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**DOI**

[10.1111/anti.12608](https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12608)

**Publication date**

2020

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Antipode

**License**

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Pinkster, F. M., Ferier, M. S., & Hoekstra, M. S. (2020). On the Stickiness of Territorial Stigma: Diverging Experiences in Amsterdam's Most Notorious Neighbourhood. *Antipode*, 52(2), 522-541. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12608>

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# On the Stickiness of Territorial Stigma: Diverging Experiences in Amsterdam's Most Notorious Neighbourhood

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**Abstract:** In Western Europe, a select number of “ghettos” are at the forefront of public anxieties about urban inequality and failed integration. These notorious neighbourhoods at the bottom of the moral spatial order are imagined as different and disconnected from the rest of the city. This paper examines how residents in Amsterdam Bijlmer, a peripheral social housing estate long portrayed as *the* Dutch ghetto, experience the symbolic denigration of their neighbourhood. Interviews show that all residents are highly aware of the negative racial, cultural and material stereotypes associated with their neighbourhood. However, these negative stereotypes are not equally felt: territorial stigma “sticks” more to some residents than others and substantial inequalities are observed in who carries the burden of renegotiating blemish of place. Differential engagement with stigma depends on how residents’ identity and the materiality of their surroundings intersect with stigmatising narratives of place.

**Samenvatting:** Zorgen in West-Europa over groeiende ongelijkheid en polarisatie in de samenleving richten zich in het bijzonder op een select groepje “probleemwijken” in de grote steden. Deze “beruchte” buurten liggen in de media onder een vergrootglas en lijken in de collectieve beeldvorming steeds verder verwijderd te raken van de rest van de samenleving. Dit onderzoek richt zich op de vraag hoe bewoners in de Amsterdamse Bijlmer te maken krijgen met zulke negatieve verslaggeving over hun buurt. Interviews geven inzicht in de negatieve raciale, culturele en materiele stereotypen die aan de wijk kleven. Tegelijkertijd blijkt dat sommige bewoners het buurtstigma makkelijker van zich af schudden dan anderen. Dit hangt af van hoe hun eigen klassepositie, raciale identiteit en woonplek samenvalt met stigmatiserende verhalen over de wijk. De gevolgen van ruimtelijke stigmatisering zijn dan ook ongelijk verdeeld: juist bewoners met meer marginale sociale posities dragen de last van het buurtstigma. Het onderzoek toont ten slotte aan dat bewoners zelf—vaak onbewust en onbedoeld—het stigma reproduceren in hun poging om zich van negatieve stereotypen te ontdoen.

**Keywords:** urban marginality, territorial stigma, othering, racialised space, ghetto imaginaries

## Introduction

In Western Europe, anxieties about urban inequality, failed integration and the emergence of so-called dual societies focus in particular on a select number of “no-go areas”, “ghettos” and “problem neighbourhoods” situated at the bottom

of the moral spatial order. This includes a shortlist of notorious neighbourhoods, whose names are nationally—and in some cases internationally—known, and which are imagined as different and disconnected from the rest of the city (Dikec 2007). Residents in these iconic neighbourhoods are confronted with stigmatising labels and negative narratives in their everyday lives (De Koning and Vollebergh 2019), in newspapers (Glazze et al. 2012), social media (Butler et al. 2018), popular culture (Arthurson et al. 2014; Van Gent and Jaffe 2017) and urban policies (Kipfer 2015; Tyler and Slater 2018). Representations of these neighbourhoods reproduce an imagined moral geography of the city, drawing boundaries between “here” and “there”, “us” and “them”, and “good” and “bad”. In The Netherlands, such imaginaries of immoral and dystopian urban spaces frequently appear in political discourse (De Koning 2015; Schinkel and Van den Berg 2011), for example when they are identified as places that need to be “reconquered from the scum of the streets” (press conference by Prime Minister Rutte, 2016) or as places that deserve exceptional treatment through harsher sentencing of crimes (proposal by Member of Parliament Dijkhoff, 2018).

Geographers have long been interested in the construction of such sociospatial imaginaries and how these are mobilised in processes of othering (Gregory 1995; Watkins 2015). Building on Edward Said’s study of imaginative geographies of the Orient (1978), scholars have questioned how stereotypical narratives about place—ranging from historical representations of “uncivilised” colonies to contemporary representations of “deviant” urban neighbourhoods—constitute difference and otherness (Jazeel 2009). Although stigmatising narratives of marginal places tend to be “mythical, regardless of materialities” (Byrne and Chonail 2014:2), thus deviating from the everyday experience of living there, they can nevertheless become a source of differentiation between people and places in their own right. As Watkins (2015:509) notes, sociospatial imaginaries may “materialize into geographies when people [and we would add institutions] act in relation to them”. In other words, externally imposed identities of “dangerous” and “disorganised” neighbourhoods can result in public avoidance, selective outmigration and institutional (dis)investment (Tissot 2018), thereby reproducing their marginal position in the territorial hierarchy of the city.

In addition, urban sociologists have drawn attention to the way in which stigmatising narratives about marginal neighbourhoods affect residents. In his foundational work on advanced urban marginality and territorial stigmatisation, Loïc Wacquant (1999) noted that territorial stigma exacerbates residents’ already precarious position in various ways. In his comparative study of the American hyperghetto and the French banlieue, he observed that residents internalised negative narratives about their neighbourhood, affecting their self-esteem as well as their perceptions of fellow residents. They subsequently distanced themselves from their neighbours, changing “communal places” into “indifferent spaces of mere survival and relentless contest” (Wacquant 2007:69). This deprived them from local informal support systems. Moreover, these marginal neighbourhoods functioned as negative symbolic capital, forming a source of discrimination on the labour market and leading to differential treatment by public institutions.

