his everyday geographies, both physically (as in where to go or not go) and mentally (as in how he sensed these public places). His experience resonates with the fluid nature of geographies of fear that change depending on where a person's identities and positionalities lie in the transforming social hierarchy (Madge, 1997). As Pain (2001) and Sandberg (2020) also concluded from their studies, race, gender, class, and age are some of

[2] WeChat is a Chinese multi-functional social networking platform that allows users to form chatgroups. It is popularly used by Chinese people, including those abroad as well.

the key axes of differences that shape people's experience of fear in the city. Our research participants continued to visit public spaces, though less frequently and with more attention to how they appeared and behaved. Before the Dutch authorities introduced anti-COVID regulations regarding mask usage, whether to wear a mask or not placed Chinese migrants in a quandary. Zhu (22-year-old female student in Rotterdam) recalled:

> Every time I went outside before masks were compulsory, I needed to think twice about whether I should wear one. On the one hand, I did not want to get sick. On the other hand, I did not want people to look at me weirdly. But people also discriminated against us Chinese because of the face mask, so it was a difficult decision every time.

Zhu's dilemma was experienced by many people of an East/Southeast Asian appearance in deciding whether, and if so, when and how to enter public spaces during the pandemic. COVID-related stigmatization of "the Chinese" transformed public spaces into spaces of social exclusion and risk. Deng (23-year-old female student in Rotterdam) tried to deal with the dilemma by giving others a "guarantee":

> One time, I wore an N95 mask on the street [when COVID-19 had just arrived in the Netherlands]. I was afraid of being misunderstood by others, so I wrote "Just for protection" on the mask. But when a Dutch driver rolled down his window and told me to "Get out of the Netherlands," I felt hurt.

Deng's labeling herself as not infected demonstrates a kind of active effort a person in fear makes to prevent discrimination. Her failed attempt reminds us how difficult it is as a victimized minority to navigate public spaces with a sense of security. This exclusiveness of public space goes against the usual assumption, especially in multicultural cities of the "free," "open," and "tolerant" Netherlands that urban public spaces should be accessible for every individual. Contrary to the propagated inclusive potential of these spaces in facilitating multicultural interactions and understanding, the street became a painful site of rejection for Deng. Our other interviewees also shared similar episodes of rejection. Lee (27-year-old female, engaged in freelance sales and marketing in Amsterdam) was told by someone to "Stay away from me," while Gaby (21-year-old female student in Utrecht) was warned, "Don't enter the building with me."

Moreover, our interview data show that racialization is caused by, and leads to, complex power relations among individuals from different ethnic groups in urban public spaces. These relations cannot be explained by the mere conventional dichotomies of majority versus minority or native versus migrant. Gaby elaborated on who the attackers are, in her own experiences:

> I don't want to sound discriminatory. But I really have to say that most attackers are Turkish or other brown [sic] people. Very few of them are blacks. The whites are generally children, but they are just scared because they have not seen anyone wear a mask before. So, it is not really discriminatory. But brown people discriminate against me more in my daily life.

Most of our interviewees shared Gaby's perception that verbal and physical onslaughts in public spaces tend to come from other ethnic minority group members, including Turkish and Moroccan children and adolescents.

It is important to put narratives like Gaby's into context. Most of our interviewees, being young students or recent graduates, live in lower cost neighborhoods, which tend to have a higher migrant presence in Dutch urban contexts, where they conduct many of their daily activities such as shopping or getting exercise. Especially during the pandemic when mobilities were extremely restrained, their immediate residential neighborhoods were the very spaces where their social experiences were—unlike during pre-coronavirus times, when they would spend substantial periods of time at university or their workplaces. These poorer neighborhoods are places where the residents are also more likely to be deprived and perceive more threat, especially in times of crises and other uncertainties. Gaby's quote, therefore, should be interpreted not only as an issue of race/ethnicity, but also as how it intersects with other salient lines of differences, such as class and gender.

Gaby's words also illustrate how stereotypes, racialization, and stigmas run in different directions. On one hand, we are told how children from other migrant backgrounds are also guilty of racialization, under which they are also victimized. Reacting to these acts, Gaby (and many of our other interviewees) hit back with their share of racialization. Also important is how Gaby condoned the white children who were "just scared because they have not seen anyone wear a mask before" and "it is not really discriminatory." This benefit of the doubt was, however, not given to "brown" children. Here, we are reminded of how individuals and social groups position themselves and are positioned in particular and highly contextualized ways. These positionalities are determined in an intersecting and contextual manner by factors ranging from colonial histories, the global political economy, and various media, to physio-biological factors such as how the COVID-19 virus is transmitted. These in turn affect the in/exclusion processes that are played out, arguably more intensively, in urban spaces.