Wacquant's work has triggered a growing body of research on resident responses to territorial stigma (Slater 2017). While some scholars find support for processes of internalisation and alienation (Contreras 2017), others have challenged these findings, noting that residents may also reject and resist territorial stigmatisation (Cairns 2018; Kirkness 2014). However, in much of the research literature, territorial stigma is presented as a generalised experience for all residents. It is identified on the basis of summational labels such as ghetto or banlieue and the kinds of binaries described above (that is, references to neighbourhoods as "other", "bad" or "deviant"). Few studies systematically deconstruct territorial stigma and acknowledge its multi-dimensionality. Consequently, there has been little attention for the way in which lived experiences of territorial stigmatisation may diverge due to different degrees in which people "fit" negative stereotypes associated with place. There is thus a need to bring "place"—as a multidimensional concept with social, symbolic *and* material dimensions—back into research on resident experiences of territorial stigma.

Bringing together the geographical literature on sociospatial imaginaries and the sociological literature on territorial stigmatisation, this paper explores how residents in Amsterdam Bijlmer differentially engage with its negative reputation. The Bijlmer has long been represented in popular discourse as *the* Dutch ghetto (Van Gent and Jaffe 2017). Since the 1990s, the area has experienced successive waves of urban restructuring, ranging from physical interventions and social mix projects (Aalbers 2011; Aalbers et al. 2011; Smets and Den Uyl 2008; Wassenberg 2011) to more recent programs aimed at promoting "active citizenship" (Hoekstra 2018). For this study, we conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with a diverse group of residents in the remaining, old sections of the Bijlmer and in the redeveloped areas. We examine how externally imposed spatial imaginaries intersect with residents' racial and classed identity and their placement in the neighbourhood to create diverging experiences of territorial stigmatisation. Our findings draw attention to the "stickiness" of stigma: while some residents distance themselves from the blemish of place quite easily, other residents invest substantial discursive work and emotional labour in negotiating and neutralising blemish of place. Substantial inequalities emerge in terms of who ultimately carries the burden of territorial stigma.

## Deconstructing Ghetto Imaginaries

As Watkins (2015) notes, the ghetto forms a larger-than-life archetype in public debates about urban marginality, which is disseminated far beyond its original context. It conjures up a host of negative associations, placing neighbourhoods at the bottom of the urban moral order. Although scholars have argued that it is problematic to use "ghetto" as an analytical concept to understand the empirical nature of marginal urban areas in Europe (Aalbers et al. 2011; Slater 2009), it is nevertheless relevant as a sociospatial imaginary. As studies on the "welfare ghetto" (Hancock and Mooney 2013), "reputational ghetto" (Slater and Anderson 2012) and "ghettos of the mind" (Byrne and Chonail 2014) show, it is used to identify a mythical other place that is characterised by

crime, gangs and societal breakdown and forms the home of a deviant urban underclass.

In addition to this cultural connotation, the ghetto imaginary is intrinsically linked to blackness and thereby forms a powerful tool in the racial ordering of urban space (Anderson 2012; Byrne and Chonail 2014). Lipsitz (2007:12) argues that for residents in denigrated spaces, place and race mutually inform and reinforce each other as “the lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension”. Jaffe (2012:675) notes that the globalisation of black popular culture and diaspora has made the “ghetto” into a mobile imaginary, travelling from the US to the Caribbean and Europe. In this process, “the articulation of spatially constructed ‘ghetto’ identities with racialized understandings of blackness shifts”, exoticising other ethnic and racial minorities. Like orientalist discourses of the colonial era (Said 1978), which served as a tool of power for the West to position itself at the centre of the world and project racialised discourses unto the periphery, “ghettos” in European cities form the margin of and the counterpoint to the white nation-state. Postcolonial subjects have thus been moved “from the margins of the Empire to the margins of the metropole” (Balkenhol 2014:65).

As the ghetto imaginary travels, it meets and interacts with other, local spatial imaginaries. In the context of Europe, one such imaginary is that of the banlieue. Poniewaz (2011) notes that the ghetto and banlieue imaginary are both used to signal places of marginalisation and immobility, where residents are isolated and excluded from participation in mainstream society. Yet the banlieue imaginary also differs from the ghetto due to its stronger spatial marker. Slooter (2019) argues that in public discourse banlieue residents are primarily identified on the basis of their marginalised residential location and only secondly on the basis of their ethnic, racial and religious identities. The otherness of the banlieues is constituted through both their peripheral location at the edges of the city and the material landscape of high-rise, modernist housing estates which forms a sharp contrast to historic central districts (Glasze et al. 2012). Social distinctions are subsequently mapped onto these geographical differences, whereby peripheral neighbourhoods with a particular materiality come to be known as “problem areas, synonymous with insecurity, violence, and the periphery of normalized social relations” (Glasze et al. 2012:1193). Dikec (2007:1194) notes that this imaginary of the banlieues—as sites of material decay and urban unrest—has “only recently changed colour, become darker and been associated with religion (i.e. Islam)”, fed in part by dystopian images of ghettos in the USA and the UK. His analysis illustrates how the notoriety of specific neighbourhoods is shaped by both global imaginaries and by local social and material relations.

In short, labels like ghetto and banlieue signify a distinctive geographic and social location in the moral urban hierarchy: the marginal is physically distant *and* exists at the edge of civilisation (Van Gent and Jaffe 2017). They evoke racial, cultural and material stereotypes, but these shift in meaning and take on different weights in different countries and cities. At the same time, different dimensions of territorial stigma often become interlinked: reference to one aspect of stigma can become a “summational statement” (Said 1978:255), calling to mind the other

implied dimensions that together make up the whole of the ghetto or banlieue and thereby underscoring the fundamental otherness of these spaces and their residents (Jazeel 2009). In fact, we would argue that much of the research literature has internalised such summational statements. Territorial stigma is presented as a unifying identifier for all residents and rarely systematically deconstructed. Yet it is important to disentangle the multifaceted nature of place stigma to understand how this may influence lived experiences of territorial stigmatisation.

## Resident Experiences of Territorial Stigma

Since Wacquant (1999, 2007) identified territorial stigmatisation as a key structural force in the production of urban marginality, a small but growing body of research has explored how residents encounter and experience territorial stigmatisation in their everyday lives and how they subsequently cope with this (see, for a substantive review of this literature, Slater 2017). Recent ethnographic studies in Europe and North America show that the symbolic denigration of marginalised neighbourhoods may have substantial emotional repercussions for residents. Contreras (2017:657) observes that residents in Los Angeles South Central experience feelings of spatial anguish and shame “at having outsiders fear, condemn or ridicule their place of residence” and at being perceived as “the living embodiments of their blemished place”. Such feelings of psycho-social stress can persist even after having moved away from marginalised urban areas, as Keene and Padilla (2010) found in their study amongst former low income Chicago residents in small town Iowa. In this respect, stigmatising narratives can function as haunting shadows, “seep[ing] into people’s understanding of themselves and their surroundings” (De Koning and Vollebergh 2019:398). In their comparative study of two notorious neighbourhoods in Amsterdam and Antwerp, De Koning and Vollebergh (2019:396) show that residents struggle with classed, racialised, gendered and religious stereotypes of generic inhabitants, as they “navigate the possibility or sense of being read *themselves* in light of such ordinary iconic figures”. Similarly, Arthurson and colleagues (2014) report that residents of Australian social housing estates feel trapped by stigmatising representations in fictional television series that place them at the bottom of the urban moral order.

Residents cope with such feelings of shame, frustration and stress in different ways. In his study in Los Angeles South Central, Contreras (2017) finds that residents use strategies of social deflection to blame residents with less social power for the blemish of place, drawing on social hierarchies at the intersection of race, class, space and gender to set themselves apart and preserve a sense of dignity, resonating with Wacquant’s (2007) original premise about sociospatial alienation in stigmatised neighbourhoods. In addition, Garbin and Millington (2012) show that residents bypass monolithic stigmatising representations of their neighbourhood through strategies of spatial deflection. In their study of a Parisian banlieue, residents designated micro-territories within their neighbourhood, contrasting their own “ordinary” surroundings with “hot” spaces in the neighbourhood, which reflected the disorganised, dangerous spaces imagined by the outside

world. Pinkster (2014) observed similar forms of spatial deflection in marginalised neighbourhoods in The Netherlands. Middle class residents in “problem neighbourhoods” in Amsterdam and The Hague justified their presence there by drawing sociospatial boundaries within the neighbourhood, distinguishing between “hotspots” and “quiet corners”. Yet as Garbin and Millington (2012) warn, while such deflective responses function as everyday contestations of dominant narratives, they do not explicitly reject place stigma.

Other scholars, however, question the degree to which territorial stigma is internalised by residents. Cairns (2018:1225) found that youths in Camden, New Jersey expressed “deep frustration with the singular, stigmatising narrative that so powerfully defined their city” and that has rendered them passive victims of their surroundings. While her respondents do not deny the challenges associated with living in Camden, they also describe such outsider accounts of present problems as “partial truths”. Drawing on their personal experiences and past memories of place, they create an alternative story about Camden that “excavates the good” in its prosperous past and envisions possible futures that deviate from the current territorial stigma. This counter-narrative provides them with hope and a sense of agency to cope with stigma. Similarly, based on his study of a stigmatised former industrial town in North-East England, Nayak (2019:944) concludes that residents may “speak back to dominant regimes of representation” by re-inscribing place with more positive meanings.

In short, territorial stigma may not necessarily undermine residents’ attachment to place. In his study of two defamed, marginal housing estates in Nîmes, France, Kirkness (2014) finds that territorial stigmatisation strengthened solidarity within the neighbourhood and affirmed banlieue identities in opposition to the rest of the city. Residents disavowed outside representations of the neighbourhood by developing meaningful ways to preserve and appropriate space and by redefining the banlieue as liveable places. While these everyday acts of resistance may not succeed in challenging dominant sociospatial imaginaries of place, Kirkness (2014:1293) argues that they nevertheless temporarily rework stigma: “however mundane, residents ... disrupt the flow of texts that are written by institutions and urban planning. They participate in making visible aspects of the city that would have been left *invisible*”.

These and other scholars thus identify different responses to the symbolic denigration of marginal urban areas, ranging from alienation to affirmation of local identities. At the same time, they collectively raise important questions about the fundamentally unequal power relations in processes of territorial stigmatisation and the limited possibilities for residents to ultimately influence or change externally imposed, negative narratives (Kipfer 2015; Wacquant 2007). In this respect, Tyler and Slater (2018:735) note that stigma “functions as a form of power” which serves to reproduce existing social (and spatial) hierarchies and justify social injustices. Considering territorial stigma, we argue that such unequal power relations are not only manifest in the external production of stigma by governing institutions and social media, but that they may also be present *within* a marginal neighbourhood in the diverging lived experiences of residents. We suggest that exploring how some residents experience place stigma more acutely than others

is important, because it fragments resident responses and ultimately makes it even harder to collectively resist territorial stigma.

## Case Study and Methods

The research was conducted in the Bijlmer neighbourhood, a marginalised urban renewal area in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The area was developed in the late 1960s and 1970s as a satellite town in the southeast of the city and formed the culmination of Amsterdam's post-World War II Extension Plan, based on rational planning principles and mass-produced, modernist architecture. With its high-rise social rental apartment buildings in the style of Le Corbusier and its park-like environment, the Bijlmer formed a deliberate break from traditional planning. Presented to residents as a "city of the future" (Aalbers 2011), it was meant to solve the overcrowding in the central city and provide high quality housing for middle class families. However, from the beginning the neighbourhood was unpopular with its intended residents, who had by then discovered low-rise suburbs and new towns further away. The Bijlmer quickly fell into disrepute due to planning failures concerning the delayed delivery of public transport and facilities, high vacancy rates and a quick population turnover (Wassenberg 2011). Because the completion of the Bijlmer coincided with the independence of former colony Suriname in 1975, the area received a substantial group of postcolonial migrants (who were at the time still Dutch citizens), for whom the central city was inaccessible due to housing shortages and discrimination (Balkenhol 2014). Since then, it has remained an arrival neighbourhood for successive waves of migrants with African heritage, first from Suriname and the Dutch Antilles and more recently also Ghana, Nigeria and other West-African countries, as well as Latin America.