Contestations of identities and in/exclusions take place not only in physical but also digital spaces. We mentioned earlier that advocacy bodies (e.g., the RADAR foundation; https://radar.nl/discriminatie-melden/) and individuals who are affected by racialized assault make use of the online space to collate and raise awareness of such aggression and establish alliances for counter-actions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people of Chinese or East/Southeast Asian appearance have also reported more incidents of online aggression, for example, in radio or TV shows and postings on blogs, in chatrooms, and on other social media. As researchers of digital geographies have argued, physical offline spaces and digital online spaces are interwoven in diverse, dynamic, and contextualized ways, even though they have their specificities and heterogeneities (Jackson and Valentine, 2014). Digital and physical spaces share a symbiotic relationship (Kitchin, 1998). They converge (Imken, 1999), conflate (Bork-Hüffer & Yeoh, 2017), or constitute (Massey, 2005) each other. Our research findings also reveal the entangled, interdependent nature of online and offline spaces. Online chats and micro-aggression can become "inspiration" for youngsters, including those from migrant and other minority backgrounds, to assault people of Asian appearance. The reports of these incidents in turn bring about more visibility, awareness, and further aggression, as well as solidarity in both online and offline spaces. The entangled nature of online and offline spaces exhibits varied spatialities

that often extend beyond the immediate life space of individuals. Wang (27-year-old male student in Amsterdam) told us about the unbounded nature of the geographies of fear:

> I remember some news about COVID-related racism in the US. The news didn't really bother me at first but bothered my parents a lot. They told me to be cautious about racists and even asked me to go back home. I said racism in the Netherlands is not as intense as that in the USA, and I believe it. But I am also more aware of these issues because if that happens to me, the damage will be forever.

Wang's narrative demonstrates that the information and imageries circulated in the digital media have a transnational impact on people's perception of the city and, hence, how to use urban spaces and interact with others in such spaces. Anti-Asian incidents in the USA can travel to far-away places to shape Chinese migrants' interpretations of their environment and cause anxiety about their safety. Online spaces become an important space where people's imaginaries of the world are formed and reshaped with a composite of realities, rumors, and imaginations. Transnational flows of anti-Asian aggression connect places across the globe. Categories of places are constructed in people's minds—especially those of actual or potential victims—on the basis of realities, labels, and stereotypes. As a result of recurrent racialized aggression during COVID-19 in "Western" and "ethnically diverse" cities, similar places were imagined as racist spaces by Chinese and East/Southeast Asian-looking people. As such, anti-Asian hate acts in the Netherlands, across Europe, and in other world regions converged to create fears of multicultural spaces in the Netherlands, which we observed in our research.

3 Public Spaces as Counter-Spaces: Protests, Representations, and Alliance Building

While public spaces have become spaces of fear for many people of Asian appearance, these are also spaces where stigmatized communities and their supporters have taken a stand against racism. To illustrate this, we spotlight two protests that took place in Amsterdam. On March 27 and April 10, 2021, hundreds of people—mostly people of Chinese or East/Southeast Asian appearance, but also supporters from various backgrounds—gathered in Museumplein ("Museum Square"), strictly in accordance with COVID-19 measures, to demonstrate against anti-Asian racism and xenophobia (Fig. 19.2). These protests were in response to COVID-related racism and Asian hate aggression, as well as to structural stereotypes and discrimination deeply seated in individual and institutional domains in Dutch society. We asked our respondents for their reflections:

> More than 200 people with an Asian background, Dutch background or other ethnic background participated in the protest [on 27 March]. They took it in turn to talk about their racist experiences on stage and chanted slogans together. I was very moved because a policeman of Asian appearance came to help preserve order that day. It reminded me that discrimination

Fig. 19.2 Stop Asian Hate protest on April 10, 2021, Museumplein, Amsterdam (*Source* stop Asian Hate Amsterdam Instagram account [*Source* @stopasianhateamsterdam], used with permission)

> is an issue no matter what your professional background is. The police work for the Dutch government and Dutch society. His presence made me feel that Dutch society hears our voices. (Lin, 22-year-old male student in Ede)
>
> The most memorable moment [during the first protest] is that an African lady appealed to the crowd to do something when anyone, regardless of his or her ethnic background, is bullied on a bus or somewhere else. It was very powerful. Not only the Chinese but every minority group experience racial discrimination. (Wang, 27-year-old male student in Amsterdam)

Strategically, Museumplein was chosen for the protests because of its central location, which thus promises visibility: it is Amsterdam's largest square and is surrounded by three major museums that attract impressive visitor traffic, even during COVID-19. Protests in busy public spaces bring together people from different backgrounds who are in different social positions. As such, public urban spaces are important places where in/exclusion is played out, negotiated, and envisioned. These open and safe (partly secured by the police) spaces allow the stigmatized and their supporters to share personal experiences and opinions, wave banners and placards, liaise and imagine common futures. These rare interactions across ethnic, class, and other social axes of differences enact (for the moment) and possibly inspire longer term inclusion and solidarity.