Since the 1980s, the area has undergone three successive waves of urban renewal that have drastically altered the built environment (Aalbers et al. 2011; Smets and Den Uyl 2008). Area-based interventions were undertaken to "repair" the social failures of rational planning and modernist architecture. Many of the characteristic high rises were torn down and replaced by low-rise housing, filling in the empty parklands to reclaim indefensible open spaces, bring back eyes on the streets and thereby reduce social disorder and crime. The demolition of social housing and the construction of new owner-occupied single-family houses has been associated with a process of "black gentrification", as it enabled the growing Surinamese middle class to stay in the renewed Bijlmer (Aalbers 2011). At the same time, this process of state-led gentrification has remained relatively marginal. Longitudinal municipal data show that in the last 15 years disposable incomes of residents have risen only slightly and slower than the rest of the city. Real estate prices of the newly constructed housing, while rising, are strongly lagging behind the steeply rising housing market prices in the rest of the city, indicating that the area still holds a highly marginal position in the Amsterdam region. Moreover, the old social housing sections of the Bijlmer are still highly marginal and have been confronted with processes of residualisation (Hoekstra 2018).

To gain insight in resident experiences of territorial stigmatisation, we conducted 41 semi-structured interviews as part of a study on residents' sense of

belonging in the neighbourhood. During the recruitment process, residents were told that the purpose of the study was to examine how residents experience their neighbourhood. Many residents immediately interpreted this question through the lens of the neighbourhood's negative reputation. For some respondents this was an important incentive to participate in the study "to present an alternative view of the neighbourhood", but other residents were reticent about participating as they believed that "nothing will change how people see the Bijlmer". These responses already show that territorial stigma is both a prominent and inevitable theme for those living in this neighbourhood and that, for some (but as we will show, not all) residents, this creates a sense of disconnection to the rest of the city (Kirkness 2014).

Respondents were recruited through a combination of strategies to ensure a diverse group of residents in terms of class, gender, ethno-racial identity, tenure and residential background. Flyers were distributed along streets selected on the basis of presence of different housing tenures (social housing, private rental and owner occupied housing) and construction year (original high rises and recently added housing). These were followed up door-to-door. Additional respondents were found through convenience sampling in local playgrounds and parks close to the selected sites and through snowball sampling of neighbours. A few respondents were also found through local neighbourhood organisations. In terms of socio-economic status, the sample included low-educated residents (11), some of whom are unemployed; middle-class residents (15) with jobs as assistant pharmacist, insurance advisor and mental health nurse; and higher educated residents (15) working as documentary maker, judge and public administrator. Half of the respondents were women. In terms of ethnoracial composition, the sample included 12 white Dutch residents, 24 residents of Suriname migrant background (of which seven are Hindustani-Surinamese and 17 are African-Surinamese), and five residents of various migrant and racial background. Approximately half of the respondents (21) live in social housing, three in private rental apartments and then another large group in owner occupied housing (17). In terms of their emplacement in the neighbourhood, 23 respondents live amongst the old high rises (referred to as the "old" Bijlmer in the analysis) and 18 respondents live in newly constructed housing projects that have replaced demolished high rises or have filled in former green spaces (referred to as the "new" Bijlmer).

## Encountering Stigma

The interviews show that despite their very different positionalities all residents are highly aware of the Bijlmer's negative reputation as "ghetto". Its national notoriety makes it an inescapable topic of conversation. As long-term social renter Henk (higher middle class, white), observed:

The Bijlmer is probably *the* best known neighbourhood in The Netherlands. With a terrible reputation. So 90% of the country would never want to live there. But then 90% of the residents would not want to leave, because they know it is not what people imagine.

Place stigma is also communicated implicitly through the non-verbal cues of surprise, scepticism or hints at disapproval when residents mention where they live. In the interviews, respondents mimic the tone of voice or exaggerated emphasis used when people ask them about living in the Bijlmer. Like Henk, most of our respondents made a sharp distinction between the negative stereotypes projected onto the Bijlmer and the everyday experience of living there, highlighting how externally imposed identities may deviate substantially from insider perceptions (Byrne and Chonail 2014; Hoekstra 2018; Kirkness 2014). Nevertheless, residents are continuously confronted with stigmatising narratives about the Bijlmer in the media (Arthurson et al. 2014). They feel that the media treats the neighbourhood unfairly by highlighting incidents that suggest widespread disorder. The neighbourhood is held “under a magnifying glass” and if anything happens, the media “jumps right on top of it” and it “automatically becomes world news”.

Residents identified three themes in outside representations of their neighbourhood. A first theme is that of the Bijlmer as a “dangerous” and “scary” place, ridden by crime, drugs and other forms of social disorder. For example, long-term resident Yvette (lower middle class, African-Surinamese), recounts:

A lot of people are scared of the Bijlmer, because they think ... For example, a lady once asked me “how do you get to work with all the crime going on there?”, so I said “yeah, when I want to catch the metro, I have to make a run for it” [laughs]. So people have no idea. They think that people are shooting back and forth. Like it is a kind of Texas, you know.

This representation of the neighbourhood as a lawless, deviant space is frequently reproduced in media accounts. Anil (middle class, Hindustani-Surinamese), who grew up in the neighbourhood and recently bought a house in the new Bijlmer, recalls when he first became aware of the way in which Bijlmer is “othered” on Dutch television:

The first time I noticed, I was in school, high school I think ... there was this afternoon talk show, and they put all these people on a bus, to go on an excursion to the Bijlmer. Like it was some sort of adventurous attraction. Really ... by bus. And the image they painted ... It was really bad.

The Bijlmer is thus portrayed as home to the urban underclass and associated with particular ordinary iconic figures (De Koning and Vollebergh 2019), that are not only classed, but also gendered, including the single mother on welfare and the young adult male as instigator of social disorder.

A second theme in stigmatising narratives and representations of the Bijlmer is that of the neighbourhood as a “dark” place. As Van Gent and Jaffe (2017) note, the Bijlmer is etched in the national public consciousness as a fundamentally un-Dutch space, due to its historic function as arrival neighbourhood for post-colonial migrants. Exemplary is a magazine cover from 2012 of *de Groene Amsterdammer*, a critical left-wing magazine that advertised their report on the Bijlmer through the headlines: “Afro Neighborhood. Despite urban renewal the Bijlmer is becoming darker”. It illustrates how the racial inscription of the Bijlmer is at the same time classed in the sense that urban renewal, aimed at bringing in higher

income groups, was assumed to also deconcentrate ethnic minorities. The reference to the “dark” Bijlmer also has a cultural connotation in the sense that “scary” and “bad” things happen in the dark. As Henk notes, this cultural inscription makes the Bijlmer a place to avoid:

Well, the reputation is that it is unsafe. And whatever I say, people who come here for the first time ... people who do not have a migrant background, or African, or whatever ... They will think, wow, what is going on here? Those men in the streets, what are they up to all day? [Drug] dealing maybe? People see it and will think, this is not my place. Because you want to recognise yourself in a place.

Avoidance by outsiders becomes personal when relatives refuse to visit or friends and colleagues repeatedly come up with excuses not to drop by. Some respondents explained that they always bring visitors to the train station by car—even if they themselves walk there every day—or meet people outside the neighbourhood. Several white respondents expressed discomfort with the connection between racialised and cultural representations of place. For example, Hester and her husband (recently arrived owner-occupiers, middle class) reflected on how the neighbourhood is often seen as far away, removed from general, white society:

Husband: It is mostly prejudice, so negative ...

Hester: That it's dangerous. And different ... that it is different.

Husband: And then when you get down to it, it is also about colour.

Hester: Because it is basically a Surinamese and African neighbourhood. When you go to the shopping centre, it breathes Surinamese ... which is all fine ...

Husband: It is what it is. But it gets such an emotional connotation.

A third and final dimension of the Bijlmer imaginary relates to its material landscape and geography. Both its peripheral location and the unique aesthetics of the built environment have set it apart from the rest of the city from the start. Its massive, modernist honeycomb social housing structures gained further infamy when in 1992 an El Al cargo plane crashed into one of the high rises and images of its destruction circulated widely in national media. Indeed, for many, the Bijlmer has become symbolic for the failure of modernist architecture and social decline. Shani (student in higher education, African-Surinamese), who grew up in the Bijlmer, clearly makes this connection between the material and cultural dimension of stigma:

A lot has changed, it has become much more open, many renovations, green, new. In the past you only had flats, garages, it was dark, badly lit ... it used to be much more like a ghetto, and now it's more suburban as they call it, not the big city but like a smaller version of the big city, whereas before it was really a ghetto, you used to have [drug] dealers everywhere.

In short, the socio-spatial imaginary of the Bijlmer contains different cultural, racial and material dimensions, but these are also intertwined. As Van Gent and

Jaffe (2017) note, the Bijlmer stigma resonates with elements of global imaginaries of the ghetto (as a racialised space) and the banlieue (as a culturally deviant, peripheral space for social housing), but also contains local, place-specific features associated with the area's particular social and spatial history. As a "black" space, the Bijlmer stigma differs from racialised imaginaries of other marginalised neighbourhoods in The Netherlands that are strongly associated with the presence of religious (Muslim) others (De Koning 2015). In addition, the neighbourhood's exceptionalism is related to its architectural history as the culmination (and subsequent failure) of modernist planning and to its unique peripheral location in the city as a satellite town.

Considering the substantial restructuring of the neighbourhood in recent years, the persistence of these stigmatising narratives is striking. In the interviews, many long-term residents wondered aloud why the negative reputation of the Bijlmer—as *the* Dutch ghetto—is lagging so far behind the substantial improvements generated by urban renewal, as illustrated by Chantal (middle class, Hindustani-Surinamese), who grew up in the old Bijlmer:

[When people say such things about my neighbourhood], of course I defend it. I say, the image you have in your head, that's just not how it is ... I say, that's just prejudice. You have to come and see it for yourself, then you know it is wrong.

Newcomers indeed recount how greatly their own perspective has changed since they first visited the neighbourhood. For example, Danisha, a middle-class, African-Surinamese home-owner, recounts how she and her husband originally did not consider the Bijlmer a suitable option in their search for a single-family home. With images of decaying high rises in their minds, the Bijlmer was a "no-go" until their realtor convinced them to have a look at the newly constructed housing. They were pleasantly surprised by the low-rise, suburban homes and realised that "we see ourselves living here, despite the feeling we had about the Bijlmer". Danisha's own experience of having to "adapt her perspective" also leads her to state, "You know, I really can't get angry about it [sighs] ... because we had the same prejudices". To which her husband adds: "and now that we live here, our view is so different. We have had such different experiences actually living here".

## Experiencing Stigma

While the interviews show that all respondents regularly encounter territorial stigma in their everyday lives, they do not experience it in the same way and therefore also show different responses to territorial stigmatisation. Their differential engagement with stigma occurs at the intersection of race, place and class. It depends on the degree to which residents' social identity and their placement in the neighbourhood matches racial, cultural and material stereotypes associated with the Bijlmer. Maarten, a white, higher educated professional living in new owner occupied housing explains why he feels largely unaffected by stigmatising narratives about place:

Personally, the prejudices about the Bijlmer don't really bother me, because I don't really fit the image that people have in their minds. So that image applies to my neighbourhood, but not to me. I guess that is more difficult when you are more like that image, and so they will think that you live in a high rise and are a criminal ... People assume there's only Surinamese in the Bijlmer, so they are kind of surprised that I live here, because I don't fit the stereotype. But it also means that it does not reflect back onto me.