Liu (33-year-old female student in Rotterdam) envisioned the spatially and temporally unbound possibility of protesting in physical public space: "We are not content with the received attention confined by space and time." To this end, the organizers and participants established their digital presence in news and social media.

> This activity invited the local media in the Netherlands that publish in Dutch. I think this is very meaningful. The media will give its readers in the mainstream Dutch community an impression that Asians are not dumb. (Li, 28-year-old female student in Utrecht)

Raising awareness in the mainstream media space is an important step for anti-racism activism. In addition to exposure, reporting in the Dutch media also makes space for further collaboration across the native–migrant or majority–minority divide to combat anti-Asian racism and other injustices. The protests attracted attention from beyond the local and national levels, inspiring international artists and key opinion makers to speak out on social media against anti-Asian aggression.

Museumplein carries symbolic significance as a place with an active history of demonstration. The two well-attended protests at this particular place provided powerful materialities—crowds, conversations, interactions, placards and banners, photos, stories, etc. (see Fig. 19.3)—that are woven into the broader on/offline landscape of anti-racism activism. The two protests against anti-Asian racism were special for the Chinese and Asian communities in the Netherlands, as they occupied the city's largest square and used it to represent them and their histories, identities, positions, and struggles. By coming together from all over the Netherlands, people of Chinese and East/Southeast Asian origin created a strong sense of solidarity with their co-ethnics:

> I am happy that many Chinese people I already knew or didn't know joined the protest. I have a sense that being in a foreign country, we Chinese are still closely united. (Liu, 33-year-old female student in Rotterdam)

As social geographer Don Mitchell (2003: 35) noted, "Representation both demands space and creates space." In our case, the two protests transformed Museumplein into a site of political claims by people from Chinese/Asian backgrounds, creating a "moment of Asians," as Gaby (21-year-old female student in Utrecht) called it. This moment of Asian anti-racist activism carries COVID-19 particularities, unlike demonstrations in non-COVID times, with protesters in face masks holding placards declaring "We are not viruses" and standing 1.5 m apart. The gray markers on the grass (see Fig. 19.4) used for distancing remained visible for days following the protests. Even after they were removed from the grass, the community and the activism lived on in new digital spaces. Instagram accounts, Facebook pages, and WeChat groups[3] were formed to continue the process of countering anti-Asian racism.

> The WeChat group gives us a platform for communicating about racism. This WeChat group is still in use. Some people share their stories of racial discrimination. [This group] is like a harbor for the soul. We would support the victims by showing sympathy and giving advice, such as reporting to the police, when necessary. (Lin, 22-year-old male student in Ede)

These digital communities transform racism encounters in everyday online and offline life from an individual into a collective level. Public-facing social media (e.g., Instagram and Facebook pages) are lively countering spaces where personal stories, anti-racism artwork, and other relevant content are shared to raise awareness and widen public debates. On the other hand, private digital communities (e.g., WeChat

Fig. 19.3 The stage decorated with posters designed for the Stop Asian Hate protest on April 10, 2021, Museumplein, Amsterdam (*Source* stop Asian Hate Amsterdam Instagram account [@stopasianhateamsterdam], used with permission)

groups) function not as counter-aggression spaces, but as "family backyards" that provide emotional support and serve as "think tanks," offering advice and instructions on how to actively respond to discriminatory acts. All of our interviewees expressed a growing tendency towards direct confrontation with offenders and taking concrete steps, such as filing complaints with the relevant authorities.

4 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have underscored the multiple roles of urban public spaces in processes of racialization during the time of COVID-19. As our research among people of Chinese and East/Southeast Asian appearance shows, urban public spaces are both where racist acts happen and where counter-actions take place. Their experiences of racialization can only be understood through an intersectional perspective. As we have shown, their ethnicity, class, and gender identities and positionalities intersect in their experiences. We advocate, therefore, for the need to go beyond the usual dichotomies that simplify identity politics, contestations, and acts of racism.

Fig. 19.4 The social distancing markers on the lawn of Museumplein in Amsterdam for Stop Asian Hate protest (March 27, 2021) (*Source* stop Asian Hate Amsterdam Instagram account [@stopasianhateamsterdam], used with permission)

Furthermore, we have underlined the conflating nature of physical and digital spaces in our contemporary world. While we discuss the in/exclusive nature of urban spaces in this book, we must also make the necessary links to processes that take place in physical and digital spaces. In particular, as we have shown, the digital space helps deterritorialize aggression and counter-actions in physical spaces. Also, communication and imageries in the digital space engage individuals and collectives transnationally—and the effects are disparate, whereas digital networks can bring fear (e.g., racism in the USA) to far-away places, they can also link activism, creating a space for alliances and emotional support. In mutually constitutive ways, identity politics and in/exclusion processes in on- and offline spaces are shaped by and also produce multicultural societies.

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