Clearly, Maarten considers the distinction between self and place to be self-evident. His repeated reference to image—as something easily observable—demonstrates that he is highly aware of his own embodiment as a white resident in an area that is conceived as a black space (Contreras 2017; McCallum 2005). Because he is white, he feels that the negative stereotypes of the Bijlmer “slide off” him. Other white respondents similarly suggest that they are insulated from territorial stigma. In fact, for some the Bijlmer stigma even seemed to function as something of an asset. For example, in their interviews, Abel and Peter (both large, white men, who worked their way up from a lower middle class background to stable middle class jobs), repeatedly discussed the cultural stereotypes associated with the Bijlmer, particularly related to social disorder in the street. Rather than rejecting these stereotypes, they emphasised their skills in knowing how to get around, how to avoid eye contact with local gang members and how to maintain a “don't mess with me” posture which they see as a sign of masculinity. As Peter summarised: “Of course, you have to get used to this place. And you have to stand your ground, you can't be a pussy”.

In addition, several white middle class respondents mobilised racial stereotypes associated with the Bijlmer to emphasise their own cosmopolitan outlook on life. For example, Marja described extensively how living in the Bijlmer means you have to be able to interact with “all sorts of residents”, contrasting herself with “less worldly” people who are “uncomfortable with difference”. At the same time, these residents also try to abate racial stereotypes by re-scripting place identity (Cairns 2018; Nayak 2019). They systematically describe their neighbourhood as “mixed”, “multicultural” and “colourful” rather than “dark” or “black”. Some residents refer to the neighbourhood as a “window into the world” and several parents suggest that living in the Bijlmer is a good learning experience for their children. These attempts to neutralise stigma shows that while blemish of place does not influence their sense of self directly; they do feel the need to justify why *they* live in a place *like this*.

Moreover, the often-received question “why someone like me lives in a place like this” is understood as not only racialised, but also classed. Maarten, for example, is not just considered out of place because he is white, but also because he is a highly educated professional in an area that is conceived as a space for the urban underclass. To justify why he nevertheless lives in the Bijlmer, Maarten—and other white middle class respondents—discursively mobilises the built environment to propose alternative place frames. Living in newly constructed housing developed as part of the urban renewal program, they juxtapose their direct residential surroundings with the material stereotypes of the concrete, high-rise and

marginalised Bijlmer. Describing the neighbourhood as a quiet, green, suburban—and therefore properly middle-class—environment, they evoke a very different sociospatial imaginary for the area, which they prefer to call “Southeast” (the administrative district name) rather than “Bijlmer”. Considering their material surroundings of brick low-rise family homes along traditional streets, lined by parking spaces and trees, the claim of living in an entirely different neighbourhood is easily made and they reinforce it by recounting how visitors often express surprise that this part of the district “looks exactly like Almere”, one of the fastest growing new towns in the Amsterdam region.

Nevertheless, while “Southeast” is represented as an entirely different type of neighbourhood, in fact the old social housing estates are just around the corner, visible from the kitchen window and encountered when residents travel through older sections of the neighbourhood to get to the metro station or the grocery store. In this respect, the described distance between “Southeast” and “Bijlmer” is more symbolic than real and the reality of navigating the area has turned out different than some new residents imagined. For example, Abel has experienced the move to the “Bijlmer” as quite negative, referring to it as a harsh confrontation with reality for his white, leftist upbringing. Coming to the neighbourhood with a “too optimistic world view”, his “reality check” that he was in fact not living in a suburb included two break-ins in his house and negative experiences of his daughter as the only white child in a “black school with low quality teachers”. In this respect, the counter-narrative of “Southeast” seems to serve more as a justification to the outside world for living in the area (and perhaps wishful thinking) than a fundamentally different experience of place.

### ***Residents of Colour in the “New” Bijlmer***

In contrast to these residents who shrug off negative stereotypes of place by drawing attention to their distinctive racial, class and geographical location in the neighbourhood, others cannot shed stigmatising narratives so easily. For residents of colour living in “Southeast”, the materiality of their direct surroundings serves as something of a buffer against territorial stigma. However, because they embody the racial dimension of stigma, cultural stereotypes associated with the Bijlmer are less easily refuted. They therefore renegotiate cultural stereotypes in two ways.

First, they re-inscribe place identity by referring to their neighbourhood as “mixed” in contrast to the “dark” Bijlmer. While these references to diversity resonate with the way in which white middle class residents talk about the neighbourhood, they serve a different purpose. As McCallum (2005) notes, the visual presence of racialised bodies alters the classed meaning of space. For residents of colour in the “new” Bijlmer, pointing to the presence of white residents serves to underscore the middle class status of the area, and thereby indirectly their own class position. For example, when asked how she feels about the negative reputation of the Bijlmer, Priya, a long-term, Hindustani-Surinamese resident working in financial aid, responds:

I'm not really bothered by it, but I do feel we have to justify it all the time, you know, explain: it's really changed, much better than it used to be. We have a great house. The neighbourhood is really *netjes* [proper] and so on, and so on.

Like Priya, other Surinamese residents in the new Bijlmer, repeatedly use the word "proper", not just in reference to their neighbourhood but also for themselves, for example in relation to keeping their driveways clean or making sure their children act well behaved in public space. In addition, to emphasise their own middle class position they redirect negative stereotypes by projecting them onto other residents, as illustrated by Nahida, an assistant pharmacist who has bought an apartment with a distant view of the high rise where she grew up:

It is so different now. I don't know if you were here before. It was a ghetto. Cockroaches, mice, dark corridors ... You couldn't pass under the high rise without getting something on your head ... Now it is totally different. Lots of different people. A mix ... but home-owners. You know, serious people, who care about their surroundings. They invest in it ... That's not how it used to be. Everyone peed everywhere, trash everywhere ... Look at the difference between here and [that other high rise]. On this side is for-sale housing, all proper. But then on the right side it is dirty, it smells. That's the difference. People who buy are more conscious of their surroundings. Of their neighbours. Renters just take less care of the neighbourhood.

Nahida clearly combines strategies of spatial and social deflection of stigma (Byrne and Chonail 2014; Contreras 2017; Pinkster 2014). Other Surinamese middle class respondents similarly attempt to dislocate stigma from their direct surroundings by projecting it onto old sections of the Bijlmer, giving detailed reports of the remaining "bad" spots that reproduce the same cultural, racial and material stereotypes circulating in the outside world. This is often combined with the distinction between home-owners and renters, functioning as a proxy for middle and lower class. This class distinction is also racialised, as becomes clear when Suriname middle-class residents talk about sending their kids to local schools. Danisha, an African-Surinamese sales manager, explained:

When our daughter turned three we were like "oh no, now we have to find her a school, how do we go about it?" [worried tone]. You know because ... Ehm ... I am proud of my roots, we are Surinamese, and so we don't mind them going to a school which is quite dark. But these local schools, they are really black [emphasised] ... And it looks shabby ... lots of African children who speak only English. They can't help it, but still ... and the mothers look really unkempt. Those things, they bother me.

Other residents of colour in the new Bijlmer similarly designate the old Bijlmer as black (as opposed to their own "mixed" neighbourhood), referring to the presence of recent migrants of African descent in this area. At the same time, these same residents value living in the Bijlmer because it is culturally and racially mixed. Chantal, for example, noted that in the Bijlmer she does not attract attention for being different:

Like when I am cooking, nobody asks me "what do I smell?", "what are you making?" [in a whiny voice], I don't have to explain ... Here, people just know. When I smell

marsala, I know that my Hindustani neighbour is cooking. I don't complain that the hallway smells too spicy.

Similarly, Danisha reflected:

Look, let's be real. If we would move to South [an upper-middle class district] as the only dark family, you just know that they would think "how did these people get here?" If you live in an area with a lot of Surinamese or Africans, you just feel more at home.

Such examples illustrate that residents of colour do not expect to be fully welcomed or understood in neighbourhoods that are majority White Dutch. Their appreciation for the "mixed" Southeast is thus rooted in their search for tolerance to difference and mirrored by a sense of not belonging elsewhere (Hoekstra 2018), while their rejection of the "dark" Bijlmer is used as a way to distance themselves from cultural and racial stereotypes. Nevertheless, they also appreciate and repeatedly emphasise the Bijlmer's function as a Surinamese enclave and place of empowerment. Long-term residents like Chantal, Nahida and Anil are anchored to the neighbourhood via family ties. They also appreciate the presence of Surinamese shops and services that sustain everyday cultural practices. Also for some of the newer residents who do not have a deep engagement with the local community, like Danisha, the neighbourhood has symbolic and emotional value. At the same time, this counter-narrative sits uncomfortably alongside the elaborate attempts to rework territorial stigma, through both re-inscription of place and stigma transfer, as they convey such different representation of space. These internal contradictions may also explain the ambivalence that seemed to underlie many of the interviews with middle class Surinamese residents.

### ***Residents in the "Old" Bijlmer***

For residents living amongst the old high rises, the nature of their material surroundings exposes them not just to the material but also the associated negative cultural stereotypes of the Bijlmer. Moreover, the large share of residents of colour in this part of the Bijlmer matches racialised stereotypes. Vincente (higher middle class, Western European migrant) recounts how he first encountered these stereotypes when he found his apartment three years ago and many people advised against moving into "the ghetto":

I never lived in a ghetto, but I know what a ghetto is. This is not a ghetto [laughs]. Of course, you have some kids smoking a couple of joints in the corner. But that is not a ghetto. You have more black people than white people but yeah ok but, that's not a ghetto [laughs] ... OK yeah, these big buildings are not pretty [points to the old high rises]. I know that this ten fifteen years ago was more rough. And I know that people still have that idea ... But when we moved here, we never felt any roughness. And there are people, of course, people with difficulties, with lower income, with different backgrounds. But that doesn't mean that it is dangerous. Not at all. Not at all.

Like Vincente, other residents in the old Bijlmer emphasised that drug dealing and antisocial behaviour used to be very common in the area, but are now far more

contained, remaining only in particular sub-sections of the old neighbourhood. Residents with a long history in the Bijlmer shared elaborate personal memories to emphasise how the neighbourhood has improved, thereby projecting stigma onto the past. They combine this strategy of temporal dislocation with strategies of spatial deflection, but at the very micro-level, referring to particular high rises or squares where social problems are concentrated. Yet as Vincente acknowledges, the area does remain “a little bit rough” and everyday experiences with social disorder, nuisance, and (petty) crime in their direct vicinity make it difficult for residents in the old Bijlmer to convincingly dislocate stigma either temporally or spatially.

The dominant response to stigmatising narratives about the old Bijlmer is therefore one of social deflection, blaming specific groups of residents for local problems (Contreras 2017; Watt 2006). Respondents in the “old” Bijlmer refer to an underclass of drug addicts, loitering youths and criminals who “spoil” the neighbourhood for everyone else. The identification of these undesirable Others often has racial undertones when specific ethnic or migrant groups are named as responsible for social and physical disorder. For example, Selena (lower middle class, African-Surinamese), attributes crime in the neighbourhood to Antilleans and Roma:

Here, it's always something. The snack bar over here, they've been robbed like seven or eight times. [When asked who is responsible] Mostly those Antilleans. Yes. Mostly it's Antilleans ... [or else it's] those gypsies that live over there, it's a disaster. Everybody complains about them ... that's what gypsies are like, just like Antilleans that mess up the place, they rob, those gypsies do all kinds of things.

However, who is blamed for sustaining the Bijlmer's bad reputation changed from interview to interview, depending on residents' own identity. In this respect, respondents whose social and geographical positionality—in terms of race, class, tenure and residential setting—seems to “match” the Bijlmer imaginary most closely are also the most vocal in distancing themselves from territorial stigma by projecting it onto others (Contreras 2017). For example, Hermione, a long-term unemployed single mother of Surinamese heritage who shares her social rental apartment with an adult son, has personally encountered the cultural stereotypes when neighbours tipped off the police about an imagined marijuana plantation at her house. While she is outraged about this unfair treatment by co-residents, who see her as the embodiment of territorial stigma, she uses similar stigmatising narratives when talking about “neglectful parents” of “young men who hang around the apartment building, vandalising cars and harassing decent residents”. She then repositions herself as a proper parent by emphatically repeating that *she* has raised her son “right”. Hermione's story shows how stigmatising narratives about the Bijlmer are most strongly reproduced by those respondents with the most vulnerable, marginalised positions, because they most strongly feel the need to create a distance between themselves and the negative reputation of place.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to understand how residents in the Amsterdam Bijlmer differentially experience and negotiate processes of territorial

stigmatisation. The neighbourhood's notoriety is found to operate as a powerful force in residents' everyday lives (Tyler and Slater 2018; Wacquant 2007). Time and again residents are made aware of the negative racial, cultural and material stereotypes associated with their neighbourhood in their interactions with the outside world and through its portrayal in the media (Arthurson et al. 2014; Van Gent and Jaffe 2017). These harsh processes of territorial stigmatisation occur despite the fact that urban marginality in Dutch cities is mild compared to many other countries (Aalbers et al. 2011; Musterd 2008). Due to substantial and sustained public investment and continued local presence of the Dutch welfare state, the quality of life in marginalised neighbourhoods is relatively high. Perhaps this explains why we did not find the strong emotional responses to territorial stigmatisation reported in other studies (Contreras 2017; Keene and Padilla 2010). Another explanation might lie in the fact that the Bijlmer has long had a strong symbolic value as an arrival neighbourhood for Surinamese Dutch in their migration history (Balkenhol 2014) and more broadly as a place of empowerment for residents of colour. So despite the substantial problems of deprivation and disorder experienced by residents in the past, the neighbourhood has always also been a source of identity and pride.

Nevertheless, dominant representations of the Bijlmer as *the* Dutch ghetto function as a trope or haunting shadow that residents always have to relate to (De Koning and Vollebergh 2019). It is here that clear inequalities within the neighbourhood emerge. Residents who are distinctly different from the negative stereotypes in terms of race (white), respectability (obviously middle class) and material surroundings (living in the newly constructed, low-rise areas) shrug off stigma quite easily and describe it as "sliding off" them. While they recognise blemish of place, they do not feel it applies to them, because they are recognised as out of place in collective racialised and classed understandings of urban space (Jazeel 2009; McCallum 2005). Some even mobilise Bijlmer stereotypes as a source of symbolic capital. In contrast, other residents cannot distance themselves from stigmatising narratives so easily and therefore engage with these more elaborately through a variety of strategies. These findings demonstrate the importance of challenging summational statements about notorious neighbourhoods that reduce places to singular labels such as "ghetto" or "banlieue". Deconstructing spatial imaginaries and understanding how they intersect with other forms of stigma can bring diverging and locally contingent experiences of territorial stigmatisation into view.

Moreover, in negotiating territorial stigma, the materiality of place was found to play an important role. Residents in the newly constructed housing projects mobilised the built environment to re-inscribe place as an ordinary, suburban neighbourhood (Cairns 2018; Nayak 2019), functioning as an additional identity marker that served to distance them from negative cultural stereotypes. In this respect, the benefits of urban renewal are clearly unequally distributed: not only is stigma often used by governing actors to justify area-based interventions, displacing social renters and attracting more affluent residents (De Koning 2015; Kipfer 2015; Tissot 2018; Tyler and Slater 2018), these new residents also disproportionately benefit from material improvements because it enables them to develop

counter-narratives against blemish of place. In the research literature, this role of the materiality of place—in both the production and renegotiation of territorial stigma—has so far received little attention. Material stereotypes of decaying modernist high rises tend to be discussed as proxies for cultural stereotypes about social disorder (Glasze et al. 2012; Kirkness 2014), rather than as a dimension of stigmatisation in its own right. Our findings nevertheless show that it is important to disentangle cultural and material dimensions of territorial stigma, because the material landscape is mobilised as an additional social axis along which residents reposition themselves vis-à-vis negative stereotypes.

Finally, in contrast to previous research we found that it is not white, middle class residents in the renewed Bijlmer who engage most strongly in strategies of social and spatial deflection (Contreras 2017; Keene and Padilla 2010; Slooter 2019; Watt 2006). Instead, the burden of reworking stigma is carried in particular by residents with relatively more precarious positions. Residents of colour—who embody the racial dimension of stigma—and social renters living in the old Bijlmer—whose homes invoke the material dimensions of stigma—try to distance themselves from the blemish of place by repositioning themselves as “good” residents and placing the blame on other marginalised residents. They thereby unwittingly reproduce negative stereotypes, constructing an internal moral order at the intersection of place, race and class, that becomes more and more refined towards the bottom of the status hierarchy, but that does not reject territorial stigma altogether. In this respect, the often-made distinction between the production of stigma by the outside world and residents who “live through” stigmatisation is far less clear than generally assumed (Tyler and Slater 2018). As Butler et al. (2018) also find in their study on spatial denigration in social media, local residents—in their desire to create distance between self and place—often reinforce stigmatising labels. We suggest that this, more than anything else, exposes the fundamentally unequal power relations, both outside *and* within the neighbourhood, that lie at the core of processes of territorial stigmatisation.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our respondents for sharing their personal stories with us about their everyday experiences of living in Amsterdam Bijlmer. Many thanks also to Aridan Mecava for his invaluable research assistance in the field and to various colleagues for their constructive comments on previous versions of this paper, in particular participants of the RC21 2018 conference session on Housing Stigma, colleagues Wouter van Gent and Rivke Jaffe, and the anonymous reviewers.

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Accepted for publication 16 November 2019